



146 Condé Nast Traveler September 2017

FLAVOUR HUNTER

IT IS A VIEW THAT DEMANDS TO BE UNPACKED before my suitcase. On one side, a haystack, an orange tree dripping with fruit, a vineyard, vines trained high on granite posts, and behind, a hillside thick with pine and eucalyptus woods. On the other, a wild expanse of dunes and beyond them a glimpse of water, still as oil, inky blue in the evening light.

Glance at Galicia on a map, high in a northern corner of the Iberian Peninsula, and you'll see a ragged chunk of Spain's west coast, above the Portuguese border, stopping just shy of Santiago de Compostela. This, its capital, sees a steady beat of footsteps drum through as they reach the finale of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. A more lightly trodden path, I'd been told, was the one taken by clever Madrilenos who, for years, have spurned the charms of Ibiza, Saint-Tropez and Mykonos in favour of a summer spent in Galicia's Rías Baixas.

Rías Baixas is the term for the five estuaries that probe their way inland from west to east like crooked fingers, their digit-like shape giving rise to the legend that God leant his hand here, resting after the labours of Creation. The Rías are sheltered by a series of islands – the Cíes, Ons, Sillveira and other small atolls – creating a deliciously mild pocket where lemons, figs, palm trees and cañi flourish.

Asking my best-connected Spanish friends, I identified a clutch of Rías Baixas devotees: the fashion editor and several stylists on Spanish Vogue had been visiting since their teenage years; a former director at Manolo Blahnik and the current Spanish president, Mariano Rajoy, were also Galicia groupies. British architect David Chipperfield had long been a fan, having built a cool little bolthole in remote Corbaldo more than a decade ago, a town with the edge-of-the-world feeling of a Cornish fishing village.

There was also enticing talk of superlative seafood and wines, and empty beaches. It was high summer. While the rest of Europe headed south, my plan was to swim against the current to the Rías.

From the summit of Carnoo, looking south, the five Rías shimmer in the sun, the estuaries snaking in from the sea like a collection of giant laces scattered along the coastline. Out in the sea, the Ons and Cíes archipelagos were dark, brooding shapes floating on a late-summer heat haze.

Five days, five estuaries. I traversed the Rías' intricate topography from calm inlets flanked by citrus orchards to the wilder waters of the open ocean. Each Ría has its own distinct character. The most northerly, finest and rarely visited is Ría de Corubión, the thumbprint of the divine hand. Moving south there's wild Muros y Noia and Arousa, the richest in seafood and hidden islands, while the Ría de Pontevedra contains the region's charming capital city. The southernmost, Ría de Vigo is wider than a mile and harbours the biggest secret of all: the magical Cíes islands, home to the prettiest beaches you've never heard of.

The one pleasantly old-fashioned seaside town, Sanxenxo, atop the Ría de Pontevedra, is an agreeable place to hang out for a

day or two. But a stronger suit were the little towns, plump with history, and the regional hub, Pontevedra, a lovely provincial city that's not so much a symphony in stone as an opera, with plentiful outdoor terraces for sipping local wines. And what wines they are. In Albariño, the Rías Baixas possess one of the world's finest whites, a fragrant, mineral-rich wine that perfectly partners the area's excellent shellfish – mussels, clams, octopus and scallops from its cool waters.

The Ría I fell hardest for was Arousa and the Salnés county behind its southern shore, with its rural charm, farming villages, the commercial towns of Vilanova and Vilagarcía, some-built heritage sites such as Cambados (the self-styled capital of Albariño) and the pretty fishing village of Combarro. It had islands in the stream, the fortress-like Ría and the Arousa atoll, with sands so white and waters so pinky-blue you could half-close your eyes and imagine yourself in the Caribbean.

It also had two hotels well worth a visit. One was Quinta de San Amaro in the village of Meaño, tucked into a valley carpeted side-to-side with Albariño vines. A 14-bedroom spot with a pool and restaurant, it channelled a colonial-meets-casa-rural feel. The courtyard was a riot of hydrangeas (Galicia's omnipresent flower) and bright arrangements of pumpkins and lemons against granite walls.

