

Spain

LA SENDA DEL OSO, THE BEAR'S PATH GREENWAY

In the mythology of Asturias in northwestern Spain, *xanas* are nymphs and fairies that live near streams, fountains and caves. Their gaze is enchanting, and their songs echo through the tunnels and canyons. If you believe in such sprites, La Senda del Oso, or the Bear's Path Greenway, would be the place to find them. Located just 15 miles from the Asturias capital, Oviedo, the 25-mile Bear's Path traverses a fairytale landscape of tunnels, deep ravines and rock crevices, mountainsides and medieval towns. The magic of this enchanting rail-trail is very real.

Story and photography by Maria R. Schneider

Leaving the Gorge of Peñas Juntas behind, the Bear's Path opens up on its way to Entrago and the Gorges of Entrepeños y Valdecerezales.

A scenic standout, La Senda del Oso, follows an old mining rail line that was used until 1963. Shaped as an inverted Y, the trail links the valleys of Tuñón (Santo Adriano), Entrago (Teverga), Santa Marina (Quirós) and Proaza. A good place to start is at the top of the Y in the recreational area of Tuñón, by the Trubia River and Route AS-228. Here you can park your car, rent a bicycle and stock up on refreshments for the day. Large brown signs make it easy to follow the route, which launches across the road from the ninth-century Church of Santo Adriano, an early example of Asturian religious architecture.

This first stretch—on flat, even terrain—runs parallel to and above the Trubia River. On quiet days all you'll hear is the breeze that brushes your face, the crunch of loose gravel on the trail and the gurgling water down below. Half a mile along, you will come upon the first tunnel. Bare rock swallows the path here, enticing you as a hoop would invite a child to jump through.

Beyond the tunnel a canopy of beech and ash trees shades the trail. Soon a farm comes into view below the trail, where sturdy Percheron horses roam in the fields. Cross a bridge over the Trubia River and continue another mile to Villanueva, a picturesque hamlet full of centuries-old houses refurbished to withstand another 200 years. You can see beautiful examples of *horreos*—houses on stilts—which are typical in this area and still are used as food pantries. You'll also cross a medieval bridge and pass a stone-laundry and fountain that further cloak the trail with a mythical aura.

Continuing on the Bear's Path, you'll soon reach the most popular point on the rail-trail: La Montaña del Oso, or Bear Mountain. An enclosed natural reserve houses three protected brown bears. At noon, feeding time for the bears, cheerful groups of children from nearby schools fill the path to catch a glimpse.

As you approach the six-kilometer mark (3.7 miles), you'll come to a hydroelectric plant designed and built



in the 1960s by the Asturian architect and artist Vaquero Palacios. Cruise past the plant and cross a bridge into the center of Proaza. The perfect place for a rest stop, Proaza is a lively town offering a selection of hotels, restaurants and bars. While here, check out the circular medieval tower and the 18th-century Palace of Gonzalez-Tuñón.

Beyond Proaza, the Bear's Path steps down to the Trubia River and runs through a series of tunnels. You'll feel like you're in a game of peekaboo as you pop in and out of dimly lit, bare-rock tunnels built 100 years ago. When you start to lose track of how many you've passed through, you'll come to the spectacular Gorge of Peñas Juntas. The echo of your footsteps in this lengthy tunnel will bring back childhood fantasies of fairies dancing in the darkness.

After crossing the main road, the Bear's Path enters the area of Perihuela, where the inverted Y route divides at a crossroads. If you head toward Entrago, you will bear right on the path before entering the town of Caranga de Abajo and traveling on to the magnificent Gorges of Entrepeñes and Valdecerezales. Excavated from limestone, the trail seems to cantilever over the ravine in this dramatic setting. You will pass through more than 20 tunnels and cross nine bridges over the Trubia River, the Teverga River and Route AS-228. This 16-kilometer (9.9 miles) segment ends in Entrago in the Valley of Teverga. The Teverga Prehistoric Park and the Collegiate Church of San Pedro



The hamlet of Villanueva, where you'll find many examples of *horreos*, centuries-old houses built on stilts; (at left) just past Proaza, where the Bear's Path runs through a series of tunnels along the Trubia River.

de Teverga, dating to the 11th century, are worth a visit.

The other branch of the inverted Y starts at the Perihuela recreational area just beyond the Peñas Juntas Gorge. The path wraps around the town of Caranga de Abajo and continues to the Reservoir of Valdemurrio and Santa Marina. This section of the trail was added in 1999 and runs parallel to AS-229, halfway up the mountain in the narrow Valdemurrio Gorge and through one more tunnel before arriving at the Reservoir of Valdemurrio in the Valley of Quirós. On this arm of the trail you will slip through lush natural reserves where oaks, beech and holly thrive.

At the village of Arrojo, three kilometers (1.9 miles) from Valdemurrio Reservoir, be sure to visit the remains of the eighth-century Castle of Alba and the even older Church of San Pedro de Arrojo. Shortly ahead, the historical town of Bárzana is a memorable final highlight for a trail steeped in medieval charm and mystique. And when you reach the trail's end just a mile ahead at the hamlet of Santa Marina, you'll already feel the lure of Asturias and the *xanas* pulling you back.

Maria Schneider, originally from Spain, is a writer and photographer based outside of Philadelphia.

GETTING THERE: The Aeropuerto de Asturias is the only international airport in this province. Located 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) from Oviedo near the town of Avilés, it has regular links with Madrid, Barcelona and Paris, as well as EasyJet service from London's Stansted Airport. On the ground in Spain, you can use RENFE, the National Rail Company network (www.renfe.es), which links Oviedo with the rest of Spain. The FEVE Company (www.feve.es) runs a more localized train system. There is a fine bus service, the ALSA Bus Company (www.alsa.es), which connects Asturias with other parts of Spain and thoroughly covers the region.

Another helpful trip-planning tool is available at www.consortioasturias.com. From this page, you can use Google Transit to plan your trip using public transportation.

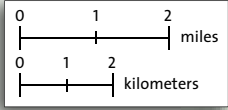
There is ample parking as well as an ALSA bus stop at each of the main towns and recreational areas along the trail: Tuñón, Entrago, Proaza, Valderrío, Buyera, Perihuela and Santa Marina.



La Senda del Oso
 Total trail length: 25 miles (40.2 kilometers)
 Trail surface: Crushed stone and gravel
 Trailhead
 MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLEMARKS.COM



Map for reference only. Not for navigation. Trail route approximate.



WHERE TO STAY AND EAT: You'll find a great variety of lodging and dining options along the Bear's Path Greenway, especially in Proaza and Villamejín. Good sources of information about the choices are www.asturnor.com and www.vivirasturias.com. Standard free Web translators work well with these pages.

Enjoy the typical specialties of Asturias—*sidra* (fermented apple cider) and *fabada asturiana* (slow-cooked meat, legumes and vegetable stew)—in almost every area bar and restaurant. Purists will tell you that pouring *sidra* from two feet above the small glass changes and enhances the flavor of this quintessential Asturias drink.

RENTALS: There are bicycle rental shops at each of the main points along the trail. One of the most popular vendors is CBTT (www.vallesdeloso.es).

FOR MORE: The Bear's Path is not the only rail-trail in Asturias. Search www.viasverdes.com for other nearby trail options. The pages for Asturias are in Spanish but are easy to navigate by clicking on "Itinerarios" and then "Asturias."