

Visiting Spain BY TRAIN

A luxurious hotel on wheels, the Transcantábrico Gran Lujo takes visitors from Santiago de Compostela to San Sebastian in comfort and style



STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN TOWLER

We celebrated our wedding anniversary on one of the world's most luxurious trains. The Transcantábrico Gran Lujo is Spain's flagship and an elegant luxury hotel on rails. Starting with carriages built in the early 1900s, they have been remodelled to create two deluxe, wood-panelled, air-conditioned suites per coach. Each suite has a king or two twin-sized beds, a sitting area, desk, Wi-Fi, mini bar, luxury linens, a flat-screen TV and ensuite bathroom complete with sauna, steam and hydro massage shower. The train also has a lounge car with picture windows, a bar and dining cars. Live evening entertainment included musicians, dancing and a demonstration on constructing wonderful cocktails. They have managed to combine outstanding art-deco design and stained-glass windows with modern comforts.

Gourmet meals and fine wines are included on board and at local restaurants

including ones with Michelin stars. There are interesting excursions every day by luxury coach. The train travels only a few hours a day, stopping each night to ensure a peaceful sleep. The staff is impeccably trained, multilingual and unusually attentive. This is a decadent experience and the epitome of luxury train travel.

The train rarely carries more than 30 passengers and the ones on our trip were from the U.K., U.S., Puerto Rico, Colombia, Spain, Australia, Belgium and Germany. We were the only Canadians. Our fellow passengers were well travelled and included developers, lawyers, a professional photographer, authors, a travel writer, hoteliers, engineers, doctors, a psychologist, financier and industrialist. Some were retired, but others were not. The group quickly coalesced and became friendly, with the exception of one grumpy curmudgeon who we did our best to avoid.

Everyone spoke English and, in addition, some spoke Spanish, French



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: The Transcantábrico made a stop in the town of Potes in Cantabria.



ABOVE: The fishing village of Luarca has one of the most attractive harbours in Spain.

RIGHT: The Transcantábrico offers live entertainment in the evenings. Visitors are treated to gourmet meals, on and off the train, and fine wines.



or German. We were accompanied by excellent multilingual guides who were completely fluent in Dutch, Spanish, English, French and German. This was a great service, although it often meant standing about for some time until they got to your language. This was a trial if it occurred during inclement weather.

Our eight-day itinerary took us from Santiago de Compostela to San Sebastian, through Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria and the Basque Country. We visited enchanting medieval towns, significant cultural and historical sites and passed through some of

the most picturesque landscapes in Europe. It would be difficult to describe all that we saw, but there were several standouts.

The first was the Parador in Santiago. Built in 1499 to provide shelter and restore the battered bodies of the pilgrims walking the Way of Saint James (Camino de Santiago), this is one of the world's oldest hotels and is filled with history and modern comforts. There are 79 plaques explaining the history of the Parador from its founding as a royal hospital to modern times. This is where the group met before visiting the Cathedral, which was completed in 1211. We were fortunate to be there on one of the few days in the year when the famous silver Botafumeiro was being used. It is the world's largest incense censer, weighing 53 kilograms, and requires eight priests to raise and set it swinging on its 65-metre-long trajectory. The story is that it assisted in masking the stench emanating from hundreds of unwashed pilgrims.

The most unusual and spectacular beach we have ever seen was at the Playa de Las Catedrales (Beach of the Cathedrals). It is completely covered at high tide but, at low tide, it is an amazing expanse of 30-metre-high arches and flying buttresses carved by wind, wave and erosion, exposing wide expanses of fine sandy beach and hundreds of thousands of barnacles. We spent an hour walking along the beach, peering into caves, admiring the waterfalls and marveling at the huge rock formations.

We also visited the Picos de Europa, the largest national park in Europe. A long, terrifying coach ride along narrow, twisty and fog-shrouded roads took us high into the mountains to a lake. We stopped at a roadside tavern, gathered around a roaring fireplace and were treated to crusty bread, sausages and all the local cider we dared to drink. The latter was poured the traditional way into glasses held at arm's length and it was very welcome to ward off the chill in the air. I enjoyed the fire, cider and snacks in that order, but some didn't care for the rather sharp cider.

