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The long way down

Drive the length of Spain in the middle of summer, with kids? It's not such a crazy idea, says Robert Elms. Just make sure you plan some treats along the way

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Lost in space ... Robert and children en route. Photograph: Christina Wilson

We passed many Spains along the way. That long schlep with a car-full of family - all the way from the Basque-lands straddling the French border, right down to the foot of shimmering Andalucia, with Morocco hovering in the distance - is still one of the great journeys. Iberia is a vast land-bridge from our safe European home to the daunting Africa waiting below, and to drive from top to bottom took us a week and took us through more landscapes, languages, cultures and cuisines than I could have imagined. Endless, dreamy longueurs interspersed with intense bouts of discovery and a fair few arguments. It was a good trip.

This was all my fault. A life-long obsession with Spain has taken me to most of the major cities, much of the coast and even acquired us a home in the deep-south, overlooking the Atlantic from a whitewashed Moorish redoubt. But I've always hankered after going all the way, a Spanish epic taking in forgotten enclaves of this still unruly land. My wife was sceptical about the distances involved and my kids were hostile to the idea of being cooped up in a car for hours in the middle of Spanish nowhere. But I managed to convince them by booking the biggest, most ferociously air-conditioned hire car we could find and a couple of fancy hotels en route.

Working out exactly where that route would take us, laying out maps and drinking Ribera del Duero back in a wintry England, was part of the appeal of the trip. Our end-point was that crumbling warren within the fortifications of Vejer de La Frontera which is our house. So I plotted a chart from sea to sea, which started at Bilbao, took us via the green hills of the Basques, down through near-empty parts of León and parched Extremadura, before finally entering Andalucia and home. It looked straightforward on the map, but still my wife bought a satnav system. She doesn't trust me with maps.

Our first turn at Bilbao airport was to head north and east, diametrically away from our final destination, but this was definitely the right move. Bilbao, bar Frank Gehry's metallic masterpiece, is not a great city, and forcing the kids into a museum on the first day would have been a big mistake. Instead, we'd promised them seaside and seafood and nowhere does that combination better than San Sebastián.

This elegant resort town is one of the loveliest in all Spain. Wrapped around a golden bay, with the hills rising behind, it's got a tobacco-coloured old quarter, a delightful promenade, plenty of good hotels and great chefs. We had arranged a couple of nights in a nicely faded art nouveau confection called the Hotel Londres, right on the beach, which is where we spent the days, while the evenings were for parading followed by eating. We watched jai-alai, their insanely rapid national sport, and as an extra entertainment saw a political rally organised by families of Eta prisoners - a reminder that, despite its loveliness, this is the very centre of the Basques' bitter struggle for independence.

The realisation that you are in a very different land comes when you leave the city and hit the dark, smokestack hills and remote villages, where everybody speaks their consonant-cluttered tongue. Sticking to twisting local roads, we took lunch in lofty Zumarraga, where conversation stopped and beret-clad heads twisted as we entered the restaurant. We drank cider at an open-air sidrería on a farm in a deep green valley, which looked like a misplaced Switzerland. We then spent the night at a B&B in a quasi-Alpine chalet in an unpronounceable village full of Xs and Zs. Finally we bid adios to the Basques, got on the motorway and left one Spain for another.

There has been an EU-funded orgy of road-building throughout this land, which means that you can now cover large distances very quickly by sticking to often empty toll roads. Of course, you miss the subtleties of dusty pueblos and smoky truck-stops, but the shift from the closed mountain world of the Basques to the vast skies and wide plains of Castille and León is so striking you feel it even at 120kph.

There's something remorseless and austere about the terrain, which now rolls in front of you; die-straight roads, distant blue lakes, large gaps between anywhere and long silences in the car. When you see a sign for a town called Torquemada, you realise this is indeed the tortured heart of old Spain.

We were bound for Salamanca, an inquisitive university city, but broke the long stretch in Palencia. The modern Spain I know is a vivacious land, but this old, overlooked part is infused with ancient catholic rigour, which makes it sombre and still. We ate well in a muted, well-mannered restaurant, took in the sites, including some rather ruined Roman ruins, but then decided to press on. Our mood was undoubtedly affected by all this solemnity, and by our electronic navigator throwing strops and ordering us to take U-turns on new motorways it never knew existed. Finally, after a suitably self-punishing drive, we arrived.

