

The end of the world

Possibly the least attractively named of the Spanish costas, the Costa da Morte, or Coast of Death, is considered by many, in fact, to be the most spectacular in Spain

THOUGH THE name Finisterre will be familiar to veteran *Shipping Forecast* enthusiasts, most Spaniards associate it with something far more sinister, *A Costa da Morte* or the Coast of Death. The graveyard of countless shipwrecks over the centuries, Europe's worst ecological disaster occurred here in 2002 when the oil tanker *Prestige* broke up in mountainous seas just off the fishing village of Muxía, spewing thousands of tons of crude oil into the sea. As people began to watch the soul-destroying events unfold on television, busloads of people from all over Spain and Europe began arriving in Muxía and other towns along the stricken coast for a clean-up operation of heroic proportions. Manfred the German, who had been living on the sea-shore in a driftwood shack, was so distraught that he passed away, some say of a broken heart, shortly afterwards. A new word also entered the Spanish language as a result, *chapapote*, a Galician term for the black, foul smelling gunk the sea vomited up on every tide. Since that dreadful day, this hauntingly beautiful stretch of unforgiving coastline has made a miraculous recovery, though some people say the damage caused to marine ecosystems in the area was irreparable.

Sun worshippers

Fisterra, or Finisterre in Spanish, means Land's End, from the Latin *Finisterrae*, the end of the known world to the Roman legions that conquered the area, naming it *Gallaecia* after the numerous Celtic tribes that inhabited the area. A delightful local legend tells the story of the Romans finding

an altar dedicated to sun worship at the end of the Cape. Some historians claim that the chalice and communion host in the Galician Coat of Arms is a Christianised version of the pagan sun-worshipping cult of *Ara Solis*, with the chalice symbolising the horizon and the host the setting of the sun. Some say the unusual fervour surrounding Easter Sunday in Finisterre also has its roots in *Ara Solis*, with the joyous celebration of the renewal of life. Further traces of the cult are found in the remains of the *Ermita de San Guillermo* at the top



Muxía



of Monte Facho. The hermitage probably dates from the 11th century, but the orientation of the stone work, facing Monte Pindo, the Olympus of the Celtic tribes living here at the time of the Roman conquest, suggest a much earlier usage. The site has long been associated with fertility rites and local folklore says that barren couples who spend the night together on the great stone slab will be rewarded with progeny soon afterwards.

The church, always at odds with this kind of thing, sought to neutralise the place, first by converting it into a Christian temple, then by completely razing it in the 17th century in a crude attempt to erase it from public memory, but some say that the ancient stones are eloquent in their silence. It's very hard to think of it as a mere coincidence that pilgrims arriving from Compostela choose to end their arduous trek at Fisterra. Tradition demands that they remove their pilgrim's attire and then solemnly set fire to it on an improvised altar at sunset, with nothing before them but thousands of miles of lonesome ocean. It could be that the old time religion is alive and well. So even if you're not that given to pyrotechnics and the getting your kit off part, the sunset itself is truly awe inspiring and shouldn't be missed.

The coast road

My own date with *Ara Solis* began on a cloudy morning in Santiago de Compostela bus station. After cowering slightly at the yappily insistent *queixeira*, the country cheese flogger on the concourse below, I hopped aboard my bus for the two-and-a-half hour ride to Fisterra and the ominously sounding Death Coast. The bus rumbled slowly through some really gorgeous



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countryside, with rolling hills, thousand year-old *carballeiras* or oak groves and dense eucalyptus plots, the mainstay of the local forestry industry. The lush fields, planted with potato, cabbage and maize, are divided into a ragged patchwork of granite walls. This is a result of the odd Galician inheritance laws called *minifundios*, where the law demands that the family estate be divided equally among all surviving children, resulting therefore in ever diminishing plots or *fincas*.

Eventually we caught sight of the busy port and sizeable market town of Cee, recently devastated by flooding, a direct result, some say, of this year's catastrophic forest fires. After a quick refreshment stop, we were on our way again. The next port of call was the charming fishing village of Corcubión with its baronial mansions, pretty squares and lovely bay. The bus then rolled round a few more headlands and we finally pulled into Fisterra.

