



TRAIN TO TRANQUILITY

▲ The Costa Verde Express by Renfe journeys over narrow gauge tracks and through varied landscapes.

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The landscape of Northern Spain alternates between mountainous countryside, bucolic hamlets, and scenic coastal towns. **Pallavi Pasricha** hops on board Costa Verde Express to savour the region's wonders and the good life.



◀ Llanes is a historic seaside town with fascinating architecture. Below: In the medieval town of Santillana del Mar, structures go back many centuries.



Watching the countryside roll by as I pressed my nose excitedly to the train's windowpane is something I recall doing as a five-year-old. Not much has changed since then. Even after 36 years, the thrill of watching the outdoors from a train is intact, but this time I am doing it in style, laying comfortably in a suite as I chug past lush meadows with cows grazing, narrow tunnels, and beaches on the Atlantic Coast in the north of Spain.

The luxury train Costa Verde Express by Renfe is my home for five nights. I had boarded the train in Bilbao for Santiago De Compostela, the Green Spain Route covers four autonomous regions—Basque, Cantabria, Asturias, and Galicia.

But my tryst with Spain began earlier, in one of its most popular cities, Barcelona. I spent time admiring the creations of famous Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi; I was completely

mesmerised by his masterpiece—the majestic Sagrada Familia cathedral that has been under construction for more than 140 years. It will be completed by 2026, a date chosen to coincide with Gaudi's 100th death anniversary. Standing in front of the massive structure, I wondered how Gaudi conceived this innovative and artistic design way back in the 19th century.

It is after three days of this kind of artistic inspiration—I stopped by other iconic structures built by Gaudi such as La Pedrera-Casa Milà, Casa Batllò, and Park Guell—that I head to Bilbao, the capital of the Basque region in northern Spain. I rush to the station as I am late, hoping the train tour has not begun without me. Thankfully, the shiny green Costa Verde Express is still on the platform. As I sip my coffee in one of the dining carriages done up in wood, it slowly sinks in that this is going to be my home for the next five days.

Before the journey, we are taken for a brief city tour of Bilbao that includes the famed Guggenheim Museum, whose building itself is an architectural masterpiece.

Then comes the moment I am waiting for—the train rolls out of the station for its leisurely journey over narrow gauge tracks through varied and often stunning landscapes. As I peer out of the window, I realise that its slow pace is a welcome change from modern high-speed trains.

My first meal on board is lunch at the dining coach where tables for two are set on either side with crisp white linen and fine cutlery. A fixed four-course meal with local wine and liqueur consists mostly of regional specialties. I have goose and blueberry French toast, monkfish salad, loin of Asturian beef, and egg and syrup pudding with ice cream. Several such gourmet meals follow in the days to come. The train has four lounges which include the dining area, a small library, and a bar.

I enter my suite done up in wood with a small double bed (4x6 feet) fitted to the wall. With just a small space on one side, at first, I find the cabin too tiny, but later realise that it is remarkably compact and self-sufficient. There's a mini bar, cupboard, safe deposit box, and space for me to tuck my luggage under the bed. All the 23 suites in the train come with a bathroom equipped with a standing shower cubicle.

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▲ Santander is a coastal city by the Cantabria Sea.

My new home trundles past pretty meadows and incredibly lush countryside—the train's route passes some of Spain's greenest landscapes. Our next destination, Santander, is a coastal city by the Cantabria Sea. Surrounded by water, it is known as the 'Bride of the Sea'. The Bay of Santander is the largest bay of northern Spain with a promenade stretching along 10 kilometres. After strolling around the town, I have dinner at El Serbal, a one-Michelin star restaurant with dishes like *foie terrine* grass with sweet potato puree, charcoal grilled Iberian pork loin with cream of carrots.

As I step into my suite to call it a night, I find two chocolates on my bed, thoughtfully placed to ensure some sweet dreams. The train remains parked at the station at night-time ensuring a good night's rest.

The next morning, my sleep is broken by the sound of a bell at 8 am—it's a daily ritual with a staff member going around ringing the bell like an alarm clock. A quick shower and hearty breakfast happen while the train snakes its way to the next destination. After reaching Cabezon De La Sal, we drive for about 20 minutes to Altamira cave, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is known for its prehistoric paintings. While the original cave is shut for visitors, there's a reproduction of the cave at a museum with some fascinating prehistoric paintings.

The next stop is Santillana del Mar, which turned out to be the highlight of the Cantabria region for me. How can you not fall in love with a charming medieval town with cobbled roads and red geranium flowers hanging from balconies? Walking down its alleys, I forget that the year is 2023 because the structures go back many centuries. The Town Hall dates

back to the 18th century while most of the houses, built between 14th and 17th centuries, still have a coat of arms outside.

To woo visitors to their tiny hamlet, women here started serving visitors a piece of cake and a glass of milk. Now it is flocked by tourists, but instead of the locals offering goodies, there is one shop that sells a slice of cake and milk. For lunch, I enjoy a local dish called *fabada asturiana*, a stew made of white beans and meat, at the Paradores Hotel.

Back on the train, I take an afternoon nap. Soon, it is time to explore yet another seaside town, Llanes. I find myself walking along Paseo De San Pedro, a clifftop from where you get the most incredible views of red rooftop homes, rolling beaches, and the sea. It's a windy evening but I sit there, gaze at the blue waters, and wonder what life would be like if I lived here, away from the rush of the city.

