

Over to Oviedo

It's a smart, relaxed, walkabout place and serves up fabulous food and drink. We think we've found the perfect place in Spain for a relaxed autumn city break

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Pictures: Oviedo Tourist Board & Adrian McManus



Fontan, old market place



UBI EDO, *ubi edo*”, repeated Ángeles from Oviedo. I repeated the words back to her, parrot fashion. It all began here in 761 she proudly declared. Fair enough, I thought; it must be the ancient rendering of the name Oviedo, a fairly close approximation of the modern day Oviedo. After some Visigoth archbishop, perhaps? She grinned, repeating the words again, as if impressing upon me the need to comprehend the profound symbolism of the words: “Ubi edo ... it means *where I eat* in Latin”. How wonderfully appropriate I thought, as Oviedo is a foodie’s dream, but more of that later.

Where it all began indeed. Back in the 8th century, Oviedo was the seat of the tiny Asturian monarchy, independent, but hanging on by the skin of its teeth. The Moors had crossed the River Duero, an imaginary border between north and south for many northerners today. They organized military campaigns called *razzias* from time to time, mainly to keep the Asturians on their toes, for they had little interest in conquering what was for them a remote, inaccessible area populated by savages. With the fall of south to the Moors, many of the holy relics were brought to the mountains of Asturias and hidden in secret places until better days came along. With the fall of Caliphate of Córdoba, the Moorish grip on the country began to lessen and the Christian kingdoms in the north gradually began to re-conquer land. At this time Oviedo was a major pilgrimage centre as the Holy Crypt in the Cathedral housed, and still houses today, some pretty serious pilgrim-pulling relics,

including the *Santo Sudario*. Not quite as well known as its big brother the Turin Shroud, the *Sudario* is believed by the devout to be the cloth used to wipe the face of the dead Christ as he was taken down from the cross.

With the discovery of the remains of the Apostle St James in the 9th century, on the site of that was later to become Santiago de Compostela, the re-conquest of Muslim territory was well and truly underway. The Moors had over-run the peninsula with the aid of the Prophet’s arm and the Christians of the north now had something to rally around too. The Cathedral of Oviedo is a hotch-potch of architectural styles, ranging

from Pre-Romanesque to Baroque. Whilst not as dramatically eye-catching as its purely Gothic sisters at Burgos and León, it is still a most impressive building and well worth a wander.

Spic and span

The first thing that catches your eye in Oviedo is how spotlessly clean the city is. I was told that they’d won several awards for being Europe’s cleanest city and it was certainly a pleasure not to be scrutinising the pavement Jack Nicholson style, dodging doggy deposits. The fifteen minute or so walk from the bus station, normally drab, run down and slightly seedy areas, was a real eye-



Fontan market and church



Camilo de Blas



opener. In Oviedo, you can stroll, suitcase and rain permitting, up and down wide spacious boulevards. When you turn into *C/ Uria* and head towards the city's lung, the lovely *Parque San Francisco*, it's feast your eyes time. I spotted belle époque, art-deco and eclectic styles side by side, jostling for attention, some of them extraordinary examples of how to flaunt your wealth and not give a damn.

Market time

Walking down *C/ Fiero* from the *Plaza de la Constitución* you'll see the Fontán, a lovely wrought-iron glass-canopied market place, built in the early 1900's. It opens all day from eight to eight and has some spectacular fish stalls. While I was there I witnessed a bunch of *marujas* or old ladies being terrorised by a stall-owner with a live 3 ft *cazón*, a small shark called a *tope* in the UK. As he struggled to keep it from taking a chunk out of his arm, I asked him how it would be prepared, locally. He came back with what seems to be the standard reply to that sort of question in this part of Spain; a parsley, garlic and olive oil marinade overnight and pan fried for 5 minutes or boiled and served with potatoes.