Nacho Salcedo, the quinta's co-owner, had a busy life in Madrid until his partner, a gallego, persuaded him to leave the rat race and put down roots in the Rías. When we bought the property, it was like Angkor Wat, he told me as we admired the estate's ancient stone granary or *horreo*. Such buildings are ubiquitous symbols of rural life here, but this one had been cunningly made over as a beautiful chill-out room; glassed in on both sides, it was the tailor-made setting for a crisp sunset G&T.

Bronzed couples, untroubled by the pool, occasionally raising their heads to cast a glance over vineyards where blue-clad farmers worked their way along the rows. La Quinta wasn't raucous, but somehow felt all the better for it.

There was more of a buzz at Novavilla, a few minutes' drive from Salcedo's place. This exquisite little hotel in Meis is owned by dapper young local José Luis Vilanova and is a collision of Galician country architecture with the more stylish end of contemporary European design. Tom Dixon lamps, a Campana Brothers umbrella stand and armchairs by Spanish designer Antonio Moragas are on loan from Vilanova Peña, his mother Carmen's cult furniture shop in nearby Ribadumia. He paints a picture of a summer scene with a glossy crowd gazing white wine on the terraces of Pontevedra or partying at Sanxenxo's open-air Das club.

Perhaps an even better choice than a hotel is to stay in one of the area's glorious villas such as Casa Minería, a Sevantes beach bar transformed into a low-slung modern beach house. Owned by Rupert Wakefield, an ex-sit-man from London, and his wife, Galicia interior designer María Moreno, it stands within a

GONE FOR LUNCH

EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT SPAIN'S INCREDIBLE FOOD SCENE, THE MICHELIN STARS, THE CRAZILY INVENTIVE CHEFS, THE WAITING LISTS, BUT IF YOU WANT TO STAY JUST AWAY FROM THE WAVE, THE GOLDEN COAST AND INSIDE-TRACK RESTAURANTS OF GALICIA ARE WIDE, WIDE OPEN

BY PAUL RICHARDSON, PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LÓFTUS



148 Condé Nast Traveler September 2017



Opposite, clockwise from top left: paprika octopus at Novavilla; the pool at Casa Minería; house in Cambados; boat in Faro da Porta; walkway at Pobra do Caramiñal; Pontevedra town centre; scallops at A Meica; illa de Arousa; octopus dishes at Pulperia de Manjua; Previous pages, Porto do Son beach

FLAVOUR HUNTER

pebble's throw of sweeping Aguiada beaches on the Ría de Muros y Noia – one of the least explored estuaries. Wakefield told me his guests were mainly German but that, increasingly, a peppering of ched-up Londoners were arriving.

A little further south, between Ribeira and Pobra do Caramiñal on the north side of the Ría de Arousa, lies another remarkable property, Castro Baroña. Designed by architect Iñaki Lete in a take-no-prisoners modern style, it has vast sliding glass windows that show off the water in wilderness. The house is filled with hand-crafted wonders: furniture and shutters made of eucalyptus wood (sourced from houses (mused-farming platforms), leather door handles, and steel staircases made by local artisans. It was thrilling to pad around, nosing into concrete-clad bedrooms, and then poster along the tiny beach below the house.

I drove to Cambados for a day, where I sat in Plaza de Fefiñáns – surely one of Spain's most attractive squares, an open-air drawing room in warm, grey stone – and drank a glass of wine made at the palace across the way. At the Fundación Manolo Paz, a sculpture park where artist Manolo Paz exhibits his monumental works, some merely stand sentinel in a pine-filled garden posed above an inlet of the Ría de Arousa. His work, which has been shown at MoMA in New York, speaks of Galicia's deep relationship with granite and the Celtic roots of this Atlantic coast.

Another day was spent with Adrian McManus, a Galician resident who runs Northwest Iberian Wine Tours, taking visitors deep into the terrain, from artisan bodegas to village-like pazoos. Our wine safari covered some of the most forward-thinking Albariño producers as well as the semi-clandestine world of the *finqueros*, rustic operations that serve their own vineyards alongside plates of home-style food. At O Tío Benito in Barantes, where we had lunch of clams and octopus and sipped wine from old-fashioned bowls known as *ovos*, McManus reminisced about landing in Galicia two decades before, when he looked at Pontevedra and said to himself: 'this is the place'.

