

Bayona

Bayona, in Galicia, was the first town in Europe to hear of the discovery of America. Now it's our turn to discover this jewel of Spain's northwest coast

the beautiful

Words: **Adrian McManus**
Photography: **Tourist board of Bayona**



AS THE bus hurtled across the huge *Puente de Rande*, a suspension bridge over the Ria de Vigo, I pondered on the fate of all those chests of ducados and doubloons, supposedly still lying somewhere in the murky depths below my feet. A significant number of gold and silver laden galleons returning from the Americas came to grief here in 1702 at the hands of an Anglo-Dutch fleet. My attention quickly moved to another kind of flotilla, *bateas* or mussel rafts anchored in formation in the middle and along the sides of the estuary. On the horizon, the *Islas Cies*,

enshrouded in mist, were just about visible. To the left, the urban sprawl of the city of Vigo, Spain's largest port and container terminal. Before I knew it, we had pulled into Vigo bus station. After a swift consultation at the information window, I boarded my second bus. Ticket stub held tightly in my hand, I was greeted with a begrudging '*buenas*' from the driver, and after ramming my overnight bag into that ridiculously inadequate space overhead, I took a seat next to a rather large *señora* protectively nursing two huge blue plastic bags of *grelos* or turnip greens. This small, seemingly





insignificant detail actually reminded me that it was still late spring in these parts, and that I was bound for what is, for the greater part, a summer resort.

Bayona is just a twenty minute ride from Vigo so I had plenty of time to engage my fellow passenger in conversation. My foot in the door was to congratulate her on her turnip greens, telling her they looked absolutely splendid. She confided to me that some people considered them a little too bitter, but for her they were the perfect accompaniment for *lacón*, salted leg of pork served with *chorizos* and boiled potatoes. The bus drops you off in front of the *lonja*, the place where the fishing boats auction off the day or night's catch, which, for those interested, is held at around five o'clock Mondays to Fridays. The area in front of the *lonja* is also the taxi rank so I jumped into one and asked the driver to take me up to the *Parador Conde de Gondomar*.

Marauding pirates

The *Parador Conde de Gondomar* is, without doubt, one of the most stunning hotels in Spain. A huge mediaeval granite fortress with a double curtain of imposing crenulated walls, towers, turrets and gun emplacements, it was the town's only defence against marauding Barbary pirates. It was enlarged in the 16th century in order to deal with a new and more-dastardly foe that operated out of Plymouth. Good old Sir Francis managed to sack just about every significant port on the way to his famous



singeing of Phillip of Spain's beard at Cádiz. Legend has it that he also wanted to raid the tomb of St James in Santiago de Compostela in order to bring back that 'superstitious old bag of bones' back to London for exhibition on London Bridge. Not a popular bloke.

Bayona has one major claim to fame in European history. In 1493 its citizens were the first in Europe to hear the news of the discovery of a New World, or at least a new trade route to the East Indies, as it was then believed to be. Every March the town holds a grand mediaeval knees-up called the *Fiesta de la Arribada* which celebrates this momentous event. You will see a replica of Alonso Pinzon's ship *La Pinta* docked in the harbour. The ship brought back a cargo of strange new foodstuffs such as tomatoes, potatoes, avocados, chocolate, maize, and of course, tobacco.

Old town charm

Armed with two maps from the friendly tourist office, I made my way along the sea front and

headed for the *Pazo de Mendoza* hotel on the sea-front. This is one of the entrances to the *casco viejo* or old town. I grabbed a terrace table there, ordered a *café solo* and started to plan my route. The town is actually quite small and all the action is concentrated on *c/ Ventura Misa* which runs more or less parallel to the sea front. In fact, no sooner are you in this street than the touts from a nearby restaurant are trying to lure you into their clutches. Call me bloody-minded, but this for me, is good enough reason to give the place a seriously wide berth. Admittedly, the 'aquarium' in the window had some pretty portly *cigalas*, or Norwegian lobsters, all strategically sitting up on large oval platter, but it was the sunken eyes of the *besugo*, or red bream that convinced me that the place wasn't for me. Never trust a *besugo* with sunken eyes and hollow jowls. I pressed on, giving the smarmy tout a woefully unconvincing 'no thanks I've already had lunch'. It was 12.30 and indeed time for me to be to movin' on.

