

# *The thrill of the ride* Cyclist

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Spanish classic





# Battleground of the Vuelta





In the Picos de Europa mountains lurks a climb of legend. The Vuelta will visit it for the 19th time this year, so we ventured to northern Spain to see what the pros have in store on the Covadonga

Words **STEVE WESTLAKE** Photography **RICHIE HOPSON**



## Sneak Picos

Discover an untapped region of cycling paradise

Starting in Potes, ascend on the N-621 south-west over the San Glorio and follow the road all the way to Riaño. At the large junction in Riaño where the N-621 meets the N-625, go north (not over the Embalse de Riaño lake). Follow this road beside the lake as it heads north on the long descent through the Los Beyos gorge to Cangas de Onís. When entering the town take a right onto Avenue Covadonga (do not cross the river). Now follow the Avenue Covadonga (AS-114) and eventually you will reach a large roundabout. Go straight over (first exit) onto Congas Onís Panes (AS-114) until reaching a second roundabout. Go straight over (first exit, in a southerly direction) on the AS-262. This runs alongside, crossing several times, the Rio Reinazo river. When reaching the roundabout turn left (second exit) onto the CO-4, which is the Lagos de Covadonga climb. Enjoy it.



Someone is smiling down on us. The morning's cloak of mist is lifting gently and the iPhone forecast predicts blanket sunshine for our venture into the Picos de Europa. This unspoiled part of northern Spain is notorious for fickle weather thanks to its proximity to the coast and cloud-baiting mountains rising to 2,650m. It means that even in mid-summer, wise visitors arrive with a healthy we'll-take-what-we-get attitude. But today it seems the cycling gods are on our side. 'Happy days,' says my riding partner

James Thompson, not for the last time today. 'Happy days indeed,' I repeat quietly as I apply an extra layer of suncream.

James runs Marmot Tours together with wife Cathy, and they've recently added the Picos to their itinerary of Pyrenees, Alps and Dolomites-focused cycling trips. He's the man providing local knowledge on our route, plus he's brought Marmot's backup vehicle to ferry photographer Richie around, with Graham in the driving seat. 'The Picos really is an undiscovered cycling paradise,' James says with genuine excitement about the ride ahead of us. 'You'll see, we'll hardly run into any other riders all day.'

With weather anxiety now a fading memory, there's a slightly different sensation arising as we unload the bikes from the car in the town square of Potes. The tranquil pre-ride mood is almost perfect, as tyre pressures are checked, bottles filled and bolts tightened – but still





there's a ripple of trepidation in my stomach about what awaits us 120km down the road...

Covadonga. Not an Australian exclamation of approval, but rather a climb that rises 1,135m with prolonged sections at 15% that has entered legend as one of the toughest and most beautiful in the Vuelta a Espana. First introduced to Spain's Grand Tour in 1983, stage 15 of this year's race will see the world's finest riders scale its spectacular slopes for the 19th time.

*Cyclist Big Rides* don't usually feature summit finishes for the simple reason that we favour the practicality of riding a loop route rather than from A to B. But the Lagos de Covadonga (its full name) is an up-and-back road, so we've massaged the rules and put this iconic climb right at the end of our ride. It's both an appealing

concept as a way of imitating the pros' schedule, and a leg-testing challenge after what's shaping up to be a scorching day in the saddle.

#### **Ascent from heaven**

Pre-ride checks complete, James and I roll out of Potes and take a right onto the N-621, ready to begin the early stages of the San Glorio ascent. 'Our next turning comes in 54 kilometres,' says James with a grin. 'We follow this road all the way to Riaño.' The Cantabrian mountains rise up ahead of us bathed in soft morning sunshine, and the peaks slowly grow in scale as we tick off the first gentle kilometres with the gradient hovering at a warm-up friendly 2%.

It's a majestic scene and as we rise further into the Picos the San Glorio is hitting the ▶

**The Picos de Europa offers green, Wales-like landscape on a much grander scale**





Above: The first hairpins of the day see the incline moving seamlessly from 2% to 6%



◻ sweet spot. The gradient has crept up to around 6% where it will linger until the summit – plenty to nudge up the heart rate but not enough to haemorrhage excessive energy – a crucial consideration bearing in mind our day to come. The moderate effort also allows us to fully revel in the surroundings.

