

# The divine gorge

Cyclist takes on a spectacular route that  
dives into the heart of the Picos de Europa  
mountain range in northern Spain

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# W

ell, it wasn't supposed to be like *this*. I'm in the north of Spain, it's July, and normally I'd bet my house on the weather at this time of year being close to perfect. An already searingly hot sun should be beaming down from a cloudless sky. Yet as I open the shutters of my room I can barely make out the building across the street.

A frigid mist has enveloped the town of Riaño while I slept. The morning has dawned eerily quiet. Any sounds emanating from a town bustling into gear and readying for a new day are dampened by the creeping fog, which has turned the end of every street into a murky haze. Big puffs of cloudy vapour roll down past my window and I feel my hopes of a pleasant foray into the Picos de Europa slip away with them.

My spluttering morale is bolstered and my faith restored over breakfast, however, when my ride partner for the day, Katia, informs me the mist will burn off by late morning and we'll get the bright and warm day in the Spanish mountains I was hoping for. That isn't just her optimistic disposition talking either. Katia is a guide for tour company Marmot Tours, which runs cycling

holidays throughout Europe. She has extensive riding experience in the area, a fact Katia hammers home when she mentions that she rode today's route – which I have judged to present a stern challenge – just yesterday as a recce. She drops this fact into conversation so casually she could have been talking about a recovery spin. I pull a second slice of tortilla towards me. It looks like I'll need all the energy I can muster to keep up with her today.

#### Into the unknown

We begin our ride through the well-kept streets of Riaño, or more accurately, New Riaño. There's a reason everything here looks so pristine; it is the youngest town in the entire province of León, having been built in the 1980s to relocate the population of the surrounding lowlands. I say 'lowlands' when in fact they are more than 1,100m above sea level, but a dam project submerged the town of 'old' Riaño (along with six other villages) to generate hydroelectric power in the region around the Cantabrian mountains. The old town is still there, lurking beneath the still waters of the reservoir.

Understandably it was said to be a great upheaval for the population, but it's generally considered that New Riaño has done a masterful job of preserving the memory



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of the old towns. Some buildings were even moved brick by brick and rebuilt. Coincidentally, the reservoir now follows the vague shape of a capitalised letter 'R', as if the drowned town is still intent on marking its territory.

The main route southwest out of New Riaño runs along a bridge that arcs directly over the old town, and the watery ruins can sometimes be seen beneath the surface. We won't have the opportunity today though, as we are travelling north out and around the top curve of the lake. However, even if we had been riding across the bridge right over old Riaño we wouldn't be getting much of a view right now. Everything beyond a radius of about five metres is still obscured by the morning haze.

It's a little galling to miss out on the view of a vast expanse of flat azure water that has become something of a tourist attraction, but Katia assures me all will be revealed when we return from the east later on.

For now we content ourselves with burning off our own personal morning hazes with a steady pace along the flat, winding road. ●

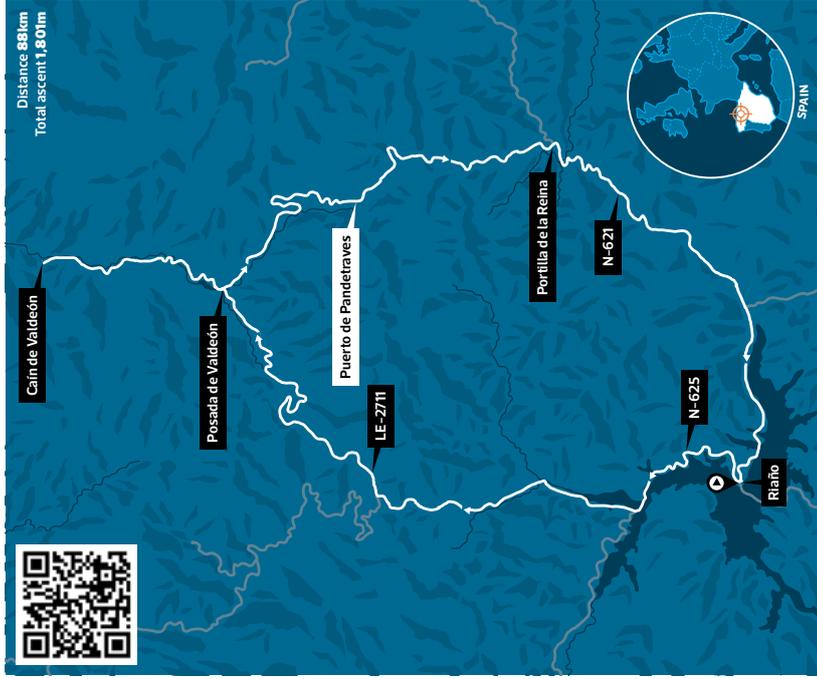
Far right: Cyclist begins the sinuous descent to Cain de Valdeón from the lookout point of Puerto de Panderrueda

