

he cargo may be different but the views from the windows have changed very little since 1894. Europe's only narrowgauge luxury train, the historic El Transcantábrico, still rumbles through Green Spain's most stunning scenery at the same wonderful, leisurely pace it did over a century ago.

Originally it was a freight train, and transported coal from León to the steel furnaces of industrial Bilbao. Today, it carries passengers for whom getting pilgrims, arriving in cheering groups dogs bark, cows' heads turn and children places fast is the last priority.

That, says Juan Pedro Aparicio, is how it should be: "Aeroplanes and high-speed AVE trains are all very well, but we've lost all the pleasures of slow travel," he says. "All we have gained is stress." Currently Director of the Cervantes Institute in Madrid, Juan was a young man when his own account of his journey on the original coal train inspired his best-selling book, El Transcantábrico. It prompted the railway

company Feve to launch the train as an international tourist attraction in 1982, commissioning a locomotive with 1923 Pullman carriages that transport its 52 passengers along an eight-day route covering 580km.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

We begin our journey in the capital of Galicia in the vast Praza do Obradoiro, overlooked by the soaring Baroquefronted Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The square is packed with

outside the train to welcome us into the wood-panelled interior, and I settle into a red velvet armchair in the lounge-car. Watching the world go by is part of the

across the transept at high speed.

Uniformed staff stand to attention

pleasure of train travel. I see an Asturian farmer in braces directing his worker in a field, an elderly Galician couple milking a cow, one on each side, and a white-haired señora in a flowery dress feeding chickens in a Cantabrian yard. Wherever the Transcantabrian passes,

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at the end of The Way of St James.

Above the cathedral altar hangs the famous metre-and-a-half high incense burner, which has been used since the 13th century to fumigate pilgrims. It still requires eight priests to swing it

wave. Among my fellow passengers \ are an aristocratic Cuban émigré couple; two doctors from Puerto Rico; a Mexican businessman and his wife; a mature Irish man who "needed time to think"; Mallorcan honeymooners and

a German professor, all in all they make up a cast worthy of an Orient Expressstyle intrigue.

The train pulls into quiet sidings each evening; a hand bell rings as it moves off in the morning. I lie in a sleepy fog listening to the metronomic beat of wheel over track before swaying through narrow corridors to the breakfast car.

The route crosses Galicia, Cantabria, Asturias, the Basque Country and Castille and León. A coach shadows the train to drive passengers into towns and villages that have no stations.

At Viveiro Port, we don large white bibs in order to crack open langostinos, razor clams and that Galician delicacy percebes (gooseneck barnacles) reeking of sea-saltiness.

Looping through wild coastal hills, we arrive at Ribadeo, with its Playa de Las Catedrales, where rock formations are like flying buttresses. Further along the craggy coast, we draw into Luarca, Asturias' westernmost town, the fishing quarter of which overlooks an S-shaped

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cove surrounded by cliffs. Fishermen we near Bilbao. You don't have to go are bailing water out of boats under a far before the "Guggenheim effect" leaden sky pierced by spills of sunlight.

LONG AND ROCKY ROAD

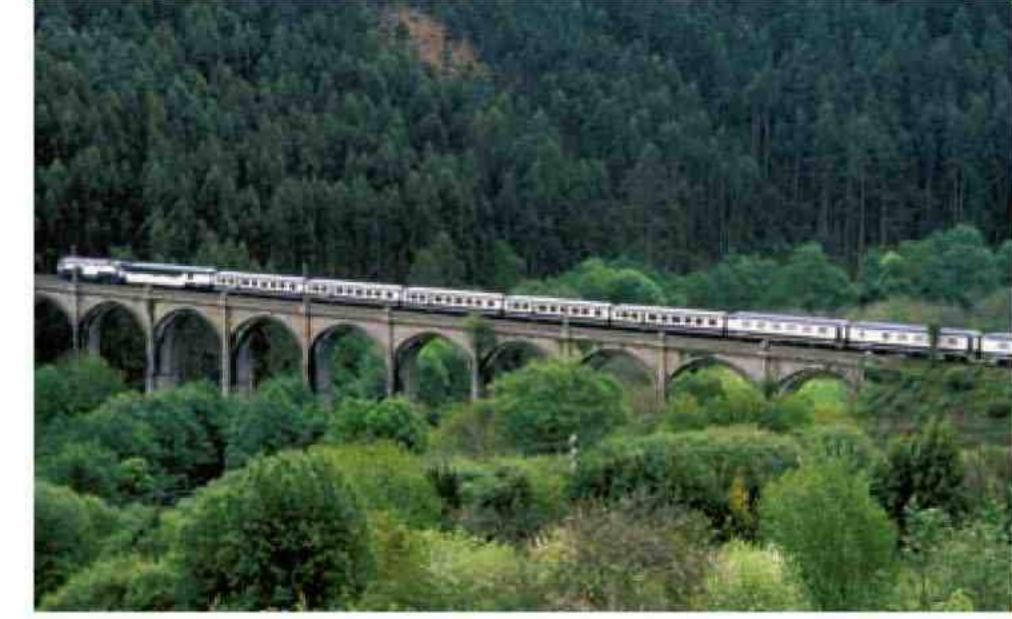
Awaking in Gijón next morning, I open my satin curtains to see a line of commuters on the platform opposite clinging to umbrellas. They stare back at me, grim-faced. We wind through rock-strewn hillsides to Lake Enol, where grey skies are reflected in dead still water. From Ribadesella, the line lamb; ending with Pilgrim's Liqueur, a hugs the coast; the waves almost splash against the wheels as we swoop past wild coves into Llanes, a pretty seaside town, where we climb to a clifftop to see the Rocas de la Memoria, brightly painted rocks on the opposite spit.

