



Wild camping

A relaxing drive around Spain with a plan to live simply and economically and to let the country itself guide us





Even in Spain in Summer it can be chilli

If you want to lose yourself in the country this is the place to do it



Dan Griffiths and Sinead Corish

It's mid-September and we're rolling off the ferry at Bilbao, Spain grinning like idiots. My wife, Sinéad, and I had already got a good few miles under our belts, driving down from our Dublin home via my parents in Derbyshire, but for us this was the start of the real journey. This was the reason we had brought a Bus a year and a half ago, to take advantage of our irregular work patterns and travel around Europe whenever we had the chance. This was our first big trip.

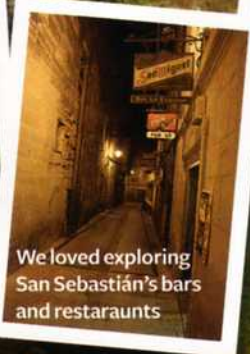
Our route was to take us from Bilbao towards San Sebastián in the East and on to Santiago de Compostela in the West, via the vineyards of Rioja and the mountains of the Picos de Europa. We wanted to lose ourselves in the country for a while and see where we ended up. We were going to try to live simply and economically, cook in the Bus mostly and only eat out occasionally. The basics of life to us were now relatively inexpensive – food, wine and accommodation were all as cheap as we wanted them to be, but unfortunately there was no cheap Spanish version of petrol so, if we wanted our money to last, we'd need to be careful not to do too much driving. With that in mind, we'd brought along our mountain bikes, and would use these to explore.

From Bilbao port, the road winds across a landscape of steep hills and deep valleys that seem inhospitable to the heavy industry that has developed here, but almost every usable piece of land has some kind of industrial complex on it, even if it's half way up a mountain.

Change of pace

Escaping Bilbao, the first stage of the journey was the easy drive to San Sebastián, mostly along the motorway, which gave us the chance to adapt to the laid back Spanish driving style. I've always found driving the Bus very relaxing – not just because of the old fashioned controls and slow pace, but there is something else that I can never quite put my finger on. In Spain, with our left-hand drive, I'm even more relaxed, and we cruise along at a steady 50mph with the windows down and music playing, until we are dumped without warning into San Sebastián's one-way system. It's a rude awakening, I can tell you. We haven't had to make any real decisions or do any proper driving since leaving Portsmouth, but suddenly we're forced to turn the music down a little to think. After an unplanned tour of the down town area, we finally find ourselves heading in the right direction and, on the second pass, manage to turn on to the road that climbs steeply uphill to the campsite at Igueldo that will be our home for the next few days.

San Sebastián is a real foodies' town. There is a wealth of everything from Michelin-starred restaurants to bars with pintxos, which is similar to tapas. After a day spent wandering



We loved exploring San Sebastián's bars and restaurants



You just can't be in a hurry in Spain

the old town area and sampling many pintxos, we spent the next few days exploring the area by bike, making use of the network of tracks that form the northern Camino de Santiago and visiting villages nestled into the sides of steep valleys. Our evenings are spent settling into life in the Bus.

By the time we're on the road again, we have developed a bit of a routine – in the morning, Sinéad transforms the interior from bedroom to living room in seconds flat. The bed is rocked and rolled back into a seat, blankets laid out neatly on the back shelf and table brought down from the roof storage. Every nook and cranny has its use and every item its place. Space is at a real premium here, so I keep out of the way.

