

Top of the world

We visit a saint stranded in Northern Spain and find ourselves looking down from the highest cliffs in Europe onto one of its prettiest villages



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THERE'S NOTHING like a ghoulish threat to kindle your imagination, and San Andrés de Teixido, Galicia's most important religious pilgrimage after Santiago de Compostela still manages to prick the conscience of thousands of devout *romeros* or pilgrims year after year. The Galician take on Christianity has always set it apart from the rest of Spain. Many of the *romerías* or pilgrimages have their roots in the early Church's rather unsubtle attempts to suppress paganism in the area and it's not unreasonable to assume that places like Finisterre and Muxía on the Costa da Morte and San Andrés de Teixido, all precariously perched on the edge of the then known world and facing west, would have been, in their day, highly revered sanctuaries of Celtic sun worship.

The legend of San Andrés de Teixido tells us of an unconvinced Apostle that whinges about being sent to such an inhospitable and far flung outpost. Finally breaking down in tears, he agrees to go, but warns Jesus that nobody in their right mind would travel to such a God-forsaken place to pay homage to him. Jesus tells him not to worry, that many people down the centuries would travel hundreds of miles to see him and that those that didn't make the trip at least once in their lifetime, would have to hit the pilgrim's route three times when they were dead.

JC, as usual, was right and since then the stream of *romeros* to this wind-lashed hamlet on Spain's stormy north-west coast has been endless. The 12 km route from the charming fishing village of Cedeira winds through some stunningly beautiful countryside, and the sloping granite cliffs here are, sorry, supporters of Slieve League, Donegal, the highest in Europe at 2,034ft.

On bended knees

The path down to the village begins at the cliff-top *Mirador Os Cadrís* and is clearly marked by two wooden posts with yellow markings. Traditionally, the most devout of pilgrims make the descent on their knees. Today you're more likely to see them do a time-saving, knee-bound lap-of-honour of the lovely granite 16th century chapel that houses, according to tradition, the saint's bones.

The first written record of a chapel here dates back to the 12th century when the Knights of Malta paid for the construction of a sanctuary on the site of a much earlier building. The wall murals inside the church depict San Andrés's martyrdom and there is a fine 18th retablo, a typically ornate



San Andrés de Teixido

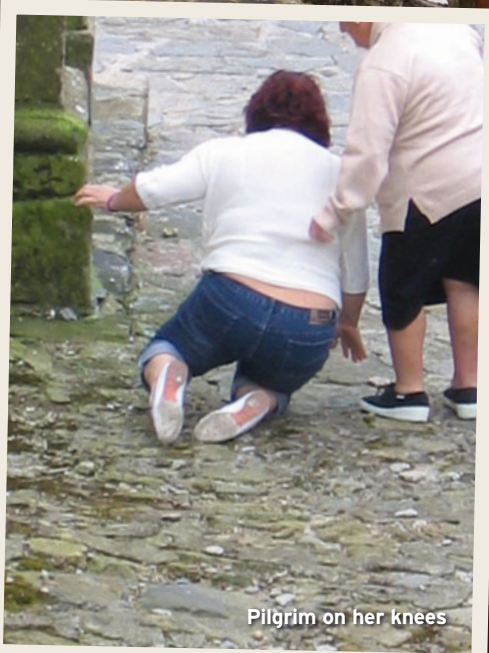
Italian Baroque reliquary, and a spookily lifelike statue where the faithful deposit offerings of candles and *exvotos*, bizarre wax effigies of hands, legs, feet, heads etc, in hope of the saint's holy intercession in a number of areas, ranging from affairs of the heart to illness in the family, pets and even farm animals.

Business and blessings

Local expert Antonio Rey, part of whose family were born and bred here, confided to me that San Andrés de Teixido 'moved millions of euros' throughout the year, that a couple of euros on a candle or *exvoto* here and a couple on a *rosquilla*, a kind of aniseedy donut, there, generated a handsome income for the locals who live exclusively off the rich pickings of the pilgrimage. The entrance to the village is lined with stalls hawking t-shirts, postcards, bottles of homemade *augardente*, the local hooch made from distilled grape-skins. There are several versions of this and all are great, though the uninitiated should tread carefully as *augardente* can be deceptively easy to knock back. Look out for *herbas*, made with local herbs, *tostado*, or toasted, *crema*, a cream liqueur similar to Baileys and the wonderfully potent *licor café* which can dangerously prolong any *sobremesa* or after lunch/dinner round the table chat.

Barnacle bounty

After fighting my way past the trinket floggers I was relieved to find the village bar-restaurant. One of the great things about *romerías* in Galicia is the



Pilgrim on her knees



Wax effigies

Cedeira

MAGIC HERBS AND TALKING TOADS

After the church, people head down to the *Fonte do Santo*, or Saint's Fountain, which is said to be fed by a spring under the altar of the church. Although someone has crudely daubed *no potable* or unfit for human consumption on this listed fountain, this doesn't seem to deter the *romeros*, who, after they've made their wish, fearlessly drink from it.

Many pilgrims gleefully pluck what is known as the *herba de namorar* or lovers' herb, a sure-fire way of enlisting the saint's help in the quest for a mate. What did seem strange was the enormous variety of *herbas* being plucked, which in turn led me to believe that no-one really knew or particularly cared about how to actually identify the herb in question. An odder and perhaps more tacky side to the *romería* is the custom of tying bits of white tissue paper, Tibetan style, to trees, bushes and barbed wire fences on the way down to the fountain. I asked several people about it, but nobody seemed to be able to come up with a plausible answer. The huge Galician *rubia* or blonde cow that sat nearby, ruminating on the kaffuffle taking place didn't seem very convinced either.

