

Spain's 'Big Three': In search of Whales, Wolves & Bears

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Ferry journey from Plymouth to Santander
Day 2	Arrive Santander; transfer to Cordovilla
Day 3/5	Wolf-watching in Montana Palentina
Day 6/8	Bear-scanning in Somiedo Natural Park
Day 9	Depart Santander by ferry
Day 10	Arrive Plymouth

Departs

September/October

Focus

Birds and mammals

Grading

Grade A/B. Day walks

Dates and Prices

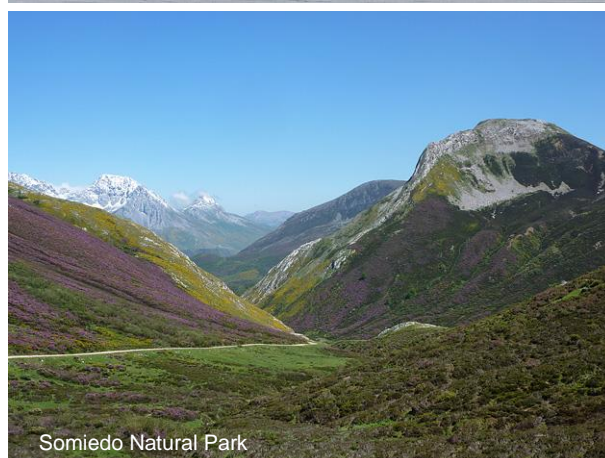
See website (tour code ESP27) or brochure

Highlights:

- Fin & Minke Whales, plus Common & Risso's Dolphins in the Bay of Biscay
- Chance of Brown Bear with Chamois, Wildcat and Red/Roe Deer common
- Very good chance of Iberian Wolf - one of Europe's most exciting mammals



Fin Whale



Somiedo Natural Park



Iberian Wolf



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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.

Introduction

Northern Spain has a great deal to offer the naturalist. The Cantabrian Mountains extend for about 180 miles across northern Spain, running almost parallel to the sea from the Pyrenees to Galicia. They are home to two isolated populations of European Brown Bear, with the majority, about 100, living in the wildest, steepest and most wooded parts of the little-visited western end of the range; of these about 20 live in the deep valleys and rugged terrain of Somiedo Natural Park. Somiedo Natural Park was established in 1988 and protects almost 30,000 hectares of some of the highest and most scenic peaks and valleys of the region, and is regarded as the best-preserved montane environment in the Iberian Peninsula. The Cantabrian Mountains and their outlying ranges also hold the vast majority of Spain's 1,000 to 1,500 Iberian Wolves and are the stronghold of the species in Europe. This is a population that has increased markedly since an estimated all-time low of just 500 individuals in 1970. The depopulation of Spain's rural regions, as Spaniards have increasingly migrated to the cities, has benefited both the wolf and the bear, as has a changing attitude towards two species which were once viciously persecuted.

Day 1

On Ship

Our holiday starts with the overnight ferry from Plymouth to Santander which usually departs at around 5pm. After settling in on board we have the evening at leisure to do a bit of sea-watching or just to enjoy the comforts of the ship and the atmosphere of this "mini-cruise" at the beginning of our holiday.

Day 2

On Ship



Brittany Ferries' Pont Aven - used for our crossing to Santander

A full day crossing the western English Channel and Bay of Biscay, a journey which at this time of year regularly produces sightings of an exciting range of whale and dolphin species. The ferry provides a good vantage-point for scanning the sea ahead for tell-tale fins or 'blows'. Our ship crosses the continental shelf during the night and the morning will find us in the Bay of Biscay, over a deep underwater topography that creates a particularly rich feeding ground for whales. Here we have a chance of encountering such exciting

species as Fin, Minke and pilot Whales, plus the deep-diving Cuvier's Beaked Whale and a variety of dolphins including Bottlenose, Common, Striped and Risso's. In September it is also sometimes possible to see migrating Sperm Whales. At this time of year we have a good chance of seeing Balearic, Great, Sooty and Cory's Shearwaters, up to four species of skua, Sabine's Gull, Grey Phalarope and petrels that may even

include Wilson's. We're due to dock in Santander just after 6pm local time. From the port we'll drive an hour and a bit south to our cosy cottages in the Palentian mountains for a 4-night stay.