At first glance, it didn't look too inspiring, the collective madness of 60s urban planning resulted in hideous extensions being slapped onto the original stone fishermen cottages, in pure cowboy fashion. I made a quick phone call to my hotel to let them know I'd arrived and the very kind owner promptly offered to pick me up from the bus stop as the hotel was a little way out of town. After a quick siesta, I headed downstairs for a *cerveza* before heading out for the evening. The owner of the gorgeous *Hotel Rustico Dugium*, Mr Ernesto Insua, a leading authority on the area, is acknowledged to have one of the finest collection of books on the *Costa da Morte*, and it wasn't long before we got down to discussing the many legends and myths surrounding the area.

Me and Julio

At around 9.30pm I started to get peckish, so I asked Ernesto for a recommendation for dinner. He warned me that nobody should leave Fisterra without experiencing what is, without any shadow of a doubt, one of the finest fish and seafood restaurants in all Spain, *A Tira do Cordel*. This restaurant's excellent reputation is known far and wide and crooner Julio Iglesias has been known to land his helicopter on the *langosteira* beach in front of the restaurant for a quick seafood fix.

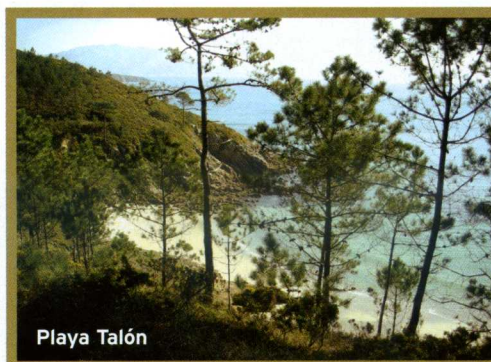


Muxía



Camariñas

The speciality of the hotel is *pescados a la brasa*, or grilled whole fish. While *Lubina* or sea bass is the star dish, there are other excellent species on offer such as *Escarapota*, a local variety of scorpion-fish similar to the French *Rascasse*. The live stuff is kept in large oxygenated tanks out back called *pozos*, though these are not visible to customers, unlike the grill area, which you pass on the way to the dining room at the back. While there I tried the excellent value *menú de degustación* or sampling menu at €35, and was served *percebes*, or goose barnacles, *almejas a la brasa*, or grilled clams, *longueiróns* or local razor clams, a half-kilo sea bass, *croca con patatas*, a very succulent rare fillet of beef with chips, *flan casera*, or homemade crème caramel, coffee and *licor café casero*, the very potent home brewed coffee liqueur. I ordered a bottle of the excellent *Albariño Don Pedro de Soutomaior*, which wasn't included in the price of the menu. The restaurant owner Pepe is a real character and regaled me with lots of stories about the Death Coast. One of the things that amazed me most about the place was the fact that Pepe's son and some of the other cooks go out at night in small boats with rods and actually catch sea bass from secret locations along the nearby coast, proudly showing me the equipment they used. The fish they catch is served up along with the rest of the stuff that Pepe gets from a select group of trusted suppliers. He assured me that the fish still have to be 'breathing' when they arrive in his cold storage area, where everything is then packed on ice to keep it in tip-top condition. I loved the place so much that I broke my golden rule of never going back to the same place twice during the same visit but I could hardly be blamed. Reservations are absolutely essential.



