

1) For those who prefer to go by car; to get to know the mountain tracks; to know what to do on a rainy day ...

Shorts trips (up to 60Km)

• **Piornedo - Balouta - Rao - Coro de Rao – Murias – Pandozarco - Piornedo**

Distance: 30 km.

This can be done in a morning or an afternoon drive; you could combine it with a hike and stop on the way for a meal.

Leave Piornedo on the road to Leon (turn right by the village fountain). The first stop is Suarbol; interesting Romanesque chapel and picturesque nooks.

Keep on climbing, pass Canpa da Cespedosa and follow signs to Balouta.. If it is a clear day, go over to Pico do Porto (500 metres on the road to Ponferrada. From here there are stunning views of the valleys of Ancares, Balouta and Suarbol.

Come back down and continue to Balouta which is well worth a visit. Visit a *palloza* or the Rural Tourist Centre known as Casa de Alexo where they make excellent chorizo sausage and there is a photo exhibiton showing the village as it was years gone by.

Keep on descending to the Rao valley, admiring the scenery till you get to a sign saying Coro de Rao – take a break here

Leave the car at the village entrance as the roads are not very wide but the paths have been repaired recently and there is street lighting. This is good place to stop and refresh.

Return to the car and head back to Murias de Rao. At the end of the road , take a fork to the right which takes you to Pan do Zarco.

On the way admire Pena Murias (if we're lucky maybe we'll hear the tale that has to do with this mountain – the area is rich in oral tradition but disappearing as the older inhabitants pass away).

Pan do Zarco was the *alzada* (highland pastures) of Murias, where families lived during the summer ... where they built their *pallozas*. These are fast disappearing, but the place has no equal..

We continue climbing until we reach the junction which leads to Suarbol, on the road along which we passed before, and return by the same route to Piornedo.

• **Piornedo - Donís - Iglesia de Donís –Vilar - Sete Carballos - Campaña da Braña-Albergue - Piornedo**

Distance: 45 Kms.

Take the road towards Cervantes on leaving the village and pass the Hotel Piornedo.

Once in Donís and after passing Casa de Naipes, turn right. In Donís we can admire the coat of arms on the Casa da Casoa which is related to the lineage of Grajal, Alcañices and other families who ruled over these lands.

Our first stop is the Romanesque chapel of San Felix, a real cathedral right up in the mountains and recently restored. If we are lucky, perhaps mass might be held and we can go inside and admire the painting from the XVI century as well as the simplicity of the building.

We continue down-hill to As Pontes de Xantes where we find the *aceña* a mill used by all the local people up to the 70's. – it's the first building we encounter and is quite

well preserved. This place was frequently visited up to the 70's as the villagers brought in their wheat to be ground here. Until only recently the inhabitants of this house depended on a dynamo for their supply of electricity.

One of the bridges (which gives the place its name) is of Roman construction and was somewhat covered over by the building of the new road, although the arch can still be seen. Once again we continue to climb to Vilar and at the first crossroads we turn right and at the second we go left. We can stop at some small hamlet and in Sierra de Vilar where we can take photos. Then let's go on to Sete Carballos where we turn left and follow the road to Campa da Braña.

Once in Campa da Braña we must head the right towards Tres Obispos.

There are a few bars where we could take a break. The one on the right called Campa da Braña is managed by a couple who settled in the area a few years ago – Pedro is a great talker and Marilo's cooking is widely recognised and appreciated. In Campa do Fiero we find the Club Ancares which is also worth a visit as the views from the restaurant are breathtaking. We should also visit the Nature Hall and get information on the flora and fauna of the area. This has been recognised as "Place of Cultural Interest", Biosphere Reserve Zone and National Game Reserve.

If you wish to combine the car journey with a hike on foot, you could go up to Pico Tres Obispos or via Brego. The first route is along a footpath right to the end and then there is a track which is easily found – the second option is to branch off from the path at the first crossing on the right (to get to Brego we must go through Cabana Vella (old huts) where we find some abandoned buildings or shelters.

We come back down to Campa da Braña and turn right back onto the Piornedo road.

### **Piornedo - Balouta - Coro de Rao - Navia - Virigo - Corneantes - Piornedo**

This time we set out again from the fountain at the village entrance and head towards Leon. We leave Suarbol on our left and go on to Alto da Cespedosa where we turn in the direction of Balouta. Before heading for Balouta and if it's a clear day, we should make a slight detour and go right for about 500 m. towards Ponferrada in order to reach Pico do Porto. There are magnificent views of the surroundings from this mountain pass Alto de Ancares

It's a good idea to stop a while in Balouta and take a stroll around the village or visit a *palloza*. Then carry on towards Rao and visit Coro, a small village which has recently been restored and is in better condition than many other places in the area.

Now we go on to Navia de Suarna. This was for many years an important town for its cattle market which is still held on the 29 of each month and also the second Sunday of each month, although nowadays hardly any livestock is bought and sold but it's a good excuse for getting down to a plate of octopus.

