





SPAIN IS DIFFERENT*

...AND GREEN SPAIN IS
DIFFERENT AGAIN

**Tourism slogan from the 1960s, Manuel Fraga*

Standing at Cape Finisterre near the end of this ride, I suddenly realised that back in 1959 I had been quite – maybe even too – close to this point. My parents and I were on our way to Australia as Ten Quid Tourists, and a Force 9 gale from the north-west seemed to be doing its best to keep us in Europe. Or possibly sink us just off Europe. Not for nothing is this called the Costa da Morte, or Death Coast. I was quite happy on the ship. Neither my Father nor I suffered from seasickness, so we had practically the entire dining room and staff as well as the public areas to ourselves. Everyone else was below decks of the tiny MV Flaminia, trying desperately to retain their stomach walls after disposing of the contents.

Ah, happy days.

In a way this voyage through northern Spain was almost as much of a revelation as the trip to Australia had been. Green Spain, this stretch along the southern edge of the Bay of Biscay, looks more like a cross between Ireland and Switzerland than the rest of Spain. It catches the rain off the Bay of Biscay and is truly, amazingly green while it has the most spectacular mountains and gorges; but it still offers the food, drink and hospitality of the Spanish people amid enough variety to make you think you're crossing half a dozen different countries. Even the language changes quite noticeably from the province of Galicia, where this tour starts, to Asturias, Castilla y Leon, Cantabria and Euskadi – the Basque country.

Arriving in Santiago de Compostela by plane seemed a bit cheeky, in a way. Pilgrims walk to get here from as far as 350km away, following the Path of St James. Completing this on foot or by bicycle supposedly gets you straight into Paradise when you die. Maybe flying in gets you time off for good behaviour... Probably not.

Santiago is one of those towns that only seem to exist in Europe, and even then only in a few places. The old town with its cathedral, stone buildings and narrow streets has been integrated beautifully in the newer settlement that surrounds it, and you can wander around in the past for hours.

Fortunately sanitation has been installed, surreptitiously and invisibly. You do not need to dodge the contents of chamber pots being emptied from upper stories. The Middle Ages are all very well, but modern toilet facilities are just terrific.

On my first morning in Santiago, before this tour started, I wandered into Obradoiro Plaza, the cathedral square. I was followed by a group of mounted pilgrims carrying the flags of Brazil, Mexico and Spain, who proceeded to pose for each other's smart phones in front of the cathedral. There was an accordion player, too, and the whole thing was thoroughly festive. I thought I had been transported into the past, an impression that grew when I walked past a bagpiper piping her bag in a stone archway. Bagpipes, it seems, are not just a Scots – or a bloke's – thing.

Right, the tour. I was signed up for IMTBike's Green Spain Tour. The company does a lot of tours in Spain itself, as well as Morocco, and has been expanding further into the world. But Spain remains its heartland, and Scott at IMTBike reckoned that when I picked Green Spain I picked the best of their offerings. We would see...

It was looking good when we gathered in the hotel lobby to meet our guide Martin and van driver/photographer Ruben. The group was about evenly split between Spanish- and English-speakers (including a couple of unflappable Norwegians); Martin and Ruben managed the two languages very happily. Down in the car park I made the acquaintance of my steed for the trip, a BMW F 700 GS. I took the top case off for the ride, and the panniers were more than adequate for my photo gear, rain suit and basic "survival" gear just in case the van with the rest of our luggage was late at any hotel. I have a couple of bags that serve as pannier inner bags; I put the stuff I'm likely to need on the road in one and whatever I might need at night in the other, so I'm always ready to leave the bike pretty quickly at the end of the day. Just grab the bags and go.

Don't sneer. This helps a lot because it usually means that I'm first in the queue to collect the key to my room, and then very quickly in the shower... and first

to order a beer at the bar. But enough Bearish rat cunning. Come to think of it, I know there's a bearcat. Is there a bearrat (or bearat) as well? Thank you, no personal comments.

