



# Cashing *in on the* Silver Route

*Loosely following the 2,000-year-old Roman road leads to a wide variety of scenery and ancient cultures*

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Spain has very rich Roman heritage and while it is evident throughout the Silver Route from Seville to Gijón, no place exemplifies it better than the 2,000 year old Roman amphitheatre in Mérida. The theatre is still used to this day. (above)  
A couple of the locals come to check out the bike in the mountainous Asturias region of Spain. (left)



Southern Spain was mostly flat but the central mountain chain of the Asturias region of Spain provided much more adventurous riding. (above)

**S**pain is known for many things: olive groves and olive oil, vast vineyards and world-class wines, amazing cuisine, Flamenco music and Spanish guitars, bullfights and a documented history that dates back several thousand years, to name just a few.

During a spring trip to western Spain, my wife, Gwen, and I were fortunate to experience many of these things and so much more. And it wouldn't take long to find out that the riding there is pretty amazing as well.

Travelling light had a new meaning as we headed to Seville, where our rented BMW R1200RT was waiting for us at the airport. All of our riding gear and belongings for the next nine days needed to be packed in appropriate bags that could travel on the bike with us at all times.

Luis Angel Fuertes Sanchez met us at the airport. He owns León en ruta (leonenruta.com), the motorcycle rental company that provided the RT. After a quick rundown of the preprogrammed TomTom GPS and pointing us in the right direction, we were on our way to Carmona for our first night's stay.

We didn't have any preconceived notions about our hotel, but passing through the Old World gate of the outer wall, we were shocked at the stunning Parador de Carmona; we later found out the hotel is actually a 14th-century Arab palace. As we walked through the glass doors of the main lobby, we were instantly thrown into a slice of Spanish history. Stone pillars;

## FAST FACTS

### THE SPANISH EMPIRE

Global exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries allowed Spain to claim vast territories in North and South America. The Spanish empire became a global power, dominating the oceans as well as European battlefields. The empire, at the time, was the largest in the world until the 18th century.

### PARADORES OF SPAIN

In 1910, the Spanish government came up with the idea of creating an upscale hotel infrastructure. There are now more than 90 Paradores located throughout the Spanish countryside. Most of these renovated luxury hotels are historically and culturally important buildings, such as convents, monasteries, castles and fortresses.

### A GROWING ECONOMY

Spain is the largest olive oil producer, claiming 45 percent of the world's production. In 2014, the country was the world's biggest wine exporter. It produces a vast number of oranges, from sweet Valencia to sour Seville, the latter of which are exported to England for marmalade.

### COLUMBUS REALLY GETS AROUND

Christopher Columbus is buried in Seville, Spain - or is he? The explorer was originally buried in Valladolid in 1506, then moved to Seville in 1509. In 1542, he was moved to Colonial Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), where he remained for two centuries. But in 1795, he was on the move again, this time to Havana, Cuba; a century later, he was returned to Seville. However, in 1877, a suspicious box with human remains in it was found in Santo Domingo inscribed with the words "The illustrious and excellent man, Don Colon, Admiral of the Ocean Sea." Both Seville and the Dominican Republic claim to have his remains.





The attention to detail, regardless of the medium, is outstanding. It's no wonder the hand-laid blocks and intricately carved pillars have withstood the test of time. (left)

The detailed woodwork we witnessed at this cathedral in Carmona was unbelievable. (below left)

The Church of Santa Cristina de Lena, built around 850, is still in use today. (right)

A very quite, picturesque street in Zamora on a Sunday morning. (right below)



massive stone staircases two metres wide; walls covered in rich, dark wood; ancient paintings on the walls; and an attention to details that only Old World craftsmen who spent a lifetime learning century-old skills could accomplish.

### Easily Misplaced

It was dark when we left the Parador on foot looking for the restaurant we had reservations at. After navigating skinny alleys trying to find and decipher faded street names mounted on the sides of buildings, we finally arrived. Our young waiter soon understood the severe language barrier between us and decided to just start bringing wine and food, and more food – we lost count

at the fifth course. Upon leaving the restaurant we got turned around, but I had made a mental note before leaving the hotel that the fortress stood on the highest piece of ground in the city, so we just started walking uphill until we found a castle wall and followed that until we came across the main gate.

The whole evening was an experience we'd come to realize would play itself out over and over again during our time in Spain.