Lush is a word I've winced at and avoided since my teenage years when the girls at my school would use it to describe literally everything. But this landscape is truly lush. As Richie the photographer had noted succinctly yesterday when we were admiring the scenery on our way from the airport, 'Apart from the architecture and the language, this place is just like Wales. Only bigger.'

I can see where he's coming from. They call this part of the Iberian peninsula *España Verde*, or Green Spain. The upside of the variable climate is that nature runs well-watered riot, with trees, grass, moss and lichen in full flush right to the top of the mountains and green seeming to ooze out of every crack in the rock. It's a long way from the scorched earth found further south. Around us oak, beech and lime forests extend into the distance, with meadows of grazing land nurturing a wealth of wildlife. Yellow broom flowers spread over large areas of the hillsides, and purple thyme adds its own flash of colour to the landscape.

The road surface is impeccably smooth and cars are as rare as clouds in the sky – it's

## 'They call this lush part of the Iberian peninsula *España Verde*, or Green Spain'

a serene entry into the Cantabrian mountains and we steadily dispatch the San Glorio. Climbing through the final few hairpins, James is labouring slightly – a legacy of recent months spent in the office organising other people's cycling adventures rather than taking part in his own – and it occurs to me a little late that he's perhaps not been savouring this exquisite climb quite as much as I have.

But relief comes soon and we take a quick snack stop on the top, then begin the 28km descent across the plateau towards Riaño. The road surface has taken on a pale complexion stained with red – something to do with iron seeping from the rocks, we muse – and has cracks testifying to the alpine conditions experienced here in winter. After an initial ◻





## The rider's ride

*Dedacciai Super Scuro RC, £1,800 (frameset), £5,500 (pictured), [chickencycles.co.uk](http://chickencycles.co.uk)*

The Super Scuro leaps into life as soon as you get out of the saddle, and as such was a very welcome companion on this ride. The first 26km ascent – the San Glorio – could have been ridden entirely from a seated position, but such is the responsiveness of this frame I was eager to stand both for the variation of biomechanics and the sheer fun of the rampant acceleration. On the Covadonga, as my energy levels faded, I was grateful for every milliwatt of power that the Deda faithfully converted to forward and upward motion. This agility is partly thanks to the light weight, which came in at 6.8kg for the complete build on the office scales, and to the stiffness provided by an impressively industrial junction of top tube, head tube and down tube, which puts the ample bottom bracket in the shade. I've ridden more compliant bikes, but the Deda was comfortable enough for this 157km adventure, and dealt with those falling-rock potholes without excessive clattering. I'd happily do it all over again on this bike.



**'I roll along in splendid isolation, pedalling through the sinuous bends of a shallow gorge cut by the Rio Yuso'**





► plunge through winding bends and hairpins where speeds go north of 50kmh for the first time today, the road flattens to an imperceptible descent and we enjoy the novelty of spinning fast in the big ring. A bird of prey – maybe a red kite – glides above us, drifting right to left as the road heads arrow-straight into the distance, the creature's effortless movement in tune with our own easy forward momentum. Then the moment its silhouette disappears from our vision another takes its place and repeats the same path across the flawless sky.

Every 50m or so, tall, striped poles mark the edge of the road, incongruous now, but there to guide snow ploughs when things get deep in winter. It's hard to imagine in 25°C heat, but the Picos de Europa is one of Spain's ski areas, and the exact landscape we're cycling through now is subject to an ongoing dispute that began in 2003 over a proposed new ski area in the San Glorio region. Environmentalists have launched legal objections at every stage and, even though I ski with glee when I get the chance, I can see their point – it would certainly seem a shame to corrupt this quiet paradise with concrete apartments and ugly lift infrastructure.

With the steeper sections of the descent complete and the temperature hitting 32°C as the plateau levels out at 1,100m, James opts to take a stint in the car with Graham and Richie. 'The San Glorio felt pretty long and hot and I don't want to start cramping up. I'd rather preserve ►

Above: The San Glorio climb lasts for 26km and you're rewarded with views like this all the way to the summit. There's talk of building a ski resort here

Right and right middle: Tunnels and falling rocks make for an exhilarating descent through the Los Beyos gorge













## 'Animals on the road present no threat to man, creature or traffic – because there is no traffic'

**Previous pages:**  
Somewhere beneath the water is the old village of Riano, submerged during the 1980 after the construction of a dam

◊ my energy for the Covadonga,' he explains as he climbs into the air-conditioned cocoon. So I roll along in splendid isolation, pedalling as fast as my Dedacciai Super Scuro's 50-11 gearing will allow, through the sinuous bends of a shallow gorge cut by the Rio Yuso.

