

The extreme northwest of Spain is home to quaint fishing villages, ancient remains, treacherous cliffs and peaceful nature reserves. Nancy Frey reveals the hidden depths of her home region of Galicia

COASTAL CORNER





A typical Galician coastal town, with terraced fields and stone-built houses tumbling down to the sea



The Miño river forms a border between Galicia and Portugal

I LIVE IN a little Galician fishing village on the northern shore of the Ría de Arousa, one of the Galicia's highly scenic tidal estuaries or *rias*. In the small harbour, the small red wooden *dornas* are haphazardly moored, moved only by the tides. Retired fishermen stroll up and down the boat ramps and head off to the local bar for an afternoon of intense card playing. On the port's new side, blue and white, iron-hulled fishing boats prepare to head off for another night in the open Atlantic. Making their way through a maze of rocky shallows and islands, small fishing boats, with a flock of seagulls in hot pursuit, return to port further inland passing a natural breakwater that separates the powerful ocean from the tranquil estuary where hundreds of mussel platforms serve as incubator for one of Galicia's many seafood delicacies.

Endlessly rolling green mountains gently rise out of the water and continue in folds as far as the eye can see. Dense forests hide the megalithic burial chambers and Iron Age settlements found littering the mountaintops and hillsides. A few scattered villages, white amid a sea of green, sprinkle the upper reaches while lower down a patchwork quilt of worked fields separated by stone fences and stands of trees surround the numerous towns clinging closely to the shoreline.

PUTTING GALICIA ON THE MAP

Galicia forms the northwest end of Green Spain, the name given to the verdant, highly scenic band of hilly countryside that faces the Atlantic along Spain's northern shore and includes Asturias, Cantabria and País Vasco (Basque Country). Three of Galicia's four provinces (Lugo, A Coruña and Pontevedra) face the sea with vast inland extensions while landlocked Ourense shares an undulating border along the great river Miño with Portugal.

Gallego, one of Spain's four official languages, is spoken throughout the region. Despite the economic boom that swept across Spain since the 1970s, Galicia still retains a strong hold on its traditional roots. Its economy is tied to the sea and to small-scale agriculture in a rocky, unforgiving countryside.

Unlike the Basque Country further east, which industrialised quickly and rapidly in the 19th century, Galicia continues to surprise for its lack of visible industry outside of the few urban centres. Widows dressed in black still usher cows along the busy secondary roads. Only 30 years ago Galicians in the eastern sierras stopped living in *pallozas*, round thatch-roofed dwellings, as they had since pre-Roman times. And, since at least the 13th century, the ubiquitous rectangular *hórreos* (granaries), »



Top and above: Curious looking stone wall boundaries and foundations are dotted around the Galician countryside

topped with a cross and phallic pyramid for fertility, have kept the winter's store safe from rain and rodents. It is precisely this anachronistic rural quality that contributes to the allure of Galicia.

STONE-WALLED

Galicia is known as 'granite land' and everywhere you look are green fields bordered by stone walls. And another thing you notice is the wide dispersion of little villages. Galicia has some 32,400 settlements – cities, towns, villages, hamlets (*aldeas*) and even small settlements (*lugares*) of two or three houses – each surrounded by small family plots, pasturelands, rough gorse and broom-ridden hills and woods. While its total extension (some 29,000 square kilometres) accounts for only six percent of Spain's whole territory, the number of towns and villages accounts for 48 percent of Spain's settlements!

I see this curious dispersion clearly from my window where many small ports hug the Arousa estuary's long shore. Most Galicians live along the coast. Of Galicia's seven major urban centres, four are coastal – A Coruña, Ferrol, Pontevedra and Vigo – but only A Coruña and Vigo manage to attain 250,000 souls. A Coruña thrives as a major shipping port, province capital and cultural centre with

excellent museums, the oldest Roman lighthouse in Europe and the expansive Riazor beach integrated into the urban landscape. A walk down A Coruña's picturesque waterfront Avenida da Marina reveals Galicia's best example of multi-paned, enclosed *galerías* or sunrooms; it's a virtual wall of glass.

Vigo maintains Galicia's largest fishing fleet as well as the Citroën car plant giving it a busy, industrial feel. Head down to its historical quarter, though, and you'll find outstanding seafood in the small bars on its Rúa Pescadería (Fish Market Street).

The rest of the population concentrates in inland Ourense and Lugo. Finally, Santiago de Compostela, Galicia's capital and important university town since the 15th century, has historically been the region's religious and cultural heart. It's the one town not to miss if you visit Galicia.

PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

Compostela has attracted pilgrims and travellers since the ninth century when a local religious hermit discovered the remains of Santiago (known in English as the Apostle James the Greater). News of the discovery quickly spread and soon the faithful came in masses



from all points of the Christian world creating the network of medieval pilgrimage roads known as the *Caminos de Santiago*.