### Thrust Into History

After a short tour of downtown Carmona in the daylight, we passed through the city's original main gate, which was built by the Romans

around 100 BC, as we made our way back to Seville for a tour of the Real Alcázar (Royal Palace). Seville, located on the Guadalquivir River, was one of the most important cities in the Mediterranean culture. Christopher Columbus had left to discover North America and returned to the palace, after which all goods shipped to and from North America had to enter Europe via the palace. Spain, after all, ruled the seas then. The Port of Seville is as important today as it was in the Middle Ages.

### Route 66

Our schedule was tight as we rode from Seville north to Gijón, but with so many





Clay rooftops of houses and the tower from the town cathedral is a common sight in all of the villages, towns and cities we visited. (top)  
A delivery of freshly caught fish arrives at Restaurante El Candil in Gijón. (above)  
Decorative ceiling in our Parador hotel in Zafrá. (right)

sights to see in between, we were a little concerned how this would all play out. My concerns began when trying to figure out the TomTom that Luis had programmed. Aggravation turned to anxiety when we were lost for hours in the centre of a large city with nary a

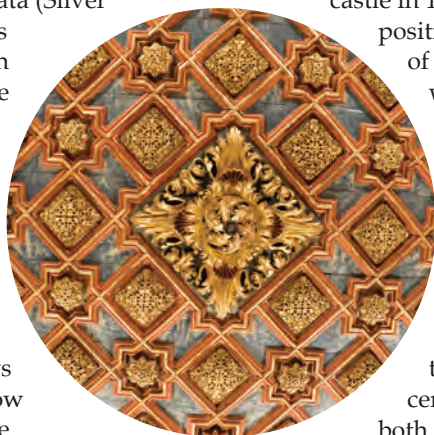
straight road and a language that was foreign to me.  
Before Spain's Arabian period of the eighth century and the ensuing Middle Ages, the Romans ruled this area from around 200 BC and for several centuries afterward. The route known today as Ruta de la Plata (Silver Route) stretches across four regions and seven provinces, from Seville in the south to Gijón in the north on the Atlantic's Bay of Biscay. The Romans built the original trade route to connect the south of Hispania to the northern coast. For nine days we would loosely follow the Roman road via the multi-lane A-66 Ruta de la Plata and, when time permitted, the smaller and more relaxed N-630.

Olive groves as far as the eye could see were a common sight as we rode

through the flat farmland leaving Seville and continuing all the way north to Zafrá.

### Fit for a King

We once again stayed in a Parador hotel in Zafrá that began its life as a castle in 1437. Our room was positioned between two of the nine towers, with a massive stone balcony that touched both towers. Arguably, exceeding the exquisite wood- and stonework were the several thousands of mosaic tiles that made up the centuries-old ceilings in both the public spaces and in our suite.



### Most Entertaining Evening

After asking many locals for directions, we finally made our way to Canela en



Rama for dinner that night. The restaurant was empty, except for a couple sitting at the bar and Pepe, the owner, behind the bar speaking with them. The language barrier was overcome thanks to Laura and Antonio, the aforementioned couple, who helped communicate enough to order food and beverages.

We began a simple conversation with Laura and Antonio who translated to Pepe. Within a few minutes, the dialogue in broken English and very bad Spanish became easier. We were having a great time with our new-found friends when Pepe determined he wouldn't be getting any more customers for the night, so he locked the door, got out his guitar and proceeded to serenade us with Flamenco music. Antonio then got behind the bar and loaded up the counter with bottles of wine – it became an open bar for the five of us. We had an amazing evening and learned more about Spanish life and traditions than we ever could have looking at books or brochures.

Mérida was our next stop and I finally began to master the TomTom. Temperatures so far on the trip hovered in the 30 C range; they rarely get below zero in this part of the country, so without the damaging effects of frost, the roads are smooth and pothole-free. The landscape changes from flat farmland and olive groves to rolling hills with brown or pale green grasses and

fairly large trees growing sporadically, indicating this area has not been farmed for a long time.

The smell of rotting or overripe fruit permeated the air in many towns; we later realized the aroma had come from the many orange trees that line city streets, where the bitter fruit falls from the tree and is left on the ground.