We come back passing through Virigo, Villarparandín and Acebedo. In some of these villages there used to be ancestral homes or palaces, the most important being one in Virigo which is still inhabited. Here there is an agricultural and livestock farm but the surrounding area is not so well preserved. We could also return via Freixis (take the road to Becerreá) and turn left after the gas station then pass Vilaverde where there is a large cooperative livestock farm. We continue towards Silvouta and then as far as Campa de Labiadas where we go right. Along the route there are a few small villages, namely Vilaquinte, Corneantes, Castelo, Donís, where we could take a break.

### **Piornedo – Corneantes – Quindous - Castro de Cervantes – Castelo de Cais - San Román - Piornedo.**

Leaving the village we take the road to Lugo and before getting to Donís (about 2 km.) we turn right to Navia de Suarna. We pass Moreira and Castelo and after leaving Corneantes we turn left towards Quindous.

In Quindous we can admire the fortress-tower which belonged to the dynasty of the lords of Quindós. This impressive tower was inhabited until the seventies and was later sold. It is now privately owned and not open to the public. We continue our journey until we come to a deviation on the left towards San Roman and later there are signs to Castro de Cervantes. Soon we'll be able to see the *Castro* (hill fort settlement), situated on a hillock with many view-points. What really stands out from afar is the parish church which was built on the hill top to christianize the place. The fort has been excavated in part and was inhabited during the first and second centuries of our era by specialized miners in gold mining. Therefore it is quite different from other settlements of a typical Celtic culture.

We leave the *castro* (hill fort) and follow the road in the same direction as before, passing through hamlets such as Villaluz, Rio de Castro and Castelo de Cais and in San Román we join up with the road which leads to Piornedo via Campa da Braña..

We can return directly from Campo da Braña or make a detour to Vilanova (signposted on your right) and Ponte de Doiras. We can also turn left in Sete Carballos and return via Serra de Vilar and the church in Donís. There are good views to be seen but a stretch of the road does not have a tarmac surface.

### **Long-distance routes (over 100 Km) for those long spring-time days:-**

#### **Piornedo – Campaña da Braña - Doiras - Vilarello da Iglesia – Balboa – Canteixeira – Villafranca - Ponferrada - Cacabelos -Vega de Espinareda - Piornedo**

Distance aprox: 140 km.

From the village take the Lugo road, on the left as you leave the village and go as far as Campa da Braña where we can stop and stretch our legs.

We suggest stopping in Doiras to view the castle, a solid fortress which belonged to the Marquis of Alcañices, Lord of Cervantes.

It is still privately owned, well preserved and is occasionally open to the public but is somewhat abandoned and lacks surveillance.

In Doiras we turn left towards Villafranca and admire the scenery beside the river. At the cross-roads go right and visit Vilarello da Igrexa. According to some reports and investigators on the works and life of Miguel de Cervantes, Vilarello (where stands the Saavedra House) or perhaps the nearby village of San Miguel, might have been the birthplace of the famous writer or at least of his family or ancestors.

After stopping in Vilarello we return to the road and continue as far as Ambasmestas, via the pass of Portelo.

Before reaching Ambasmestas turn left and after about 4 miles we come to Balboa.

Balboa is a small municipality, with interesting initiatives for tourism, for heritage conservation and has taken steps to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. There are several *pallozas* of recent construction (owners are Chis, Balboa ...), and these are used as B&B or for holding festivals and evening concerts which are open on specific days and weekends, when on these occasions they are converted into makeshift bars.

We make special mention of the *palloza* in Canteixeira (a village some 3km from Balbao) which was built upon the walls of an old, original *palloza* and so it keeps its olde-worlde charm. You should also visit the Meeting Room (Casa de las Gentes) a sort of social centre which has been decorated by Domingo de Canteixiera and is surprising as are other works which have been carried out in the area - restoration of *pallozas*, bars etc.

If it is late afternoon or night, in addition to the *pallozas* mentioned, we have somewhere else to have a drink and appreciate this part of the Mountains of Leon. We refer to the water mill (between Balboa and Ambasmestas, on the left). We could stop in Ambasmestas as well at the factory and taste Vegadarte goat cheeses of different varieties and rich cheese and chestnut cakes.

Now head towards Villafranca, a proud well-preserved medieval town with its castle, a beautiful plaza and restored streets where one can stroll at leisure.

After our stroll in Villafranca we drive on to Ponferrada to see the ruins of an immense Templar castle. In the proximity of Ponferrada, if you so wish, there are many places worth visiting, such as Las Médulas, Peñalba de Santiago and Valle del Silencio, the forge at Compludo ... (information at the Tourist Office).

Alternatively, instead of going to visit Ponferrada, we could stop off at Cacabelos (signposted from the road and from the motorway) and continue to Vega de Espinareda.