The pilgrimage's popularity put Galicia irrevocably on the European map and was in large part the source of the region's medieval splendour, leaving the countryside filled with innumerable churches, monasteries and masterpieces of art and architecture in the villages and towns through which the pilgrimage ways pass. The pilgrimage reaches its apex of splendour in the city on the sublime Praza do Obradoiro where the great powers that have influenced the city over the centuries all find a place: the Romanesque cathedral with its soaring Baroque façade, the magnificent 15th-century Reis Católicos hostel founded by the monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand as a pilgrims' hospice, the imposing neo-Classical Raxoi palace cum modern-day city hall and the university's Colegio San Xerome with its well-carved neo-Romanesque portal.

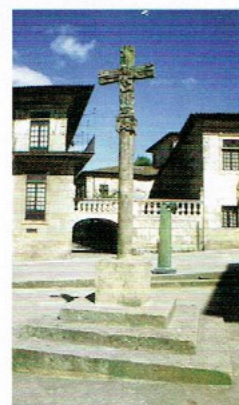
Listen on the plaza (and down the historic arcaded streets alive with outdoor cafés) and you'll hear street musicians playing the *gaita* (the Galician bagpipe) and benefiting from the acoustics provided by the arch of the Archbishop's Palace. Music fans will enjoy Galician folk groups Milladoiro and Luar na Lubre as well as bagpipers Carlos

Núñez and Susana Seivane. Many of the instruments played by these groups can be seen in the cathedral's masterpiece of Romanesque sculpture, the *Pórtico da Gloria*, in which 24 wise men are depicted strumming, blowing and animatedly ushering souls to heaven.

TOWARDS THE COAST

Galicia's 1,200 kilometres of rugged, indented coastline, fringed by 50 islands, is typically divided into three parts: the densely populated and highly touristic Rías Baixas (Lower Estuaries); the most rural and undeveloped Costa da Morte (meaning Death Coast); and the Rías Altas (Upper Estuaries) which have the best surfing waves and Spain's highest cliffs. The crown jewel of the Rías Baixas recently became Galicia's first national park (Spain's 14th): the Atlantic Islands National Park. Most prized is the Cíes archipelago easily accessed by ferry in summer from Vigo or the summer resort town of Baiona. Known for their blinding white sand beaches, crystalline waters, great walking trails, and abundance of rare flora and fauna, two of its islands are connected by a sandy isthmus and stone walkway.

The Death Coast, named for its treacherous waters and shipwrecks, is home to Fisterra (or Finisterre in Spanish), the »



A rickety wooden bridge crosses one of Galicia's many mountain streams, while a village square is dominated by the ancient carved stone cross



Above: A Coruña's bustling seafont walkway, the Avenida da Marina

Right: Galicia's striking coastline is characterised by dominant granite rocky outcrops and strings of unspoilt sandy beach

medieval end of the earth. In the untidy fishing port, sardines, brought fresh off the boat on ice, are grilled to perfection at one of the small bars. In the middle of the port's huge roundabout, there's a granite monument depicting a man holding a windowpane and a suitcase. He gives testimony to the long and sad history of Galician migration in which 1.5 million Gallegos have packed their bags and sought their fortune elsewhere since the 1880s. Galician handicrafts are kept alive in the nearby 14th-century Vimianzo castle. All summer long basket weavers, potters (from the nearby pottery town of Muíños), linen weavers, wooden shoe cobblers, lace makers and jet artisans are busy at work.

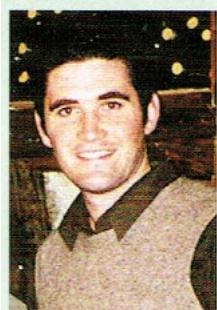
Along the Rías Altas, a must-stop is the Praia das Catedrais (Cathedrals' Beach) during low tide when the ocean reveals a series of natural arches and caves. At San Andrés de Teixido, located on a steep cliff and one of Galicia's most curious shrines, pilgrims leave wax body parts in hopes of a miraculous cure. As true of all the Galician mountains, semi-wild horses range here.

IT'S PARTY TIME

Annual round-ups (known locally as the *Rapa das Bestas*) are held all over Galicia and form part of the hugely popular cycle of fiestas or celebrations. Galicians have a knack of turning anything into a



'we live here...' Insider advice from a Galicia resident



Sean O'Rourke runs an activity and adventure holiday company near Vigo in eastern Galicia

Where do you live?

We live in the coast village of Cangas do Morrazo across the bay from Vigo, Pontevedra, where my office is. We had a flat in Vigo city but decided to get out to a village with excellent beaches and walking trails. We're renting until we buy some land or a property to renovate... I have my eye on a few options!

When and why did you move here?

I used to live in Barcelona where I met my wife Angie. Her parents are from Arbo in Pontevedra province and when we decided to get married, we came here to meet her parents and I loved Galicia so much that we moved here and started our speciality tour business. I've now been here for six years.

So what do you do here?

