

MOTORCYCLE



british motorcyclists federation

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# TAKE THE OLD ROAD

Imagine, tourist boards combine to promote a motorcycle-friendly route – IAN KERR tries one in Spain

In the late 1990s motorcycle industry stalwart Peter Gleave published a book called *Motorcyclists Welcome*. It listed UK accommodation, pubs and cafes where motorcyclists were accepted. Broken down to 12 regions across the country with information on each, plus a list of motorcycle dealers in the back, it was a useful tome.

Of course, after 25 years many of those venues are no longer with us, while some might be under new management not quite so keen on accommodating motorcyclists. Various websites have now come onto the scene with recommendations by riders, but none of these have any officialdom to back the content to give a degree of security to the venues featured or those using them.

In Spain, it's a different story. The tourist boards in the regions of Asturias, Castile and Leon, Extremadura and Andalusia have combined to list and promote motorcycle-friendly hotels and attractions along the length of the ancient Roman road that travels from the northern coastal town of Gijon to Seville in the south. Now that's recognising the economic benefits of motorcycle tourism to the local economy.

Right: Ruta Via de La Plata does Spain top to bottom

**RUTA VIA DE LA PLATA GR 100**

En el siglo I a.C. comenzó la construcción de una calzada romana que aprovechaba la presencia de un corredor natural en el oeste de la Península Ibérica y que con el tiempo se transformaría en una de las principales vías de comunicación peninsular. Su trazado, además de conectar algunos de los principales núcleos de población peninsulares, sirvió de elemento difusor de la cultura romana. Esta vía, una de las más importantes de la península Ibérica, fue iniciada por el cónsul Quinto Servio Corpio, pero quien realmente impulsó su construcción fue el emperador Augusto. Por ella circularon sus tropas, al mando de Publio Cornelio, hasta el norte de la península para conquistar los valles trasmontanos y pacificar por fin Hispania. Su nombre, de origen medieval, se debe al término árabe *Balath* o *Balata*, que significa pavimento o camino pavimentado.

**ETAPAS EN ASTURIAS**

## The Old Road

Known as the Ruta Via de Plata, the old route was built by the Romans during the 1st Century AD, exploiting a natural corridor in the west of the Iberian Peninsula close to the Portuguese border, which was originally used for trade before the troops arrived.

It quickly became one of the Empire's major road links, still busy today with the Autovía 66 basically following the same route. While this busy motorway is heavily used by tourists heading for the south coast and warmer weather, they are missing the many



cultural locations (including UNESCO heritage sites) which can be enjoyed by following the older N-630 which almost runs parallel, but more closely mirrors the Roman road, parts of which are still visible in places.

Very much a more bikey route, it is punctuated by hotels and locations which have registered as motorcycle-friendly – you can even get a 'passport' to be stamped as you use them along the 500-mile trip, which runs through seven provinces. Maps in English and lots of hints and tips can be found on the website which encourages motorcycling as well as general tourism.

Of course, the beauty of a route like this is that you can do it in your own time, taking as long as you like with frequent stops, or just pick and choose which of the listed locations is in tune with your particular interests. Apart from the pure magic of riding a motorcycle on roads that allow you to really enjoy the riding, in generally better weather than we 'enjoy' over here. (Actually, that's not guaranteed – read on).