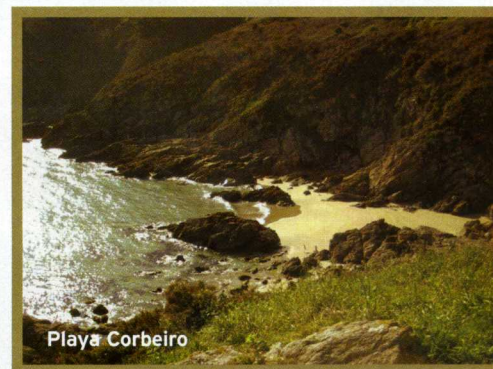
Playa Talón



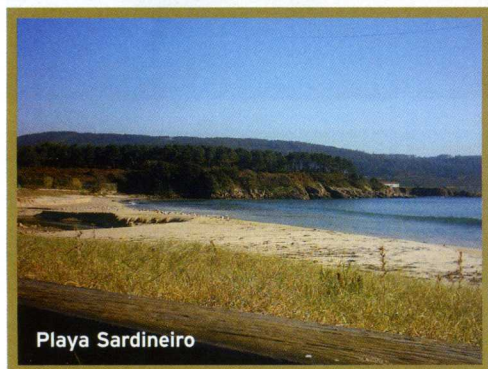
Arnela



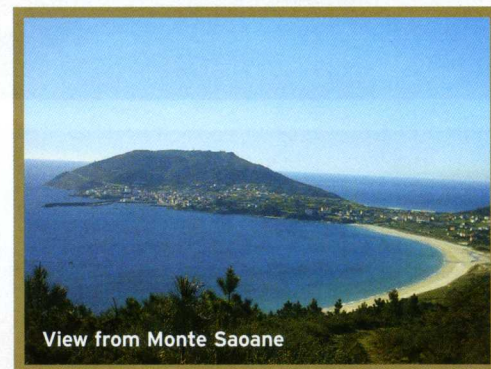
Mar de Fóra



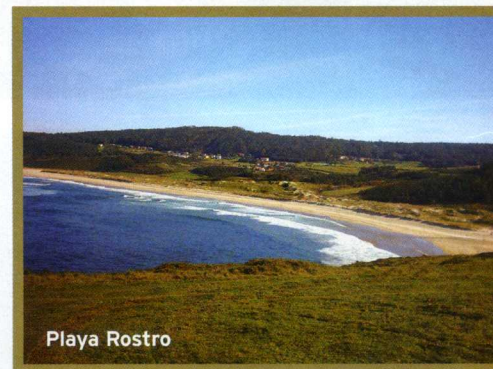
Playa Corbeiro



Playa Sardineiro



View from Monte Saoane



Playa Rostro

Towards Land's End

After a great night's sleep and a hearty breakfast I was very kindly dropped off in town and began my ascent to the famous *faro*, or lighthouse. The road gently wound its way up and folk on their way down never failed to call out *buenos días* or *buen camino*, a good example of pilgrim protocol at the World's End, I guess. The intense blue-green of the ocean and the bright yellow of the *toxo* or gorse bush, the soaring larks, spring flowers in full bloom, and the odd technicolour lizard darting in and out of crevices made me seriously begin to doubt Darwin's theory; Cabo Fisterra was a riot of colour that morning and I was enjoying it immensely. When I reached the *faro* I began to search the area for tell-tale signs of garment burning, and there they were immediately below the *cruceiro* or stone cross. Unfortunately, one of last night's pilgrims had tried to burn his Adidas trainers as well. I couldn't help feeling that they looked a little out of place poking out of the ash. After a few mumbled words in praise of *Ara Solis* and agreeing to take a photo of a couple of French pilgrims, I made my way back down into town. It was now about 1pm

and time for an *aperitivo*. I headed instinctively for the *peixe do mar*, a rowdy tavern, full of fishermen and their families, but with a blaring television drowning out all but the loudest individuals, I slugged my *cerveza* and ventured out into the streets again.

After walking around the imposing Castillo de San Carlos, a small gun battery from the days of Drake's deadly incursions, I decided to explore the area behind the mediaeval *casa do porto*. This, in essence, is the heart of the old Fisterra, with its higgledy-piggledy streets, squat whitewashed granite fishermen's cottages with green doors and windows, worn sun dials, makeshift washing lines, a tabby chasing bluebottles underneath the *borreos* or granaries, and the ever present Galician long haired, buck-toothed, ankle snapping dog, ready to take a lunge at the unwitting *guiri* or foreigner. Currently under construction in Fisterra is the *lonja turística* or 'tourist friendly fish auctioning house'. This is the place where the fishermen auction off the night's catch to waiting restaurateurs and other *empresarios* from the service industries. When it's finished it

should be a great place to visit, not only for the grand variety and colour of the produce sold, but also for the manic cries of the vendors, the unintelligible burble of the auctioneers, and as always in Spain, a bar where you can have an early morning *carajillo* or hot toddy to warm you up while you watch the proceedings from a comfortable distance.