Our family has a small vineyard in the wine

region DO Rías Baixas. We make Albariño and Condado white wines. And we also run our online tour business company offering holidays to all of Spain and Portugal. We do all sorts of trips: wine, food, culture, spas, honeymoons, golf, walking and so on.

Why Galicia and not another region?

Galicia intrigued me because of its Celtic past. I feel at home here... in Galicia they joke about saying that Ireland is the fifth province of Galicia!

I have lived in Barcelona, Madrid and Marbella, but what was always lacking was the green lush countryside. Everywhere in Galicia you see water and stone and a verdant landscape.

Another highlight is the gastronomy. On the coast you have excellent seafood and fish while in the interior you get fine meats such as lamb and baby goat.

Are there any downsides?

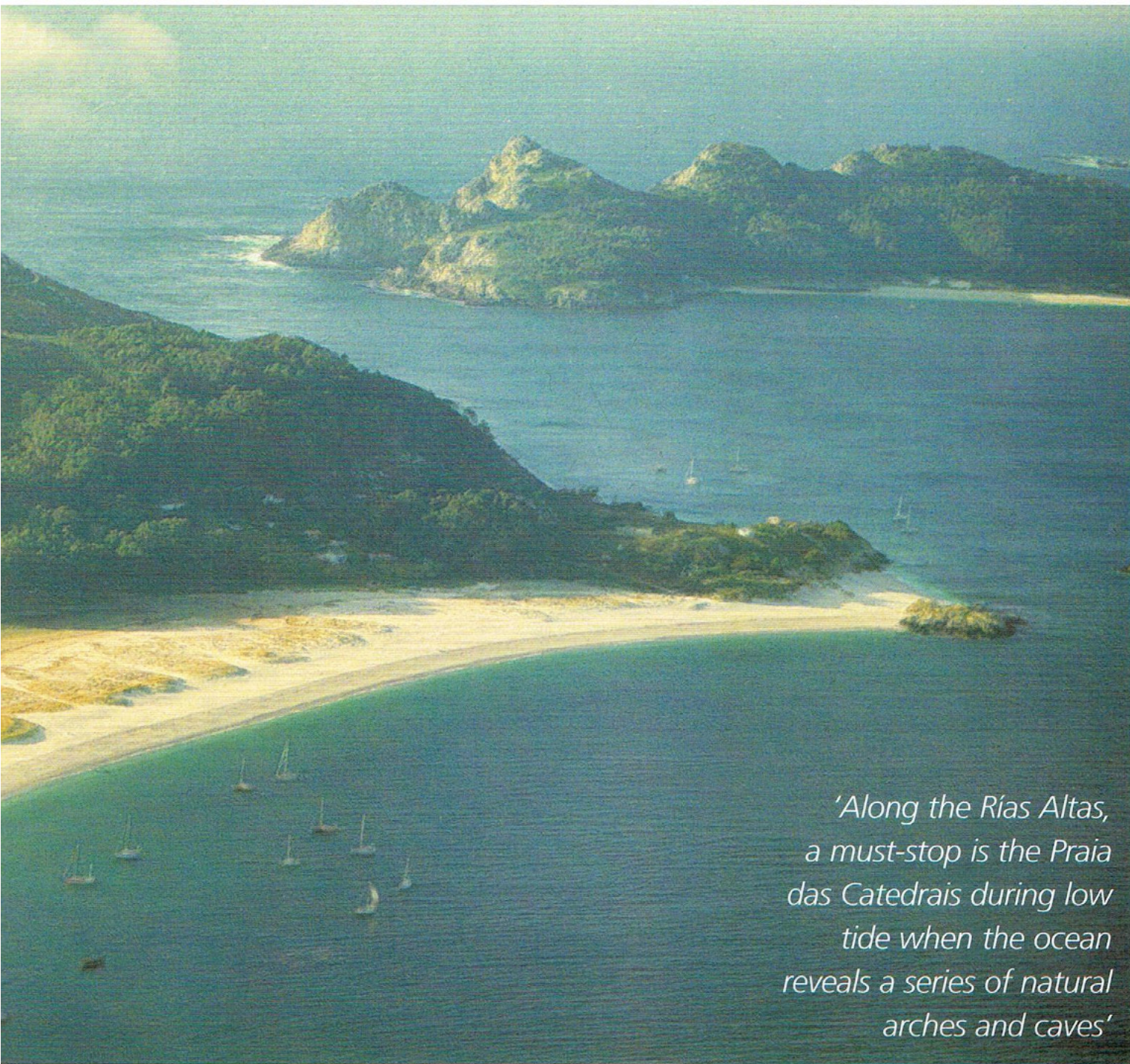
It does rain quite a bit during the winter, but I prefer the seasonal weather and here the summer is just perfect, not too hot like in some places of southern Spain.

What would you advise any readers planning a move to Galicia?