There's a stature and a melancholy about this learned town. Salamanca predates Oxford as a varsity city and outdoes it in terms of architectural grandeur. It's all heraldic crests and huge portals, especially on the Brobdingnagian main square. Massive and imposing, the whole place with its labyrinthine cloisters, looming cathedral and numerous clerics, reminds you that Spain's devoutly Catholic past is not so far away, not up here in the conservative heartland. **Our spirits were considerably lightened though by an elegant and amazingly cheap new boutique hotel right by the walls of the old town and a great meal of the rich, dark beef that is bred out on those endless plains.**

Extremadura is officially the least-visited region of Spain; poor, arid and pitilessly hot. It was also, until all those roads were built, a long way from anywhere. Now, though, it's opening up and revealing some true wonders. We pushed on, past broken crusader

castles and Roman viaducts, over the mighty Río Tajo to Cáceres, where we spent a sumptuous afternoon and night wandering virtually alone through a film-set 16th century walled town of bewildering grace and charm. Recognised by Unesco as a world heritage site, but ignored by almost everybody else, even our blasé offspring were amazed by its riches. There's a plethora of churches, palaces and mansions provided half a millennium ago by the conquistadors who left this tough land to subjugate continents and then returned to display their wealth.

Over here, hard by the border, the accent takes on that sibilant Portuguese slur and the people also have the slow, slightly subdued manner of their more downbeat Iberian neighbours. So we slowed down too. We'd booked a couple of nights in a rather posh hotel in a converted monastery in the very epicentre of rural nowhere. After all that driving, a cool pool and room service were very welcome.

Perhaps the most wondrous part of the journey was still to come. Now heading east as well as south and back on little local roads, we were meandering through undulating pasture when we saw a tiny caravan of beautiful old horse-drawn Gypsy carts parked up by the side of the road, three or four families hanging out their washing and feeding their steeds, their kids playing football in a field. Poverty is rarely romantic but this scene was so redolent of a Spain now almost vanished that we could but stop and stare at time frozen in the heat haze.

Our next stop was also pretty magical. Zafra, its name clearly pointing to Arabic origins, lies on the cusp of Extremadura and Andalucía, and simply happened to be where we were at lunchtime. And what a time. The greatest pleasure of driving through Spain is to land in some village, locate the old quarter and discover an unpolished gem. Zafra was just that, a charismatic community, out in force eating and playing, arguing and flirting in their unique double plaza, a couple of wondrously wonky Moorish squares, one after the other, both laid-back yet buzzing with life.

We plotted up at a shady table in the eaves of a medieval inn, ordered ham and olives, local wine and bread and dined as well as you could ever hope to. The ham, reared in the forests just south of here, was the taste of the trip. My kids are connoisseurs of jamón and they declared it the best ever. The best moment was probably the football match my son took part in, which somehow combined with a wedding procession going by, so that at one point the groom in all his finery was in goal.

All roads from here lead to Seville, so we took one, traversing dense cork forest and steep hills, passing entire villages dedicated to that succulent ham, flamenco now on the car radio, eagles hovering in the unforgiving skies. Pulling into that great Moorish metropolis felt almost like the end of our journey, as this is where we usually finish our Spanish sojourns. This time though it was just a staging post and I was anxious to complete the odyssey.

Finally, a full week after landing on Spanish soil, we arrived at the foot of our adopted home pueblo. But rather than climb up to our house I decided to push on just a little further. My family thought yet again that I was mad, that we should finally unpack and relax, but we had started at the Atlantic and I felt it was only right to finish there, more than 1,000 unmistakably Spanish miles later.

• P&O Ferries (08705 980333, poferries.com) sails Portsmouth-Bilbao from £788

return for car and passengers. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies London-Bilbao from £53pp one-way. Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies Seville-London from £60 one-way. Hertz (08708 448844, hertz.co.uk) offers a week's car hire at Bilbao airport dropping off at Seville airport from £102.

Where to eat and sleep en route

1. Bilbao

Where to sleep

Gran Hotel Domine

Views of the Guggenheim, an 85ft-high rock artwork in the atrium and groovy interiors including a Philippe Stark tub in every bathroom. Doubles from £88.

+944 253 300, hoteles-silken.com/ghdb.

Where to eat

Rio-Oja

The speciality of this bar is cazuelitas, steaming pans of stews, a dozen different dishes every day - there might be baby squid in its own ink, bacalao al pil-pil, or bull's tail casserole - served in tapas-sized portions along with big glasses of red wine or cañas of beer.

c/Perro 4 (+944 150 871).

2. San Sebastián

Where to sleep

Hotel de Londres

An elegant belle epoque facade with gorgeous seafront views over a healthy swathe of honey beach. Doubles from £137.

+943 440 770, wlondres.com.

Where to eat

Txepetxa

The Txepetxa has a well-deserved reputation for excellence in pintxos - the Basque snacks that started out as tapas and have become an art form. This unassuming-looking bar in the Parte Vieja is known locally as the "temple of the anchovy". It specialises in cured anchovies every which way, often in striking combinations - with roquefort, with sea urchin, with mango ...

c/Pescadería 5 (+943 422 227).

