

TRAVEL

SUN
DAY



SPAIN'S WILD COAST

Hikers explore country's pristine northwest in a carefully organized but guide-free trek

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG HANSEN

Serendipity — an unexpected delight — is the word that comes to mind when describing the seven-day hike my wife, Sharen, and I recently completed in the wild and undeveloped northwest coast of Galicia, Spain. Simply put, anyone who is adventurous, loves traveling to Europe and is fit enough to do 10-mile-a-day hikes should seriously consider this trip.

▲ Each day's hike was on a variety of trails, including wide, grassy paths and narrow, rocky trails.

► The sun sets on the fishing village of Camelle, Spain.

► Horses on the fountain by Santiago's main cathedral greet pilgrims as they arrive.

◀ A cross at Finesterre marks the place considered by the Romans to be "the end of the world."

◀ A break during the middle of a day's trek allowed hikers to savor delicious and inexpensive Galician seafood and beer.



Prior to this experience, I had never heard about On Foot Holidays' programs. The itineraries allow hikers to go at their own pace, with maps and detailed hiking instructions but without a guide or other travelers, while still enjoying a high level of local support. What initially caught my attention was an announcement about On Foot Holidays' newest hike, the Lighthouse Way or "Camino Dos Faros," which was accurately described as a journey along "the last unspoiled coast of Europe." Although the company has packaged nearly three dozen tantalizing hiking routes in 13 European countries, including Spain, Greece and Italy, this particular hike sounded both challenging and rewarding enough to warrant a try. The company offered 10-day, seven-day or five-day routes for this hike, and we opted for seven days, which proved to

be the right amount of time and distance for us — a total of about 55 miles. Afterward, my wife and I agreed that this unique experience is one that we will always remember and treasure.

So what made the hike so special?

ORGANIZATION

On Foot Holidays provided us with an extensive pre-trip package containing a custom-written guidebook about the region and our hike, a set of detailed trail descriptions and maps for each day's route. In addition, they booked our lodging each night and arranged for a taxi to take our baggage to the next destination, so all we had to do was carry our daypack essentials. Each day we texted or spoke with the company's local expert, who was available in case of emergency but whose main function was to keep us informed about the daily weather forecast and also to make special taxi arrangements when we opted to shorten a couple of 14-mile hikes to less than 10 miles. (That was a much-appreciated option since my feet protested going more than 10 miles.) We found that the cost was very reasonable, considering the meals, lodging and transportation the company provided.

THE HIKING

The variety of the trails and scenery made every hike a delight. Single-track trails in grassy meadows soon became double tracks that paralleled a wide bay before heading through pine and eucalyptus forests cloaked in rich, green ferns. One of our hikes followed a narrow trail along a steep, rocky

SEE SPAIN • E11



IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA: DO GO CHASING WATERFALLS

Nature has packed the region with some 250 splash zones

BY HILLARY SPEED

BREVARD, N.C.

Some are big. Some are small. Some are wide. Some are narrow. Some crash down. Some are a slow trickle. And some, you can slide right down.

There are at least 250 waterfalls in Transylvania County, N.C., located about halfway between Asheville, N.C., and Greenville, S.C. Known as the "Land of Waterfalls," the region has the biggest concentration of waterfalls on the East Coast, according to the local tourism board. The cascades are particularly dramatic this spring. Unique features include a temperate rainforest in Gorges State Park, where more than 80 inches of rain fall annually.

"This is a land of all kinds of superlatives," says Nathan Jordan, a spokesman for the Transylvania County Tourism and Development Authority.

With lots of state and national parks in the area, visitors have easy access to other outdoor adventures, too, including biking trails and fly fishing.

Travelers who do go chasing waterfalls

If you go

Land of Waterfalls: Waterfalls of Transylvania County in Western North Carolina

Online: www.visitwaterfalls.com.

Getting there: Nearest airports are in Asheville and Charlotte, N.C.

this summer could challenge themselves to hunt down as many as they can, bucket-list style, or they could make a leisurely jaunt to one or two.

There's no wrong reason to visit a waterfall.

Go for the Instagram shot

Those who want the best #nofilter photos for the least amount of hiking can easily pop into the Pisgah National Forest and take selfies in front of the 60-foot Looking Glass Falls.

Five miles past the forest's main entrance, this beast of a waterfall can be viewed within steps of the main road, U.S.

SEE WATERFALLS • E12



HILLARY SPEED AP

Two people ride down Sliding Rock, a natural waterslide located in the Pisgah National Forest, between Brevard, N.C., and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Visitors annually flock to Transylvania County, known as "The Land of the Waterfalls."