Right: The out-and-back through the Cares gorge from Posada de Valdeón to Cain de Valdeón is technical on the way down and hard work on the way back up





Left: The Picos de Europa form part of Green Spain, a band across the top of the country with a cooler and wetter climate than the rest of the country, so even in the height of summer the surroundings are green



## Fancy a walk?

Don't forget your hiking boots

### Yordas Peak

Starting at the northern tip of the Riño reservoir in a town called Liegos, this 20km out-and-back trail features over 1,000m of climbing to get to Yordas, 1,966m peak. From the top you can view the Picos de Europa range to the north while below you lies the entire Riño reservoir.

### Ruta del Cares

The end of the road in Cain de Valdeón marks the start of one of the most famous hiking trails in the world. The trail was blasted into the Cares Gorge over 100 years ago to connect Posada de Valdeón to Puente Poncebos in the north. It is a 12km technical hike but the dramatic cliffs and gorges make the route one to savour.

### Covadonga Lakes

The Lagos de Covadonga route, along the northern edge of the Picos allows you to combine riding and hiking. The famously tough road ascent leads to a gentle hiking loop around two high-altitude lakes, Enol and Erquina, and panoramic lookout spots.



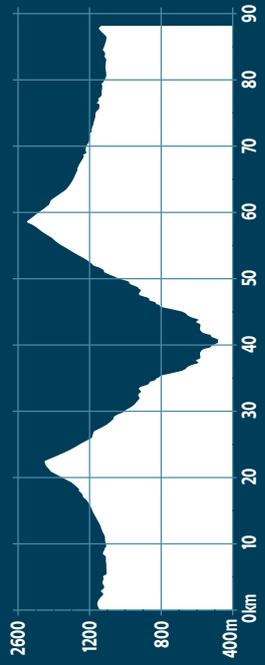
**The stretches of tarmac that lace the Picos are far more irregular than the roads in the Alps. No two corners are the same**

## Into the valley

Retrace Cyclist's route down the Valdeón valley

To download this route go to [cyclist.co.uk/4115-spain](http://cyclist.co.uk/4115-spain) or scan the QR code. Starting in Riño take the N-625 north along the top curve of the reservoir and beyond. At the border of Castilla y León and Asturias, take a right onto the quiet LE-2711. Follow that all the way to Posada de Valdeón, then turn left onto the Cain de Valdeón road. Proceed with caution on the way down to the village of Cain de

Valdeón and make sure your bike has a compact chainset fitted for the way back up. Once back in Posada de Valdeón take the left fork out of the village and keep climbing to reach Puerto de Pandetraves. With a good wind you can freewheel down to Portilla de la Reina, before picking up the N-621 and following it alongside the reservoir to get back into Riño.





Left: The road up from Cain de Valdeón contains a number of steep ramps through both woodland and more open scenery

Below: The Rio Cares river has cut through the Picos' limestone for millennia, so the road to Cain de Valdeón often hugs sheer cliff faces as it traces the river's path



**An endless sea of peaks, as stormy as the Atlantic that lies not far beyond them, dominate the background**



It turns out to be false flat. Fresh legs and the disorientation of our featureless surroundings mean we are actually gaining height as the kilometres tick by. The town of Vegacerneja is another casualty of the mist. I am told it is over a thousand years old, with characterful and ancient architecture, but I will just have to take Katia's word for it because the town is obscured from view.

Despite the prolonged murk Katia remains resolute that our ride will amount to more than a treadmill of tarmac surrounded by a world of white. Her confidence is rewarded soon after when, as suddenly as switching on the lights in a dark room, we burst into sunshine. In an instant the temperature jumps by 10°C and the Picos de Europa are finally revealed to us, plunging and thrusting across the skyline as far as the eye can see.

I'm immediately put in mind of the Dolomites in northern Italy. The Picos are all jagged, exposed peaks and sheer cliff faces of white limestone, but instead of the uniform blanket of pines you'll find below the treeline in the Dolomites, the greenery here has a more jungle-esque quality, denser and more verdant.