The next day, I head out to the first national park created in Spain—Picos de Europa. It is a cloudy day and the bus winds its way through the mountains, and for about five minutes, we meander along the sea with the hills on the side. It is a breathtaking sight. Little do I know that it's only going to get better. We go past Lago de Enol, the deepest lake in the area. As I step out of the bus, the crisp, cold air hits my face. A five-minute walk takes me to a

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▲ Clockwise from above: Seafood is an integral part of Galician cuisine; the glacial lakes of Covadonga are located over 1,000 metres above sea level; Santiago de Compostela Cathedral's rooftop offers a panoramic view of the city; pilgrim statue at Cape Finisterre; Combarro is a fishing village with stone crosses, sea houses, and granaries.



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gorgeous viewpoint, where all I can see are floating clouds, green mountains, and wildflowers, accompanied by the gentle sound of cow bells.

In the nearby village of Covadonga, I visit the impressive basilica that has soaring spires and blush-pink walls. This hamlet is home to a sacred cave and a ‘marriage fountain’ with seven spouts, and the story goes that whoever drinks water from all of them will get married within a year. I am determined to do so but trust my luck—one spout is spoilt. So all I can do is wait to see how the legend unfolds for me.

An evening of entertainment lies in store at the pub coach when we return to the train. I learn that this is a daily affair. So, one day, a magician enthralls us with all his card tricks, and on another, a pianist rolls out lively music and it turns into a karaoke night with everyone singing Spanish and English numbers. Another time, a mixologist sets the mood with some delicious cocktails, and on the last evening, there is a grand party. In fact, it does not take long to settle into life onboard—it comes with lavish breakfasts, fine wine, and gourmet meals.

My introduction to the Galician region is through the beach of Praia das Catedrais which is peppered with rocks that form arches. Luckily, the tide is low, so I can dip my feet in the water and enjoy walking on the wet sand. This stretch from Ribadeo to Viveiro is the most enchanting as we meander along the sea, crossing lovely beaches, and spotting an occasional lighthouse. I relax in the dining coach, sipping espresso and not taking my eyes off the view.

The next day, we disembark the train at Ferrol and drive to our final destination, Santiago de Compostela. It's the last stop not just for me but thousands of pilgrims who come walking along the Camino trail, which ends at the cathedral where the relics of St James are buried. They walk a minimum of 100 kilometres to the cathedral to complete the trail. The square outside is a place of high emotions—pilgrims hug each other, rejoice, and cry. I spot a row of backpacks lined up along the cathedral wall, people taking pictures of their worn-out shoes, or just lying down on the square. The energy is palpable. Apart from the church, Santiago de Compostela Cathedral is one of the few places where one can climb to the rooftop and get a panoramic view of the city.

I spend two days roaming around the Galicia region, where my guide takes me to charming coastal towns and villages. One of them, Combarro, lying near the town of Pontevedra, is a postcard village with narrow cobbled alleys that have granaries and shops, and restaurants by the sea. Within 15 minutes, I roam the entire place. I go to Pazo de Rubianes, a Ducal palace with a massive garden and vineyards, for a wine-tasting session and sample five of their most popular varieties. I also come to know that this region is the biggest exporter of mussels to the world.

The next day, I drive towards Cape Finisterre, also known as ‘Land’s End’. It’s believed to be the end of the spiritual path on the famed Camino trail, so I cross a lot of pilgrims making their way here. On reaching, I see a lighthouse, rocks, a cross with shoes kept under it, and a viewing platform from where you see what is called ‘the last sunset of Western Europe’. I stand there for a few minutes to take it all in.

Jenny, the oldest passenger on the train, turns towards me and says, “Well, I turn 83 tomorrow, my dear!” Watching her enthusiasm and joy in exploring new places and experiences makes me smile. Vowing to live like that till the end of my days, I leave Spain. 🌐



▲ Rúa do Vilar is a popular street leading towards Santiago de Compostela.

The Spanish Life

GETTING THERE

Emirates (emirates.com) and **Qatar Airways** (qatarairways.com) operate connecting flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to Barcelona and Madrid. From Madrid, the Renfe train to Bilbao takes 4.5 hours and from Barcelona it takes nearly 7 hours.

BOOK

The Green Spain Route from Bilbao to Santiago De Compostela on the Costa Verde Express by Renfe is for 6 days and 5 nights. The train runs from May to October (not August). The cost is ₹4,08,856 per person during the months of May, June, and September and ₹3,27,085 per person in July and October. The train can be booked via email: treneturisticosdelujo@renfe.es

EAT

Café Bar Bilbao is known for the snack *pintxo*, which is served on bread, skewers, or a toothpick and had with wine or beer. bilbao-cafebar.com

A Horta do Obradoiro is a Galician cuisine restaurant in Santiago focussed on seafood. ahortadoobradoiro.com

Casa Marcelo is a one-Michelin star restaurant serving a mix of Galician and Japanese cuisine near the cathedral in Santiago De Compostela. casamarcelo.net

VISIT

The Towers at Sagrada Familia

Get gorgeous views of Barcelona and the cathedral from either of the two towers—Nativity or Passion. While there’s a lift to go up, you have to come down by narrow stairs. sagradafamilia.org/

Guggenheim Museum

Bilbao’s most iconic site for modern and contemporary art. Don’t miss the outdoor installations which include the Puppy and another one by sculptor Anish Kapoor named *Tall Tree* and *the Eye* that is made of 73 metal spheres anchored around three axes. guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en

A Ponte Maceira

A picturesque stone bridge that has Roman origins is highlight of this small village, just 20 km away from Santiago De Compostela along the Tambre River. Sit by the river for some quiet time.