Galicia is a very diverse land and is very rural, but cities are well connected to other parts of Spain; Vigo is the biggest city and one of the most important ports in Europe. If you don't speak Spanish or Gallego, then stay in a location near or closely communicated with one of the cities.

My favourite areas are the Rías Baxias coast, Ribeira Sacra valley and the Baixo Miño, but all of Galicia is beautiful if you are looking for a piece of unexploited Spain.

● For more details of Sean's business, visit www.euroadventures.net



'Along the Rías Altas, a must-stop is the Praia das Catedrais during low tide when the ocean reveals a series of natural arches and caves'

...otive for a fiesta whether it be food (everything from pigs' ears and ...arnacles to octopus and the delicious local green peppers, ...*mimientos de padrón*), saints' days (the most famous is the vibrant 25 ...uly celebration of St James in Santiago), historical incidents (a Viking ...ttack in Catoira has been re-enacted since 1961), political protest, ...usic (the International Celtic Music Festival in Ortigueira) or a ...additional holiday such as carnival (those of southern Ourense ...rovince take the cake especially Laza village).

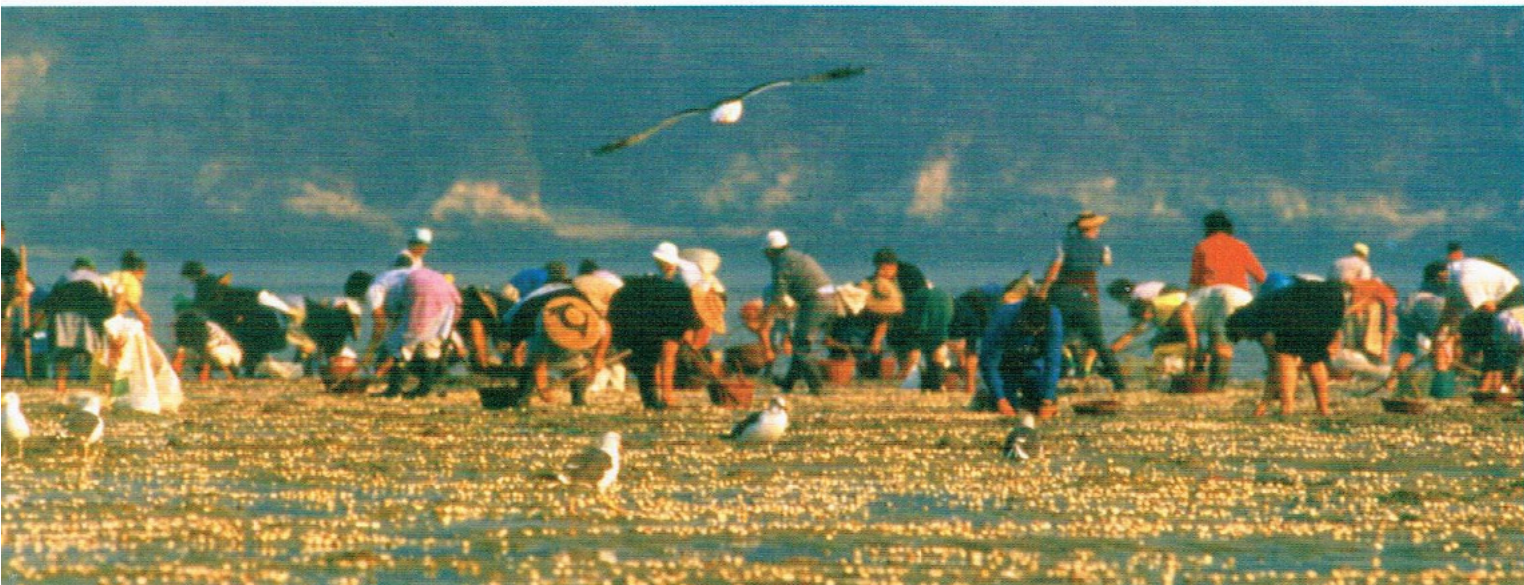
If you hear cannon fire at any time, especially in summer, don't be ...armed as that's the Galician way of letting you know the fiesta has ...egun. My favourite fiesta comes up in July when seaports shut ...own to celebrate their patroness, the Virxe do Carme (Our Lady of ...armen). In Muros, her statue is processed out of the church to the ...ort where fishing boats, decked out with flowers and brightly ...oloured streamers, await to accompany her in a circuit around the ...harbour as she blesses the sea. Fishermen on the boats throw floral ...reaths to the ocean in her honour.