In an ironic twist, just as our surroundings become more appealing to the eye I find myself increasingly staring down at my stem as the kilometres of climbing

begin to take their toll. We work our way up to the Puerto de Panderrueda, a mountain pass just inside the Picos' southern boundary, and are rewarded with a panoramic view of the mountain range. An endless sea of peaks, as stormy as the Atlantic ocean that lies not far beyond them, dominate the background while the foreground falls away downward into the Valdeón valley.

#### **Down into the valley**

As we concede to the pull of gravity we start a prolonged descent that will ultimately deposit us at the halfway stage of our route and our day's lowest point, the isolated village of Cain de Valdeón. That's still some 20km distant, though, so for now we focus on the road passing under our wheels with increasing speed.

The stretches of tarmac that lace the Picos are far more irregular than the roads in the Alps. No two corners are the same and some occasionally broken sections of tarmac necessitate wits being kept about, but the roads are totally bereft of traffic and there are plenty of flowing sections that provide opportunities to lean over into the corners and carve wide, smooth arcs at good speed.

As we shed more altitude the road plunges into dense woodland and the tree tunnels cause shafts of fractured





Above: It's an 8km fight to get up from Caín de Valdeón to Posada de Valdeón. Although the road continues to climb after the village, the gradient settles at a steady 5%

light to scythe down across the road, the contrasting patterns on the tarmac ensuring that even when the surface is pristine our fingers never stray far from our brake levers.

If our route today roughly resembles an upside down balloon on a string, the village of Posada de Valdeón is at the neck of the balloon that the string is attached to. It sits in the middle of a colossal valley and marks the point at which our route turns wilder. Even the temperature is more unruly. The coldest temperature ever recorded in Spain was measured in an enclave nearby at a rather chilly -35.8°C. That's a swing of almost 60°C to today's balmy temperature.

Katia likens the village to a rock perching at the edge of a waterfall and it proves to be an apt description. We follow a river with more than its fair share of waterfalls as we begin to pick our way down. The road follows the river faithfully, by which I mean it is just as inconsistent in character as the watercourse. The river plunges dramatically before gathering in pools and the road does the same. Steep, technical sections corkscrew their way through trees before opening up onto more benign stretches along expanses of rocky ground.

The vast, sheer slabs of limestone of the Cares gorge begin to loom over us, the rocks closing around and above us like hands capturing an insect. The sky is reduced to a blue streak far above and the whole environment begins to feel rather oppressive. It isn't

hard to see why the Cares gorge is called 'the divine gorge' – its geography is otherworldly.

Out of nowhere the village of Caín de Valdeón appears. It's a curious place that was settled for the sole purpose of serving as the southern gatehouse to the Ruta del Cares trail, a route opened about 100 years ago to provide a connection during winter up to Posada de Valdeón from Puente Poncebos in the north. It continues to track the Río Cares river we've been following when the topography of the Cares gorge gets too wild for any road.

We stop for a coffee and watch the determined faces of those just beginning the trail contrast with the exhausted ones of those just finishing it. They appraise us too, our outfits of Lycra and helmets appearing just as foreign to them as their baggy cargo trousers and full-brimmed hats do to us. It's our footwear that is most disparate, their rugged, bulky boots at extreme odds with our sleek, carbon-soled cycling shoes.

For all our differences in appearance, though, we have a mutual understanding of the beauty of our surroundings. On that common ground we exchange a nod of respect and part ways in separate directions, the hikers moving onwards while our sights turn to look back up the way we came.

#### What goes down...

It's nothing short of a battle from the very start. How Katia has the motivation and ability to do this for a



**Steep, technical sections corkscrew their way through trees before opening up along expanses of rocky ground**





## By the numbers

A number is worth a thousand pictures

88

Distance ridden in kilometres

15

Kilometres ridden in thick mist

73

Kilometres ridden in blazing sunshine

1,801

Total climbing in metres

6

Average gradient in per cent

21

Maximum gradient in per cent

3

Rivers dammed to create the Riaño reservoir

5,000

People relocated when their villages were drowned

**We descend through rocky slopes and scorched grasses towards classic Vuelta territory**



## The rider's ride

Sarto Asola Disc, £9,900, [vuelosports.com](http://vuelosports.com)

Sarto is an Italian custom frame fabricator and this is the disc version of its enduring climber's frame. It uses classic tube profiles to balance light weight with rigidity and when I first rode it in 2018 it was one of the only disc brake bikes at that time that didn't incur a weight penalty over rim brake designs (as pictured this bike weighs 6.99kg). That's less rare now, but the Asola Disc still manages to hold its own as a consummate climber.

Sarto has been smart in balancing the bike's aggressive characteristics with a high degree of comfort. There is clearance for 32mm tyres to add cushion and grip and the stack is a little taller than you'd expect for this frame size. That meant I could create an 'all-day' ride position without any spacers under the stem for extra style points.