IMTBike's tour arrangements are very similar to other operators', with the major exception that you pick up your own luggage and take it to your room at the end of the day, and then bring it back down in the morning. The van driver does that with most other companies. It's no big deal; in fact it ensures that your bag gets to your room at the same time as you do.

The first day was, very sensibly, an easy ride. Most of the participants were still recovering from mild jetlag, so an easy run up the freeway and then one of the National Roads (these are generally in excellent condition but have very little traffic) took us to a turnoff onto a terrific back road to A Coruna. Here, Martin led us around the main city traffic and, after a coffee stop, onto another back road. Local knowledge pays, as always, and we avoided not only a 75km stretch of tollway but also found another terrific road instead.

Now, forgive me if I don't keep lapsing into superlatives about the roads on this tour. They are just about all really good and most are fairly new; rumour has it that the EU (read "the German taxpayer") coughed up for this. The bad roads are pretty bad, but they are rare and usually just small back roads in the mountains. This tour did not tackle any gravel or dirt roads.

Unlike some tours I've been on which focused on culture or food or scenic beauty, the Green Spain tour is a rider's ride. Martin rode at a fair clip, but obviously had to hold back for some of the slower riders so I pulled my usual trick of stopping to take photos and then catching up with the group – at slightly higher speeds. Radar is becoming a bit of a pest in Spain, I'm told, but we didn't encounter any. Not that I noticed, anyway... no tickets have arrived in the mail unlike one time in Italy where I received a polite request for 20 Euros some six weeks after the – alleged! – offence.

With the weather looking less than brilliant we took another back road

to our lunch stop and then continued along the clifftops through what seemed like endless corners. The roads were wet but the BMW's Metzeler proved their value as usual. It felt good to be able to stretch the legs of the F 700, and in these kinds of conditions the bike has no trouble keeping up with its bigger brothers, both GSs and RTs. Set a terrier to catch a badger; set an 800cc twin to deal with wet, tight roads.

We had intended to take a look at Cathedral Rocks, a natural feature on the beach, but believe it or not, the place is so popular that we couldn't find parking spots - for the bikes! That was a real taste of what Spain must be like in the tourist season - we were there a bit early, and managed to miss most of the rush.

Our hotel for the night was the first of several Paradores we would stay in. Paradores are a network of more

Spain

Despite all the alleged increases in security, border formalities in Spain are still reasonably quick. Italy, for example, is now a complete pain if you're not on an EU passport. Australians do not need a visa or any other formality. It is strongly recommended that you get an International Driving Permit (see your local Auto Club) so do it; it doesn't cost the world.

The country uses the Euro and has a fully functioning banking system. ATMs are everywhere. Except in Green Spain, which is where I was, the country generally receives relatively little rain. Much of it is a high plateau, with Madrid sitting in the middle. Most holiday areas are around the edges.

Food is universally good and affordable, and alcohol is affordable and mostly good. I just don't like the cider. If you want to have picnics, remember that Spain gave us the word "siesta". Often shops close from 1.30 until 4.30pm.



Once a monastery, now a Parador. Pretty luxurious monastery.



Martin shows how to pour cider. Some of it lands in the glass.



Juggling in the old town of San Sebastian, accompanied by live music.





than 90 state-run Spanish hotels. Don't let that "state-run" put you off. It's not like China or Russia. Quality of everything including service is very high. Most Paradores are restored castles, monasteries, convents, fortresses, manor houses or palaces. They are found in some of the most beautiful corners of Spain, and occasionally, where there wasn't a convenient old building, a new one was put up.

Our first experience of this was the Parador de Ribadeo, a member of the latter class. Although it was clearly a fairly new building it was beautifully equipped and situated, with views over the river. In a way it was a gentle introduction to the Parador concept. The next night would be full-on at the Parador de Canga de Onis. Meanwhile nobody seemed to know what "Canga" meant, and searching the interwebs came up only with a Chinese instrument of torture, resembling the stocks. It is unlikely that there is a connection... I think...