Spectacular beaches

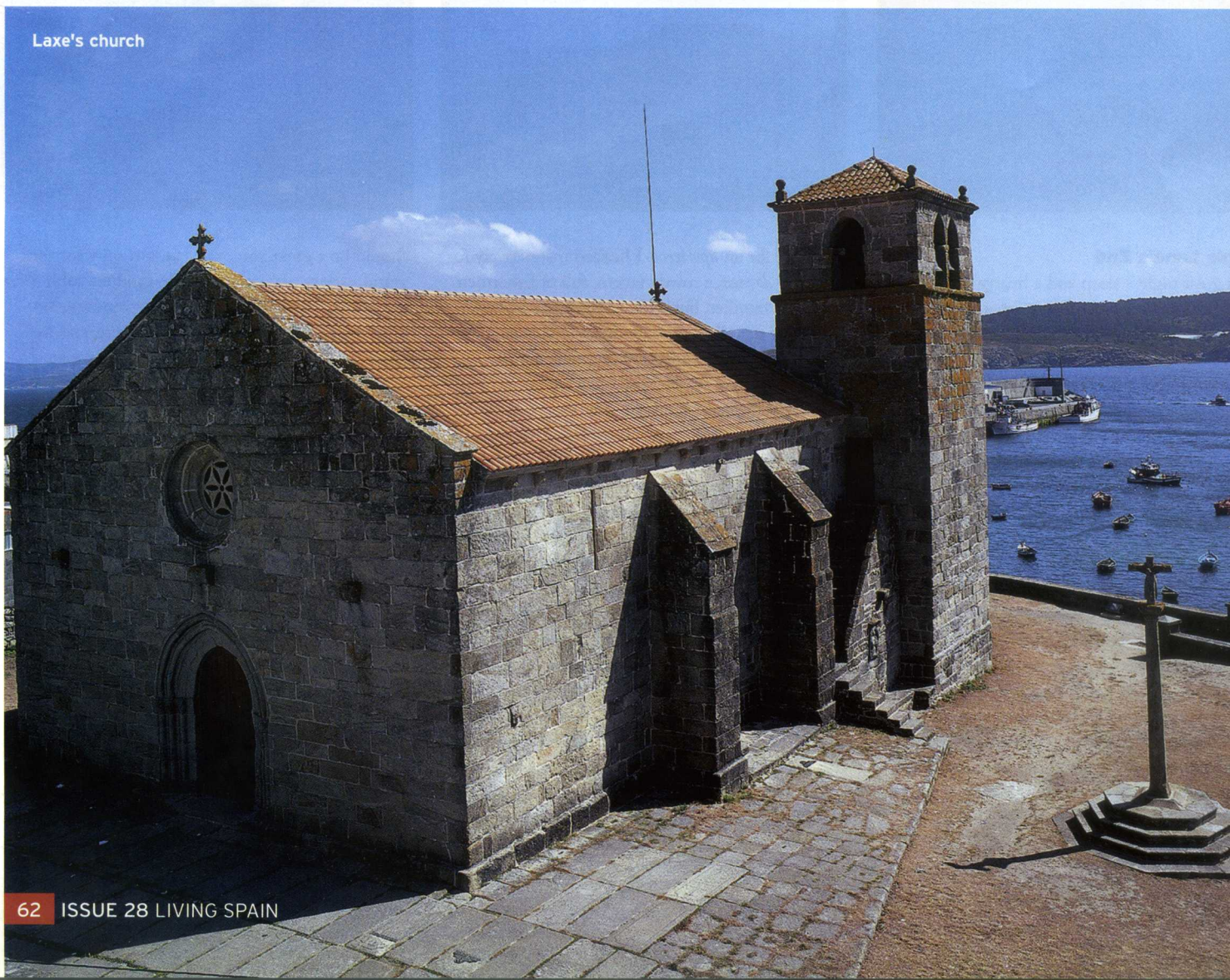
Galicia boasts some of the most deserted, unspoilt and spectacular beaches in Spain. The only downside is water temperature and on some beaches, the dangerous currents. There's nothing better, however, than setting foot on pristine white sands with seagulls and terns as your only company. Access to the beaches can be primitive at times, but it's well worth the effort. All of them can be reached on foot or bicycle, though car obviously makes the job a lot easier.

