



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 Igeldo 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.

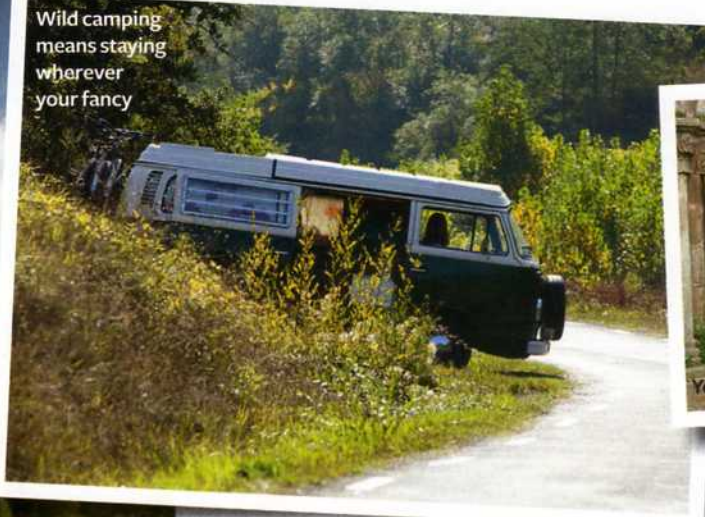
The first thing you stop trying to do after a while is two things at once as there really is only enough space for one person at a time to be doing something productive in the living area. During longer stays, the space outside the Bus becomes almost as important as that inside and, looking around at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





Some of the lush rolling landscape reminded us of Derbyshire!

Back at the campsite we hear about a classic motorbike rally that's on in a nearby village at the weekend, so that seems the ideal place to head to next.

The great and the greasy

We reach Colombres and it's eerily quiet. We're wondering if we have the right place when we hear the unmistakable sound of a British twin coming around the corner. It turns out to be a Spanish single, but at least we're in the right place. We find a nearby campsite that's within walking distance and spend the next few days rubbing shoulders with the great and the greasy of the classic bike world. There are some lovely old bikes whizzing around, and it's great to see them being put through their paces in the hillclimb. The bikers all show as much appreciation for our Bus as we do for their bikes and I'd like to think we became honorary members of the club for a few days.

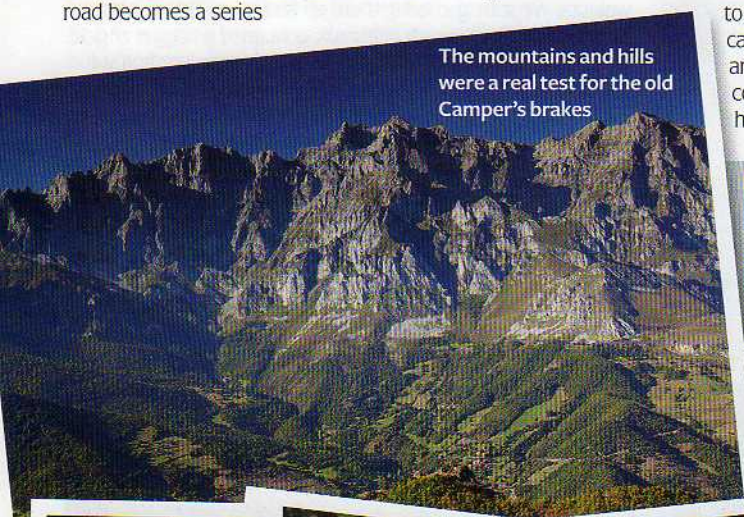
From Colombres we make our way slowly around the northern foothills of the Picos de Europa, taking a diversion into the mountains to visit the remote village of Sotres. The road up is steep and narrow and it's the biggest test so far for both the Bus and our nerves. As we near the top, the road becomes a series

of 180-degree switchbacks, so steep on the inside that we're forced to pull out on to the far side of the road around the blind corners, hoping that we don't meet anything coming the other way. Thankfully, we make it, but only just – the last mile was in first gear, and I feel that this time we've reached the limit of what we can reasonably expect the Bus to do.

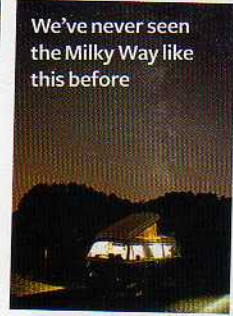
Sotres, as it turns out, wasn't as pleasant as the drive up so, after a short walk around, we make our way down again. I had thought that the hard part was behind us, but coming down presented an unexpected problem. The road now seemed to be twice as steep and half as wide as it had been on the way up, and we inched our way down, again reduced to first gear around the switchbacks, as anything other than walking pace seemed suicidal. Once the switchbacks eased up slightly, we relaxed a little – at least enough to notice the acrid smell filling the cab. After desperately looking around for something else that could be burning and failing, I had to admit to Sinéad that it



