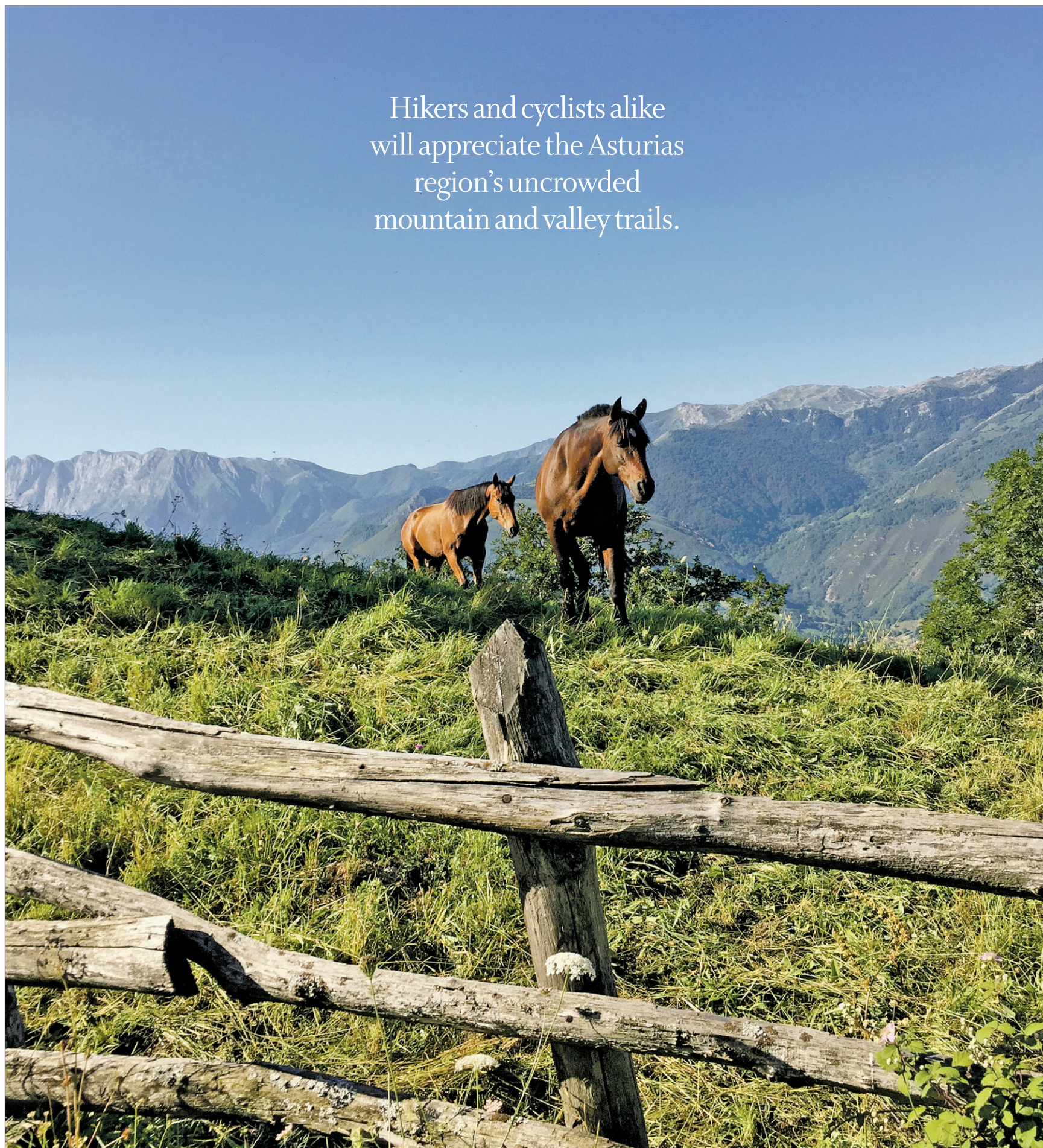


TRAVEL

Hikers and cyclists alike
will appreciate the Asturias
region's uncrowded
mountain and valley trails.



Horses graze near the village of Salcedo in Asturias, a regional of northern Spain filled with rugged beauty.

Spain's outdoor playground

For centuries, northern Spain has remained one of the nation's most remote parts, with rugged mountain ranges making it difficult to conquer and distinctive cultures and languages — Galician, Basque, Catalan — all its own. Tiny centuries-old villages tucked high above lush green valleys dot the region. Despite this beauty and culture, most tourists head to other regions of Spain.

