

NORTHERN SPAIN

MIGRATING SOUTH FOR THE WINTER



As the chill of the late autumn wind blew through our mesh motorcycle jackets, we felt the urge to migrate south from Great Britain **UPSHIFT Issue 76**. We pointed our handlebars towards the warmer climate of southern Europe, by booking a two-day ferry from Portsmouth, England to Santander, Spain for ourselves and our two BMW G650GS mules. Chantil and I had hoped to leave the grey drizzly October weather of England and arrive in sunny Spain. In reality, the day we left Portsmouth was unusually sunny and warm, and when the ferry ramp lowered in Santander, the skies were an angry grey with rain pouring down on our dampened spirits. So much for sunny Spain.

Fortunately, the rain was only temporary, and after a few days of hiding out in a hotel room, we enjoyed relatively blue skies – especially as we ventured further south into the dryer climates of the Bardenas Reales.

Destination Planning and Roadside Oddities

People often ask how we plan our travels while being on the road full-time. It all started years ago when we purchased a coffee-table book called *Destinations of a Lifetime: 225 of the World's Most Amazing Places*. Chantil and I poured over each of the pages and dreamed of visiting these incredible locations throughout the world. We plotted them onto our Google Map as “Want to go” pins, and over the years these 225 pins grew to over a thousand, as we learned of more exotic and interesting places we wanted to visit.





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Once we enter a country, we search travel websites to determine the “must see” places. After all, we wouldn’t want to visit Paris and miss the Eiffel Tower, or Rome’s famous Colosseum. However, we often prefer the less-known locations, where we can enjoy them at our own leisurely pace. One of our favorite go-to sites for finding interesting, and often unusual, places to visit is the website Atlas Obscura. Spain currently has more than 580 locations listed on their website! With so many interesting places to see, it’s no wonder that we tend to travel so slowly – sometimes spending months in a single country.

One of these Atlas Obscura locations was a place called Parque De Los Desvelados (Park of the Sleepless) located near the town of Estella. This obscure and weathered park was the 30-year creation of Spanish artist Luis García Vidal. The skulls and crushed cars are a eulogy to life and how fragile it can be – a grief that was painfully felt by Vidal when he lost his brother to an automobile accident in 1991. Like human frailties, the sculptures are also fragile since they are only made from wooden branches, wire mesh, plaster and paint. You could see where some of the skulls were destroyed by people wanting to stand on them for a picture. We felt it was best to enjoy the sculptures as you would in a museum – not touching them and quietly reflecting on our own thoughts. We left Parque De Los Desvelados with a reinvigorating feeling that life is a gift that should be cherished and enjoyed.





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The Ghosts of Esco

Another Atlas Obscura find was the 12th century town of Esco. This farming town was abandoned due to the inadvertent flooding of farmland created by the Yesa Dam in 1959. Sixty years later, what used to be a flourishing farming village, was now slowly withering away. Broken rafters, fallen stone walls, and decades of decay filled the cobblestone streets. Centuries of family memories, destroyed by a single act of careless civil engineering.

We arrived late enough in the day, that we didn't have time to explore the ruins and nearby church, so we decided to set up camp at the base of the town. After a relaxing dinner and a stupendous sunset, we enjoyed the incredible view of the night sky – uninhibited by any nearby light pollution. It felt like a picture perfect evening of motorcycle camping.

Around midnight, we were awoken to the sounds of howling, followed by sudden gale force winds that were so violent that they flapped the tent fabric, and pulled the support stakes from the ground. We reinforced the stakes by placing large rocks on top of them and went back to bed. Three hours later, we were once again awoken – but now the howling intensified. The winds were so fierce that we didn't think our tent would make it through the night. Just as we were getting out of our sleeping bags, we heard what sounded like a freight train rolling into us! The violent wind blasted the tent with so much force that it flattened and snapped one of the aluminum support poles in half! All of the items that were in the tent's vestibule were blown downwind into the ruins of a rocky wall!

