

The Galicia Trip – August 2014

Day 1

A couple of days spent in North West Spain instead of flying direct to Málaga. I flew to Santiago de Compostela from Newcastle via Dublin. The first flight was in a Stobart Air prop plane - unfortunately it didn't look like a Stobart truck but was in Aer Lingus livery. A smooth flight but saw nothing between Hexham and Howth. Dublin has good connections between UK and most parts of Spain, courtesy of Aer Lingus. I presume this is a result of Irish efforts to sell Ireland as a tourist and English-language learning centre to Spaniards (there are plenty of young Spaniards who speak English with a slight Irish accent). The only problem at Dublin was a long transfer queue - the Newcastle flight coincided with those from other UK airports connecting with flights to various parts of the US – it would have been quicker exiting airside and re-entering through security. The usual long walks within the airport before ending up, an hour later, directly above the gate where my flight arrived. However the flight to Santiago was less than half full and comfortable.

Santiago Airport has vastly expanded since Colin and I were there in 2002, but I still managed to catch the bus into town which was due to leave 10 minutes after the plane pulled up to the gate. This meant I had some spare time in Santiago before my train to A Coruña. Bought my ticket then wandered up to the city centre – I vaguely remembered that the station was at the foot of the city, but not quite how long an uphill trek it was. I managed a quick look at the cathedral, dodging the crowds of pilgrims who had just completed the Camino de Santiago - there was a queue of people outside the office where they collect certificates to say they've completed the journey, many with knees and legs in various states of disrepair. For some reason there was a series of naked men (sculptures) looking down from the balconies above the Praza das Praterías (I tried Googling to find out why, unsuccessfully). Santiago was much busier with tourists than it was 12 years ago – but it was the August holiday season, and Northern Spain is cool enough to be out in the middle of the afternoon.

A quick beer near the station, onward by train for an hour to A Coruña, then a 20 minute walk into town and my hotel. Comfortable enough but (as usual) the free wifi was incredibly slow if more than one person in the building was using it.



A Coruña

A walk round in the early evening, and A Coruña was packed. It's a sizeable city, a resort as well, and there was a *feria* in progress. The city centre and the historic part of town is situated on a promontory, connected to the rest of Spain by an isthmus a couple of streets wide – and every car and bus in the city was trying to get through them. I wandered via the beaches (on one side of the headland) then across to the harbour and port on the other. There are rows of buildings known as 'glass houses', about six storeys high, with the balconies facing the sea glassed in, so the inhabitants could keep an eye on what was going on in the port in all weathers. The narrow streets around the central Praza María Pity are crammed with cafes, bars and restaurants. It was a bit early for dinner (Spanish time) and some of the bars were too crammed for comfort, others not yet open.... But I looked at enough menus to decide that, at some stage, I'm coming back for the seafood.

I fancied a couple of beers somewhere relatively quiet and stumbled into the Cervezateca Malte, which turned out to have the widest selection of beers in the city, and in particular an excellent selection of locally brewed beers. The beers are bottled craft beers, served from a fridge but not too cold, and pretty expensive. I'm not complaining as they knock the socks off the standard Spanish draught and bottled lagers. I hadn't thought to check beforehand, assuming Spain was a lost cause when it comes to beer, but Galicia in particular has become the centre of a fledgling craft beer scene in Spain. It may be the Celtic connection, the cooler weather meaning dark strong beers are a good option, or just increased interest in beer – most of the locals were drinking imports from Germany, Belgium and the UK. I tried a couple of beers brewed by Keltius in Ourense, then meandered back to the hotel.

Day 2

I had sussed out the A Coruña bus network by now, so caught a local bus to the bus station. No information so I hung around the platform roughly where I thought the bus would depart. Next thing I knew an orderly queue had formed behind me. What's happened – this is something unheard of in Spain. Some of the parked coaches looked very familiar – many of the regional routes are operated by the dreaded Arriva. To be fair, the A Coruña – Ferrol Express was a modern coach and we were there in 45 minutes. Ferrol was my base for the second night - my original plan was to stay in one of the villages along the north coast, but it is difficult to get accommodation in mid-August, so I settled on a day trip out along the coast, returning to Ferrol in the evening. Ferrol is a naval base and port (and also was a centre for shipbuilding, though the yard is now closed). It is not touristy and many businesses close in August – so it was possible to get a four-star hotel room for half the price of A Coruña.