That's a good thing, because this part of the country is an outdoor enthusiast's dream, with miles of footpaths linking hamlets and traversing valleys. Narrow roads lead up mountains and through national parks.

I discovered all this when I explored the province of Asturias, in northwest Spain, last

Story and photos by ANNE STEIN
Special to the Star Tribune

August. It's a hiker's paradise and the perfect place for an unusually scenic and active European vacation.

Since I neither spoke much Spanish nor knew my way around, I found a tour guide company with its own tiny hotel in the Asturian hamlet of Faedo, about 45 minutes north of the region's capital, Oviedo. The guided hiking trip included twice-daily yoga classes and farm-fresh, vegetarian meals, all of which turned out to be critical components for a blissful recovery from each day's journey.

Before and after the week of hiking, I spent two nights in Oviedo enjoying the city's art, history, restaurants and cultural attractions.

The company I used, Spanish Steps, is owned by an American, Judy Colaneri, and her Spanish husband, Juan Carlos, who have restored a 400-year-old farmhouse to the eight-room Hotel Fuentes de Lucía. They've also built an airy yoga studio, all overlooking the Quirós Valley. While Chef Juan Carlos does most of the cooking, Judy and her team of guides lead trips throughout the year in Spain, France and Italy.

My weeklong trip, however, was based at their hotel. Each morning started with a yoga class, which prepped our bodies for

See **ASTURIAS** on G4 ►



ERIN E. WILLIAMS • Washington Post

The sun set behind the Golden Gate Bridge on the expedition's return trip into San Francisco Bay.

Expedition to Farallones nets shark close-up

The rugged islands off San Francisco are home to seabirds and sea-loving mammals.

By ERIN E. WILLIAMS
Washington Post

The boat rose and fell relentlessly, one ocean swell after another. I leaned over its stern, fixing my eyes on the decoy floating a few yards away. I had watched it for hours, barely glancing at the elephant seals hauled out on the nearby island.

In my eagerness to see who might nibble on the bobbing object, I was reluctant to look away.

I was on a daylong expedition to the Farallon Islands, about 30 miles west of San Francisco. The craggy islands are a familiar sight for Bay Area beachgoers on a clear day, but most people don't know that they support vast seabird colonies and mammals such as sea lions, dolphins, elephant seals and humpback, blue and gray whales.

The Farallones are also home to some of the largest great white sharks on the planet.

My husband, Andrew, our friend Neil and I joined a dozen biologists, volunteers and wildlife watchers for the trip, part of Sharktober, an annual Bay Area celebration of the great

whites' return from their oceanic migration each September through November. Along with land-based educational events, the excursions immerse aspiring seafarers in the Farallon Islands' natural history and marine ecosystem.

Shark Stewards, a nonprofit group, organizes the events and tours. Its director, marine biologist David McGuire, led our expedition, one of several weekend day trips during Sharktober.

We boarded the Silver Fox, a chartered 50-foot fishing boat, at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. Although thick November fog dulled See **FARALLONES** on G5 ►

SPAIN'S OUTDOOR PLAYGROUND

◀ **ASTURIAS** from G1 the day's hike. After a breakfast of smoothies made with produce from nearby gardens, eggs, bread and other simple goodies, we grabbed our day-packs and embarked on the day's adventure, generally 6 to 10 miles of hiking. Siestas followed each hike — I'd never appreciated until this trip why Spaniards rest at 4 p.m. each day — then we returned to the yoga studio to stretch muscles. Like everywhere in Spain, dinner was at a leisurely late hour, around 8:30-9 each evening, when it's still light out in the summertime.

Tiny villages, steep trails

Each day brought dramatically different landscapes. Our first day began with a gentle hike through a forest, then along cow paths and up into several mountain villages, including Fresnedo, population 5. Our guide Judy chatted in Spanish with a couple of elderly villagers who still live in the town's wood structures with red tiled roofs. While some of these homes have clearly given way to age, they are passed down by family members and visited by younger generations on weekends. Each village we visited had its own tiny cemetery where for eternity, those who were born and raised there would continue to have a view of the valley below.

The next day brought us along portions of the 25-mile-long Senda del Oso, or Path of the Bear, a popular cycling and hiking path that gently rolls along a former mining railway route. Here you can rent bikes, walk and stop along the way at local parks to kayak, swim or picnic. Even in late summer it was fairly uncrowded and easy to traverse.

As a former racing cyclist I was especially thrilled with our next day's journey, which started with a drive up a steep road that was part of a previous Tour of Spain. Cities and towns vie to host stages of this bike race, one of the world's greatest, and I understood why this particular route in the village of Salcedo was chosen. Motoring up the narrow mountain pass was hard enough; cycling it would take the legs of someone who rides for a living.