Baja calendar

Ruta del Vino Bike Ride: 10 a.m. July 21. A fun ride for some and a race for others, this 40-mile bike ride around Baja's Valle del Guadalupe starts and ends at Rondo del Valle Winery, with a wine and food festival at the finish line. Race entry fee is \$60-\$65, with several upgrade options available for purchase. More information: rutadelvinobikeride.net

Tijuana Half Marathon: 7 a.m. July 22. The 24th International Half Marathon of Tijuana, an event that is part of the celebrations for the 129th anniversary of the city, is expected to draw more than 4,000 runners. More information: fmaa.mx

Fiestas de la Vendimia: Aug. 3-19. Baja's Valle de Guadalupe marks the annual wine harvest with a variety of events celebrating the many "fruits" of the region, ending with the Concurso de Paellas — a paella competition and consumption party — on Aug. 19. More information: provinobc.mx

Concurso de Paellas: Aug. 19. As the closing event of the Fiestas de la Vendimia (www.provinobc.mx), the Concurso de Paellas — under the oaks at Viña de Liceaga, a winery in San Antonio de las Minas — features 80+ teams presenting paellas for competition and consumption, plus tastings of more than 130 wines from 50 Valle de Guadalupe wineries. Tickets (\$70 per person; \$60 members) are available through Discover Baja Travel Club. More information: discoverbaja.com. U.S. (800) 727-2252.

Tattoo Expo: Aug. 11-12. Tattoo culture takes over the Real Inn Tijuana with international tat artists, live music and more. Admission is about \$10-\$12. More information: facebook.com/tijuanatatooexpo

Rosarito Baja Blues Fest: Aug. 17-19. First and foremost a fundraiser for regional children's charities, this festival on the waterfront at the Rosarito Beach Hotel & Resort is a good-time blues fest. This year's headliner is Chubby Carrier & the Bayou Swamp Band. More information: bajabluesfest.org

Baja Sand: Aug. 24-26. Baja Sand, a sculpture festival and competition held at Playas de Rosarito, features international sculptors creating intricate sand sculptures, a sand sculpture competition for families and amateur artists, numerous food and merchandise vendors, live music, beach games and more. More information: eventbrite.es

Feria Tijuana: Aug. 24-Sept. 16. The Tijuana Fair, held at the state park, Parque Morelos, features typical fair attractions — beauty contests, food vendors, rides, music, cultural and sporting events and more. More information: tijuana.gob.mx

Sabor de Baja: 6 p.m. Aug. 29. The sixth annual "Sabor de Baja" returns to the Rosarito Beach Hotel with the friendly culinary competition featuring 25 of Baja's top chefs, paired with the finest Mexican wines and artisanal beer producers. White attire is mandatory. Tickets include access to all food and wine, live entertainment, a commemorative wine glass and more. Tickets cost \$70-\$85 per person; hotel room packages are available. More information: sabordebaja.com

Fiestas del Sol Mexicali 2018: Sept. 28-Oct. 14. Since 1975, Mexicali's Fiestas del Sol has featured typical fair attractions in a family-friendly atmosphere: foods, rides, mechanical games, music concerts, merchandise vendors and libations. General admission costs about \$2. More information: www.fiestasdelosol.com.mx

Mariachi and Ballet Folklorico Festival: Oct. 3-6. Held at the Rosarito Beach Hotel, the festival features workshops, competition and performances, with net

proceeds from this annual event benefiting the Boys and Girls Club of Rosarito. Tickets for the Concierto Espectacular, featuring performances by two Grammy Award-winning groups, The Mariachi Divas and Mariachi Garibaldi, begin at \$25. More information: rosaritobeachmariachifolkloricofestival.com

Events are subject to change or cancellation. Please confirm information with event organizer before booking your trip. To submit Baja California events information, email at cynthia.zanone@sduniontribune.com



DOUG HANSEN PHOTOS

Striking stone structures called horreos have been used for centuries to store grain for livestock during the winter.