Colombres classic motorcycle rally



The mountains and hills were a real test for the old Camper's brakes



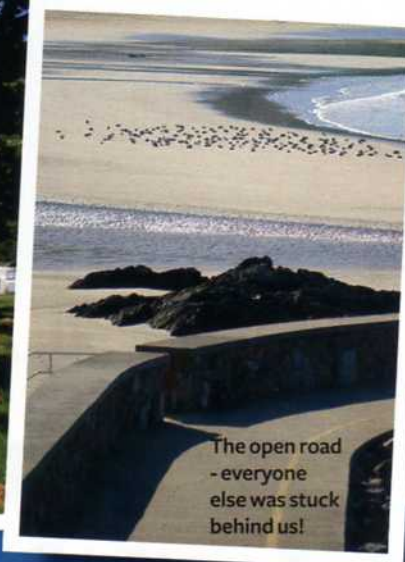
We've never seen the Milky Way like this before



The trees are beautiful and a great source of food! Walnuts and figs abound



The travel rug was great but next time we'll be a bit more prepared



The open road - everyone else was stuck behind us!

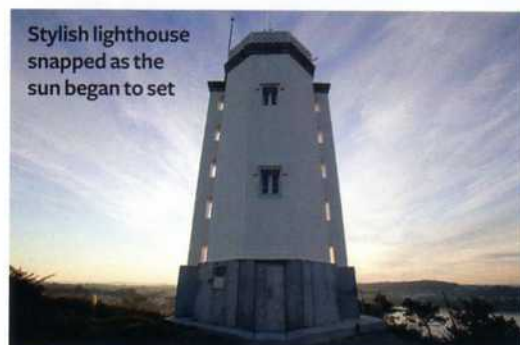
Spain has some ruggedly beautiful and remote coast line



was probably our brakes that were about to spontaneously combust. Luckily, there was just enough room at the next corner to pull in and stop, leaving the Bus in gear and the brakes off until they had cooled enough to carry on.

A short way further down we decided to rest and spend the night in a car park that jutted out over the steep valley. Here's where having your own instant accommodation really pays off as it enables you to stay in some of the finest locations around, and we relaxed, listened to the soothing crackle of cooling brakes as the sun went down.

Back along the coast and we make our way west. It's mid-October now and there is a definite chill in the air. The cooling temperature suits the changing landscape as we travel and the typical closely built drab monotone towns give way to more defuse settlements of brightly coloured houses, which complement the wild landscape. Once again we seem to be in a different country. We cut in from the coast and up into the Sierra De La Bobia, which we must cross to reach Galicia.



Stylish lighthouse snapped as the sun began to set

luxury after a week or so of rough camping and so book into the large campsite at Santiago. The town is packed with pilgrims and students and there is a great buzz about the place in the evenings. We also take a day trip on the bus to A Coruña, the regional capital. We know the drill by now, and head straight to the old town and spend the afternoon exploring the tapas bars. A Coruña has some of the best we've visited and one is simply a large, wood-panelled room off a side street, with no indication that it's a bar, other than the locals crowding in. Here we have country wine straight from the barrel and chicerones, a local pork dish made by cooking shredded pork in pork fat. It tastes amazing. In another bar everyone seems to be slurping sweet wine from a porron (a cross between a glass and a small watering can) and eating monkey nuts. We give it a go, and by the second round we're convinced we've spotted a gap in the market back home and spend the evening dreaming up plans of opening a sweet wine and monkey nut bar in Derbyshire.

Sadly, the weather had now turned decidedly colder and wetter and the constant rain is making us homesick. We'd love to start heading down through Portugal and then into Andalusia, but for this trip we've run out of time and money.

Our route back to the ferry at Bilbao is more direct, and the reverse journey takes just two days. The driving is still relaxing though, and glancing in the rear view mirror as we trundle along it hits me that with our Bus we've always got the open road ahead of us. It's all the other poor sods that are stuck behind us. ☹

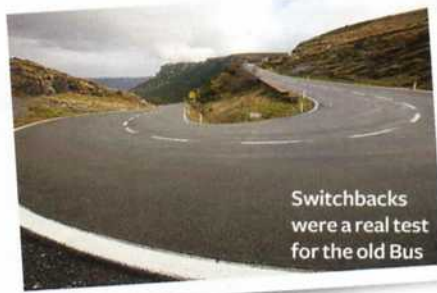


A Coruña was one of our favourite places

Wild camping

By now we've developed a system for finding perfect wild camping spots. We'd look at our AA map, find the nearest yellow dotted road (which signified a scenic route) and drive along it until we find a wild camping spot, normally signposted with a large camera symbol that some other road users seem to think are viewing points. Our road crosses a ridge near the mountain of Peña Caimada, and here we find the perfect wild camping spot. The last few nights have been exceptionally clear and we are now high up and relatively isolated from civilisation. For this we are rewarded with the clearest view of the night sky we had ever seen. We could clearly see the Milky Way rise at right angles from one horizon and trace its path all the way overhead to the other. It was quite literally jaw dropping.

In Galicia we decide to have a bit of



Switchbacks were a real test for the old Bus