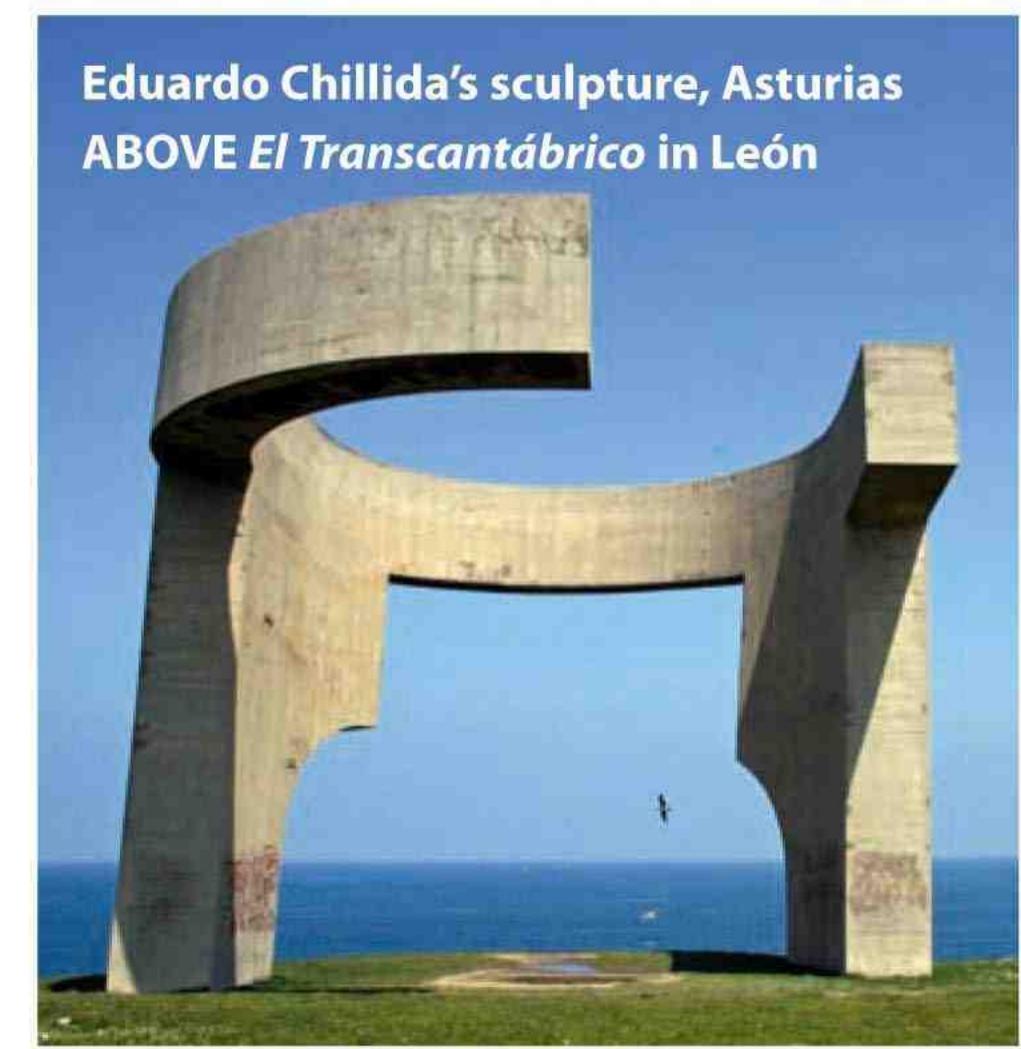
Greens turn to industrial browns as

hits. I approach from the modernistic footbridge, a taste of the swish of energy to come with Frank Gehry's rippling titanium and glass structure.

The line then descends over the Ebro, passing fields threaded with stone walls, trees and red-tiled hamlets. At an inn, we feast on a meal fit for Don Quixote: big chunks of moist chorizo and hard cheese, garlic soup and suckling roast hot brew of Galician brandy and coffee.

A morning mist rises over green fields as we pull into León, our final destination, to visit the cathedral. We linger over our goodbyes outside the station – then rush off to our fast planes and high-speed trains for home.







Ticket to ride

■ El Transcantábrico (00 34 985 981 711; www.transcantabrico.com) runs from April to October and costs €2,600 per person (two sharing) and €3,500 (single occupancy) for eight days, and includes meals, excursions and accommodation but not flights. Ryanair flies to Santiago de Compostela from London Stansted (www.ryanair.com). Excellent accommodation is available at the historic Parador at Santiago de Compostela where the journey begins. You can book accommodation through Keytel International (0207-616 0300; www.keytel.co.uk).

■ Juan Pedro Aparicio's book, The Transcantabrian, translated by Michael Jacobs, is published by ChristieBooks in conjunction with Rey Lear, price £24.95.