

# Spain's Camino de Santiago & Its Natural History

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Zaragoza and transfer to Berdún.
- Day 2/7** Programme of daily walks along the Camino de Santiago from our base in Berdún.
- Day 8** Fly Stansted.

### Departs

September

### Focus

Birds, plants and butterflies; also walking and history.

### Grading

Grade B. Day walks only, but some more challenging ground covered.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP26) or brochure

### Highlights

- The spectacular Foz de Lumbier gorge is home to Egyptian Vulture & a host of flowers
- An abundance of orchids such as Early Purple, Lesser Butterfly & Fragrant
- Rich flora includes Pyrenean specialities: Violet, Squill & Snakeshead Fritillary
- Look for Lammergeier & Wallcreeper between Col de Pau & the beautiful Hecho Valley
- Black Woodpecker, Spectacled Warbler, Black Kite & Alpine Chough



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## Introduction

For nearly a thousand years, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela or 'Way of St. James' has been the most important pilgrimage route in Europe. In fact, the Camino de Santiago is a collection of many pilgrimage routes, all of which have the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, north-west Spain as their ultimate destination, where tradition has it the remains of the apostle Saint James are buried. Many of these ancient pathways cross spectacular landscapes and scenery, and none are more enticing for the naturalist than the series of paths which cross the Pyrenees, then descend through Aragón to link up with the main pilgrimage route in Navarra. On this 8-day holiday we'll make leisurely daily walks exploring a combination of the wildlife and historical highlights along key Aragonese routes. We'll make plenty of detours off the beaten track, along ancient footpaths, focusing on birds and plants, as well as endeavouring to identify some of the area's diverse range of butterflies and moths.

While the French Pyrenees are wet, green and thickly forested, the Spanish side is dry, arid and generally more Mediterranean, and home to a very different list of plant and bird species. These sunny southern slopes are characterised by stunning limestone erosions, cliffs and canyons, and a rich variety of scrub, maquis and arable farmland along with good beech and conifer forests, as well as high alpine pasture. Our comfortable base for this tour is a delightful property situated right on the Camino, in the pretty hilltop village of Berdún which enjoys fine views of the Pyrenees, surrounding foothills, and valleys of the Veral and Aragón Rivers. Our hosts make us most welcome, keeping us well fed on local cuisine, and providing a wealth of information that would not be available on a hotel stay in the region.

**NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.**

### Day 1

### Fly Zaragoza, Transfer to Berdún

We depart from London Stansted on a flight direct to Zaragoza before transferring to our base in Berdún.

Berdún is a spectacular old hilltop village, sitting amidst the floodplains of the Aragon and Veral rivers, yet surrounded by the mountains and foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees. Our base for the holiday is a comfortable and charming 'casa rural' which has pleasant en suite rooms, each with views of the garden and surrounding fields.

### Day 2

### Somport to Villanua

One of our first excursions will be to follow the Camino from the medieval hospital de Santa Cristina at the Pyrenean pass of Somport, on the French-Spanish border (1,640m), to the village of Villanua (953m) passing through alpine pasture, woods and fields and along the Rio Aragón.

In September this route offers a chance to see birds such as Wood Warbler, Roller, Dipper, Crag Martin,



Roller

Alpine Chough, Citril Finch, Linnet, Serin and Northern Wheatear as well as raptors including Short-toed Eagle, Griffon Vulture, and Red Kite. The pathways and surrounds are delightfully unspoilt and among the mass of wild flowers we'll be trying to pick out orchids such as Loose-flowered and Bog, as well as Pyrenean specialties including Pyrenean Eryngium, Pyrenean Angelica and Pyrenean Scabious. The keen botanists amongst the group will not be able to go far without stooping to try and identify this bonanza of late summer flora – and we'll also be hoping to include

Trumpet and Short-leaved Gentians, Alpine Bird's-foot Trefoil, Green and Stinking Hellebore, Hepatica, Viper's Bugloss, Cut-leaved Mallow, Meadow Saffron, Merendera, Grass-of-Parnassus, Hoary Mullein and Wood Scabious among our numerous finds! Attracted by the wealth of flowers along the undisturbed old pathways we'll be walking on, we hope to see an array of butterflies including Purple-shot Copper, Wall Brown, Camberwell Beauty and Clouded Yellow.