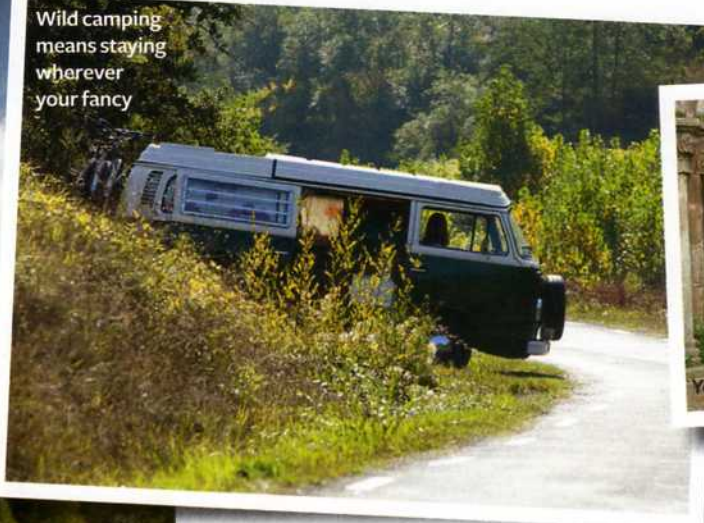
The first thing you stop trying to do after a while is two things at once as there really is only enough space for one person at a time to be doing something productive in the living area. During longer stays, the space outside the Bus becomes almost as important as that inside and, looking around at fellow campers, we pick up a few tricks on how best to utilise it.

HOW & WHY

LEAVING HOME

We're perhaps fortunate in that our jobs are irregular and allow us to take some time off, but having the Bus means we can really make the most of that time. This trip is just the start!

Wild camping means staying wherever your fancy



You can wait years for a pub to open

They all have clever things like camping chairs and tables and sun canopies. We had a picnic rug, which is great for its simple charm and lovely on grass, but the novelty soon wears off when trying to use it on gravel. We still had much to learn.

The next stage of driving takes us south to Rioja. We leave the steep wooded valleys of the Basque coast and climb to the stunning Parque Natural de la Sierra de Urbasa y Andía that sits atop a high plateau. The landscape goes through many changes on the way up, from dry scrub to rolling green meadows, to ancient woodland perched on the plateau edge.

Mood swings

It's a steep gradient, and the first real test for the Bus. We have a reconditioned 1600cc engine, and what it lacks in power it makes up for in mood swings. Just when you think you're going to have to admit defeat and put it into first gear to crawl up, a surge of power comes out of nowhere and, all of a sudden, you're motoring away in third gear. It reminds us that perhaps we're not in complete control after all... Driving the Bus needs a different set of skills than those needed for a modern car. Sound, vibrations and smell all have to be incorporated into the driving experience, with smell being particularly important since most things tend to smell bad just before they fail.

As we near Rioja, we see the first signs of the late

Autumn harvest of wild nuts and fruit that the countryside offers. We're soon able to identify a chestnut tree from half a mile away by the distinctive hoard of locals, equipped with plastic bags, milling around its trunk. Then, at the campsite that will be our next base, in the town of Haro, there is a Spanish couple carrying out a systematic pillaging of a large, shrub-like tree that turns out to be a fig. We're late to the party again and all the ripe ones have been taken, but we now know there is free food to be had if you know where to look.

Haro turns out to be an excellent base. There are over a dozen wineries within walking distance of the campsite. We spend a few days doing the tours and sampling the wine, and a few more getting heat exhaustion by cycling around the surrounding countryside in the midday sun.

We leave Rioja, heading west to the Picos de Europa mountains over the next few days. The landscape becomes lush and green and in places reminds me of Derbyshire. After settling in at Potes, the gateway to the Picos, we spend a week riding on the bikes up into the foothills, along the steep tracks used by people here for centuries to get from village to village. Modern roads have largely replaced these now but, if you're traveling under your own steam, the ancient back ways are still the quickest and most pleasant way of getting around.

It's while exploring these tracks that that we go native after we ride over some spherical objects on the ground that we at first take to be unripe apples. We find some more further on where the green shell has been split to reveal, to our surprise, walnuts. We start gathering them up and it's addictive. We're collecting them as if each little husk contained a nugget of gold. Soon we have enough to open a Swiss bank account and we haul our stash happily back to the Bus. ☺

Having our mountain bikes with us meant we could explore the countryside without having to drive everywhere

Vineyards and rolling landscapes of the Picos de Europa



