

# Iberian Traveler



## Chestnuts, Celts and the Camino

### *Following the wine routes of Galicia & Northern Portugal's Minho Valley*



#### *The Sophisticated Traveler*

Let us prepare a customized itinerary for you to discover the very best of Galicia's most exciting wine regions: the **Ribeira Sacra, Rías Baixas & Ribeiro**. A three to four-night package based in each of these three D.O.s will allow you ample time to sample their award-winning wines, innovative cuisine and rich cultural heritage, lands filled with ancient Celtic settlements, Romanesque churches and Medieval treasures.

*Maribel*

We recently spent 17 days exploring Spain's lush, misty, and verdant northwest corner: the land of the fierce Atlantic with its spectacular cliffs, of mighty rivers gushing through deep gorges, of chestnut, pine and eucalyptus forests, of Celtic heritage, legends and myths, of bagpipes, dolmens and petroglyphs, of stunning medieval architecture dotting the countryside along the various pilgrimage routes to Santiago. Galicia also offers wild horses roaming the high mountain *Serras*, stately granite manor homes covered with blankets of moss, lively outdoor markets with bubbling cauldrons of *pulpo a feira* (octopus), more festivals that one can begin to count and 1,300 kilometers of coastline with unique *Rías* or low estuaries that supply the region with an astounding bounty of fish and shellfish.

**Galicia** is blessed with a unique mix of favorable microclimates which, along with lemon, orange and palm trees, afford it five principal wine making regions, with their official Denominaciones de Origen, three of which we toured in depth: the **Ribeira Sacra, Rías Baixas** and **Ribeiro**. These three wine producing areas encompass the provinces of Lugo, Ourense and Pontevedra and are currently enjoying a growing international recognition for excellence.

#### ON THE ROAD

##### THIS MONTH'S FEATURES:

- Celtic Galicia, Spain's Ireland
- Meandering the Ribeira Sacra
- Navigating the Rías Baixas
- Following the Miño and Ribeiro wines
- The wines of northern Portugal
- Santiago, at the end of the Camino



## MEANDERING THE RIBEIRA SACRA



Using the Parador of San Vicente do Pino, a reconverted Benedictine Monastery, in Monforte de Lemos as a base, we spent 4 intensive days touring the out-of-the-way, exquisitely rural, ancient Ribeira Sacra, or ‘Sacred Bank’ (noted as such for its wealth of monastic retreats). Without a doubt, it is one of the most stunningly picturesque wine growing regions of Spain! The rich, rugged canyons formed by the Miño and Sil rivers are covered with steeply terraced vineyards, vines cascading down the precipitous slopes to the very edge of the meandering rivers below. The harvests here require arduous, back breaking labor to collect the grapes from these plunging slopes.

Smaller than the Rioja, but slightly larger and with an even more dramatic landscape than the Priorat, the Ribeira Sacra has been growing wine for 2,000 years, its terraces (*bancales*) dating back to the

Roman occupation. They produce lighter, lively, fruity, mineral-rich wines, primarily mencia-based reds and godello-based whites, along with fine liqueurs, or *orujo*s. [Adegas Vía Romana](#) and [Adegas Regina Viarum](#) enjoy two of the most spectacularly beautiful and panoramic locations of any winery we’ve visited and are truly “must sees” for wine lovers.

Along with winery visits, we toured the area’s vast array of Baroque monasteries and Romanesque hermitages and purchased ceramics from the artisan hamlets of Gundivós and Niñodagua.

The Ribeira Sacra wines are attracting world-wide attention, and we promise that once you try them, you will definitely be hooked!



The Sil river canyon



View from above Vía Romana, overlooking the Miño

NAVIGATING THE RÍAS BAIXAS



Road signs in Galicia can be challenging, but navigating the Rías Baixas (Lower Estuaries) region proved to be most difficult due to poor or non-existent signage. Therefore, when touring the area, the help of a local guide is strongly advised.

Like the Ribeira Sacra, this D.O. is divided into 5 sub zones, the largest being the *Val do Salnés*, Salnés valley, consisting of rolling fields laced with stone and wire trellises (*parralelos*) used to lift the vines away from the damp soil, towards the sunshine and to provide ventilation and prevent rot. The vineyards are planted predominately with the resistant *albariño* grape (Spain's most expensive), and these rather feminine wines taste intensely fruity- peach, pear, citrus flavors.

Along with the Palacio de Fefiñanes, located in the wine capital of Cambados on its handsome medieval square, we found the countryside [Pazo de Señorás](#) and [Agro de Bazán](#)

to be the most charming and welcoming.

Both boast stunning *Pazos*, or ancestral manor homes, these usually with private chapel, garden, *hórreo* (stone granary built on stilts) and dovecote. And both wineries produce delicate, aromatic wines that pair perfectly with the region's superb seafood.