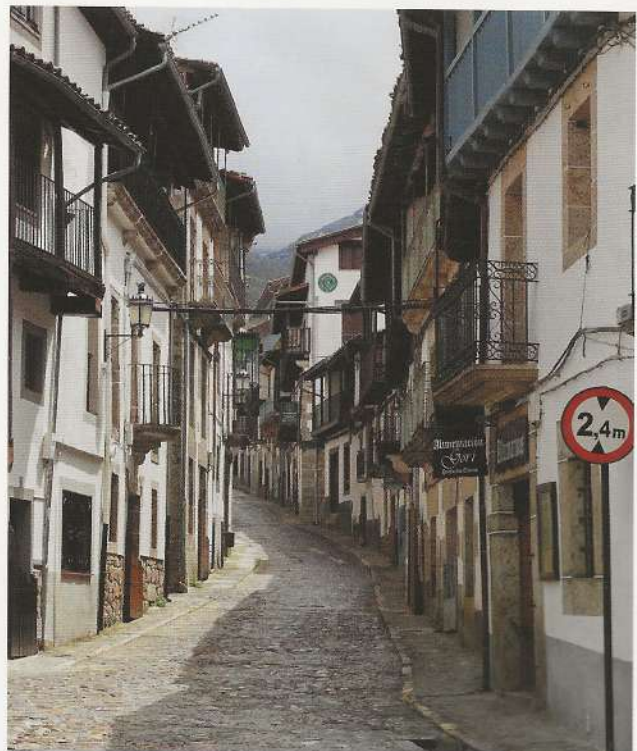
### Follow the Romans

Still, the proof is in the riding, and I wanted to find out whether the reality was as good as the hype. Was I going to be welcomed, wet or dry? Was there security for the bike overnight? Would the route be worth the time spent away for the more common roads and destinations in the region?

Northern Spain itself, with the Picos de Europa and the Asturias region both just a short hop from the excellent Brittany Ferries routes to Bilbao or Santander, has proved a favourite area for motorcyclists from all over Europe looking for some fine biking roads for many years. Personally, having spent 20-plus years riding them I know exactly what the attraction is, so although I had an open mind the result needed to be good to add this route to my list.

When the Romans were building Via de Plata they worked their way from Seville in the south up to Gijón. Unlike them, I was rolling off the ferry at Santander, so it made more sense to do it the other way round. And it soon became clear that the riding was

Route takes you through varied scenery on some superb motorcycling roads





Mountain passes and fantastic views, but as I'm found, you can't guarantee the weather in April



not going to disappoint any more than a visit to the underground Roman baths close to the harbour did before I set off – you really do forget how much the Romans did for us apart from roads.

Sticking quite close to the route and using the recommended hotels (pre-booked) I had secure motorcycle parking reserved and despite my arriving dripping wet on several occasions, nobody batted an eyelid. In fact, it was exactly the same warm reception that I received on sunny days. Most of the hotels were close to many cultural centres so there was plenty to look around in the evenings to help understand the significance of what is often referred to as the 'Silver' route. The name actually derives from the Arabic word 'balat,' which means 'cobble path.'

### Side Benefits

Whatever you call it, the variety of riding and terrain was a joy. Challenging mountain roads with high passes, flat plains, history... the route has it all. Unfortunately for me the weather too showed great diversity, ranging from snow to brilliant warm sun, but that serves me right for going in April!



Whatever the weather, the attractions along the way were all ancient antiquities, and in fact there were some excellent locations for any motorcyclist or petrol head to enjoy. Once a year the small town of La Baneza hosts a race around the town, once part of the World Championship. Just like the Isle of Man TT, spectators are right next to the action, separated from the speeding bikes by hay bales. And although this is not a championship event any more, the action is fast and furious – I’ve spectated there before, and it’s well worth seeing. The organising club is now 70 years old and runs a World Championship motocross event on a purpose-built track on the outskirts of town, to go with the GP.

Although neither event was running when I was there it was nice to learn about this history in the club house, ride around the ‘circuit’ and see the many murals that adorn property adjacent to the roads, including 13 times world champion Angel Nieto.

Further south in Hervás (Cáceres) is a motorcycle museum with eight halls that house a few cars along with a large collection of restored motorcycles from all across Europe, not just Spain. And in the main museum at Villafranca de los Barros there’s a car and bike display on four floors at the back of the main building – it’s in the town square.

### Give it a Go

I learnt a lot on this trip, and not just about the Roman contribution to modern life. For me, the real lesson is that Ruta Via de Plata shows that with a little bit of support from the powers that be, plenty of businesses are attuned to encouraging motorcyclists and supporting them by actively helping them enjoy their time in the country – perhaps a model that could be adopted here by the tourist boards in the UK?



**Above:** La Baneza is the scene of urban closed-roads racing  
**Left:** Part of what the Romans did for us

If you are thinking of doing a trip this summer, I would suggest you take a long hard look at the Ruta Via de la Plata and give it a go either on its own, or on the way to somewhere else.

[www.rutadelaplata.com](http://www.rutadelaplata.com)

### What Should We Do?

If the Spanish can do this, why not us? Which motorcycle-friendly routes do you think need promoting in the UK? (Apart from the NC500). Wales top to toe? Length of the Pennines? London-Lands End? Write and tell us: [editor@bmf.co.uk](mailto:editor@bmf.co.uk)