Anyway, an excellent dinner was followed by an equally excellent night's sleep – it does make sense to get to the start of a tour a day (and more importantly a night!) early to adjust to the time zone, which is what I had done at the suggestion of IMTBike's Scott.

We began the day with one of the infrequent freeway stretches. Most Spanish freeways do not offer divided road – they're just two-lane tar, but with limited access and reasonably high speed limits. The ride up along the Navia River that followed was another test of the bike and tyres, both of which stood up to the demands... well, if anything probably a bit better than I did. I have to say here that I was riding quite briskly part of the time, and happy to do it. Outrageous fun, especially since there was once again almost no traffic. I'm not surprised that a lot of bears apparently live here. I could, too. A few bicycles did act as moving chicanes, but unlike Australia, Spain does not seem to foster a culture of aggression on the road. We turned east at Grandas de Salime and tackled first a mountain pass and then a smooth road along the river and then reservoir of the Rio Narcea.

Passing Oviedo, the capital of the



region, we headed for the coast again. A quick stop at the fishing village of Lastres, and then we turned inland again for Cangas de Onís at the foot of the Picos de Europa mountains.

The Peaks of Europe apparently got their name because they were the first sign of Europe that Spanish galleons returning from the New World over the Atlantic would see from the sea... see? The geology of the northern edge of Spain is seriously complicated, which is reflected in the constant changes of landforms. Fortunately for motorcyclists, most of them are rugged. The landforms, not the motorcyclists. Not that they're not rugged too.

The Parador turned out to be the real thing, a beautifully and sensitively restored monastery which even has internal excavations displayed in a special room or under glass floors. This really brought home to me how effective and respectful the Parador concept is, using old buildings rather than roping them off and either letting them decay or making them a drain on state finances because nobody ever bothers to go and see them. Indeed, using the Paradores for accommodation is a bit of a secret weapon for IMTBike; spending every



night in this kind of splendour certainly sets its mark on a tour. On top of that, the Paradores feature outstanding local cuisine; and the beer is always cold and affordable.

I should mention the breakfast, or rather breakfasts. They were all pretty similar, and featured a superb buffet. I just love Spanish ham, or jamon (pronounced ham-on) and there was always a good supply of that. But there were other delicacies as well, and usually you could order dishes like bacon and eggs or an omelette, included in the room charge. Along with the wonderful crisp bread this was the perfect way to set yourself up for the day.

Pilgrims on horses in Compostela – isn't that cheating?

We headed west along the edge of the Picos de Europa and then turned south through the Hermida Gorge to make our way around the back of the mountains to the south. This was wonderful riding; much better than, say, a lot of the Alps where you essentially get the same curve repeated over and over again. Here, the road was more like a long ribbon that had been thrown carelessly across the countryside making all sorts of loops and corners. Tops – until...



A bunch of post-Brexit Poms getting some Spanish sun while they still can.



One of the good things about having a local guide, or at least one who knows the country, is that they can tell you where to go. But another good thing is that they can tell you where not to go. And so Martin stopped us within sight of the Picos, and pointed up. The peaks were wrapped in thick cloud. He shrugged and said, more or less, it's up to you – but you're not going to see anything from the top of the cable car that takes you up there. We took his implied advice instead of the cable car and, being careful to not be turned into roadkill by the giant tour buses taking people up to see nothing, turned and spent a bit longer over lunch in the nice little village of Potes. Ah!



"They", being people who don't live there, call this small medieval town "the city of three lies". One, it's not a holy place; two, it's not on the plains; and three, it's not on the ocean. You could add four, it's not a city. What it is, is a beautifully restored/maintained town with a parador right on the central square opposite the town hall. We took maximum advantage of the romantic enclosed courtyard... actually, I should rephrase that... um. But anyway, a couple of guitars came out and blues coloured the night. Wonderful; just the way you think of the ideal motorcycle trip.

The Spaniards call hairpin corners "paella turns", and it was good to know

If I spent too long in Spain I would double in girth. The food is good with a capital "OO".

that because there were plenty of them the next morning after we dodged the traffic and busy-ness of Santander. The day's riding was outstanding, both through the valleys of Cantabria and Euskadi (the Basque country) and along the coast towards Donostia San Sebastian. Despite that, though, it was two places not at all connected with motorcycling that made the day especially memorable.