FRUITS OF THE SEA

...ife in the little port below my window is always a feast for the eyes. ...one are the days when the village beach reached the front »



Locals don crazy costumes and run through the streets of Laza for the Os Peliqueiros carnival



Top: Taking advantage of a particularly abundant clam and cockle harvest on the coastal mud flats

Below: A Galician woman takes home her wares plus an array of shellfish available all over Galicia

doors of the fishermen's houses and the *dornas* were sailed and achingly rowed in the *rias*. But, what hasn't changed since time immemorial is Galicia's fame as a seafood mecca. Each day I watch the white fibre-glass boats, painted bright red on the inside and powered by out-board motors, zip out to the nearby islands working Spain's richest and oldest sea beds in search of tasty crustaceans, molluscs and cephalopods: *almejas* or clams (razor shell, wedge, carpet shell), *berberechos* or cockles, *mejillón* or mussels, *ostras* or oysters, *vieira* or scallops, *zamburiñas* – a delicious, petite scallop, *erizos* or sea urchins, crabs (diminutive *nécoras*, robust *buey* or ox crab and the highly prized *centollo* or spider crab) as well as *bogovante* and *langoste*, European and spiny lobster, *chopo* or cuttlefish, *calamar* or squid, and *pulpo* or octopus.

Right now it's *percebe* (goose barnacle) season. These succulent, finger-sized (and rather grotesque looking) crustaceans grab a huge price at the fish market and are usually ordered by the gram in restaurants. The clam and cockles season preceded the barnacle. To get clams men stand in their small boats for hours on end combing the seafloor while women work the estuaries at low tide bringing in cockles by the bucketful (sometimes carried on their heads!). In Santiago de Compostela the restaurants (there are at least 25 in about 50 metres of street) along the *Rúa do Franco*, such as O42, display their tasty offerings in refrigerated window cases and let you hand pick your lobster or crab from the bubbling aquariums.

Archaeological evidence indicates that hunters and gatherers have worked the rich tidal estuaries since at least 15,000BC digging up and scraping off the rocks delicious morsels-of-the-sea long before people were being buried in the fascinating megalithic (4000 to 3000BC) burial tombs (called dolmens) found preserved and scattered around the western half of Galicia or living in the nearly 5000 fortified villages (*castros*) inhabited by warrior Iron Age peoples (1800BC to 200AD), including the Celts, which completely cover the Galician territory. The mountain-top Castro de Santa Tegra looking down on A Guarda and Portugal as well as the impressive seaside Castro de Baroña are both worth a visit.

Galician seafood's great fame is partly due to the simplicity of preparation. Forget about speciality stores or adapting recipes. Mussels and barnacles are steamed with water, salt and laurel leaf. Cuttlefish are floured, fried and served with a squeeze of lemon.

Octopus (*pulpo a la gallega*) is boiled in huge copper pots, cut with scissors on to round wooden plates, drizzled with olive oil, and seasoned with marine salt and sweet and spicy red pepper (*pimentón*). Outstanding fresh fish (hake, monkfish, sea bream, sole and bass just to name a few) are typically grilled, served *a la gallega* (with olive oil seasoned with garlic and paprika), *a la romana* (egg battered and fried), or, the fisherman's classic, *caldeirada* (a mixture of fishes and potatoes slowly stewed). If you want to take a taste of the sea home, the canned seafood produced here is also outstanding. Keep an eye out for Luís Escuri's Batalla's excellent hand-packed products.

With this seafood cornucopia it's easy to forget about Galicia's inland offerings. Hearty pork dishes to kill any hunger predominate: *lacón con grelos* (pork shoulder with greens), *cocido* (every pig part imaginable and chorizo sausage slowly boiled and served on heaping platters with cabbage), *caldo gallego* (broth soup with greens and potatoes). *Empanadas* (using both wheat- and cornflour) are delicious meat pies filled with just about anything: outstanding local veal, tuna, cod with raisins, clams, or octopus.

'With this seafood cornucopia, it's easy to forget about Galicia's inland offerings'

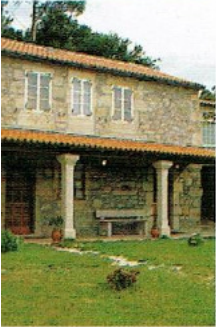
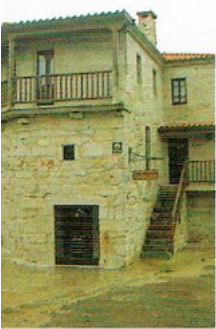
Galicia's four cow's milk cheeses, especially the creamy breast-shaped *tetilla* and smoked San Simón varieties, are not to be missed. Galicia also produces excellent white Ribeiro wines in the warmer, southern climes along the Río Miño and notable white Albariño wines in the *Rías Baixas*.

GALICIAN GARDENS

If I look out the back window, it could be anywhere in Galicia's interior. Small garden plots divided by granite stone walls and planted with corn, potatoes and long leafy greens make a chaotic yet beautiful quilt of tilled fields. I see fig, lemon and laurel trees as well as two kinds of willow (one used to fashion baskets) along the brook. There are also stands of oak and fragrant pine and eucalyptus trees, the latter planted extensively (and to the detriment of the environment) for paper and pressboard.