After a day of leisurely exploration along a historic pathway in search of a wealth of natural history, we'll return to our guesthouse for a hearty Aragonese meal.

## Day 3

## Castiello to Jaca

Today we'll aim to walk the cabañera or drovers' road to Jaca. The Camino follows the drovers' road from Castiello on a short and picturesque walk to Jaca, the first large town medieval pilgrims would have come to when walking into Spain. Jaca was once the capital of the kingdom of Aragón, and is now a small historic town situated in the Aragón Valley in the southern foothills of the central Pyrenees. The town has a 15th century fort, with Red Deer inhabiting the moat and an interesting 11th century Romanesque cathedral – indeed, the first in Spain to be built in that style, surrounded by a maze of medieval streets. At the nearby Diocesan Museum we can see frescoes and sculptures contemporary with the Camino's golden age in the 12<sup>th</sup> century which will help to put the pilgrimage in a historical context and add a bit of magic to walks as we imagine the pilgrims of a thousand years ago who trod the same paths as we are today.

We should be richly rewarded with botanical and birding highlights today. Rock Bunting, Black Redstart, Short-toed Treecreeper and Golden Orioles live here. If we are lucky we may catch sight of Hobby hawking for insect prey, and both Black and Red Kites are seen regularly along this route. We will also visit a hide above Santa Cilia to see Griffon Vultures coming to a *muladar* – a traditional enclosure where dead livestock is put out for the vultures to dispose of.



Rock Bunting

We'll return for dinner at our guesthouse after a full day's exploring along the Camino and in Jaca.

## Day 4

## The Monastery of San Juan de la Peña

Taking a detour off the main Camino today, we'll explore a route that would once have been taken by medieval pilgrims to see the holy relics (including the Holy Grail!) at San Juan de la Peña. This is a fascinating walk along a rarely trodden path which passes through a variety of habitats. For the naturalist, the allure is the wildlife inhabiting the open pastures, woodlands and thick forests – in particular we'll keep a look-out for the vultures which nest on the south-facing cliffs of the 'Peña'. The roadside plants on our way to the Peña include Pink Bindweed, *Fumana ericoides* (a shrubby Cistus), Rock Soapwort and Pink Rock-rose.



Griffon Vulture

Views towards the high Pyrenees are stunning and the area around the Peña is a good place to look for birds of prey such as Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle and, if we're lucky, Lammergeier. While on our way to the Peña we'll be looking (and listening) for Red-billed Chough, Melodious Warbler, Blackcap and Black Woodpecker, as well as Short-toed Treecreeper and a variety of finches and tits. Looking skywards, Crag Martin and Alpine

Swift will most likely be circling above us. It is a great pleasure to follow these ancient routes, stooping to identify the wealth of interesting flowers and butterflies, scanning the sky frequently for birds, and stopping for a picnic lunch, a well-deserved snack or simply to admire the scenery as we walk. The sense of a connection, with both nature and history, is one of Europe's greatest treasures.

## Day 5

## The Camino de Santiago down the Hecho Valley

Today's walk follows another branch of the Camino that enters Spain over the Col de Pau (Puerto de Palo) and along the Roman road down the Hecho Valley, one of the most beautiful of all the Pyrenean valleys. Rock Bunting, Bonelli's Warbler, Rock Thrush, Spotless Starling, Dipper and Yellowhammer are among the birds inhabiting this spectacular route and there's a chance of Honey Buzzard here, though we'd have to be lucky to spot one. We should hear and see Alpine Marmots and the botanical treasures include the localized Dragonmouth, Ivy-leaved Toadflax and Welsh Poppy. As we enter the Hecho Valley, large numbers of Red and Black Kites are often visible hunting over fields, as well as shrikes (including Red-backed) perched on roadside wires on the way. We'll pause to enjoy the stunning scenery here looking out for Lammergeier and vultures. As we walk through tracts of woodland we'll be hoping to find Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest and Crested Tit; the elusive Wallcreeper is also possible if we are very lucky.