On the hoof

Oviedo is fabulous for wandering from bar to bar, *tapeando* as you go. The trick is to order your *caña* or *vino*, then wait, if necessary, for ten minutes. Read a newspaper, engage somebody in conversation, but just wait a while. More often than not, the waiter will eventually bang your first free tapa down on the counter in front of you. If this doesn't happen then you'll just have to choose from the selection behind the glass case in front of you. All of the following establishments serve some imaginative and beautifully presented tapas: *Siete Plazas C/*

Cimadevilla 11, La Consistorial Plaza del Sol 2 and Casa Amparo C/ Arco de los Zapatos. Ask at the Tourist Office for the *gastro mapa*, an excellent route map that will direct you to over 50 places across the city that turn out quality *pinchos* and tapas.

Hearty fare

For some hearty, well prepared Asturian cuisine, look no further than *Punto y Coma, C/ Suarez de la Riva 5*. Their repertoire includes all the classics: *Fabada* and *Pote*, bean based stews, laden with saffron, *chorizo*, *morcilla* or black pudding and assorted pork bits, you would definitely only eat this at lunch time. On the fish front, *Pixín* or monkfish is very popular, as is *bonito* or tuna, so popular that the Cantabrian fleet from the Basque Country in the east to Galicia in the west caught 18 million kilos of the stuff in 2006. *La Gran Taberna Plaza Porlier 1* is a very elegant and refined eatery. Whilst there I tried the *cazón*, which I'd seen harassing the *marujas* in the market earlier in the day. It was served boiled, probably just for a few minutes, with new potatoes and was exquisite. Towards the end of lunch, the Archbishop of Oviedo arrived, causing quite a stir, with several folk standing up to kiss his ring. It still happens.

Scrumpy and scorpion fish

Asturias is cider country and in Oviedo there's a whole street dedicated to its quaffing. *C/ Gascona-El Bulevar de la Sidra* is where it all happens. I was told there's a strict etiquette to follow and that it's not the kind of thing one should do alone as it's a social thing. Basically, the waiter brings you and your gang one bottle of cider and one glass. Then the spectacle begins. After uncorking the cider the waiter raises his right arm and the bottle aloft, the other arm, holds the glass down by his left side. He's not allowed to look at either the bottle or the glass, so looks nonchalantly into the distance, through the window to the street perhaps. He tilts the bottle and the cider pours down into the glass below. As it hits the side of the glass, it froths up a bit, at which point it's swiftly handed to the first person to stick their hand out. You must drink it in one go, but always leave a little to swirl around the glass, so as to 'clean' the area where your lips have had contact with the glass, and so on, till the bottles are done, you've killed each one and the table is full and overflowed.

One of the best, if not *the* best places on the *C/ Gascona* to experience this is *La Pumarada*. It's also a great place to have lunch or dinner and is always packed to the door and buzzing. Specialities of the house are *Parrillada de Mariscos*, a kind of seafood platter, *Chuletón de Buey a la Piedra*, this is a humungous ox t-bone weighing up to two kilos or more and cooked on a scorching hot stone slab. I had the mind-warpingly scrummy *Paella de Bugre* which is made exclusively with local clawed lobster. The delicious *Pastel de Cabracho*, or red sea scorpion mousse here is reputedly the best in Asturias. Another atmospheric place for some cider swilling is



Plaza del Riego



La Pumarada



Tapería



ESSENTIALS

■ GETTING THERE

Daily flights with easyJet from London Stansted to Asturias-Oviedo.

www.easyjet.com

A taxi from the airport into Oviedo costs about €45. An express bus service leaves from outside Arrivals for Oviedo from 7am-12midnight, every hour, on the hour (except at 10pm). Tickets: €5.60.