### The beautiful and dammed

Soon we arrive at the spectacular Riaño lake, created in the 1980s with the construction of a dam that submerged the original village of Riaño, which was then rebuilt in its current position by the side of the lake. It was highly controversial at the time, as dams tend to be, involving environmental protests and forced evictions, but to the passing foreign cyclist 30 years later the result is very pleasing to the eye – the glassy blue expanse of water reflects the mountainous horizon, and the edges of the bridge converge to a perfect vanishing point up ahead.

It's hot, and for the last hour I've been involved in my own fast-flowing water cycle: bidon to mouth to skin to jersey – which is ringing wet. So far it's been 56km of perfect cycling on all counts, but James' prediction is correct – we've seen only one other rider

– remarkable considering the quality and tranquility around us. A glance at the Garmin clock tells us we're entering Spain's famously broad lunch window (roughly open from 1-5pm it seems) but we decide to press on over the next mini-climb and aim to fuel up with food in one of the tiny villages in the Los Beyos gorge.

Rolling through fast, flowing bends with the deep blue lake below, a flattering invisible tailwind pushes speeds up to an effortless 40kmh while leaving no evidence in the leaves of the trees, which allows me to kid myself that I'm much fitter than I am.

As we approach the second short climb that will take us out of this plateau, cattle fill the road and we have to slow down and weave through the livestock. They seem utterly relaxed about the situation and it's further evidence that these roads are so quiet that animals on the carriageway present no threat to man, creature or traffic flow – because there is no traffic. As it turns out, this cattle-dodging practice will come in useful for Covadonga.

While the livestock abound wherever there is grazing land on this ride, we've seen no sign of the brown bears that are protected in these ◊





Left: For the first time on the ride the sun takes a break and Cyclist is climbing through mist...

Below: ...and then fog

parts and are increasing in number (200 at the latest estimate). The lady from Asturias Tourism who gave us a lift from the airport yesterday had enthusiastically told us about some much celebrated recent TV footage of a local brown bear eating a deer carcass, while wolves in the background waited their turn, and vultures behind the wolves queued ready to pick the bones clean. These are pleasing images for blood-thirsty conservationists for sure, but hardly reassuring when you're alone in the landscape and dressed only in micron-thick Lycra. At least if we do meet our maker on the Covadonga, our dehydrated corpses are unlikely to go to waste.

This next climb isn't long, rising just 200m in five or so kilometres, but in the heat I'm aware of my head being gently baked, and sweat is dissolving my suncream to form an emulsion that's flowing slowly down my legs. Meanwhile, James is looking fresh in the car and opts to take to two wheels again.

The start of the descent is welcome, and it's one that will last for 50km and reduce our altitude by 1,200m – fast at first – and then at a steadily decreasing gradient all the way to Cangas de Onís and the foot of the Covadonga climb. As we plunge down through beech forests and on towards the Los Beyos gorge, the landscape changes dramatically. The wide open vistas of the morning have been replaced by towering walls of rock on either side, occasionally punctured by roughly finished tunnels that steal us from bright sunlight into pitch darkness with only a pinprick of light in the distance to guide the way. At 50kmh it's a strange sensation to be relying on trust that there's nothing on the road beneath our wheels.

The engineering to create the roads and the





tunnels is impressive enough, but it's clear that the Rio Sella has put in the really hard work here – a tireless watery rouleur grinding away over millennia to carve the route we're now enjoying through vast tower blocks of limestone. Even in the shade of the gorge the temperature is 28°C, and in humble homage to the relentless toil of the river to my left, I take yet another swig from my bottle and allow the fluid to do its other essential job today – hydration.

The road surface has deteriorated considerably in places, and with good reason. I remember looking at falling rock signs from the back seat of my parents' car as a kid and being mildly disappointed that the roof wasn't actually being hammered from above, but the clusters of 20cm deep potholes we're now dodging indicate that

the warning signs are not for decoration. I'm not sure if my helmet will offer much protection against these meteors, so we continue to descend with haste, keeping a weather eye on the threatening cliffs above.

Pedalling fast in places, coasting through sweeping corners, and then picking up the tension in the chain, we rapidly tick off the kilometres in high-speed payback for the long ascent of San Glorio that started the day.