We leave Ponferrada, towards Vega de Espinareda on the LE 711 road.. We could stop off at many villages which we pass through as the Bierzo has its own special charm; here the villages are larger than those in the valley or in the mountains. The houses have exterior corridors/verandas; the churches are larger and their town-squares, where the locals gather to chat are more beautiful. As we start to climb towards the Ancares we find that the villages are smaller but also very charming:- places such as Candín, Teixedo These villages, like those in Galicia, have the problem of being scarcely populated and aging residents.

We return to Piornedo again from the other side of the mountains than that which we left and come back over the Pass of Ancares and Suarbol.

### **Piornedo - Puerto de Ancares - Vega de Espinareda – Burbia - Campo del Agua - Villafranca - Doiras - Campaña Braña - Piornedo.**

Distancia: 130 km.

We leave Piornedo in the opposite direction than previous route, heading to Leon (right at the village fountain).

We first stop in Suarbol to see the Romanesque church, strolling calmly through the village streets, in search of the Casa de Cadenas (House of Chains) ...

The next stop is the Ancares mountain pass where we view all the Ancares valleys, Suarbol and Balouta; if there is snow on the ground, this is a good place to enjoy it as you won't have to walk very far.

We continue through the valley of Ancares – the villages are now larger than those we left behind. We stop to take a look at some :- Candín or Teixedo. We now begin to note the architecture of the Bierzo with its larger churches and pleasant squares, houses with wide corridors and verandas ...

In Vega de Espinareda we head to Burbia (after going over the bridge, first on your right) and now go through places like the Valley of Finolledo.

Burbia was once a very large village. There were many *pallozas* (slightly smaller than those in Piornedo), but now almost none of them are left. For hikers, Burbia has good mountain paths with glacial lakes and forests. We could take one of these glacial tracks and return to Piornedo following the route the villagers used when they went to the market fairs in Vega de Espinareda.

From Burbia we suggest going to Campo del Agua. (The road is not asphalted). You should inquire first if it is suitable for cars/vehicles and if not, you back-track to Vega and get to Campo del Agua from another route which bears off from Villafranca .

Campo del Agua was an *alzada* of Aira da Pedra (a village in the municipality of Villafranca) –an *alzada* is an “upland” grazing pasture where people used to spend the summer months with their cattle on the highland pastures whilst in winter they came down to lower ground.

The village of Campo del Agua was totally restored in 1985; all the *pallozas* were restored and as these were only occupied in the summer months, no slate roofed houses had been built. Unfortunately, some time later, a fire destroyed most of the village; the villagers rebuilt it again but without respecting the original typology.

Today there are *pallozas* to be seen in Campo de Agua but nevertheless its location makes a visit worthwhile and it is a place of interest in these mountains.

We leave Campo de Agua on the Villafranca road and come back on the same route we took to get here.

#### **. Piornedo - Fabero - Castro de Chano - Guímara (Valle de Fornela).**

We leave Piornedo, as before, taking the road towards Leon and in Vega de Espinareda we turn to Fornela Valley via Fabero. (from the main street turn left).

In Fornela visit the Castro de Chano, dating from Roman times and, like that of Cervantes, this was built to house the workers who specialized in the extraction of gold from the surrounding mountains. Some of the excavated houses still reveal the very high walls and you can see evidence of two-storey buildings..

In some of the villages in the valley, during festival-time, young boys interpret an interesting, ancient dance accompanied by drums and the “chipro” (a kind of flute with three holes)

From Guimara we could go up to Braña del Cuadro (if we have free time and have brought some food with us). We should turn off a few miles on the left along a dirt track but which is in good condition.

After discovering the charms of the Valley, we have two options to get back; with a car it is better to return the same way we came via Fabero but if we have a 4 wheel-drive vehicle we can continue on the track which ascends from Braña del Cuadro to the Alto del Marco and then descend into the Ancares Valley passing through Suertes and back onto the road at Candín.

There is another track that links the valley with the Asturian municipalities of Ibias and Degaña. This starts at Braña del Cuadro and leads up to Alto de Tormaleo. From here there is a track up to Balouta but it would be wise to enquire first about the state of the approaches and to keep your tank topped up with petrol.

#### **Piornedo - Ponferrada - Las Médulas - Peñalba de Santiago, Ponferrada - Piornedo**

At the lower end of the village turn right, go through Suarbol, Ancares Valley, Vega de Espinareda (with stops if you wish) and head on towards Ponferrada.

Get information on possible routes in this area and also enquire about typical places in

Ponferrada as to where to eat, take a stroll or taste the delicious *tapas*. Dedicate a morning to visit to Las Médulas (old gold mines exploited by the Romans, who destroyed the mountains and sifted the earth to separate the gold from the rubble). In the evening drive up to the Valley of Silence or Peñalba of Santiago. Return by the same route as the journey is rather quite long. Another possibility could be to make these trips over two different days in a more relaxed atmosphere..