

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 *Ermíta de San Guillermo* at the top



Muxía