'Is that your rims?' asks James, who's also detecting a smell that we at first think might be the Deda Elementi carbon wheels objecting to the prolonged stretch of descending and braking we've done so far. But a few corners further on we arrive at the real reason – a convoy of slow-moving vehicles backed up behind

**'The clusters of potholes indicate that the "falling rocks" danger signs are not for decoration'**







► a double-trailer lorry that can barely squeeze its bulging cargo of hay through the tunnels. The gorge is filled with the pungent smell of truck brake pads, and with an overtake looking highly perilous, we decide it's time for lunch.

We pull into the car park up at the conveniently located Puente Vidosa restaurant, nestled next to a bridge where the road crosses the Sella river for the umpteenth time. The wiry, elderly gentleman who serves us seems a little alarmed as we order patatas bravas, jamón, croquettes, calamari, dos salades... 'Es suficiente!' he protests as we continue to scour the menu for fortifying local fare. Clearly he thinks we're over-ordering, but with the start of the Covadonga looming only 20km in the distance and 100 hot and demanding kilometres already in the legs, James and I are erring on the side of over- rather than under-eating caution. I, for one, would rather carry some excess food in my stomach up the climb than risk bonking on the famous slopes to come. But we heed his advice, safe in the knowledge that we can always top up with a pudding if we feel the need.

Pudding consumed, followed by coffee, we hit the road once more, James choosing the car option again to give maximum time for his lunch to be converted to glycogen. This ride's end game is about to begin. It's a pleasingly rapid blast from our late lunch stop to the town of Cangas de Onís, which was the first capital of the Asturias region and boasts the famous 'Roman



## By the numbers

*Because everyone loves a good stat*

**3**

Total number of other cyclists seen on the route

**1,000**

Height in metres of the walls of the Los Beyos gorge

**26**

Length in kilometres of the Sella Glorio climb out of Potes

**18**

Number of times the Covadonga climb has featured in the Vuelta prior to 2014

**7**

Bottles of water drunk and sweated during the ride

**16**

Number of times James said 'Happy days'. He was right.

**Left:** The road surfaces are generally good, although cracks testify to the harsh Alpine conditions in winter



◻ Bridge', hanging from which is a replica of the Victory Cross. The wooden core of this cross, as legend goes, was carried at the Battle of Covadonga by Palagius (Pelayo in Spanish), the first King of Asturias. It was this victory scored by Palagius in 722AD that bolstered the Christian resistance against the Muslim invaders from the south and triggered the subsequent re-Christianisation of Spain. It's also the reason that the town of Covadonga has become a popular tourist destination, together with magnificent Basilica and tacky gift shops. Most tourists aren't visiting to test their legs against its harsh kicks in incline though.

### The land of kings

Cangas is also famous for a significant moment in cycling history – the capitulation of Miguel Indurain. It was here during the 1996 Vuelta that the King of Spanish cycling pulled into his team's hotel (called El Capitan) and retired from the race before even attempting the Covadonga climb. It was the moment that also effectively marked the end of his pro career. It's not impossible that Indurain's two weeks of riding up to this point had been marginally tougher and faster than our 120km day so far, but if a machine like him could consider the Covadonga a climb too far, what chance do we mortals stand? By coincidence, in only a few kilometres' time, we will ride right past our hotel on the way to the Covadonga...

These thoughts I banish from my mind as the road tilts almost imperceptibly upwards on the



Above: The fog clears to reveal the magical landscape at the top of the Covadonga with Lake Enol indicating our ride is nearly done

Left middle: What look like purple thistles on the slopes of the Covadonga are in fact field eryngium – members of the carrot family





way out of Cangas. It's the official start of the climb, but in reality the first four kilometres (averaging around 1.5%) are so gentle that I'm unaware it has even begun and simply assume my legs are weakening as the evening approaches.

We flash by our hotel on the left with barely a glance and continue the drag to the village of Covadonga at the base of the climb proper. The name Covadonga comes from the Latin *Cova Dominica* or Cavern of the Lady – referring to the cave I'm about to pass where a statue of the Virgin Mary is said to have miraculously inspired King Pelayo prior to his map-changing campaign. The Basilica towering from the hillside to my right (a guaranteed helicopter shot during the Vuelta) now houses that very statue, and with the climax of this ride about to begin, I'm also open to any inspiration available.