First was Bilbao, where we broke the usual rule of staying out of big population centres and rode right into



the middle to look at the convoluted, metal-clad Guggenheim museum. Looking like a complex mathematical formula made three dimensional, it is well worth a stop and I hope to get back some time. Even the food in its café is good and affordable, an unusual thrill considering what most museums dish up.

Martin pointed out that the museum is even more important than it might seem from looking at it. He said that after it was built, the whole city had pulled its sock up, cleaned itself up and made a real effort to live up to the museum and show its attractive side to tourists and locals alike. Despite intermittent rain I'd have to agree that it is a stylish place.

The Romans didn't invent the arch, but they invented concrete to hold them together.

The other place aroused less cheery feelings. Soon after Bilbao we passed Guernica, now spelt Gernika, a small town firebombed by German and Italian air force units under the control of Franco's military during the Spanish Civil War. I used to have a print of Picasso's famous allegorical painting devoted to this, but I lost it somewhere... and won't be buying another one. It's too gruesome. Maybe some of the punks who think it's so outrageous to have a skull tattooed onto their forearm



Pinxtos, or over-sized tapas. Choose your poison!



Beer comes out of these taps. Good beer, too.

should get "Guernica" needled across their backs...

Late in the afternoon we took another small, scenic back road along the ocean and then followed a similar but really small one along clifftops and through forests to the door of our hotel for the night, high above Bahia de la Concha and San Sebastian. Unusually, it was a Mercure, but while it lacked the style and grandeur of the Paradores, it did have that brilliant location. We (sensibly) took a pack of taxis to one of the area's ciderhouses where we ate, drank and

took a tour of cidery things. Sadly, I have to admit that I do not like Euskadi, Cantabrian or Asturian cider. I'm sure it's highly authentic, but to me it just seems sour. Sorry. Gimme a beer.

Next day was a "rest day", a motorcycle tour operators' euphemism for "get off your arse". While most of them do offer rides on these days, they're usually in places where walking around is pretty interesting and possibly (actually usually) intoxicating. San Sebastian was no exception. I took the funicular railway down to the waterfront and walked around to the city's heart. It is like a lot of Spanish and even French towns and cities – a network of square blocks with shops at ground level. This was not shaping up as the "ideal city for walking" that Martin had promoted the night before, but then I crossed a well-kept park and plunged into the old town or "centro historico". It was still made up of straight streets in an intersecting mesh, but held a combination of tapas or pintxos bars, bookshops, restaurants, speciality shops of various kinds and places selling souvenirs. As per the United Nations Universal Agreement on the Sale of Tourist Crap, each

souvenir shop sold more or less what all the other shops sold and matched prices so closely that an investigator from the Monopolies and Cartels Commission would have died on the spot from sheer anticipation.


I wandered, watched a juggler, listened to a blues and several flamenco bands and just soaked up the atmosphere along with some of the excellent beers (essentially only lager, but tasty) and the vast selection of pintxos. Whenever I could no longer stand, I sat at a table outside one of the bars and consumed a glass of the superb local dry white wine. Well, it seemed superb. I could have been drinking Manildra Overproof Old Still ethanol and would probably still have classed it as superior, at least.

When I had really, truly had enough I gently made my way back towards Monte Igualdo, at the top of which the hotel beckoned. While I was wondering vaguely how I was going to get back up there without the funicular – which had long stopped running – I was passed by the IMTBike van. I caught it at the next traffic light and attempted to climb aboard on the driver's side but was redirected to the other and delivered

safely at the hotel. Service, yes!

Unexpectedly lacking a hangover the next morning, I joined our little dusty troupe for the day's ride on the best roads we had tackled yet. Tracking the border with Navarre, we "dive(d) into the lush green forest" as the IMTBike guide so accurately notes and began a day of riding small, narrow and wonderfully up-and-down back roads. We must have crossed more than half a dozen passes, all with their own character. As with most of the roads we had tackled so far, there was remarkably little traffic considering the quality of the road surfaces. Once again, a big thank you to Germany's taxpayers and the EU for passing the cash on.

