

Secret Spain: mountains, ancient villages

Valdarrobres, the main town of Mataraña



Go biking, hiking and nature-spotting in Mataraña, a little-known rural idyll in northeast Spain, says **Helen Ochyra**

The vultures are descending. At first the otherwise clear blue sky is dotted with just a few of them, coffee-coloured dots as easy to miss as a piece of dust on a camera lens. But then, in the time it takes me to look down and switch my camera on, the sky changes, darkening with a flock of larger and larger moving dots until I am looking at a mass of wings, beaks and talons reminiscent of a scene from a Hitchcock movie.

This is Mas de Buloñ in Mataraña, Spain, where "vultureman" José Ramón Moragrega has been feeding the vultures every morning for decades. I am sitting behind a glass window up the hill from the feeding ground, itself the yard of an old chicken farm (mas is short for masía, or farmhouse), while Ramón loads up a wheelbarrow with dead rabbits and pushes through the mass of vultures — now obscuring the ground and squabbling with each other — to deposit the daily feed.

I watch spellbound as more and more vultures swoop down from the surrounding Puertos de Beceite mountains, their dark brown wings outstretched a full metre (either side of their strong chests. It is impossible to see the rabbits among the millie, but I am told that the vultures are given 200kg of them every day, and always at the same time. This is breakfast, for whoever wants it. Some days that's two or three hundred vultures, other days up to a thousand.

When Ramón comes into the shelter to answer questions from wide-eyed visitors, he speaks passionately about protecting these birds. Spain is home to about 85 per cent of Europe's vultures, an endangered bird (post-BSE, farmers must burn their dead animals rather than leaving them out as a food source) and still much maligned by the public. He tells me that we are wrong about these birds: they eat only what is dead and would never attack a person — we have nothing to fear.

This is good news because I am here

to explore this remote area of Aragón on foot and by bicycle, alone. I am taking advantage of Ryanair's increased flight connections to Reus, an hour and a half away, and am staying at two British-owned hotels that have been steadily attracting more British visitors to the area during the past few years. Mas de la Serra and Torre del Visco.

I begin my exploration on the Via Verde, a railway line turned cycle route that runs for almost exactly 100km from Alcañiz in the west to Tortosa in the east. I choose to begin my half-day ride at Cretas and finish at Benifallet, about 34km east. Mataraña Aventura, a local adventure travel company, has set me up with a bike and dropped me off just outside the medieval village on a wide strip of dusty path that promises to be largely flat — and mostly downhill. I pedal contentedly along in the sunshine, passing almond trees with white blossom and crossing the ancient arched bridges that link one hillside from the next. Most roads here wind up and down the hills, but the area dramatically rucked-up landscape does not affect my ride — I say a silent thank you to the railway engineers who carved out this flat route through the mountains.

Flat it may be, but dull it is not. Every few minutes I must switch on my light to plunge into a pitch-black tunnel, dodging the drips from the curved rock above my



Need to know

Helen Ochyra was a guest of Real Holidays (020 7359 3938, realholidays.co.uk), which has tailor-made holidays to Spain. Seven nights in Mataraña, with four nights at Mas de la Serra (room only) and three nights at Torre del Visco (B&B), including return flights to Reus with Ryanair and car hire, cost from £795pp.

head, and each time I emerge to find yet another mountain ridge beckoning me onwards, its towering rocky fingers clenched together like a balled-up fist punched deep into the landscape. I stop constantly to take pictures of the chunky rock formations, and ponder the oft-repeated theory that Picasso was inspired to begin cubism by these strange-shaped mountains (he is said to have stayed with a friend in the nearby village of Horta de Sant Joan).

There are few man-made interruptions to this landscape, only the odd vineyard and the occasional medieval hill town, its church tower sticking up among the terracotta roofs. Tourism has made its mark, but it is a positive one, restoring old farmhouses as hotels and bringing in money for much-needed infrastructure upgrades.

My first base is Mas de la Serra, a hilltop farmhouse restored by its British owner, Alistair Grant (of the Scottish whisky-making family), which is now a rural hotel where guests can enjoy the view over a dinner of local produce, a glass of Mataraña wine or a wee dram.

Mas de la Serra can organise all manner of local excursions, one of which is to visit Vents d'Anbert winery, where the winemaker Stefan Dorst and his team produce a range of fine wines, including a deliciously fruity viognier. Antozelo, the winery manager, takes me through the range and explains that the altitude and

cooler, windier climate make this an ideal area for winemaking (we are about 500m above sea level).

This also makes Mataraña a great place to dry ham, and I drive past numerous jamon producers as I explore. That jamon is used by Mas de la Serra, as is the local black truffle and plenty of almonds, which grow in the grove outside my bedroom window.

These don't attract only tourists seeking high-quality Spanish cuisine, they also attract the ibex, a wild goat with large curved horns. Luis, the manager at Mas de la Serra, tells me to wake up early and open my shutters, and sure enough there they are, wandering between the trees.

After a few nights I move on to Torre del Visco, a Relais & Châteaux hotel known for its food. On my first night there is a feast of fresh fish (the Ebro Delta is only 30km away across the Puertos de Beceite mountains) and sucking pig, washed down with yet more local wine; breakfast is taken en masse in the open kitchen, while Ana-Mari bakes a cake, makes request cheese with local goats' milk or carves a Teruel cured ham in the background.

Torre del Visco, a restored 15th-century tower house perched above a valley and surrounded by an organic farm and sloping emerald hillsides, feels far removed from the modern world — indeed, it is more than 5km down a dirt track from the main road.

And yet it is an easy base for visiting

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