FOOD AND DRINK

■ FONTE DE ZETA

Praza Fonte de Zeta, 5
Tel: +34 986 35.82.14

One of the best restaurants in Bayona with superb fish and shellfish at reasonable prices. It's small and they don't take reservations. I was told to come a little early (9.30) for dinner to ensure a table.

■ JAQUEVI

c/ Ventura Misa

Jaquevi stands for *jamon*, *quesos* y *vinos* - hams, cheeses and wines. Try the delicious *pimientos jaquevi* - *pan tostada* with *tetilla* cheese, *pimiento de piquillo* and topped with an *anchoa de santoña*. *Jaquevi* is always packed, day and night. Grab a seat where you can or simply stand at the bar and order away.

■ POST DINNER DRINK

Portiko
c/ Ventura Misa, 50

There are some excellent *copas* to be had here. My G&T was painstakingly prepared and an education to watch.

STOCKING UP

■ VINATERÍA EL ZAGUÁN

c/ Ventura Misa
Tel: 986 355485

Their motto is 'traditional food and drink'. A kind of deli where you can buy local wines, cheeses, assorted cured products and excellent quality *conservas*, or canned produce featuring Galician staples such as baby sardines in olive oil and even *grellos*.

WINE ROUTES

Bayona is very close to the *Rosal*, a sub-zone of the *denominacion de origen* Rias Baixas, producers of the fabulous white wine Albariño. In recent years producers in the Rosal area have been carrying off most of the gold medals, much to the dismay of the vineyards in what is generally considered the cradle of Albariño, Cambados. Some of these Rosal wineries are located in jaw-droppingly beautiful settings, and are well worth the visit. You will of course be able to sample some of their recent vintages and as always in Galicia, wash it all it all down with some great local cheese, ham or *empanada*.

■ BODEGAS TERRAS GAUDA

Tel: +34 986 821001
www.terrasgauda.com

■ BODEGAS LAGAR DE FORNELOS

Tel: +34 986 626875
www.riojalta.com/lagar.htm



Shouting match

Twenty or thirty yards ahead I spotted a group of elderly gentleman standing round two old barrels, a sure-fire sign of a good watering-hole. If the old boys are outside on a cloudy, though not terribly cold day in March, it means that the place is heaving inside, and heaving inside usually spells decent wine and decent *pinchos*. I'd arrived at the wonderfully atmospheric *O Refuxio D'Anton*. As I fought my way through the doorway I was greeted by a seriously-listing-to-portside retired fisherman, his steely blue eyes met mine. After a few nanoseconds of deluded recognition, his wizened Yarmouth luggerman's mouth uttered the time-honoured scatological rejection of his maker, *me cago en Dios!*, a curse which would have had him incarcerated 30 or 40 years ago. Now this is just my kind of place, literally falling down around your ears. A nicotine stained plywood board sealed off

the kitchen from prying eyes. In front of that there were a few tables and chairs for sit down tapas. The scrummy aroma of *zorza* (spicy pork) and *xoubiñas* (baby sardines) wafted across the bar and cloudy, acidic white wine was being poured from large white jugs into little white porcelain bowls. There was a gum-staining red version for those with more sophisticated palates. I shouted my choice of wine to the barmaid and for a *pincho* I was offered *huevos rellenos*, or stuffed eggs, *empanada de bonito casera*, or homemade tuna pie, and of course, *tortilla de patatas*. The place was absolutely deafening. Two or three rowdy fishermen were shouting each other down in one corner, whilst a large group of *pijos*, toffs up from Madrid for the weekend, were gleefully roughing it in the other. I downed the contents of my *cunca* or porcelain bowl, paid my 50 cents to the smiling barmaid and headed out into the streets.