Ornamental gardens have excellent examples of magnolias, camellias, hydrangeas and rhododendron: species all brought at the end of the 19th century and planted in the gardens of rich return emigrants and wealthy local families in their huge manor homes called *pazos*. Missing from the scene are chestnuts.

The best examples are in my favourite lost corner of Galicia: the Serra de Courel mountain range which lies just south of the »



Typical stone-built gallego houses, some of the most rustic being built on stilts

Cebreiro mountain pass in Lugo province. Great groves still thrive producing outstanding sweet chestnuts. Some of these nuts wind up roasting on Madrid's streets in winter. Until the 18th century chestnuts were the major carbohydrate – and thrown into stews, boiled, eaten raw, roasted – before the easily cultivated potato became a dietary mainstay. In some regions of Galicia, potatoes are called *castañas de terra* (earth chestnuts).

LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

Lugo province is dominated by the city of the same name, an old Roman settlement founded in a sacred forest once dedicated to Lug, a pagan god. Lugo's claim to fame is its intact third-century Roman wall ringing its historical quarter. Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002, the two-kilometre perimeter gives a voyeur's view into the chaotic city and its magnificent cathedral, dilapidated historical quarter, elegant 18th-century avenues, private schoolyards, open fields, huge magnolias and the quirky evolution of slate (the province's dime-a-dozen building material) roof tiles!

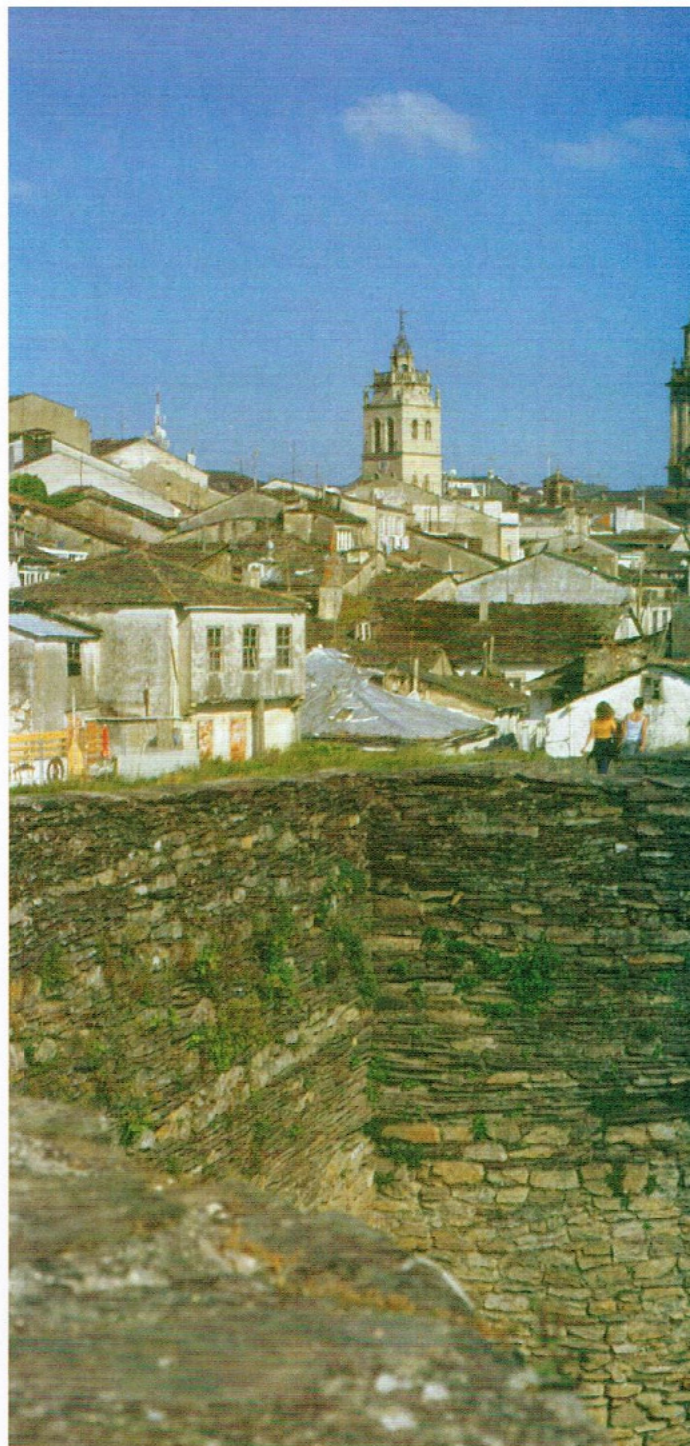
Romans came to conquer these prized Galician lands once rich in gold, tin and silver but they also exploited its thermal waters. Down by the Miño, remnants of thermal baths exist alongside the modern spa, Balneario de Lugo, where the water emerges at 43.8° Celsius

If I listen, rather than look out my window, I hear another element of Galician reality: the cement mixer's whir, the clanking of chains on huge mobile cranes and the sound of hammers busy at work. Next door an elegant 40-apartment, granite-faced complex quickly rose up taking the place of rundown port buildings. Construction and real estate speculation are two popular activities especially on the coast and the outskirts of the major cities.