### Roamin' Romans

There is so much history in Spain, and while the Arabian and medieval periods are evident, we found the Roman period the most interesting. In Mérida, we visited a 2,000-year-old

Roman theatre in extraordinary condition. Most of the pillars of the two-storey backdrop are still intact, as are many of the headless statues (the statues were permanent, but the heads would change as new emperors



Pepe, the owner of Canela en Rama in Zafrá, locked the doors to his restaurant and serenaded us with Flamenco music. (left)

Glenn, Gwen, Antonio, Pepe and Laura in Pepe's restaurant. Thanks to Antonio and Laura for the translation and for making it a fantastic night. (above left)

The beige house of the edge of the alley is the skinniest house in Plasencia. (above)  
Ever wonder why Roman statues are often headless? It's because the bodies stay the same, just the heads were changed to depict a new emperor or dignitary. (below)



# Spain

and dignitaries changed), and the amphitheatre seating is in perfect shape. The theatre is still used to this day for plays. Behind it is the arena where battles to the death would take place between gladiators (slaves, criminals, POWs), and gladiators and animals. The men and animals would travel from city to city like a circus and were used for pure entertainment for the citizens. I'm sure the gladiators who perished would beg to differ on the value of the entertainment.

We then headed to Plasencia for the night in yet another Parador. I concentrated on my skills, navigating the R1200RT around slow-speed uphill and downhill hairpin corners in an unfamiliar town. Even in the tight turns, though, the bike was very well balanced. The RT was a dream to ride – its responsiveness was spot-on and handled anything I threw at it. On the open road, I consider it one of the best

touring bikes there is.

The GPS told me we were at our destination, but there was only a massive wooden

door in the thick 10-metre-high medieval stone wall – I was expecting a parking lot. The door creaked open as I pulled up and rode into a car elevator that took us down two floors into the bowels of the 15th-century convent.



### Your Kitchen Wall Is How Old?

We walked to the town square of this ancient walled city that was once inhabited by Romans and Arabs until the 12th century. It was later conquered by King Alfonso VIII and eventually

became a centre for noblemen of the region. Interestingly, many of the original stone walls in Spain still exist but aren't always visible, because over the centuries, people have built houses against them, making the 2,000-year-old edifice part of the house. We passed by a store that used one of the original main gates as its storefront entrance – unique, to say the least.

In every city we visited, we saw countless storks, and their nests on rooftops or perched precariously on towers and church steeples. These nests can weigh upwards of 70 kg and have been known to cave in roofs of ancient buildings, obviously causing severe and expensive damage as it crashes through many floors.

Roman ruins abound on this route



Sitting on the rock'n' roll stairs in Gijón. (above) All of the Paradors we stayed in were 4 or 5 star medieval buildings but the Parador de León, originally a massive 12th century monastery, may have been the most lavish of all. (below left) Inset photo below shows the main entrance.

and there is no greater evidence of that than in Baños de Montemayor, where there is still a functioning underground Roman bath and remnants of the original Roman stone road built some 2,000 years prior. With a village population of 800 and more than 1,400 hotel beds in the town, it's obvious that the baths are a hot tourist attraction.

### Bad Timing

Getting off A-66 and onto the N-630 when time permitted provided a much slower pace, with twists, elevation changes and villages to check out and to better see how the locals live. One thing we found odd is that pretty much every store, including restaurants, cafés and even tourist offices, closes up around 2 p.m. and reopens at around 5:30 p.m..

In Béjar, we were hoping to see Spain's oldest bullring but arrived during siesta. Upon finding the tourist office to ask about it, it too was closed.

Then, looking for a snack, we did find a bakery that was open. I'm sure the woman behind the counter said it was some kind of meat in a bun, but it turned out to be whipped cream in a bun. I really need to brush up on my Spanish.

We also realized that many restaurant kitchens don't open until 8:30 p.m., so it's best not to plan on getting to bed

too early. The streets in the old cities are small and run off in all directions, and few are straight, making it quite easy to get lost. I highly recommend picking up a city map from a tourist office, if you can find one open. At one point, I was unknowingly riding the wrong way on a one-way street that was only wide enough for a small car. My mirror almost touched the wall on one side, as did the car's mirror.

### How Do You Lose a Castle?

We were lucky to be in Zamora for Corpus Christi, an important Christian religious festival that sees houses and storefronts decorated and large processions through the streets as thousands of people pack into the city's 12th-century cathedral.

Around the corner from the cathedral are the remnants of a castle from the 11th century. Over the years it had become overgrown with trees, and apparently local elders and storytellers had forgotten about it. Recently



Hundreds of people enjoying cider outside the bars on a Tuesday evening in Gijón. (above) A view from the lost castle. The trees and the garden below were once so thick that the townspeople of Zamora apparently forgot there was a castle there. It underwent archeological digs in 2009 and is now open to the public. The huge domed top of the Zamora cathedral sits in the distance. (below)





**Heading to the Coast**  
Gijón, located on the northern coast of Spain, is the end of the Ruta de la Plata, and was our next destination. Here, too, are a massive number of Roman ruins and, being a seaport, was, and still is, an important part of Spain's seafaring culture. The city and the immediate

area boast numerous large beaches on the Cantabrian Sea, which immensely helps the tourist trade. That being said Gwen and I had much different agendas.