Toward the top we got out and began our hike, past grazing cows and horses. A further small climb led us to an isolated chapel — they are everywhere in heavily Catholic Spain — locked but with lit candles placed nearby to honor the Virgen de Alba, whose statue graced the dark and dusty altar. Just past the chapel and up another small hill were three imposing crosses overlooking the valley. We rested there and contemplated the view.

The next day brought us to a breathtaking gorge, El Desfiladero de las Xanas, where a long path hugging the sides of a canyon brought us through rock tunnels, past lush green woods and over the occasional bridge. The reward for making it to the top was a delicious picnic lunch with fresh bread, cheese and fruit. We walked to the nearby village of Pedroveya and bought beer from the busy restaurant, Casa Generosa, at the center of town. The restaurant's an excellent choice for a more traditional Asturian meal.

The next day, we took a one-hour van trip to the northern Cantabrian coast and encountered crashing waves, gorgeous cliffs and nicely marked trails. Our tiny group followed a six-mile path, partly on the sand and then up footpaths with views above the Cantabrian Sea. We finished with a long walk down a steep set of stairs leading back to the water and into the nearby bustling but charming tourist village of La Purmarjega for a seafood lunch.

On our final day, we headed to Bermiego, wandered through the village, and walked through the woods to another village, Barzana, where we ate



Photos by ANNE STEIN • Special to the Star Tribune

Hikers in the El Desfiladero de las Xanas gorge go through rock tunnels and over bridges, leading to beauty but no crowds.



Cats lounged on winding streets and laundry hung outside the occasional occupied houses in the mountainside village of Bermiego, at left. Hikers take in the view from Alba Peak, where three crosses stand to honor the Virgen de Alba.



In northern Spain, the Asturias region is a natural choice for outdoor enthusiasts, though it is off the usual tourist path. The mountains and valleys of the region are dotted with tiny villages and paths.

lunch. We finished our trip the next morning with a final yoga class, watching the sun rise above the mountains out the studio window. We drank a last smoothie, gathered our luggage and loaded into the van for a drop-off in Oviedo. There, at our hotel, Hotel & Spa Princesa Munia, I relished a massage. It was well deserved after a week of hiking.

Oviedo, old and new

Founded in the 8th century and considered one of Spain's oldest Christian cities, Oviedo is a great mix of sleek hotels and blocks of chic restaurants and cafes, along with an easily walkable Old Town of ancient buildings, narrow streets and a huge square dominated by Oviedo Cathedral.

Founded in 781 A.D., the cathedral was built over time and reflects pre-Romanesque to Baroque styles of architecture. You can rent headphones for a self-guided tour to explore this massive structure, which is filled with gilded altars, tombs, an art museum and numerous nooks and crannies.

Other ancient buildings in the city's Old Town include the 15th-century Palacio de la Rúa, the ninth-century Iglesia de San Tirso, and the 17th-century Palacio de Valdecarzana. The Monasterio de San Pelayo, a working Benedictine convent built between 1592 and 1600, is open to the public for mass. Also located in the old quarter is the Museo de Bellas Artes (Museum of Fine Arts), which opened in 1980 in the Velarde Palace (built in 1765), the Oviedo-Portal House (1660) and in a more modern wing. Admission is free and the collection is excellent, including works by Picasso, Dali, Goya and Miró.

A short stroll away is Oviedo's archaeological museum, Museo Arqueológico de Asturias, located in a 16th-century Benedictine monastery. Permanent exhibits include Roman and medieval artifacts, as well as tools and art from humans who occupied Asturias tens of thousands of years ago. For a small respite from the somewhat bustling city, check out centrally located San Francisco Park, which is dotted with statues, paths and benches.

That night for dinner, I discovered the unpretentious Carulo Restaurant, in the corner of a huge square near the cathedral. We took a seat at one of their dozen or so tables in the plaza, which on a late summer evening was filled with families, couples and groups, chatting over drinks and candlelight.

The red wine flowed, some fresh seafood and rice dishes arrived, and I enjoyed my last evening in gloriously uncrowded but lively north-west Spain.

Anne Stein, a writer and former bike racer, lives in Evanston, Ill.



Source: maps4news.com HERE

Asturias: If you go

I flew to Madrid, and from Madrid to Oviedo's airport (OVD). Bus service also runs between the two locations.

Asturias tourism information: www.turismoasturias.es/en.

Spanish Steps: spanishsteps.com; 1-877-787-9255.

ANNE STEIN