Unfortunately, uncontrolled building has resulted in cases of unappealing urban sprawl and rural development with little aesthetic uniformity. Nonetheless, a wide array of properties from new and used coastal apartments and chalets (modern, usually, second homes) to 18th-century *pazos* to chunks of undeveloped property (*fincas* in the country and *solares* in the city) to run-down rural stone cottages and stunning multi-storey houses in the centre of the region's numerous historical quarters are waiting for either massive restoration or gentle fixing up.

If you are looking for an affordable, run-down property in the boonies then head to the hills of Lugo or Ourense province where

Busy streets in Vigo



entire abandoned hamlets are for sale. The restoration of farmhouses, *pazos* and other buildings of historical import into rustic lodgings and elegant hotels, called *turismo rural*, has been a major thrust of the tourism industry. The Galician government provides grants to restore historical properties intended for this type of tourism. (The website www.turgalicia.es lists all of these lodgings.) 30 minutes east of Santiago, you'll find the elegant Pazo de Andeade and enjoy its peaceful ample gardens and outstanding kitchen.

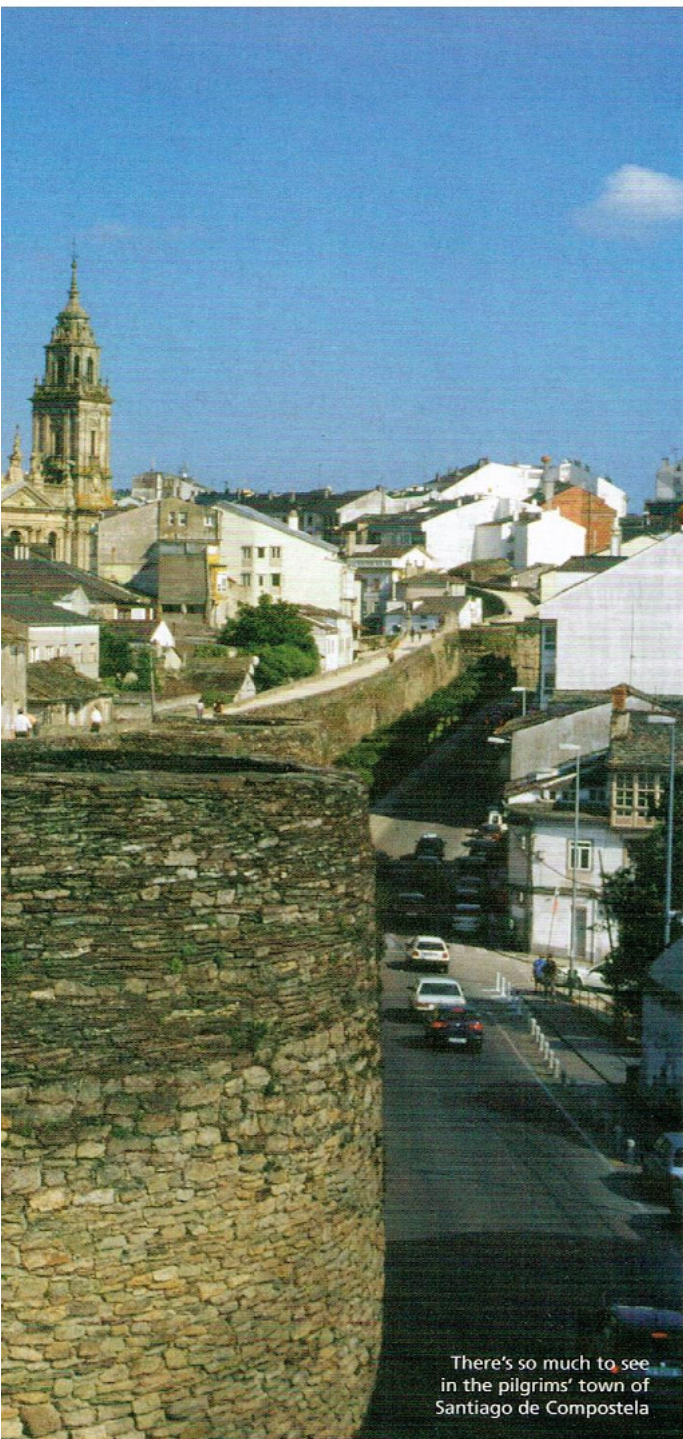
PROPERTY BOOM

Spain's expanding economy of the 1990s provoked a building craze and explosion in the real estate market all over the country. In comparison to the rest of Spain, Galicia continues to be a good place to buy: the average price of used property in Spain in 2003 as a whole was 1,330 euros per square metre, whereas in Galicia it was 852 euros. In 2003 the price of second-hand property rose 17 percent on the national level while in Galicia it only rose five percent, the smallest rise in Spain.