Above: Cyclist rides through the sleepy town of Portilla de la Reina after the descent from Puerto de Pandetraves

Above right: The architecture of New Riaño, built in the 1980s, is in distinct contrast to the more ancient-looking settlements in the vicinity



second time in two days I have no idea. The road twists up then dips and turns, winding along sheer rock faces before ducking through trees. Even though we are retracing our steps the road is so erratic it's impossible to remember what comes next.

At several points hazard signs warn of upcoming 20% ramps, which are followed by plateaus reached so suddenly that I quickly find myself spinning out before I have a chance to adjust my gearing. My chain rattles up and down my cassette and jumps between rings like a robot short-circuiting. My poor derailleurs must be wondering what on earth is going on.

It's a welcome sight to see Posada de Valdeón again after the 8km tussle. Even with another 10km of ascent up to the Puerto de Pandatraves to come before gravity becomes our friend again, the incline settles at a manageable 5-6% for the duration so we can winch ourselves through the tranquil, green environment of the pass in relative comfort.

Although the Puerto de Pandatraves is one of the Picos de Europa's highest passes we emerge from the Valdeón valley to no ceremony. The gradient simply abates and then reverses. It's in our surroundings that the change is marked. The pass holds back the lushness of the Picos from spreading into the more arid foothills further south, so we descend through an open environment of rocky slopes and scorched grasses towards classic Vuelta territory. Should we turn left instead of right in Portilla de la Reina we would find ourselves taking on the Puerto de San Glorio climb, which could then lead on to Fuente Dé or Piedrasluengas. All three are regular features in the Spanish Grand Tour.

## Minerals from the limestone mountains mean the water is an unusually bright blue that shimmers in the sunlight



Above and left: The final portion of road down from the Picos de Europa is a pancake-flat run along one of the arms of the Riaño reservoir

Ticking off some WorldTour-grade ascents is always a tempting proposition but we may have to leave that for another day. With the fatigue of the climb up from Caín de Valdeón still weighing heavy on us we opt for the pancake-flat run back along the reservoir to Riaño.

After about 12km we round a bend and the much anticipated view of the reservoir is finally revealed. All credit to Katia – she has predicted how the day would unfold in weather terms as sagely as a meteorologist. The result, with the golden late afternoon sun arcing down and not a wisp of mist in sight, is as spectacular as I'd hoped it would be and well worth the wait.

The minerals and particulates carried down from the limestone mountains by the rivers serving the reservoir mean the water is an unusually bright cerulean blue that shimmers in the sunlight. From our viewpoint off and above to one side we see its flat expanse stretch flawlessly across to the outcrop on top of which New Riaño has been neatly engineered. The sharp grey architecture of the town's bridges that span across legs of the reservoir contrasts against the organic grey of the surrounding mountains. White peaks above and swathes of rich green vegetation below complete the scene that seems like such a perfectly sculpted blend of engineering and nature that it could be from a fantasy computer game.

Considering the ease with which a cyclist can access the delights of the Picos and the view that welcomes you home, I'm inclined to believe Riaño may just be the best cycling base you've never heard of. **📍** *Sam Challis is tech editor of Cyclist, the magazine that ensures you get to hear about all the best cycling bases you've never heard of*



## How we did it

### Travel

Cyclist flew into Oviedo with Vueling from London Gatwick. Expect to pay around £200 return plus £40 each way for a bike. It's about 120km southeast to Riaño from the airport so renting a car is recommended, but leave the car parked once you arrive. The town is lovely to explore on foot and the Picos are a mere 18km bike ride to the north.

### Accommodation

Cyclist stayed at Hotel Presa, one of many pleasant options in Riaño's town centre. The rooms are cosy and breakfast is an authentically hearty Spanish affair of tortillas and chorizo with plenty of fresh fruit.

### Thanks

Alberto Bosque Coello from the Castilla y León Tourism Board deserves thanks for organising Cyclist's stay at Hotel Presa. For more information about the Castilla y León region visit [turismocastillayleon.com](http://turismocastillayleon.com).

Our huge thanks also goes to Sophie Baker and Helen Snell of Marmot Tours for the time and effort they put into organising the logistics of this trip. Marmot Tours offers a range of fully supported cycling holidays throughout Europe. Visit [marmot-tours.co.uk](http://marmot-tours.co.uk) for details. Lastly, thanks to ride partner Katia Knight, whose local knowledge was only matched by her unerringly accurate weather forecasts.