



Up hill and *down dale*

Nick Rider travels the mountain roads of the **Navarran Pyrenees** to find witches, pilgrims, caves and magnificent forests



The sudden change of air is remarkable.

Less than two hours east of Bilbao, just before the French border, a turn inland takes you straight into a different world. The Pyrenees in Navarra divide into interlocking valleys, offering a gorgeous range of landscapes – thick forest, snug fields, glittering streams and mountain pastures. The Basque-speaking villages have a special look and atmosphere, with massive white-walled farmhouses beneath broad sloping roofs, and balconies loaded with geraniums.

Winding roads – often narrow, but very good – connect the valleys, corkscrewing up and over windswept passes with breathtaking vistas. There are endless opportunities for walking, from strolls to long-distance hikes. Plus, there are lovely, mostly family-run places to stay.

Each valley has its own character. First up, 10 minutes from the motorway at Irún is the Valle del Bidasoa, celebrated for its *Cinco Villas*, or five historic towns. Bera is the largest, but less attractive than Lesaka, a gracious little town of stone towers and narrow streets beside babbling streams. Beautiful Etxalar has some of the finest traditional houses, while Igantzi and Arantza are tiny, charming clusters of hilltop lanes. Beyond Arantza the road ends in total tranquillity at Arantza Hotela, a seductive retreat that's almost as much a work of art as a hotel.

The upper Bidasoa curves north-eastwards and changes its name to the Valle de Baztán, where the Señorío de Bertiz nature park hosts a botanical garden surrounded by beech and oak woods, ideal for easy walks. Elizondo, the largest town in Baztán, lining the river, has streets of grand noble mansions. For a radical contrast, off the main road at Bozate is the Museo Santxotena, with extraordinary wood and metal sculptures by local-born artist Xabier Santxotena.

The Baztán's best-known attractions, though, are at the north end, virtually in France, at Urdazubi-Urdax, with a pilgrims' monastery, deep caves of weird rock formations and the immense, cathedral-like caves at Zugarramurdi. In 1609, claims that 'Witches' Sabbaths' were held here led to the largest witch trial in history; a story told in the village's Museo de las Brujas (Witch Museum).

Below Elizondo at Irurita a minor road (NA-1740, signposted Eugi) meanders up for 20 miles through the pass of Artesiaga (976 metres). →



Find out more...
For further information, visit turismo.navarra.es

Stay

Arantza Hotela
Arantza
arantzahotela.com
Beautiful rooms, fabulous views, utter peace, gourmet food.

Señorío de Ursua
Arizkún, Valle de Baztán
hotelursua.com
Charming country-house hotel.

Posada de Elbete
Elbete, near Elizondo
posadaelbete.com
Very friendly hotel-bar-restaurant, at the heart of village life.

Hotel Roncesvalles
Roncesvalles
hotelroncesvalles.com
Modern rooms within part of the monastery.

Casa Sario
Jaurrieta, near Ochagavía
casasario.com
Village hotel-restaurant with loads of character and delicious food.

El Almadiero
Burgui
almadiero.com
Welcoming small hotel overlooking Burgui's placid square.

Visit hotelesruralesnavarra.es and rusticae.com for more options.



PHOTOS: TOUIREST ARCHIVE, REYNO DE NAVARRA

- 1 Navarra's sweeping, woodland landscape
- 2 The Colegiata at the monastery in Roncesvalles
- 3 The cathedral-like caves at Zugarramurdi, said to be the haunt of witches
- 4 Clouds fill the Navarra valleys to dramatic effect near the town of Etxalar

Here it meets a larger road at Zubiri, where a left turn leads to Roncesvalles. A Pyrenean crossing since prehistory, this became the principal gateway into Spain on the pilgrimage path to Santiago, and its huge monastery – with a superb Gothic church, the Colegiata – still caters to pilgrims today. Since the Camino de Santiago has become a global phenomenon, Roncesvalles is also the only spot in the valleys where you find large multinational crowds. At Roncesvalles'

cobbled alleys that looks inescapably like a film set – which it often has been. Ochagavía is also the main entry-point, via a 20-mile road that sometimes wanders into the clouds, to a real jewel of the Pyrenees: the forest of Irati. One of the largest native forests in Europe, with a reservoir amid swathes of beech, oak and ash, Irati is fabulous for walking – whether for an hour or a whole day.

highest point, Ibañeta, a monument commemorates the near-legendary battle in AD 778 that was immortalised in the great medieval poem, the *Chanson de Roland*.

A dramatic change comes in the easternmost valley, Valle de Roncal. The road enters a tight, narrow gorge and pines predominate over beech and oak. From Isaba, a road heads through another gorge to climb a wall of rock up to a wild alpine plateau of bare karst stone and dark pines at Larra-Belagua, with a centre for Nordic cross-country skiing. The main valley is best-known for a strong sheep's-milk cheese, Queso de Roncal, and there are several places to buy it in the town of Roncal. Further down, Burgui was for centuries a departure point for *almadiás*, log rafts that carried timber downstream, a tradition revived each spring (usually early May) in the Día de la Almadía.

Escaping the crowds, the NA-140 road south of Roncesvalles leads into the Valle de Aezkoa – the most thickly wooded and Hobbit-like of all Navarra's landscapes, with tiny fields among the trees. A side road runs up to a strange ruined 18th-century arms factory at Orbaizeta and above the treeline to open moorland at Azpegi, where prehistoric stone circles are dotted across the hills.

The flashing, white-water river, running south between giant rock walls, is the next in a stunning array of images that stay in the mind, all inviting you to explore just one more twisting valley. 🏞️