For my day out I caught the 1030 FEVE train from Ferrol as far as O Barqueiro. FEVE, now part of the Spanish national operator RENFE, is a narrow metre gauge network along the north coast of Spain. The two-coach diesel railcars pootle along, stopping frequently, at every village and sometimes in the middle of nowhere. After the suburbs, we spent some time in heavily wooded country, up and down hills, before arriving on the north coast. The coast is a series of promontories broken up by long inlets known as *rías*. After travelling alongside the Ría de Ortigueira, we arrived at the halt at O Barqueiro on the Ría del Barqueiro. Apart from passing places, the FEVE stations are basic, a bus shelter and small platform, often with a ruined old station house in the background.



The view of O Barqueiro from the station (above) is impressive. The village nestles in a small bay in the *ría*, the village houses climbing up steeply from the active fishing harbour. I wandered down into the village, around the quayside and had a couple of beers in a nameless old bar on the quay. The *tapas* appeared, first a home-made *tortilla* then *percebes*, which turned out to be goose barnacles. I had to ask how to eat them, and they were tasty once I mastered the technique – they turn out to be a local speciality. I walked to the bridges over the *ría* – the old road bridge built in the early 1900s and in use till the 1980s is now a path and cycleway, next to the new road bridge and the railway bridge – then back to the village and into another nameless bar. I sat outside in the sun (I don't think there was an inside...it had the appearance of someone's house turned into a bar for the summer), beer in hand, jazz playing in background, watching the boats and people, and eating the *tapas* as they were brought round every few minutes. Nice.

There was one other person waiting for the train to Ferrol, so we got chatting in a mixture of Spanish and English. He was a Brazilian, who had lived in Santiago for a few years and enjoyed walking or kayaking stretches of the coast. Somehow we managed a conversation about Spanish, UK and Brazilian politics.

On the return journey we had a 25 minute stop at Ortigueira, waiting for the late eastbound train to pass. The driver and guard/conductor went off for a coffee with the station master while we sat on the platform in the sun watching nothing happen.

I checked into the hotel, stocked up on bread, cheese and *chorizo* from a supermarket, then went for a look round Ferrol. First impressions were not good – it was clear that there is high unemployment and poverty and there were many closed and empty shops in the town centre. However, it livened up as the evening progressed and the cafes and bars filled up. Somehow I found Papillon, a bar with the widest selection of beer in town, and had an enjoyable hour or two, drinking more Galician beer, this time mainly from the Santo Cristo brewery, which turned out to also be brewed in Ourense. I remember a roast chestnut flavoured stout amongst others.

Day 3.

Two FEVE trains a day run all the way from Ferrol to Oviedo, a six hour journey. From there it is another six hours by FEVE to Bilbao and then three hours onward to Santander. The train doesn't stretch to a buffet – in fact it was the same two-coach railcar as yesterday – but there is a toilet. Nine hardy souls boarded at Ferrol, though it became busier later.

I was going as far as Cudillero, another fishing village on the coast, just before the line turns inward to Oviedo. It is a mere 5 hours and 81 stations from Ferrol (though, to be fair, we only stopped at 60-odd of them). I do this for fun. The journey is interesting all the way, and scenic for the most part. Through the woods to Ortigueira in the early morning mist, over the *ría* bridge at O Barqueiro, then along the north coast. The line is often a few kilometres inland but it crosses all the *rías* and there are excellent views. There's an aluminium plant near Viveiro, and a few grotty seaside developments on the coastal stretches, but otherwise it is attractive all the way. At Ribadeo we had a forty minute wait for the delayed eastbound train to arrive and pass, so time to stretch our legs. In the adjacent siding was El Transcantabrico, FEVE's luxury train of 1923 Pullman coaches, parked while the punters were visiting the Playa de las Catedrales and having lunch in Ribadeo. The Coche Pub was being replenished. A five day trip along the FEVE line from Santander to Ferrol and on to Santiago cost from €1686 to €2571 per head in 2014. My journey today cost €19 (and a 30 day pass for all scheduled FEVE trains costs €87.25).

