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# Travel

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## Cool, green and undiscovered

Spain's Asturias region offers glorious ancient history and outdoor adventure

By DAVID APPELL  
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

OVIEDO, Spain — Bagpipes and cider pubs? Snowy peaks and verdant vales? Prehistoric Celtic monuments and fresh-off-the-boat seafood served on picture-book-pretty oceanfront promenades? And not a bullfight or castanet-clacking flamenco dancer in sight?

No, it's not Ireland, Wales or Brittany, but the ancient principality of Asturias, the crown jewel of Spain's green north, with its own distinct culture and variant of Spanish, not to mention some of Iberia's most gorgeous scenery and oldest historic sites. In fact, it's the cradle of modern Spain.

Never heard of it? No wonder — discerning Spaniards, French and other Europeans have mostly managed to hog Asturias to themselves, so few of us Yanks have discovered this appealing wedge of land less than half the size of Massachusetts perched on Spain's north coast on the Cantabrian Sea (part of the Atlantic, and not at all affected by November's cat-



astrophic oil spill off Galicia, well to the west).

As adventure and ecotourism grow hotter every year, this bucolic land of mountains, lush forests, rushing rivers and rugged coastline offers some of the



**HISTORIC TREASURES:** The Oviedo cathedral, left, and the Santa Maria del Naranco in Asturias, Spain, were built in the ninth century.

best in Europe. It's home to Europe's biggest national park, the Picos de Europa range (where mountains reach heights of more than 8,500 feet), which boasts some of the continent's most stunning vistas outside the Alps. This and adjoining areas are a hit with active-vacation mavens for their headspinning variety of outdoor activities.

Yet culture and history buffs also will find this region gratifying. There are engaging museums and historic old towns that afford a fascinating peek centuries into the past — hardly unique in this ancient country. But there's also an extraordinary collection of pre-Romanesque

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