Another deeply rooted San Andrés superstition is the *almas en pena*, or the souls of the departed that never made the pilgrimage during their lifetime. These *almas en pena* can take the shape of reptiles and amphibians like lizards and toads. Children down the centuries have been told the tale of a lad who, in a fit of boyish cruelty, was about to stamp on a toad that happened to be hopping along the pilgrim's way. Just before his boot came crashing down on the hapless creature a voice croaked out 'Don't do it José, it's me, your Granddad'. Faith can move mountains.



Cetarea, roman fish farm



People fishing on the Cedeira harbour wall



Cedeira old town



Cedeira from the castle



Cedeira

fact that the *comilona* or mega pig-out is never far away. The sun had passed the yard arm and we entered the bar for an *aperitivo*. The place was packed with pilgrims and ramblers. A swift glance at a sign up on the wall told me I was in *percebe* country. The *percebe* or goose barnacle (*pollicipes cornucopia*) is Spain's most expensive crustacean, which, depending on the time of year, can reach up to 120 euros per kilo. So why then are they so expensive? Basically, because the gathering of this most sought-after *animalito* can be downright suicidal, with *percebeiros* losing their lives on the rocks almost every year.

Apart from the odd sighting at London's *Fino* restaurant, we don't really bother harvesting our barnacles in the UK, so why don't we eat them more? Probably because it hasn't occurred to anyone yet that something resembling Ranulph Fiennes's frost bitten toes could be in the slightest bit edible. Antonio and his daughter were shocked to hear that entire colonies of *percebe* on Britain and Ireland's Atlantic coasts, probably capable of sustaining entire communities, were left to their own devices. If the Canadians and Moroccans could export their *percebe* when demand in Galicia outstripped supply, then why couldn't the British and Irish board the *percebe* train too? *Percebe* for thought.



Pilgrims enjoying percebes

Stunning Cedeira

The annual pilgrimage of San Andrés de Teixido takes place on September 8 with the fishing village- summer resort of Cedeira getting quite busy in the process. This fishing village, which goes back to Roman times, is the base for most pilgrims.

For anyone who sees the San Andrés stuff as a nonsense Cedeira is a wonderful spot anyway, away from the chapel, the wax legs and pilgrims shuffling round on their knees.

The approach from Ferrol is breathtaking. Intensely green, wooded slopes, dotted with characteristic granite houses give way to a



Locals in San Andrés de Teixido



succession of enormous white sand beaches and finally the town itself, nestling around a small river mouth. The harbour wall is still the magnet for fishermen as it has been for generations and the old quarter is charming with winding streets and blind alleyways hiding shops where time seems to have stood still.

Tapas treats

While there, I was treated to some spectacular tapas at the *meson kilowatio*, a tiny place which is justifiably famous. One of their seriously tasty specialities is *marraxo* or porbeagle shark. Thin slices of *marraxo* are marinated in olive oil, lemon juice and parsley, sprinkled with sea salt and cooked on the *plancha* for a few minutes and then piled onto a rectangular plate already piled high with chips. The outrageously crispy and tender *calamares* were quite simply the best I've ever tasted. Be sure to order *tapas* and not *raciones* because portions are ridiculously huge.

Another lovely place for *vinos y tapas*, and former haunt of Picasso's Godson, the singer and heart-throb Miguel Bosé, is *Taberna A Calixa* at *Eirexa*, 7, up a small alleyway not far from the

Oficina de Turismo. For the big *marisco* splurge head straight for *El Nautico* on *Rua do Mariñeiro*, 7.

Miracles and microclimates

For some splendid views of Cedeira from the sea, walk down to the port area, past the white fishermen's stores on your right till you reach the *Castillo de la Concepción*, an 18th century fort apparently sacked by both French and British troops in the Peninsula War. From here you can see the remains of some Roman *cetáreas* or stone fish and shellfish breeding pens, built into the rocks. The name of Cedeira is said to have originated from the Latin word for fish farm, *cetaria* which derives in turn from the word *cetus*, meaning tuna or whale. Although temperatures in the *Rias Altas* de Galicia are usually a few degrees below those of the *Rias Baixas*, it has considerably less rainfall and therefore well worth a visit in late August and early September. So take heed of the old Galician refrain, a *San Andrés de Teixido*, *vai de morto quen non foi de vivo*. He that doesn't go to San Andrés de Teixido during his lifetime will go when he's dead. Heavy stuff indeed. ■

ESSENTIALS

■ GETTING THERE

Fly London Heathrow - La Coruña with Clickair. La Coruña to Cedeira takes around an hour and a quarter by car.

Fly into Santiago de Compostela with Ryanair and then you have a drive of around an hour and a half.

From the ferry ports it is about a 6 hour drive with the mouthwatering prospect of a visit to the cute Asturian fishing village of Cudillero. You are exactly half way to Cedeira and a stop here is the perfect break.

■ STAYING THERE

There is some remarkable rural accommodation popping up all over Spain these days and at prices we can only dream of in the UK. Take a look at:

www.cedeira.net/carreiro and www.casaruralcordobelas.com

■ FURTHER INFORMATION

For visitor information (and some of the loveliest music you are likely to hear on a homepage) check out: www.cedeira.org