We left Ribadeo 40 minutes late and crossed the head of the *ría* into Asturias. Though the coast is a little more developed, there are plenty of rural stretches. The railway is crossed several times by the modernised coast road which marches across the *rías* and valleys on huge viaducts. The railway winds through the countryside through umpteen tunnels and the train travels slowly along jointed track, some of which was in poor condition. We arrived into Cudillero 75 minutes late. No obvious reason for the further delay except speed restrictions - maybe they are new or it is just impossible for the driver to obey them and keep to time. No complaints from the passengers – people in a hurry take the coach along the motorway.



Cudillero

Cudillero station is two kilometres inland from the village and 103 metres above it. It's a 20 minute walk downhill to the harbour (and a 30 minute walk back uphill to the station, though there are a few bars halfway down/up in the centre of the village). The village is built on steep slopes above the harbour, is picturesque, and popular with tourists. Today was a holiday in Spain, so it was packed with daytrippers. The train delay meant that, instead of arriving before the two o'clock rush for lunch, I arrived in the middle of lunchtime – everywhere around the harbour was packed with enormous family groups devouring huge plates of seafood. However, on the harbour wall I found a drinks-only café where I could sit and watch the world from a beer glass.

Then back to the station (with a beer and *tapa* stop halfway up the hill) and on to the next train. From Cudillero FEVE runs electric trains fairly regularly, via Pravia (where the line to Oviedo heads off) and Avilés to Gijón. I was going to Avilés, 50 minutes and 16 stops down the line. The FEVE station, RENFE station and bus station are adjacent to one another, a few hundred metres from the city centre, and I only had time for a quick look round. Though it is an industrial town, based around a huge steelworks, it has a small historic centre which is worth a look. There were more than a few *sidrerías* selling Asturian cider. Nice stuff...but I opted for the *cervecería* next to the station. When I asked for an Asturian beer, the waiter took me to the fridge and let me have a rummage around. I had a Bayura beer (though I can't remember which), and I noticed they had some Cantabrian beer that rejoiced in the name of Dougalls.

From Avilés it is a 20 minute hop on the bus to Asturias airport, quite a homely little affair as these things go, where I caught my late evening Vueling flight to Málaga. It was packed – I was the only non-Spaniard on board - everyone else was off for their holidays in Torremolinos. And I found the Spanish announcements much easier to understand than the attempts at English...but they tried. Arrived in Málaga airport in time to catch the last train to Arroyo, and for a couple of pints before arriving home sometime after 1am. As I mentioned once before I do this for fun. Honest.

Railway Buffery

FEVE stands for *Ferrocarriles de Via Estrecha* (Narrow Gauge Railways) and was founded in the 1960s to bring together the remaining narrow gauge railways in Spain under common management. Spanish mainlines are broad gauge, with the exception of the new network high speed lines built since 1990 which are standard gauge. Some of the FEVE lines (for example in Mallorca, Valencia, Cataluña and the Basque Country) were taken over by regional governments in the 1990s, leaving the metre-gauge network in the North of Spain from Ferrol via Oviedo and Santander to Bilbao as the core of the network, together with local branches in Asturias and a line to Leon. In addition to long distance, regional and suburban passenger traffic there was substantial freight traffic from the heavy industry of Asturias. FEVE was absorbed into the national company RENFE in 1913, and the lines and stations passed to Adif, the equivalent of Network Rail. There is concern that the management of both organisations see FEVE as peripheral, and that operations will suffer.



FEVE Class 2700 at Ortigueira

The line from Ferrol along the north coast to Oviedo, Avilés and Gijón was constructed remarkably recently. It was first proposed in 1883. However it was not until 1950 that construction of the line began. Most of the route was opened in the 1960s but it was not until 1972 that the central section was opened, and through services began in September of that year. For example Cudillero station was opened in 1962 and O Barqueiro in 1966. The section from Cudillero to Avilés was electrified in 1994. The whole route forms the longest metre gauge line in Europe.

The trains used on the long distance trains from Ferrol to Oviedo are designated Series/Class 2700. They are diesel *automotors* (railcars) built by CAF and Sunsundequi of Spain and delivered to FEVE in 2009-10. They seat 90 people, are air conditioned, and have a toilet on board.

Sources: Wikipedia.es and www.spanishrailway.com/2012/03/24/ferrocarril-de-ferrol-a-gijon by Juan Peris Torner. Any mistakes in translation are my own.