If you have a bit longer, the greener option of course is to jump on a boat. The fast ferry *Pont Aven*, operated by Brittany Ferries, sails from Plymouth and docks at the classy port of Santander in Cantabria. You then have a wonderful, scenic drive of just over 2 hours along the north coast with the sea on your right and the mountains on your left. Fabulous.

www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

Tel: 0870 5908 1306

Sailing to Bilbao from Portsmouth with P&O will add another hour to the journey but that simply means an extra 60 minutes of wonderful scenery.

www.pofferries.com

Tel: 08705 980 333

■ STAYING THERE

HOTEL FRUELA

Fruela 3

Oviedo 33007

Tel: +34 985 20 81 20

www.hotelfruela.com

The Hotel Fruela is a real gem. The location couldn't be better, a stone's throw from the old town and just around the corner from the Fontán Market. The building is 19th century and was very stylishly renovated in 2003. The wonderful Parque San Francisco and shopping area of the C/ Uria is less than a hundred metres away.

HOTEL DE LA RECONQUISTA *****

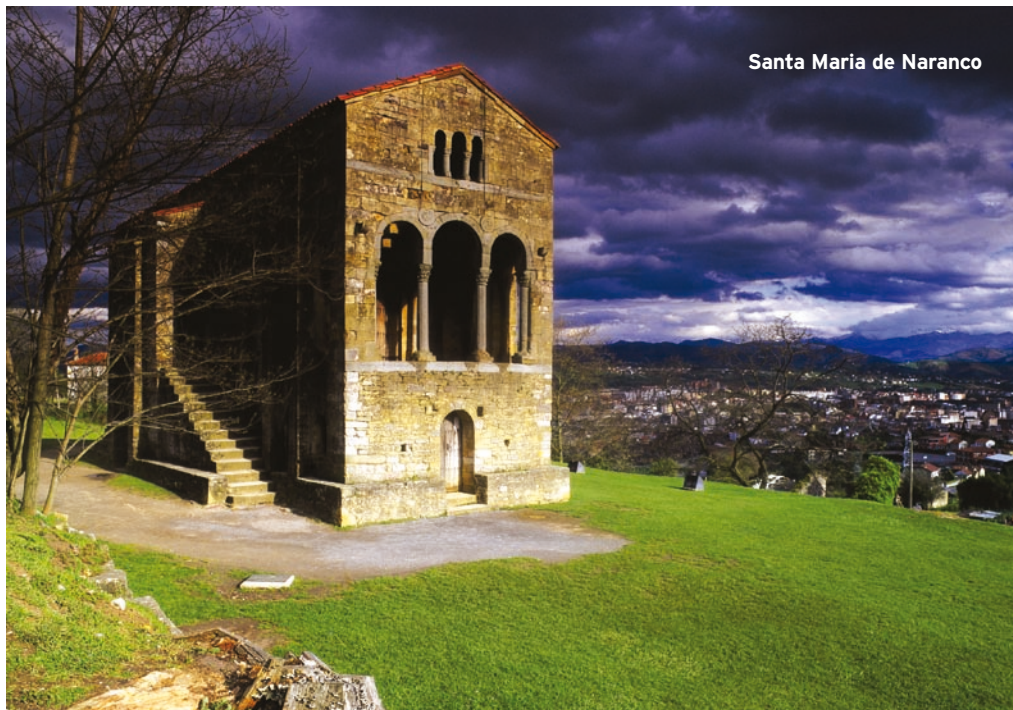
Gil de Jaz 16

Oviedo 33004

Tel: +34 985 24 11 00

<http://www.hoteldelareconquista.com/>

This is where Bob Dylan will be staying if he turns up to accept his prestigious award, the *Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Artes*, in October. It is one of Spain's most exclusive hotels and well worth the splurge.



Santa Maria de Naranco



the *Fontán* old market place. Its pretty 16th century colonnaded interior is often used as a film set and when the tables and chairs are set out it's a perfect place to lunch, dine and while away the hours.

