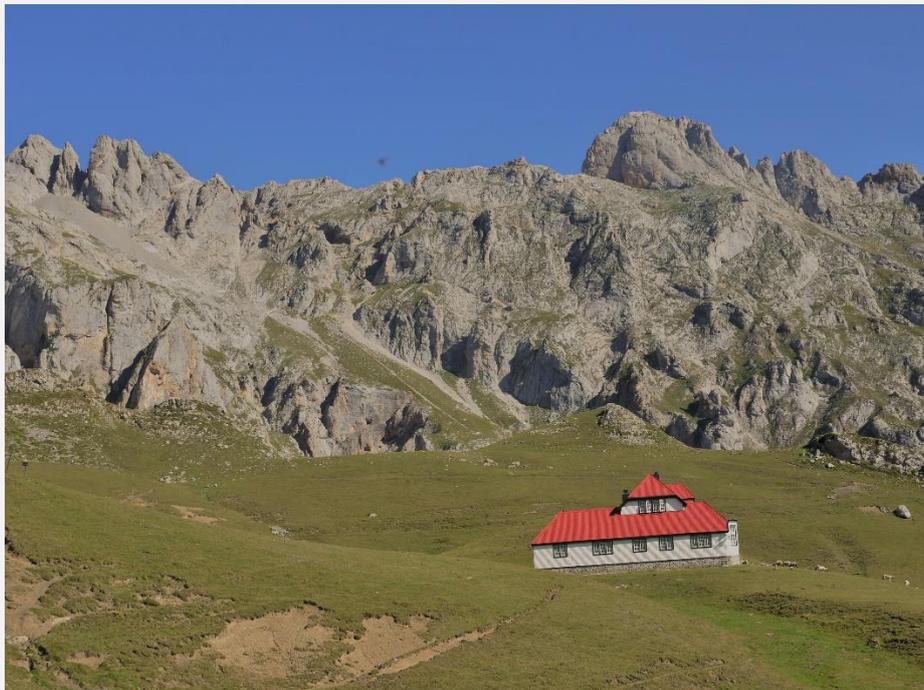


**EPIC HIKES: PICOS DE EUROPA
ASUTRIAS, CANTABRIA
START AND FINISH: PONCEBOS
5 DAYS, 65 km**

As Spain's first ever National Park (established in 1918) the Picos are often overlooked when it comes to serious high altitude hiking adventures in Europe. But with several peaks in the 2500m range (the highest peak is the Torre de Ceredo at 2648 metres), the area certainly is a match for its competitors in the Alps or the Pyrenees. The place is spectacular: scraggy limestone peaks, steep gorges, green meadows – a truly Alpine scene, yet enhanced by picturesque Spanish villages.



Straddling along the borders between the regions of Asturias, Cantabria and Castilla y León, the Picos offer some serious hiking challenges, chiefly among them being the Anillo 3 Marcizos trail, which connects several mountain huts in the national park at a distance of 114 km (see: www.elanillodepicos.com/en). At the other end of the scale, the area around the Covadonga lakes in the north-western part offer those of a less physically competitive disposition a series of shorter walks amidst spectacular surroundings. There is also a cable car in the centre of the National Park at Fuente Dé which gives you quick and convenient access to high altitude mountain scenery, and from where you can follow several trails along snow-capped peaks. At the top of the cable car ride, you can embark on a lovely circular trail of about 5 hour: head towards Espinama on trail #24. Just before descending into the village, there is a further trail that brings you back to the parking lot at foot of the cable car station. Please keep in mind though, that the funicular can get very, very busy at the height of summer, and you might have to be there a day early in order to secure a ride the next morning. Otherwise, you might just get a late afternoon slot.



But I would like to focus on a longer loop: 24 hours of hiking spread over 5 days covering around 65 km. This long distance hike requires a certain level of fitness, as there are some steeper sections, but anyone who can complete a 5 mile run should do just fine. The hike is also not technical, so Alpine experience is not necessarily required (unlike boots: unless you prefer to be the sneaker-wearing butt of jokes whilst jeopardizing your health in the process).



As start and end point, I would suggest the village of Poncebos at the northern edge of the park in Asturias. The place is relatively easy to reach. There is a nearby train station in Llanes on the Atlantic Coast, which has connections to Santander to the east, and Oviedo to the west. From Llanes you might have to take a taxi to Poncebos with the 40-minute journey setting you back around 40 – 50€. Unfortunately, there is no bus service. International airports are in Bilbao and Santander, from where you could also rent a car. Given the very modest size of the settlements that you will come across (the Park is home to only 1500 people), accommodation is not that plentiful, so I suggest that you book ahead. I have made some suggestions, which can all be accessed through www.booking.com



Day 1: Poncebos – Sotres

14 km, 5 hours

Accommodation: Hostal Poncebos, Hotel Rural Peña Castil/Sotres

The loop picks up long distance trail #202. It starts with a bang and a 4 km (2 hours) climb up to the beautiful village of Bulmes. Still inaccessible by car, the place is connected to the outside world by a cable car from our starting point Poncebos. But surely you don't want to chicken out so early. From there it is a further 10 km (3 hours) to the first overnight stop at Sotres.

Day 2: Sotres – Espinama

18km, 6 hours

Accommodation: Hostal Nevandi/Espinama

The longest hiking day awaits, continuing along hiking route #202: 3 hours up and three hours down, pretty much in a north-south direction and crossing from Asturias into Cantabria with impressive

peaks to your left and right. The #202 follows a so-called Ruta Gran recorrido, which is a gravel road that foolishly permits cars to drive along this beautiful stretch. And during the summer holiday season, you will indeed encounter the odd vehicle temporarily spoiling it for others. Thankfully, they are far and between. After a total of six hours you will descent to the beautifully located village of Espinama with some restaurants and even a Cantabrian-themed deli (!). If you decide to stay at Hostal Nevandi, you can revitalise your bones in a refreshing swimming pool.

Day 3: Espinama – Posada de Valdeón

15 km, 6 hours

Accommodation: Los Horreos in Valdeón or La Casa Vieje en Valdeón

Another longish day: From Espinama you can follow the road (there is a footpath along the way) to the Fuente Dé cable car, which should take you about one hour. From there follow route #15 (the so-called Senda del Mercadillo) up a spectacular steep (ish) climb, before descending into the hamlet of Posada de Valdeón.

Day 4: Posada de Valdeón – Cain

8 km, 3 hours

Accommodation: Hostal Casa Timo/Cain

An easy hop compared with the previous three days. The hike follows route #3, partially along a paved road. As an upside, you will get into Cain (with what might pass as an almost cosmopolitan vibe in these parts) for a lazy afternoon.

Day 5: Cain – Poncebos

12 km, 4 hours

Accommodation: Hostal Poncebos

Saving the best for last. This is the stuff of travel brochures: This section of the hike is called the Ruta del Cares; an atmospheric, yet modest hike along narrow paths that meander through a steep ravine, also referred to as the 'divine gorge' with soaring cliffs (and obviously steep drops) along the way. Together with the cable car access at Fuente Dé this is where most tourists can be found. It is not difficult to imagine why.

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