After four days here I was closer to understanding why people was lyrical about the Rías, but it was during my last stay, at the Ares Beach House, a big villa outside Sanxenxo that everything came into focus. It is owned by Susana Macraia, a London-based gallego who used to work for Manolo Blahnik and has been coming to Sanxenxo all her life. Ares is perched on a slope, with gardens and balconies starting directly out to the Atlantic, and sunsets that are a fiesta of blazing colour. The house is Galician-meets-the-Hamptons, a breezy mix of primary colours on a background of dazzling white. As we sat on the terrace, fashion designer Ester Jiménez, Macraia's sister-in-law, told me about the three-day birthday bash Sigrá had recently thrown for her Californian husband. 'The Americans flipped out over the Rías Baixas. It was the food mostly, and the wine, of course. And the beaches, and the quality of life – I hope you're going to the Cíes Islands?'

The rumoured home of some of the world's most pristine beautiful beaches, guarding the mouth of the Ría de Vigo, the Cíes enjoy total protection as part of the Atlantic Islands National Park. There are no cars and nowhere to stay, but a simple campsite. The ferry pulled out of Vigo harbour on a morning simultaneously warm and crisp that carried with it a hint of summer's end.

We docked at a tiny harbour, and there it was, Praia de Rodas, a long arc of sand with the texture of soft brown sugar, the water blue as pharmaceutical glass, framed by a gentle landscape of rocks and farmland. A few little boats seemed to float in the celestial calm of the bay. There was no doubt in my mind that this place could hold its own among the finest beaches of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

I plunged into the untroubled water. The shock of the cold Atlantic came as a reality check: the Rías Baixas aren't the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean after all. But then neither would we want them to be. The whole point of Spain's secret summer destination – the costa the crowds forget – is that it happily refuses to be anything but itself.

WHERE TO EAT

Restaurante Culler de Pau

The mesmerizing views of the Ría from this minimalist dining room in Pontevedra compete for attention with Javier Oliva's cooking. His dishes are a simple evaluation of local products: octopus caught on the rocks, with a garlic emulsion, hake with a citrus sauce and pickled seaweed. culledepau.com. About €75 for a six-course tasting menu for two

Vinoteca Bagos

For modern tapas and great service, this Pontevedra basement-bar-restaurant is top-drawer. But the big attraction is its wine list, taking in great Albariños and a careful selection of fascinating wines from across the world. vinotecabagos.com. About €55 for two

Yayo Daporta

Contemporary Galician cuisine, hitherto best represented by Pepe Vieira and Casa Solla (both near Pontevedra), now has another star in chef Yayo Daporta, who showcases original creations such as oysters with caramelized cauliflower and carrot vinegar at his slick restaurant in Cambados. yayodaporta.com. About €75 for two

O Tío Benito

Head to 'Uncle Benito's' in Barantes for traditional cooking at its best. Choose from classic dishes such as salt cod, or a deeply savoury octopus and potato stew. Be sure to try the notorious local red, so dark it stains the porcelain cup it's drunk from, as well as your teeth. +34 986 702287. About €35 for two

A Meica

This family-run marisquero in the diminutive port of Sulle on Arousa is well-known for its seafood – sardines, mussels and clams – brought in by the island's own fishing fleet. +34 986 531951. About €50 for two

Benboa

A converted salt warehouse (right on the waterfront in Corbaldo), this destination restaurant combines the virtues of a new-wave tavern, fish market and eco-del. +34 981 863228. About €45 for two

WHERE TO STAY

Ares Beach House costs from €6,900 per week and Castro Baroña from €2,950 per week, both gallia.com. Casa Minería costs from €223 per night; gallia.com. Novavilla costs from €135; novavilla.com. Quinta de San Amaro has doubles from €73; quintadesanamaro.com

Opposite, clockwise from top left: chapel in Cambados; tapas at Sarafin; Pobra do Caramiñal beach; the path to Sarafin restaurant on the Cíes Islands; the yacht club in Vigo; octopus at Culler de Pau; view from Faro da Porta; hake and John Dory at Culler de Pau; old buildings in Pontevedra