Later, we were glad to immerse ourselves

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Playa de Las Catedrales (Beach of the Cathedrals) is a spectacular beach with 30-metre-high arches and flying buttresses carved into rock by wind, wave and erosion.

If you go

There are a few things to keep in mind if you want to take this tour.

Weather. Remember that this is the northern, very green part of Spain and it is cooler and wet. We went at the end of April and had warm, sunny days and a few that were rainy and downright cold. The train has umbrellas for everyone, but be sure to take a warm jacket and layers that will keep you toasty. Avoid going late in the summer when you could run into crowds.

Bookings. We found that trying to book through RENFE or FEVE, the Spanish train companies, was very difficult and frustrating in any language. We resorted to booking through Palace Tours in New Jersey, who were co-operative and helpful. We never did find a Canadian firm.

Meals. You are certainly fed well, but meals are on Spanish time, which means they are late and long. Breakfast is at 8 a.m. and you are expected to be on the excursion bus by 9:30. Lunch is at 2 p.m. and dinner starts at 9 p.m. The food was generally good, but they were set menus and we were never offered any choices. We felt that some of the meals in local restaurants were not as wonderful as we had expected and anyone with an allergy or dietary restriction could find it difficult. However, most people put on a few pounds.

Shopping. We often had free time in villages on our excursions, but this rarely exceeded an hour, which didn't make for a great shopping opportunity, especially if it happened during the Spanish siesta when the shops are closed.

Relaxing. This is a very busy tour and there are many things organized for every day. We all fell into our beds for a good sleep at the end of the day and those who chose to party into the early hours were often seen snoozing on the bus.


Clothing. Thankfully, there are no formal nights on the train and passengers were comfortable in casual clothes. People did dress up for our final evening and some, but not all men, put on a jacket.

Costs. This is not an inexpensive trip. Suites start in the \$4,000 US range per person, but everything is included — food, drink, excursions, entrance fees, etc. Tipping is optional, although it seemed that everyone contributed. There is no doubt that this is a wonderful, elegant tour on a very special train and, while it is one of the world's best, there are others and a club that caters to them. The Luxury Train Club offers free membership and tells about luxury trains throughout the world.

in hot water at Balneario La Hermida, a spa that dates from the 17th century. My wife enjoyed a massage and I opted for the pool, hot tub and sauna. Warmed and relaxed, we further enjoyed a long lunch before getting back on the coach to Comillas, where we had a guided tour of Capricho De Gaudí, a charming if flamboyant palace decorated with sunflower tiles designed by a young Antoni Gaudí in 1885. It is surprisingly intact with different coffered ceilings in every room, original stained glass and shutters that roll sideways and disappear. It has a checkered past and has been a residence, then abandoned, restored, made into a restaurant and is now a museum.

Another highlight was the world famous Cave of Altamira near Santillana del Mar. This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the first cave in which prehistoric cave paintings were discovered. Entrance to the original cave is now restricted to protect the paintings, but an amazing and extremely well-done replica museum has been built nearby. We spent several hours there with a local guide who carefully explained the discovery and history of the cave, the people who lived there and how they created the paintings. It is beautifully reconstructed and quite breathtaking.

Near the end of our tour, we visited the city of Bilbao and the amazing and wonderful Guggenheim Museum. Designed by Canadian-born American architect Frank Gehry, it houses an eclectic collection of modern art in a spectacular titanium-clad building. We had longed to visit it for years and were not disappointed. The building itself is the most beautiful avant-garde masterpiece of the 20th century and its contents kept us mesmerized for hours. The huge 12-metre-high flower sculpture of a West Highland terrier created by Jeff Koons welcomes visitors and has become the emblem of the museum and the city itself.

The tour ended in San Sebastian after the train staff gathered around for kisses and hugs for everyone. The passengers did the same, accompanied by an exchange of emails and invitations to visit, although I don't think the curmudgeon was included. 



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