Despite some rain, the ride through Urkiola National Park was beautiful. Martin couldn't believe his luck when we all rolled up at the Hotel Silken in Vitoria Gasteiz, our overnight stop. We had been trawling through an extensive network of wet and indeed partly flooded roads on our way to the hotel's underground garage, held up at varying times by traffic lights and unexpected lane changes, but we were all there hale though wet.



Our dinner spot that night, in the old city, reminded me a little of Botin, Ernest Hemingway's (and my) favourite restaurant in Madrid – before it went all touristy. As a rule on the IMTBike tours you eat at the Parador, if that's where you're staying, or at another restaurant that is outstanding or interesting in some way. As you'd expect from Spaniards, they have the quality and variety of the food all sorted...

In the morning the rain had cleared, but as we made our way first south and then west, heavy clouds weighed down the northern horizon more and more. Martin put it to us at Trespaderne, after a wonderful run along a huge reservoir – did we want to head north into the rain or would we prefer a shorter but dry alternative? He didn't need to take a vote, and we took a short connecting road to another east-west road which stayed considerably further south. We did the same thing again in Cantabria, where our original route would also have taken us right into heavy rain.

I suspect that there are actually no bad roads in Green Spain, because the alternatives chosen on the hop, so to speak, were brilliant. The only negative

note all day was a wild boar's head on the wall of our lunch spot. It sneered at us, a cigar in its mouth. But who cares what wild boars think, cigar or no cigar?

Initially I thought the Parador de Cervera, our destination for the day, had something to do with beer. It seems, however, that it's a matter of *cerveza* (beer) and *cervera* (not beer). They had a decent stock of the stuff anyway and we watched a huge local wedding take place as we refreshed ourselves on the terrace overlooking a large forest with a reservoir in the middle.

This Parador is one of the purpose-built ones, not an ancient building, but as before that didn't reduce its comfort and style. Mind you, it did look like a vastly overgrown ski chalet. I put in some time at my window looking for the wild boar, deer, wolves and golden eagles that inhabit these nature reserves, along with brown bears. No luck. But hey, there was an adequate supply of brown beer instead...

Incidentally, booze is not covered by the IMTBike tour. But that's not much of an imposition – firstly because it is pretty cheap, this being Spain, and second because every day, Martin

would think of a reason for Ruben and himself to shout us a few bottles of wine with dinner.

Another day followed, with another ride over excellent and near-empty roads. Top marks to the Spanish drivers, they don't seem to take advantage of the lack of traffic, and stay in their own lane. We nearly reached 1500 metres on some of the mountain passes we crossed, but the weather was friendly and the views were terrific. On the way

Declaration of interest

The Bear took the Green Spain tour as a guest of IMTBike. We do not offer positive coverage in return for tours, and it is not expected by the operators. If they screw up, they wear it. Martin and Ruben not only didn't screw up, they handled potential problems smoothly and effectively.



towards the Picos de Europa, which we would pass on their southern side, we got some glimpses of their steep peaks, pointing both up and, with their reflections in the mirror-still reservoirs, down. We were effectively in mountains the whole day. Just in case I hadn't mentioned it, the riding was wonderful once again.

Just a quick word on that subject. The daily briefing and route sheets, along with the maps that Martin handed out,

IMTBike

A large motorcycle touring and rental company, IMTBike has a good range of bikes at its three bases in Spain:

Madrid, Barcelona and Malaga. They offer tours in Spain, Morocco and many other places – see www.imtbike.com or call +34 916 337 222. I found them to be highly professional and well informed.

were quite enough to find your own way. In this case, however, we all stayed in more or less a single group. This consisted of Martin at the front, three or four quick riders with him, then the bulk of the group in two or three small bunches and finally the Norwegians, who obviously liked to take it easy and see the sights. This arrangement varied very little except when I decided I wanted to take photos. Usually I'd go ahead when the whole group stopped, wait for them to catch me and snap away. I would then chase them – and of course

that's where a lot of the fun was. Quite legitimate! I needed the photos, after all.