To help facilitate the sale of property, *inmobiliarias* (estate agents) abound. Many of these companies have websites and display properties with photographs to facilitate your research. For example,

PROPERTY REVIEW

A guide to homes for sale in the area



There's so much to see in the pilgrims' town of Santiago de Compostela

the website (www.tusinmobiliarias.com) has listings all over the region and branch offices in Santiago, A Coruña, Pontevedra, and Vigo and publishes a free monthly newspaper with property listings. The more ample bi-weekly publication, *Galicia Inmobiliaria*, is available in kiosks for one euro.

When buying an old house or undeveloped property be sure to check very carefully that what you are being sold corresponds with the paperwork documenting the property and that construction is permitted. Many properties, especially country *fincas*, have never been noted in the local registry and may only be documented through a will. A Galician law enacted in January 2003 regulates uncontrolled building to maintain an aesthetic norm outside city limits and in rural areas. In some instances, real estate agents have kept properties on the market that at one time were legal but are no longer according to the new regulations. The town hall in which the property is located can assist you.

One thing I haven't mentioned is that I can't enjoy the view from my window every day. Galicia is green for a reason and when the waves turn white and the winds threaten from the southwest, I know it's time to batten down the hatches and enjoy a steaming bowl of *caldo gallego* inside while the winter storm roars on. **S**



€300k

GALICIAN HOME FROM HOME

This new development offers three- and four-bedroom homes in the A Guarda area with great sea views. The property also boasts a living room, terrace, fitted kitchen, three bathrooms, garage and cellar.

Reyco Inmobiliaria: +34 986 611741
www.reyco.net



€217,241

COUNTRY HOUSE

A beautiful recently restored rural house with 450m² living space across two floors. It has chestnut wood interiors and seven bedrooms with a patio. It is situated about 17 kilometres from Santiago de Compostela.

Galicia Paradise: +34 982 455437
www.galiciaparadise.com

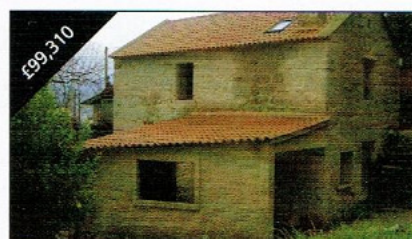


€290,000

CHALET WITH VIEWS

Set above Panxón on the west coast, this villa has five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a large terrace and swimming pool. With luxurious living space and great views, this home is a short drive from Vigo.

Blakemore Walker: +34 985 518721
www.blakemorewalker.com



€99,310

PROPERTY WITH POTENTIAL

This semi-restored stone property is 15 minutes drive from Vigo. It has two floors and is open plan, plotted on 700m². A stream runs parallel and there is a granary and an orange tree in the garden.

BK Property: 08717 801158
www.bkproperty.com

BUYING IN... GALICIA

Galicia is the furthest northwest region of Spain and is divided into smaller provinces. As a result, the mosaic of landscapes seems to have something to please everyone: a thousand kilometres of spectacular coastline, beaches, estuaries as well as many rivers. The mountainous regions are found in the province of Lugo where the weather varies dramatically. For wine lovers, Galicia has a rich wine region, especially white although both are produced.

The variety between regions means there are inevitable hot spots as far as property is concerned. Sarah Allinson of BK Property says the most popular area for buying is 'the province of Pontevedra, mainly due to the fantastic micro-climate. It is very warm and sunny and rains very little in comparison to the rest of Galicia whose rainfall is abundant.'

But attractive areas don't stop there, as Allinson points out: 'Ourense is also quite popular but, as with Lugo, it gets very cold in winter and hot in summer.'

It is very hard to imagine living in this part of Spain if you prefer the coastal bliss of the Costa del Sol. But according to Allinson, Galicia is perhaps more familiar to us than we

think. 'The area is green and similar to Ireland or Wales but unfortunately, construction is developing fast so towns are increasing rapidly in size.'

However, if you are looking for the quieter parts, then inland is the way to go. As Sarah indicates, 'Property prices are a good deal lower and there is still a lot of property for renovation there, with some potentially spectacular properties. This is changing fast as Galicians are starting to realise the true value of their houses so I would advise buying now.'

So, what is it really like to live there? Well, Galician people are very keen for the visitor to feel at home. There is a well developed hotel trade, excellent restaurants, spas and rural houses converted for tourism. There is also no need to worry about the Gallego language as everybody speaks a little English and certainly Castillian. As people buy into the area, it is fast becoming more and more cosmopolitan. Nevertheless, there are still patches of Galicia which remain untouched. Allinson's opinion is that 'people will continue investing in coastal areas as they are green but the real boom is happening inland.'

For details of other properties for sale in Galicia, refer to our North, Central & Pyrennes Sales section, starting on page 146