3. Zumarraga

Where to eat

Jatetxea Sagardotegia Balentina (Restaurante Sidrería Balentina)

The cider house restaurant is a Basque institution in which the menu is practically set in stone: juicy tortilla of salt cod, followed by lamb chops a la brasa. The required accompaniment to these edibles is sagardoa (cider), swigged from a thin-walled glass into which the golden liquid has been poured from a great height (usually by your waiter) - a technique known as escanciar

c/Urola 6 (+943 725 041).

4. Basetxeta

Where to sleep

Agroturismo Txopebenta

Atmospheric 19th-century farmhouse B&B with beamed ceilings, warm rustic decor and a lovely terrace with views of Urdabai Biosphere Reserve. Doubles from £33.

+946 254 923.

5. Palencia

Where to eat

La Traserilla

A shining example of a very Spanish phenomenon - an eating place that combines tradition with modernity but does so with no pretensions, no need to book weeks ahead, and astonishingly reasonable prices. The place is a stone townhouse by the cathedral in the medieval centre of Palencia. Reyes and Miguel are your hosts, and smilingly serve up delights such as cured sardine fillets with apple cream and tomato vinaigrette, rabbit with snails, and leche frita ("fried milk") with turrón ice cream.

c/San Marcos 12 (+979 745 421).

6. Salamanca

Where to sleep

Hotel Residencia Rector

A light, airy 13-room hotel near the cathedral fusing contemporary decor with period flourishes, including mahogany furniture and art nouveau style stained glass. Doubles from £83.

+923 218 482, hotelrector.com.

Where to eat

La Hoja 21

It's posh, but not frighteningly so, and the food is delicious. La Hoja is trumpeted as a pioneer of the new wave in cocina salmantina - which means that the char-grilled ox steak comes with red-pepper jus and the presa ibérica (a prized cut of Iberian pork) is served as an exquisite carpaccio.

c/San Pablo 21 (+923 264 028).

7. Cáceras

Where to eat

Atrio

One of Spain's most extraordinary restaurants, it was recently awarded a richly deserved second Michelin star. José Polo and Toño Pérez are the genius couple behind Atrio, whose fame rests both on its ingenious use of regional products (rare-breed meats, ibérico ham, pimentón, cheeses), and on its magnificent wine list, which comes in a vast tome of barely manageable size. The main problems with Atrio were always its overpoweringly chintzy decor and uninspiring location, but these are to be remedied imminently with a new high-design locale in the city's medieval heart.

Avda de España 30 (+927 242 928).

8. Almendral

Where to sleep

Hotel Rocamador

A stone-walled, 16th-century Franciscan monastery reborn as accommodation with a wonderful vaulted cloister, chapel and panoramic terrace with pool. Doubles from £86.

+924 489 000, rocamador.com.

9. Zafra

Where to sleep

Hotel Huerta Honda

Eclectic decor - fat sofas, kilims, beams and ochre walls - a patio dripping with plants and a lovely roof terrace. Doubles from £50.

+924 554 100, hotelhuertahonda.com.

Where to eat

La Barbacana

There are moments when the body craves nothing more elaborate than a plate of the best acorn-fed ham, a bottle of red wine and a basket of bread. This old-fashioned restaurant is a good place to satisfy the urge for simple Spanish things like jamón ibérico, chargrilled slabs of retinto beef and migas (the signature dish of Extremadura, essentially breadcrumbs crisp-fried with garlic, chorizo and panceta). Try the criadillas de tierra - literally "testicles of the earth" - a strange and subtle local variant of the truffle.

Avda López Asme 30 (+924 554 100).

10. Seville

Where to sleep

Hotel las Casas de la Judería

Once an entire housing block in Seville's old Jewish quarter, now a charming, gorgeous hotel of restored mansions and houses. Accessed through an enormous mahogany gateway set in thick honeystone walls, the rooms are clustered around shady Moorish patios and fountains and linked by narrow passageways. Doubles from £81.

c/de Dos Hermanas 7 (+954 415 150).

Where to eat **Salvador Rojo**

The new wave of excellence in Spanish food has yet to break over the city of Seville, which is more than happy to muddle along with traditional staples like fried fish and garbanzos con espinacas (chickpeas with spinach). Salvador Rojo is the secret exception. Inexplicably little-known by visitors, Señor Rojo's place just opposite the Hotel Alfonso XIII gives Andalusian dishes like rabo de toro (bull's tail) and gazpacho a new lease of creative life. In high summer, it's worth making a play for one of the tables on the tiny terraza out back.

c/San Fernando 23 (+954 229 725).

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