Almost as quickly as the wind arrived, it dissipated. We spent the next hour trying to collect all of our possessions, and huddled against the ruins of a stone wall, waiting for the light of morning to determine the extent of damage. The center of the tent was ripped where the pole had broken and was shoved through the fabric. There was also a large five-foot rip at the base of the tent. Definitely not a picture perfect night of camping. We imagined that the anger of the families that were displaced in 1959, still haunt the town of Esco. It sure haunted us that night!

When morning arrived, we packed our gear, and broken tent, and rode to a nearby city where we found a camping store, and purchased a splint for the broken pole and some tent repair tape. It took the whole roll, but with some patience, and some hand-stitching, we restored the tent, and were able to continue using it during the next leg of our travels to the desert region of Bardenas Reales.

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Riding the Trans Euro Trail

Spain has one of the most extensive sections of the Trans Euro Trail (TET) within its borders. The 7,500 km (4,660 mile) length is impressive – especially considering that the Trans America Trail is “only” 6,840 km (4,250 miles) long. One could easily ride offroad for weeks through the varied terrain of Spain. During the previous year, we had ridden sections of the TET **UPSHIFT Issue 51**, but this time we focused on the 200 km (124 mile) section that winds through the badlands of Bardenas Reales.

We love riding in the desert! The wide expanse of open land, ripe for exploring, feels invigorating and free, and Bardenas Reales was just what we hoped it would be. This 42,500-acre UNESCO Reserve is composed of three separate areas: El Plano is the large plateau region in the north and west, Le Negra features sections covered with pine forests and scrub in the south, and La Blanca is the most picturesque with the spectacular formations of Castildetierra and Pisuerra. The moderate November temperatures, multitude of dirt roads to explore, and the ample wild camping opportunities, made it feel like we were in adventure motorcycle heaven. Life was good! At least it was until my mule’s radiator sprung a leak.

Leaking Coolant in the Desert

I was high in the rev range, climbing a rocky hill in first gear, when I suddenly felt the splash of liquid and the distinctive odor of engine coolant burning on a hot exhaust header. I pulled off the trail to diagnose the problem. There was clearly a decent amount of green coolant leaking from the radiator cooling tubes. We were about 8 miles from the nearest roadway, and 75 miles from the nearest BMW dealer. What to do?



We removed the plastic access panels and topped off the coolant reservoir with water we carry in our RotopaX canisters. With the comfortable temperatures of the late afternoon, perhaps we could make it to the roadway before the coolant temperature got hot enough to where the thermostat would direct cooling water into the radiator. Sure enough it worked! I shifted into a higher gear, to keep the engine revolutions below 2000 RPM, and rode all the way to the BMW dealership in Soria – albeit at only 30 MPH.

The next morning, we showed up at Talleres Sebas BMW Motorrad with the hopes that they could get us a new radiator. After talking with the parts manager, we quickly discovered that one could be overnighted from Madrid the next morning. Perfect! In addition, the owner agreed that we could use their shop and motorcycle lift to do all the maintenance ourselves! After a full day of replacing the radiator and coolant, and servicing both of our mules, they were ready for exploring more of northwestern Spain.

Another highlight of our visit to Talleres Sebas BMW Motorrad was seeing their beautifully restored BMW R51/3. This model was produced from 1951-1955 and had a 494cc four-stroke flat-twin. BMW built this particular engine so well that it remained relatively unchanged until 1969. With only 170 km on the odometer, the R51/3 on display at Talleres Sebas, was truly a museum piece worthy of praise.

More of the Iberian Peninsula Ahead

With each passing day, we could feel the cooler temperatures closing in upon us, pushing us further south along our snowbird migration route. We crossed the border from Spain into Portugal and headed towards the city of Bragança, where the entire 1250 km (775 mile) length of the Portugal Adventure Country Track lay ahead. More adventure awaits...

About viajarMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill have been living on the road and motorcycle overlanding since early 2020. So far they've explored 44 countries in North America, Europe, and north Africa, and hope to someday circumnavigate this "pale blue dot" they call home. Follow their journey at www.viajarMOTO.com.