Beside the seaside

Once out of *c/Ventura Misa*, I followed the sea-front *paseo* to the left and made my way to the *Casa de los Ceta* on the *Avenida de Joselín*. This building is also known locally as the *Casa del Perdón* due to a strange, if slightly warped privilege granted by the Catholic Monarchs Fernando and Isabel. About to be publicly chastised criminals were pardoned if they were able to jump up, grab hold of, and more importantly, hang on for grim life to a chain that hung from the door of the main entrance to the house.

Overseeing the Atlantic Ocean crashing over the sea wall is one of Bayona's other notable monuments. *La Virgen de la Roca*, erected in 1930, is a huge 50ft granite statue of the Virgin Mary. Holding a small fishing boat in the palm of her white marble hand, she looks out to sea,





guiding home the fishing boats. Mariners admit to breathing a heavy sigh of relief when they first set eyes on her through the dark and rolling winter skies.

Past and present glory

After joining a group of cooing Portuguese visitors in a manic photo session from the lofty perch of the Virgin's palm, I scrambled back down the spiral staircase and made my way back towards *Montereal*, the fortified promontory and original location for the town of Bayona. It's rather hard to picture a thriving, bustling community behind its stark, silent walls today. Until the mid 17th century, when Vigo rose to prominence, Bayona La Real was one of most important transatlantic ports in Spain, rivalling both Seville and Cádiz.

One can just picture the great galleons arriving and unloading their exotic cargo, the bustle of townsfolk hawking their produce to ships about to depart, the cries of people bidding a tearful *adios* to those embarking on a new life in the new world.

Today, the moorings in the port of Bayona are quite different. It is now home to some of the most beautiful cruisers and yachts you're likely to set eyes on. Bayona's *Montereal Club de Yates* is a posh affair that plays host to a number of prestigious regattas, including this year's Volvo Ocean Race and the *Regata S.A.R. Príncipe de Asturias*. After being very politely turned away from the members' only yacht club, I decided to do the promontory before lunch and recommended by locals Tito and Charo, who I'd met the previous night in one of the many watering holes on *C/ Ventura Misa*.

STAYING THERE

■ PARADOR CONDE DE GONDOMAR

Tel: +34 986 355000
www.parador.es
Simply stunning.

■ HR TRES CARABELAS

c/ Ventura Misa, 61
Tel: +34 986 355133
www.hoteltrascarabelas.com
Charming staff, spotlessly clean
and where the action is.

■ TOURIST INFORMATION

Official website
www.baiona.org

GETTING THERE

The quickest route from the UK is by flying to Vigo. Air France go direct from Heathrow to Vigo. It's then a 20 minute drive to Baiona. Iberia and British Airways fly to Vigo but this takes longer as you have to catch a connecting flight in Madrid.

Ryanair fly in to Santiago de Compostela and then you are an hour away by car down the A-57. Or you could fly in to fascinating Oporto over the border in Portugal from where it's around an hour and a half's drive.

Along the prom

'Doing the promontory' consists of following the pathway below the fortress walls. At several points along the route, small stone steps lead you down to a series of natural rock pools, though you'd be foolhardy to swim there due to dangerous currents and freak waves. There is also a small 17th century chapel, should you feel the urge to have a chat with *Santa Liberata*, the first woman to receive martyrdom on the cross.

For safe bathing there's the great town beach, *Santa Marta* (complete with Blue Flag), along with *Os Frades* and *Concheira*. The long sweeping *Playa Ladeira* between Bayona and Santa Cristina de la Ramallosa though is by far the nicest of the bunch and within easy walking distance.

Wild horses

In summer, villages near Bayona host *curros* or *rapas das bestas*. These events are truly a sight to behold as, once a year, wild ponies in the surrounding hills are herded at breakneck speed into specially built wooden corrals. These corrals are surrounded by a makeshift grandstand where spectators, villagers and tourists alike can follow the event from a safe distance, commenting on the remarkable horsemanship of some and screaming with laughter at the 'cowboy' antics of others. The ponies are then branded and have their manes and tails trimmed. The local wine flows with a vengeance and there are usually stalls serving *churrasco*, barbecued pork ribs and the omnipresent *pulpo a feira*, octopus Galician style. And who knows? You might even meet up with my turnip top lady with some summer goodies in her blue plastic bags. ■