No sooner does the road turn left away from the Basilica than it kicks up to 8% for an arduous kilometre, then 10.8% for the next, then 10.6%. Tales of history are immediately banished as the gradient wrenches me right back to the present day battle unfolding in front of me. It's an engaging climb, the steep early stages skirting

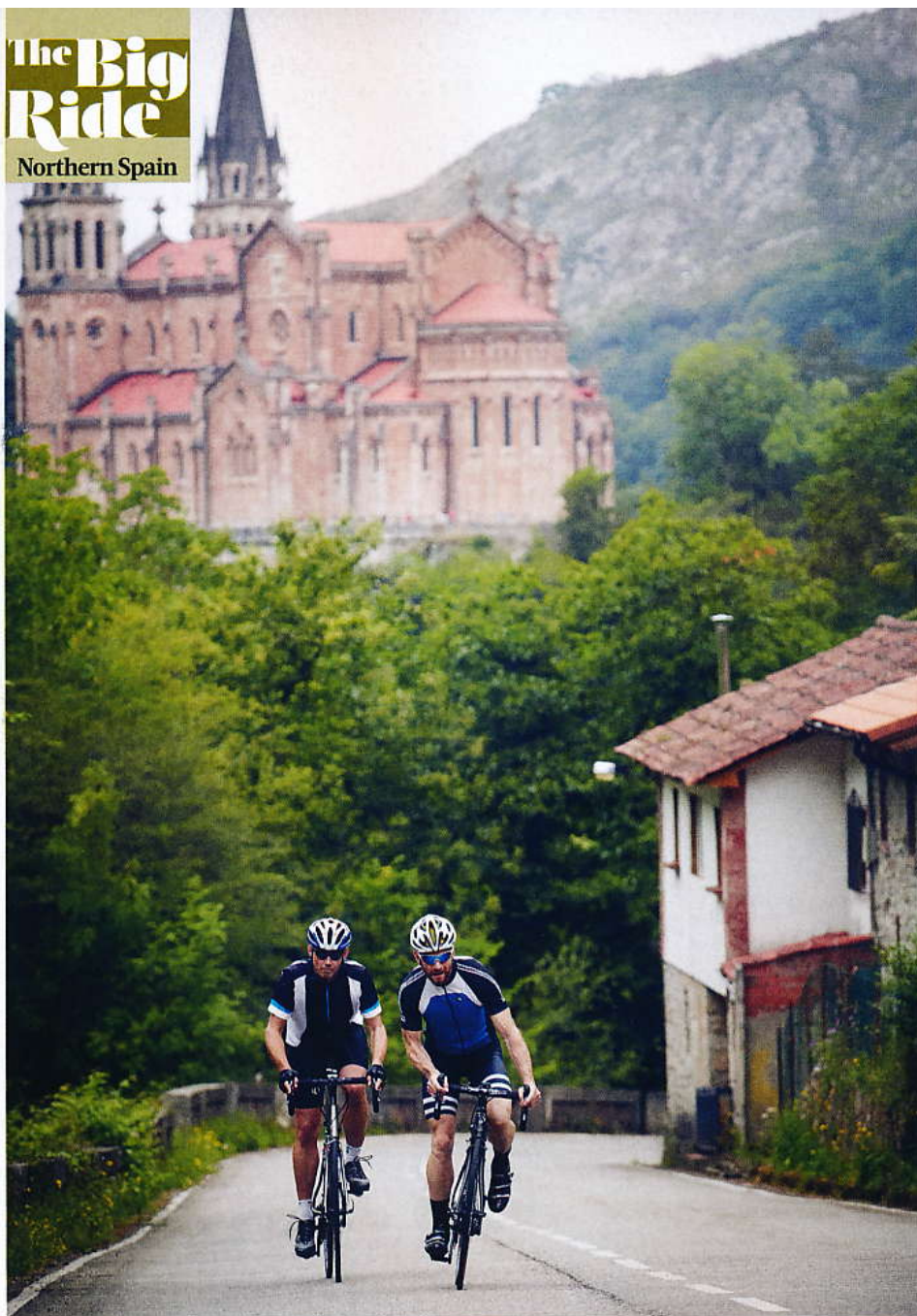
and traversing the contours of the lower slopes with varied corners that slowly evolve into the familiar pattern of alternating straights and hairpins. I barely notice it happening in my haze of effort, but the immaculate weather we've experienced so far has gone and we're ascending into mist, which gradually becomes fog.