Although names like *Praia Langosteira*, *Talón*, *Corbeiro*, *Nemiña*, *Lires*, *Mar de Fora*, *Arnela*, *Sardineiro* are legendary, for me, the most spectacular of all was the *Praia do Rostro*.



Laxe

Laxe's church



Directly open to the Atlantic Ocean, a pristine curve of golden sand dunes stretches along its entire 3km length. The lush scenery along the way from Fisterra is really lovely, with *pallares* or hay-stacks, centuries old barns, cottages, mediaeval churches, wayside crosses or *cruceiros*, and lovely old stone cottages.

Lost at sea

The most beautiful stretch of the Costa da Morte is between Camariñas and Laxe. Starting at Cabo Vilán, a series of rocky headlands, crested by gleaming white *faros* penetrate into the sea, taking a tremendous battering on all sides from a sometimes furious Atlantic Ocean. Just a few hundred metres from the shore, sunken reefs called *bajos* are a constant danger to shipping in the area. Not far from Cabo Vilán lies the moving English Cemetery. The cemetery was built to commemorate the wreck, on November 10, 1890, of the Royal Navy training ship *The Serpent*, due to a storm and poor illumination from the lighthouse. The bodies of the cadets that drowned were buried here, and there were only three survivors. For years, an RN ship used to approach the site of the wreck, fire a salvo and deposit a wreath in honour of the dead. The Lord Commissioner of the British Admiralty presented the parish priest of Xaviña with a shotgun, a gold watch to the mayor of Camariñas and a barometer to the town hall as a gesture of gratitude for the heroic deeds of the townsfolk that night. A new *faro* was built at Cabo Vilán as a direct result of this tragedy and the lighthouse (the first electric one in Spain) now illuminates over 40 miles of fabulous coastline for those visiting under less hazardous conditions.

The Coast of Death might well be the name of the shores here in the far north-west, but take a journey to the end of the world as we knew it and discover what is possibly Spain's most beautiful stretch of coastline. ■

ESSENTIALS

■ STAYING THERE

HOTEL RUSTICO DUGIUM

San Salvador, 1

Fisterra 15155

A Coruña

Tel: +34 981 740 780

http://galice.net.free.fr/galice.net/hotel_dugium_finisterre.htm

Highly recommended. Apart from the wonderful owner Ernesto, brimming with tales of the myths and legends of the Coast of Death, this splendid stone built hotel also houses a remarkable library of books on the area. Rooms from 53 euros including a great breakfast and understandably, people flock here from all over Spain. If you can't get in then a great alternative is:

HOTEL RUSTICO INSULA FINISTERRAE

A Insua, 76

Fisterra 15155

A Coruña

SPAIN

Tel: + 34 981 71 22 11

www.insulafinisterrae.com

A unique position near the lighthouse means both amazing sunrises and sunsets. A lovely building dating from 1908, there are just eight stylish rooms and at

prices from just 50 euros, a hugely popular choice for anyone wanting to visit the fabulous beaches of this part of Spain.

■ GETTING THERE

Ryanair and Air Berlin fly into Santiago de Compostela from Stansted. Ryanair also fly there from Liverpool and East Midlands.

From Santiago de Compostela to Finisterre is a 1hr 45min journey by car (84.4km).

■ FINISTERRE ONLINE

As ever, the excellent website of the Tourist Board of Galicia is a good place to start (www.turgalicia.es) and a number of the local councils in the region have informative websites in English. Try the following:

Finisterre

www.concellofisterra.com

Laxe

www.concellodelaxe.com

Camariñas

www.camariñas.net

Muxia

www.concellomuxia.com

Spanish readers can check out the Coast of Death website, (www.costadelamuerte.com) and to take a look at that wonderful restaurant, go to: www.tiradocordel.com



Ría de Corme e Laxe