



Passing the remote country chapel

On August 17, 2009, Pat Lemmon and I made our way into Picos de Europa (Peaks of Europe) National Park intent on setting up a new walk for the first edition of our Northern Spain walking adventures tour. The park is formed around a strangely remarkable set of limestone formations that poke about 8500 feet into the azure blue of the Spanish sky only 20 kilometers inland from the Bay of Biscay. The most commonly accepted explanation for the name of these mountains is that their conspicuous color and shape and elevation so close to the sea made them the first sight of Europe for ships arriving from the Americas.

The walk here has become a perennial favorite with our travelers. We typically arrive from the north, having spent the previous night in a parador (state owned historic inn) near the remote, medieval Asturian town of Cangas de Onis. Not far away (9 kilometers) is Covadonga where, in 722 AD an Iberian (early Spanish) army won the first Christian victory against Muslim Arabs and Berbers, the so-called Moors. Many historians consider this the beginning of the 770-year conflict to expel the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, an epic cultural and ethnic shift known today as the “Reconquest”.



On the access road into Cain

All that history is generally wasted on our group when we leave Cangas de Onís to drive along the strikingly beautiful Sella River Valley as we ascend into Picos de Europa. Visitors are usually surprised at the lush vegetation in this part of Spain, and the Sella River is locally famous for outstanding salmon fishing – not an activity one typically associates with Spain.

The destination of our bus is the mountain village of Posada de Valdeón, from where it can go no further. Local taxi vans meet us here to drive us deeper into the mountains along a single lane road that dead-ends in the even more remote and miniscule enclave of Cain. We stop halfway along the road to Cain and disembark to begin our trek through the adjoining valley along a mountain stream.

Besides the local Reconquest connection, what travelers are also generally unaware of is the special walk planning experience Pat and I had on that August evening back in 2009. Our intention had been to map out this walk during afternoon hours, then continue south to our destination for the evening – the city of León. Advance research indicated that Cares Gorge, just beyond Cain, is where we'd find the walk route for which the mountains are justly famous. Upon arrival in Posada de Valdeón, however, locals informed us that the road into Cain was under reconstruction – closed until 6 pm that evening. All vehicular traffic was stranded at either end of this 10 kilometer country road until that time.



Maintenance trail works great for hikers

A quick tour planning counsel determined that walking in would be too time consuming and waiting until 6 pm would definitely force a change in our destination for the evening; we'd have to overnight in Posada de Valdeón. Sleeping options were limited but we found a room in one of the two local inns, where we waited until 6 pm.

Every minute of daylight was now precious, but as Pat piloted our rental car north on the single-lane road, it became clear that we were like the spawning salmon of the Sella River. Most of the traffic had been trapped in Cain through this fine summer day and was heading south, out of the park. Only a few locals, and us, were headed north to Cain. What happened over the next 45 minutes or so became one of those remarkable cultural memories which never fail to amaze me and keep me enthralled with the differences between people groups around this incredible globe!

Pat inched our car north, frequently forced to find wide spots to let oncoming traffic by. It became a dizzying dance as Pat and oncoming drivers jockeyed with each other in a delightful display of skill and cooperation that could never occur on the space-rich highways and byways of North America. Backing up to find a wide spot... hugging guardrails while oncoming cars slowly passed with only millimeters of clearance between vehicles...patiently engineering strategies for the next curve in the road and negotiating the next tight squeeze.

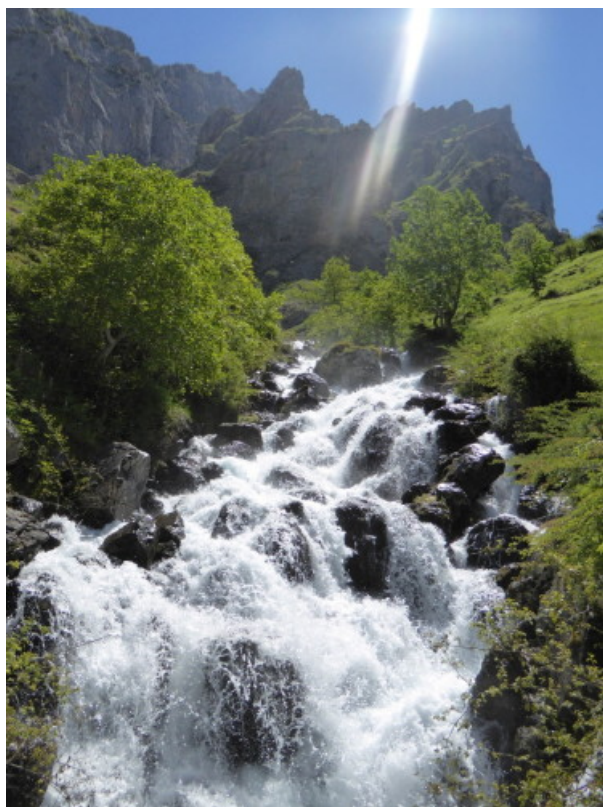


The Cares Gorge deepens as we walk north

At the beginning of the dance, I was pretty sure we'd have to abandon our quest. But with Pat's persistence and the cooperation of southbound drivers, we arrived in Cain, surprised that so many cars could have been trapped in this beautiful little community of fewer than 15 stone homes at the end of the road.

The trail into Cares Gorge begins at the north end of Cain, crossing the Cares River on a footbridge then entering the gorge through a tunnel chiseled from limestone. The drop of the river through the gorge has been harnessed by a hydroelectric system and the path open to us is a maintenance track carved into cliff faces high above the river, sometimes flanked by the canal cut to channel water towards generators further downstream. Pat and I walked about 5 kilometers into the gorge, enjoying the sensation of hugging the edge (the gorge drops to nearly a mile deep further downstream) and drinking in Picos panoramas!

Dusk was falling when we returned to our car in Cain. But as Pat pointed the car south along the incredible stretch of road forever etched in our minds from our inbound journey, we noticed a trail to our left down along the river. It was now nearing total darkness, but I hopped out of the car and, armed with 2-way radios, Pat drove slowly along the road as I navigated the trail below. Just enough light filtered down between the peaks for me to see the striking possibilities of this route and we continued south, side-by-side, Pat driving the road and me walking the trail. Finally the trail returned to road a little over two kilometers upstream.



Picos de Europa waterfall near Cain

We marked the potential starting point on our hand drawn maps and drove back along the route to confirm entry onto the trail and exit back on the road as it led into Cain. Though Cares Gorge is a top-notch walk, we decided the new section along the valley leading into Cain adds new elements: the lush greenery, walking directly adjacent to the river, and several attractive groupings of stone buildings, including a charming little pilgrimage chapel.

We arrived back at our inn at Posada de Valdeón just past 10 pm, riding that wave of walk planning adrenalin that comes from the “treasure-hunt” success of finding a great walk and discovering a way to make it even better!

Four WAI groups have now enjoyed this trail and it consistently ranks as one of the favorites among a series of top notch Northern Spain walking trails!

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