James has jumped out of the car and joins me 4km into the meat of the climb. 'I didn't fancy doing the boring tree-lined bit,' he grins cheerfully, barely able to suppress his fresh-legged exuberance in the face of my ill-disguised fatigue. 'Happy days,' I murmur.

Covadonga has a reputation for its cruel ramps, and sure enough after a couple of 'rest' kilometres averaging 8.6% and 8.3% the incline increases to 10%, then 12.5% for a kilometre – and then 15% for 800m. It's enough to blunt even James' nascent enthusiasm and we ascend in silence as the fog closes in, edging towards the zone where climbing pleasure turns to pain. Through the murk we can hear cowbells chiming near and far on the mountainsides. These are the beasts that source the milk used to produce Gamoneu cheese – a local delicacy made by shepherds ◀

**'We ascend in silence as the fog closes in, edging towards the zone where pleasure turns to pain'**





Every major Tour climb should have its own cathedral at the base. This one is the Basilica de Santa María la Real de Covadonga

On these slopes and matured for three months in mountain caves. The road is decorated from time to time with their waste products and for the second time today I find myself weaving through cattle – this time at a vastly reduced pace.

As the steep section subsides, what feels like a minor miracle occurs. The fog thins to mist and then with a few more metres of ascent we emerge once more into exquisite blue skies and bright sunshine. Squinting and fawning like peasants before a deity, we fumble for our sunglasses and gawp at the awesome panorama. The Picos de Europa in all its green and rocky glory is enough to take the breath away in any circumstances. When it's combined with hard-earned fatigue at the end of a ride like this, it's near ecstatic. With cloud filling the valleys between the peaks, it's a picture postcard panorama and James and I grin at each other.

### Happy days

We pedal on inspired, relishing the 500m long downhill section that leads to the final testing kilometre at 12%. We've been reborn into a glorious landscape and the pedals spin easier as Lake Enol – one of the lakes that gives the Lagos de Covadonga its name – comes into view. Our ride is complete, save for the cautious, foggy descent back to the hotel, and the Covadonga has lived up to its reputation as a legendary challenge.

This has been a beautifully balanced ride starting with the long gentle San Glorio and building to a wonderful, testing crescendo – it's one that I will always remember and would recommend to anyone. Someone was definitely smiling down on us. ☘

Steve Westlake is production editor on *Cyclist* and may change his name to Esteban Lago del Oeste

## How we got there

### Follow in our wheeltracks

#### TRAVEL

We flew with Easyjet from London Stansted to Asturias Airport just northwest of Oviedo (Return prices start from around £90, plus £70 return for a bike bag). Flights are also available from Heathrow and Gatwick to Asturias, from Edinburgh and London to Santander, or from Glasgow, Manchester and London to Bilbao. The best option is then to hire a car to get to and around the Picos.

#### ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at Hotel La Ablaneda (ablaneda.com),

ideally situated on the road from Gangas de Onís to Covadonga. The friendly owner, Batu, has a passion for Harley Davidsons, but he's more than happy to move his bikes out of his garage so you can store yours. Double rooms start at €75 per night in high season, €50 in low season.

#### THANKS

A big thank you to James and Cathy from Marmot Tours (marmot-tours.co.uk) who provided invaluable assistance with the planning of the trip, honing the riding route, and logistical support and advice.

Marmot offers fully planned, immaculately scheduled and supported tours for all levels of rider in the Pyrenees, Alps, Dolomites and Picos. Also thanks to Graham, one of Marmot's tour guides, who drove photographer Richie around and provided excellent back-up, as well as copious knowledge on the rich plant and wildlife we encountered. Thanks also to Jesús Ruis Martínez from the Spanish Tourist Office (spain.info; email: spaininfo@tourspain.es) and to Ana Villasuso from Asturias Tourism (turismoasturias.es) for

logistical help and insider information on the Picos.

#### BIKES AND GEAR

If you don't want to take your own bike, Juan at Carma Bikes (carmabike.es) in Oviedo will hire you a Felt Z85 for €30 per day, or a model such as a Wilier Cento Uno Air for €100 for the first day, €80 for the second. We had three almost entirely sunny days, but the weather in the Picos is unpredictable, so best to pack arm and legwarmers and enough (waterproof) layers to cope with wet, foggy and cold descents.