I had been looking forward to Oviedo, our next overnight stop and rest day. I won't say that I was disappointed, because that wouldn't be true, but while places like the central park and the markets were terrific, I found the old



part of town severely over-touristy. Such is life, however, or *asi es la vida* as we old Spain hands would say. I did learn how to pour cider from above my head into – or perhaps I should say nearly into – a glass. The locals say that this is done to aerate the cider. I say it's so a lot of it misses and they won't have to



drink so much of the sour stuff. There you go: both of my disappointments on this tour in one paragraph.

To be fair, almost everyone else seemed to like the cider. In small quantities.

I could have gone on the ride to the fishing village of Cudillero, organised for the rest day, but I decided I'd get some work done instead (What work, Bear? – Ed). I do all this for you, you know!

Probably what makes a truly outstanding motorcycle tour is a route that has no major transport stages – only full-on riding days. IMTBike's Green Spain is one of those, although I suspect that you would get wonderful riding up here if you took any combination of roads. No bull (ah ha ha, forgive the small Spanish play on words). It's like riding the Oxley for 10 days, ever changing and ever different, with jamon for breakfast and paella for dinner...

We took a short stretch of that curious Spanish single-lane freeway before turning off once again into the mountains and through Somiedo Natural Park. After some more of the usual Spanish secondary roads, we slipped away onto a true back road, winding its way up and above one of the many reservoirs. Here the road surface was not the best; in fact it was quite spectacularly bumpy and highly unpredictable. After all the good roads we'd had it was actually fun. Well, almost. The F 700 GS coped pretty well.

The Babia Valley is a confusingly gentle place compared to the rugged mountains all around it, and we crossed it before tackling the mountains again. By now we were back on a smooth, wide highway where we crossed another couple of passes, and it wasn't long before we reached Montforte de Lemos. Mind you, it seemed to take forever to reach our destination for the day, the Parador de Montforte. It's an old monastery high up on a hill overlooking the town, and you can see it literally for dozens of kilometres.

This is another of the great old Paradores, with metre-thick walls and... and a swimming pool! It had been a hot day, and the pool proved popular for many of the group. Mind you, places like this can be a bit confusing. I mean, this was a monastery – but my room, or rather apartment, would have been suitable for an Earl or a Count. It was certainly not a “cell”. Did the monks live a rather more luxurious life than we're led to believe?

The second-last day of the tour dawned sunny again and as we rode down the serpentine road from the Parador I thought I was, by now, ready for anything that Green Spain could throw at me. Wrong, of course. We found a series of vast gorges, carved out over centuries by the Sil River with the sides filled with vineyards and the road snaking its way through them. The good road didn't last, and we found another lengthy stretch that could have

**San Sebastian across the bay
from our hotel at night.**

done with some attention – but then it was probably a good idea to make us pay some attention to the road for a change!

We stayed in another old Parador that night in Cambados on the Atlantic coast after a mixup where some of the riders missed a turn. That meant lunch was at what amounted to a truck stop instead of the nice café that had been planned. But it was excellent food, and it was really cheap as well. Serendipity rides again.

We passed the remains of Noah's Ark, lying in the hills near Ria de Muros y Noia which is named after Noah's granddaughter. We didn't seem to have time to stop and have a look, but far be it from me to disbelieve the locals. After all, they'd know if the Ark was lying in their hills or not, right? Right.

Mixed road surface took us out to Cape Finisterre, which is where a pilgrimage very much older than the Santiago de Compostela walk ends, and then criss-crossed the mountains a little before we returned to our start. A final dinner in a crowded and entirely authentic local eatery was followed by overnight at the most impressive Parador yet – the Parador Nacional; de Santiago de Compostela. And that was it.

I'm going back, and next time I'm taking Mrs Bear. ●