Crested Tit

## Day 6 On the Camino to Biniés, past the Hermitage of the 11,000 Virgins



Ramonda myconi

Today's walk to Biniés follows the Hecho branch of the Camino from the hermitage of the 11,000 Virgins (dedicated to St Ursula) to descend to Biniés in the Veral/Ansó Valley. The walk is through open, mixed mountain woodland and fields, dramatically skirting above the Biniés Gorge (Foz de Biniés). This walk is in a dryer, more Mediterranean zone so the flora is quite different to previous days. The keen botanists amongst the group will be delighted with the variety of wild flowers and other plant-life here and amongst the exciting plants we might hope to find during the day are: Ramonda, Blue Aphyllanthes, Pyrenean Honeysuckle and Pyrenean Scabious.

Once in the Biniés Gorge birds should include Orphean Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Stonechat and Cirl Bunting. The river banks leading to the gorge support the Pyrenean Pink Rockrose. Growing on the spectacular gorge face are large bright red clumps of *Antihrrinum majus*, *Euphorbia characias*, Pyrenean Saxifrage (*Saxifraga longifolia*) and several species of allium

including Yellow Onion (*Allium moly*). We may also find *Petrocoptis hispanica*, a member of the Pink family endemic to the Jaca area. In particular we shall look out for birds such as Alpine Swift, Dipper, Golden Oriole, Hoopoe and Bonelli's Warbler, plus an excellent range of birds of prey including Golden Eagle.

## Day 7 The Camino from La Virgen de La Peña to Escó

The final walk of the trip starts at the Ermita de La Virgen de La Peña, a chapel dramatically perched on a cliff edge 600m above the Esca Valley, and follows a dramatic limestone gorge out of the High Pyrenees into the gentler terrain of the Canal de Berdún. Here we will look for some species we may not have seen so far on the trip – raptors including Sparrowhawk, Booted Eagle and Montagu's Harrier, as well as Kingfisher, Spotted Flycatcher and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Common Rockrose, Knapweed and Rock Tea should be among our botanical finds, and Dingy Skipper, Marbled Fritillary and Great-banded Grayling among the butterflies we may see today. The last part of the walk follows ancient walled pathways through abandoned fields to the fascinating abandoned village of Escó. The Yesa reservoir is nearby, with opportunities for seeing Osprey (on migration), Black Kites fishing and resident and migrating waders.

## Day 8 Aragón River and Mallos de Agüero, Fly London

As we have an early evening flight back to the UK we will have time for further exploration. We will visit the River Aragón near Berdún where we might find Great Egret, Southern Grey Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Yellow-legged Gull. We will then return to the Casa Sarasa to say our farewells before heading for Zaragoza. If time permits we will stop at Mallos de Agüero – a beautiful outcrop of rocks rising from the Mediterranean garrigue country. Here we may find Egyptian Vulture, Dartford Warbler, Black Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush.

We will then drive to Zaragoza airport to check in for our flight back to London Stansted.

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## Tour grading

Grade B (moderate). From our outstanding base in Berdún we will explore both the foothills and mountains of the Spanish Pyrenees on daily outings, enjoying their natural history by means of day walks. Our pace will be slow as we look for birds, plants and butterflies, but we shall aim to be outdoors as much as possible covering around five miles each day. This holiday should suit those of all ages who enjoy natural history, some exercise, fresh air and mountain environments. On some days it will be possible to bail out at the halfway stage of some of the walks, if desired.

## Weather

We have chosen September as being an ideal month for walking conditions whilst still being able to enjoy a good number of the special flowering plants, birds and butterflies of this region. However, although we expect plenty of fine, warm, sometimes hot and sunny weather (especially at lower altitudes), in the high mountains the weather is never predictable and you must be prepared for such variability and bring a good range of clothing!

## Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.