SPAIN

FROM E10 cliff overlooking the steel-blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean that thrashed against jagged rocks hundreds of feet below us. We stopped there to picnic and watch the only living things we saw that whole day: a herd of goats above us, and a group of dolphins cavorting in the waves below. In the distance, many of the mountain peaks sported gleaming wind turbines like candles on a cake. Later, that same trail led us across a 2-mile-long, curving, sandy beach with nary a soul nor structure in sight before heading onward through rich farmland. Before long, we stopped at a small village café that served Estrella Galicia beer and freshly baked bread with cold cuts for less than \$2. While we did get lost briefly a couple of times, in general the instructions were adequate and the trails were well-marked with the official "Camino dos Faros" green dots, arrows or little feet pointing the way.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

During our mid-May journey, the profusion of flowers delighted us as we admired the intricate designs and colors of statelily, purple foxgloves, dazzlingly yellow gorse (the spiny national flower of Galicia, covering entire hillsides), white daisies and countless

others. The ocean, however, was the star of the show. On our first day, as we walked downhill toward a long, deserted sand beach, I felt diminutive in the presence of the Atlantic's powerful swells that rolled toward the shore in a steady procession, cresting and breaking with a ferocious intensity.

A sad reminder of the ocean's power appeared out of the gray mist, halfway through a long coastal hike. It was the English Cemetery, where 172 British sailors, whose ship sank in 1890, were buried on this aptly named "Costa da Morte" or "coast of death." In fact, the name of our hike, the Lighthouse Way, derives from the series of lighthouses built along this treacherous coast.

Silence and solitude were the hallmarks of each day's sojourn. The only sounds we heard were birds chirping, the wind blowing through trees or the waves breaking against the shoreline. The air was clean and the temperature brisk, with frequent intervals of cloudy, cool, windy and rainy weather interspersed with glorious bursts of sunshine. There was remarkably little litter, the exception being spots along the shore where ocean currents deposited refuse that was mostly related to fishing.

PEOPLE AND FOOD

Staying in pleasant small towns and villages that we never otherwise would have



When the trail neared the coast, hikers marveled at the power of the Atlantic Ocean's waves crashing against the rocky outcrops.



Hikers celebrate the end of their pilgrimage after walking hundreds of miles on El Camino de Santiago.

visited made the hikes more special. We noticed that virtually all homes were well kept and neatly painted, mostly in shades of white with some in baby blue, light green or yellow hues that blended with their red tile roofs. While walking past rural homes, I was puzzled by the striking Galician rectangular, stone structures, called *horreos*, perched on top of mushroom-shaped stone pedestals. I learned that *horreos* have been used for centuries to store grain for livestock during winter months.

We found the local people to be friendly, welcoming and honest; in one small shop, I asked the owner about which bottle of Albarino wine he recommended, whereupon he took away my 8-euro bottle and replaced it with a 3-euro bottle, explaining that it

was much better. Where else would that happen? During a sudden rain shower, a man invited us into his home for tea or coffee. In Santiago, a woman walked a block out of her way to show us where to go.

While Galicia is famed for its seafoods, the menus focus mainly on octopus,

various types of shellfish and their coveted delicacy, barnacles. The local beer was good, and we relished the ubiquitous fresh breads and cheeses. In the morning, we always had freshly squeezed orange juice; one of our hosts insisted the juice tasted better when it was hand-squeezed. Being a fan of white wine, I was happy to find that the majority of local wines were white varieties that tasted great and cost between two and five dollars.

PILGRIMS AND EL CAMINO

Although our hike was generally not part of the renowned walk called El Camino de Santiago, there were stretches where both trails overlapped, combining our green marks and the blue-and-yellow Camino trail signs with the official scallop shell motif. Before and after our hike, we spent a night in Santiago, the destination each year for tens of thousands of pilgrims (both

If you go

On Foot Holidays
Phone: +44 (0) 1722 322652
E-mail: walks@onfootholidays.co.uk
Online: www.onfootholidays.co.uk

religious and nonreligious hikers). Coming from around the world, most of them appeared to be over 50 and had walked an average of 50 miles to reach that holy place. As small groups of hikers reached the main plaza of Santiago's ancient cathedral, they often cried, hugged and took lots of photos of themselves with their large backpacks, worn hiking boots and walking staffs. On this trip, spending a day or two in Santiago is a must.

Most of the pilgrims I spoke to said that walking the Camino had changed their lives in profound ways. What I realized on our much shorter hike was that I could allow myself to slow down, appreciate the beauty around me, and let go of the urge to power-walk from point A to point B. My wife and I realized that we, too, are pilgrims searching for meaning, awareness and joy on our journey through life. Our Galician hiking experience had moved us farther down that path in ways we won't forget.

Hansen is a travel writer and photographer based in Carlsbad. See more photos and articles at www.HansenTravel.org, Instagram: @doug_hansentravel or Facebook: @HansenTravel.org

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