We were here for two days. Gwen wanted to shop and I wanted to ride . . . solo . . . in the mountains. After I jettisoned the side bags and top box, my first stop was the Fernando Alonso Museum, a name familiar to anyone who follows Formula 1 racing. Inside are displays of trophies, helmets, coveralls, etc. But what is most astonishing is that every car he has competed in since the age of three is also on display. I'd never been this close to an F1 car, and admiring the aerodynamic flowing lines and the technology from the suspension to the engines close up was outstanding. I counted 16 F1 cars. It was simply unbelievable.

### Into the Clouds

The ride in the mountains southwest of Gijón was some of the best riding I have ever experienced, with deep valleys and vast mountain views. The roads are about three metres wide, hairpin turns with sheer drop-offs in places and no guardrails, and throw in free-range cattle and their droppings just to make things a bit more interesting. At one point, I was climbing a 23 percent grade to 1,500 metres when I had to stop for a herder tending to his cows – their

hooves slipping on the pavement as they climbed. As I was near the top of the mountain and in clouds, I couldn't see anything, so I thought it best to turn around, instead of waiting for the farmer to redirect his herd off the road.

I'm glad Gwen didn't accompany me; she's not fond of heights and I would never have gotten to experience those Spanish mountain roads.

Southern Spain is unique with prairie-type fields that stretch beyond the horizon, beautiful sunny days and high temps with no humidity. The orange trees and palm trees trick you into believing you are much closer to the equator than you really are. As the rolling hills of central Spain turned into mountains, my heart rate increased at the riding possibilities that did not disappoint.

The food was amazing, although we didn't always know what we were eating; the quality of the wine was unparalleled; and the people were friendly and tried their best to help with menus and directions, considering my poor excuse of the Spanish language. Keep in mind that going there, or likely to any Old World country, for that matter, would be very frustrating without a GPS, mainly because of the myriad twisting roads and the complexity of the city streets.

And there is nothing quite like spending a night in a centuries-old castle. **MM**

In Baños de Montemayor, the stone road (on the left) is part of the original Roman road. (left)  
Bars and restaurants can be found down even the smallest of alleys.(above)  
Pouring cider the Asturias way. (below)  
Luis (on the left), owner of León en ruta, at his motorcycle rental store. (below left)  
One of many Formula 1 cars at the Fernando Alonso Museum outside Gijón. (bottom right)

rediscovered, it underwent archeological digs in 2009 and is now open for public exploration.

As much as we enjoyed Zamora, we were looking forward to spending another day on the road that would allow extra time in León. Here we found the most lavish Parador yet, originally a massive 12th-century monastery.

With a bit of extra time in the city, Gwen was happy that she had time to shop, something which had so far been a rarity this trip. The cobblestone roads and alleys of the old city are restricted to foot traffic only and offered a nice relaxed feel to a sunny day. Some of the medieval streets are barely wide enough for two people to pass.

Here we met up with Luis again. In addition to BMWs, he also rents Harley-Davidsons and Ducatis from his downtown store. Luis was fantastic to deal with, providing us with printed

maps of the routes that he had pre-loaded onto the TomTom.

Everybody we interacted with in Spain was very friendly, but I recommend learning some Spanish. I've found you can usually get by using basic English, as most people in the service industry understand at least a little English, but not always. A translation app on my phone helped a lot in this regard. One thing we didn't have to ask for was tapas (hors d'oeuvres), which automatically come free with every type of beverage, whether it's coffee, tea or wine. And León, so far, had the best tapas.

### Finally, Some Mountains

After León, we looked forward to getting into the central mountain chain of the Asturias region of Spain. Here we took a number of smaller roads through the mountains and over passes

with many 20 km/h switchbacks. We ran into about 2 km of rough road on one of the passes, the only rough road we encountered on the trip. The only person we saw was a farmer with his truck stopped on the road to tend to his free-range cattle.

The Asturias region is famous for its apple cider, and we learned here the proper way to pour and drink it. You must slowly pour a decent mouthful



from arm's length above your head into a glass held by your other outstretched arm by your thigh without spilling it. You must drink it all at once, but leave a bit at the bottom of the glass, which you pour out on the ground.

For additional photos of Spain visit: [motorcyclemojo.com](http://motorcyclemojo.com)