World Heritage Sites

Oviedo also boasts three terribly cute little UNESCO World Heritage Site churches dating from the 9th century, and are well worth a look in, especially for the absolutely wonderful views they afford of the city. The best way to visit the first two is to jump into a taxi as they are only 3 km out of town. *Santa María de Naranco* began life as a hunting lodge for the Asturian king Ramiro I (842-850). It's a building of simple yet beautiful proportions and depending on the light and time of the day, can be a stunning sight. Just a little further up the road is *San Miguel de Lillo* of which only a third remains due to the damp undermining the church's foundations in the middle-ages, it is still nevertheless a pretty little church. Fans of early Byzantine influenced frescos should head back down into town to *San Julian de los Prados*, another early 9th century jewel that sits, amazingly,



teatro Campoamor

surrounded by blocks of flats and next to the main Oviedo to La Coruña dual-carriageway. The wooden ceiling, the superb pictorial decoration and alpha-omega inscribed cross, entirely unique in Western Europe, should firmly place this church on any art lover's itinerary.

Stocking up

Most of the big name emporiums are on or around *C/ Uria*. If you're looking for local foodstuffs to take home then *Crivencar* at *C/ Fontán, 1* is definitely the place to check out. The shop is of shoebox proportions and just crammed with goodies. Beans or *fabes* means Asturias and the regional dish *fabada*, which like *paella* has transcended its boundaries, is popular all over Spain. The choice is really bewildering; especially with cheese, as Asturias has more than forty registered D.O. cheeses, which is incredible considering its relatively small size. (The *Denominación de Origen* guarantees that it is what it says on the label.) The most famous is *Cabrales*, a blue cheese similar to our Stilton, but stronger in flavour and less creamy. For a wonderful step back in time, 1914 to be precise head for *Camilo de Blas* at *Jovellanos, 7*. This is a wonderful old fashioned *pastelería* or cake shop specialising in *carbayones*, *duquesitas* and *nueces glaseadas*, delicious little cakey things that defy description, the best thing is to try one and decide. The cash registers, lighting, scales and service are a throwback to more genteel times. I didn't want to leave the place.

Another charming old fashioned *pastelería* is the *Rialto* in *C/ San Francisco* opposite the University. The café in the back is an art-deco time warp and the waitresses serve you politely and efficiently. It was also nice to note there was no television or music blaring out to spoil the old time atmosphere of the place, just conversation, which was most relaxing.

And that sort of sums this provincial capital up. Wending my way back to my room after an after dinner snifter, I found myself as you do, dodging those immaculately groomed, almost touching five foot tall grannies you see in Spain, ambling along the street, arm in arm, deep in conversation. I looked at my watch and mused on the shenanigans that would no doubt be taking place on the streets of provincial capitals all over the UK at 2 am in the morning. Ambling grannies was not the first image that came to mind. ■



Calle Fruela



FURTHER INFORMATION

■ VISITOR INFORMATION

The main tourist information point is conveniently located in the *Plaza de la Constitución*, opposite the clock tower. The extremely helpful staff will only be too happy to arm you with maps, walking routes, *pincho* and tapas routes, vouchers etc.

Tel: +34 984 08 60 60

turismo-oviedo@ayto-oviedo.es

■ INSIDE THE MUSEUMS

The extremely impressive *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias* is housed in two lovely 17th and 18th century mansions. For a publicly owned collection, the range of works on display is outstanding. They were all present, Berruguete, Tiziano, Morales, El Greco, Ribera, Zurbarán, Murillo, Goya, Picasso, Dalí and a splendid selection of notable Asturian art from the 18th to the 19th centuries. The rest of the museum's collection is made up of modern sculpture, posters, photography, and industrial art, especially ceramics and glassware.

■ NIGHT AT THE OPERA

Oviedo is one of Spain's premier cities for Opera, Theatre, Classical Music and Dance.

The stunningly beautiful 19th century *Teatro Campoamor* is the setting for this year's opera season, running from October through to December.

■ OVIEDO ONLINE

Oviedo Tourist Board's excellent website provides up to the minute information on cultural events taking place in this elegant city.

www.ayto-oviedo.es