Day 3/5

Montana Palentina

For the next three days, from dawn until dusk, we will be mounting our search for the region's Wolves. You will, of course, be free to either join or opt out of any of our excursions that you choose; however, your chances of seeing a Wolf obviously increase the more time you are prepared to put in. Indeed, our chances depend on the hours we put in, our patience in our quest and, above all, the stealth and silence that we maintain during our long hours in the field. This is not a tour for the loud and talkative! You must be prepared, at all times, to follow your tour leader's instructions, and to be quiet at any time, and for long periods. Such patience will, we hope, be rewarded. It should also allow us to see some of the other mammals as well as the birds that inhabit the region.

It is in these hills and mountains of northern Spain that the vast majority of Spain's 1,500 to 1,500 Iberian Wolves are found – the stronghold of the species in Europe. This is a population that has increased markedly since an estimated all-time low in Spain of just 500 individuals in 1970. The depopulation of Spain's rural regions, as Spaniards have increasingly migrated into the cities, has benefited the Wolf, as has a changing attitude towards an animal that was once viciously persecuted.

The particular area in which we have been watching Wolves in recent years, and on which we focus during this section of the holiday, is a region of rolling hills and broad valleys which affords excellent opportunities to scan wide areas of open land and which may easily be accessed via an extensive network of metalled roads and gravelled forest tracks. It is a landscape that is part Scotland, part New Forest; a rolling tapestry of conifer plantations, sprawling oak woodlands, extensive heaths, ancient grazing meadows enclosed by tumbledown dry stone walls, and damp grassy hollows marked by elegant poplar stands. Much of the birdlife here is shared with such similar habitats in Britain. Birds of prey are much in evidence, and include Red Kites, Hen Harriers, Sparrowhawks, Common Buzzards, Kestrels, Merlins and even the occasional Cinereous (Black)



Rock Bunting

Vulture and Golden Eagle. Conifer forests are home to Firecrests, Coal and Crested Tits, Jays and Crossbills. The heaths hold Woodlarks, Stonechats and Dartford Warblers, whilst Ravens honk evocatively as they pass overhead. Good numbers of both Red and Roe Deer (the prey of the Wolf!), complete the picture. But, take a look around the traditional granite-built villages of the region and the Crested Larks, Black Redstarts, Southern Grey Shrikes, Spotless Starlings, Rock Sparrows, Serins, Cirl Buntings and Rock Buntings soon confirm that you really

are in southern Europe!... as, too, do the Wild Boar that are common in this region.

Looking for Wolves requires a great deal of persistence, patience and stealth. It also requires a lot of luck... not least with the weather! We will spend much of each day (certainly the first and last three or four hours) ensconced in the mountains at suitable viewpoints in order to scan for Wolves... and any other mammals and also birds that we may happen to see. Each day will be tackled with flexibility, but a typical day is likely

to involve a pre-dawn start to ensure on-site positioning by dawn or sunrise, armed with drinks and some 'nibbles' to keep us going! We might well be in the field until late morning before returning to the hotel for a late breakfast. Later, armed with a packed lunch (or having taken lunch in the hotel) we will head out into the field again, probably remaining out until dark.

Our lodging, three terraced converted farmhouses, is newly renovated but not flash! Its rooms are warm, comfortable and beautifully clean; rustic but functional, and all have shared bathrooms with toilet (see detailed description at end of itinerary). Breakfasts are varied; cereals, fruit, bread/toast and jam, eggs, with tea or coffee. Three-course dinners are straightforward but enjoyable and eagerly anticipated each evening – soup, salads or pasta, followed by meat (usually a choice of pork, lamb, steak or fish) and chips, followed by desert. We also include very drinkable local Toro and Duero wines in our package.

This simple, but comfortable, and unique environment will be our base for four nights.

Day 6

Somiedo

Today we undertake a 170-mile drive west to Pola de Somiedo, just to the south-west of Oviedo.

The journey will provide several opportunities for some birding stops, leg stretches and lunch. Although it will be too early in the year for big groups of bustards to have formed, (we have previously seen up to 500 Great Bustards in a single day in winter), we should still see this enigmatic species. The sight of a male Great Bustard in flight has to be one the most spectacular avian sights Europe has to offer! We should keep an eye out for Marsh and Hen Harriers, Merlins, Red Kites, other raptors and numerous larks, finches and buntings. We should also be on the look out for the last of the summer visitors and migrants which might include one or two White Storks or a Great Spotted Cuckoo.

We will be based for three nights in one of the larger villages in the park, Pola de Somiedo, the sleepy hub of the region. Our hotel is clean and comfortable with basic, but functional, rooms. All have an attached bathroom with toilet. The hotel's restaurant is located a minute's walk away in the main square, serving delicious wholesome Asturian fare. Breakfasts are traditionally spartan, just bread/toast and jam with tea or coffee but could also be quite substantial as they may add fruit, eggs and even pancheta (the local crispy streaky bacon)! This simple, but comfortable, environment will be our base for the next three nights. Upon arrival we will head out for our first explorations of this beautiful park.