Although we based in Cambados at the Parador del Albariño, we also recommend the elegant, *Belle Epoque* spa hotel, the 5-star Gran Hotel on the pine covered island of A Toxa as a pampering, relaxing base.

While in the area one should also visit the 12th century Monastery of Armenteira, the 16th century Monastery of Poio and picturesque village of Combarro with its line up of *hórreos* facing the river.



A wine tasting of the Albariños at the Agro de Bazán, Vilanova de Arousa (Pontevedra).



The chapel of the Pazo de Señorás, Vilanoviña, Meis (Pontevedra).

FOLLOWING THE MIÑO-THE RIBEIRO WINES



Ribeiro (Ourense province), the oldest appellation in Galicia, in medieval times, under the reign of King García I, saw its wines, the potent *tostados*, exported from the court of Ribadavia to almost the whole of Europe. Ribadavia's thriving Jewish community became rich thanks to the pre-Inquisition wine commerce. In the 16th century Ribeiro wine was revered throughout Europe and even shipped to America. Cervantes described Ribadavia as Spain's "Mother of Wine". But in the 18th century the vineyards suffered a sharp decline as foreign wine merchants moved on to Porto. Then in the 19th century a vine plague devastated the Ribeiro wine industry.

The vineyards here are situated in the deep green hills that slope down to four rivers that irrigate this pastoral land. (*Ribeiro* in the Gallego language meaning "River Bank").

At his [Viña Mein](#) estate in Leiro, ex-attorney Javier Alén has been a pioneer in the renaissance of Ribeiro wines, returning to its native grapes, and bringing the Treixadura, called the "queen of all white grapes", on to the world's stage. Adjacent to the winery, the owners have created a cozy and charming 8-room B&B from the original stone farmstead, which makes a delightful retreat for oenophiles. Viña Mein also owns a strikingly avant-garde, boutique hotel, a member of the prestigious Rusticae group, in the hamlet of San Clodio, adjacent to the Monastery.

Other noteworthy wine estates to include on your Ribeiro itinerary: The Coto do Gomariz and Casal de Armán, an 18th century winery with atmospheric 8-room hotel and delightful bistro with heavenly views.



Adega Coto do Gomariz



The rural hotel of Adega Casal de Armán

### THE WINES OF NORTHERN PORTUGAL

From the Ribeiro we crossed the Miño river and stepped back 30 years in time. The Portuguese Minho, far more pristine than its Spanish counterpart, is endowed with a number of highly photogenic fortress towns with their defensive walls and watch towers intact, filled with magnificently restored churches, beautifully manicured gardens, *quintas* (noble estates) and mosaic cobbled squares, along with thermal spas. Vila de Cerveira, Caminha, Monção and Melgaço all delight visitors with their Old World charm.

In Melgaço, gateway to the Peneda-Gerês National Park, we dropped in to sample the

area's crisp, refreshing, slightly effervescent *alvarinho vinho verde*. Sampling here couldn't be more pleasurable in the village's Solar do Alvarinho wine center, a showcase for these fresh white wines, along with local cheeses, sausages, honey and handicrafts, including exquisite embroidered linens.

And a visit to the northern Minho valley wouldn't be complete without an unforgettable gourmet lunch at [Adega do Sossego](#) in Peso. A tucked-away charmer, it serves gargantuan portions of local specialties, such as grilled trout stuffed with country ham, washed down with the house *alvarinho* wine, and ending with a complimentary miniature vat



Solar do Alvarinho

### SANTIAGO, AT THE END OF THE CAMINO

After two weeks and 3,000 kilometers of explorations, we reached the end of our own Galician pilgrimage on the Road of St. James-with our final 3 days in spectacular Santiago de Compostela.

Preparations are officially underway for the Holy Year - Xacobeo 2010, when the city expects between 8-9 million visitors. The Jubilee Year of Compostela has been celebrated since the Middle Ages, whenever the feast day of the Apostle St. James, July 25, falls on a Sunday. Celebrations will begin the eve of Dec. 31, 09 and end one year later and will include special exhibits and performances by international artists (Cecilia Bartoli, Lang, Lang, Zubin Mehta, Cirque du Soleil, Merce Cunningham). Mark your calendars!

In our Santiago wanderings, we were lucky to catch the filming of a crowd scene of the Martin Sheen / Emilio Estevez movie, a family drama, *The Way*, which was being shot on the magnificent Praza do Obradoiro.

While we lodged in Galicia's historic Paradors for our country stays, here we chose the superbly renovated 4- star Hotel Monumento San Francisco, a perfect blend of medieval and modern (with 50 monks still in residence). Its 76 rooms and huge suites combine the tranquility of a monastery with all the proper creature comforts of today, including a lovely indoor pool and fine gourmet restaurant. It provided us with true pampering at the end of our Camino. A jewel!