Female Brown Bear by D and J Dimmock

Day 7/8

Pola de Somiedo

We have two full days to explore Somiedo. We will probably begin our bear quest by driving high into the valley of the Rio Somiedo, a wonderland of steep slopes adorned with rugged rocky outcrops, Beech

woodlands and lush alpine pastures – the land of Bears, brañas and vaqueiros! Leaving our vehicles, we will spend most of the day walking some of what is normally a 4-hour traverse of the high slopes back towards Pola de Somiedo. With so many magnificent viewpoints over the valley to the slopes on the opposite side, we will stop regularly to scan with binoculars and telescopes in the hope of sighting a Brown Bear as it grazes in a stone-walled meadow. During September the Bears will be feeding on the seasonal glut of fruits, nuts and other food sources in order to fatten up for their long winter hibernation. There is also always the very slim possibility of a sighting of one of the park's four packs of Wolves. Such sightings are rare, but in this area in particular we are likely to find both Wolf tracks and droppings, as these slopes are a favourite hunting area.

The open mountain slopes provide the best scanning opportunities and, as well as mammals (the most likely



of which we are to see – probably in some numbers – are Chamois, together with Red and Roe Deer), we are also likely to be provided with wonderful views of birds of prey. Griffon Vultures may often be seen cruising beneath us, whilst others to look out for include resident Golden Eagles, Goshawks and Peregrines plus good numbers of such summer visitors as Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures. At these altitudes we will also hope to see Crag Martins, Rock Thrushes, and both Rock and Ortolan Buntings, whilst both Red-billed and Alpine Choughs frequent the high meadows and

are often seen wheeling overhead in large flocks.

In order to stand a chance of seeing a Bear we must also put in long hours of patient scanning from one spot during the early mornings and late evenings. A successful bear quest will require a hefty dose of luck, not least with the weather! We'll also enjoy the other wildlife we see from our vantage-points, and during other gentle-paced wildlife walks, as well as leisurely and lavish al fresco lunches amongst the beautiful Cantabrian scenery.

Quaint villages and hamlets lie intermittently along our route each day, all exemplifying the wonderful Asturian architecture of the stone and clay-tiled houses typical of Somiedo's valleys – each dwelling with its separate, classically Asturian, stilted storehouse. Many of these stone houses stand in varying stages of dilapidated antiquity. Elderly ladies dressed in black, and hunched, walnut-faced menfolk beneath weathered caps, amble occasionally and sedately about the streets, and remind one of a bygone age that, actually, to some degree, still persists in this backwater of rural Spain that seems, for now at least, to have escaped the EU and local government funding that has recently so transformed so much of Spain's countryside.

Day 9

Santander/on ship

Today we undertake a leisurely 170-mile drive east to Santander in time to board the boat for the journey back across the Bay of Biscay.

We'll arrive in Santander in time for a drink and/or a bite to eat and a stroll, before boarding the boat.

Day 10

Plymouth/Portsmouth

After darkness in the Bay of Biscay, breakfast time will find us south of Brittany and in potentially productive waters, where we will once again look out for Harbour Porpoise, Minke Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin, together with Balearic, Cory's and Great Shearwaters. A chance for a last bit of sea-watching and some reflection on our experiences of the last 10 days before we dock at Plymouth usually at about 4pm and say our goodbyes after what will surely have been a varied and enjoyable trip.

Accommodation

Twin cabins (inner 2-berth with one bunk-bed) on the ferry. All cabins with private facilities. Should you prefer your own single-occupancy cabin, please let us know at the time of booking and we will advise you on availability and additional costs.

Our accommodation in Montana Palentina comprises up to 3 old farm cottages. Please note that facilities are not en suite.

Casa Montes, the largest, has a double room, bathroom, kitchen and living space (where group meals will be had) upstairs, with 2 twin rooms and 2 bathrooms downstairs.

Casa del Arco has 2 bedrooms upstairs (1 twin, 1 double) with 1 bathroom, together with toilet, kitchen and living space downstairs.

Casa Gutierrez has a twin and a double upstairs with a bathroom, kitchen and living room downstairs.

You will be assigned a twin share room, unless you would prefer a single room, in which case please let us know and make your payment before departure or, preferably, on booking.

Food

All meals included except those on the ferry and dinner in Santander.

Grading

Day walks, grade A-B.

Focus

Birds and mammals.

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, 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, at the time of booking.