

## Nature Reserves in Cantabria

Cantabria is a region that is rich in beautiful scenery. The wild and craggy coast leads to a lush mountainous terrain. Amongst the natural protected areas of Cantabria, the Picos de Europa National Park, that it shares with Asturias, Castile and Leon, is without doubt the most emblematic. Although there are other less familiar reserves, these too can still boast a high level of conservation and provide essential shelter for numerous birds and mammals.

The National Park is the most important in terms of environmental protection and is managed by the state. The Nature Reserve is further down the ranking and is managed autonomously by the local government. Both areas are characterised by their keen awareness and promotion of the environment within the reserves, but this does not detract from people being able to sensibly enjoy what they have to offer.



One of the most spectacular natural areas of Cantabria can be found in between the wild Liencres coast and the Mogro river, which is a tributary of the Pas river. It is called the **Liencres Dunes Nature Reserve**. The strong winds have sculpted the landscape that is made up of a beach and a field of moving dunes, considered to be one of the largest on the whole of the Cantabrian coast. It was therefore no coincidence that it was the first declared protected area in Cantabria (1986).

The majority of the dunes, some measuring up to 40 metres in height, were replanted with marine pine trees some decades ago. The ecosystem is fragile with a beautiful landscape and forms the habitat of numerous species of flora and fauna.

Another protected area of the coast is the **Oyambre Nature Reserve**. With the Picos de Europa mountains as a backdrop, the reserve includes a strip of the western coast of Cantabria, between the Rabia and San Vicente de la Barquera estuaries. Estuaries, dunes, beaches, cliffs, as well as hills and valleys are the purist form of nature from the region. Towards the east of Rabia estuary, the coast forms into cliffs of over 50 metres, which are outstanding for ornithologists. Some of the birds that can be found here are shags, peregrine falcons and various species of seagulls. The estuary and the marshes are also an important stopping ground for migrating birds arriving from the European continent.

Towards the south of Rabia, Mount Corona stands at the centre of the reserve's protected forest. Forests intertwine with green pastures and small rural villages full of prime examples of typical Cantabrian architecture can be found at every turn.

Peña Cabarga Nature Reserve can be located around Santander's southern bay. The perimeter is made up of a coastal mountain range that is karstic in origin (Peña Cabarga massif) and the Cabarceno Wildlife Park, with its zoo that houses over 500 different species from all over the world in a semi-free enclosure.

The peaks of the compact massif, amongst them Llen Peak (560 metres), are the main attractions of the reserve, as they offer the visitor the best views of Santander and its bay.

Human intervention on the northern slope of Peña Cabarga has left an indelible mark comprising cultivated farmland and pastures for cattle. Further up the mountain, there are rocky areas that remind the observer of the areas important mining heritage that dates back to Roman times. The south side still has indigenous plant life growing on its slopes, with vast holm oak woods native to the region.



Finally we head into the heart of Cantabria. The **Saja-Besaya Nature Reserve** located within the confines of the Caza de Saja National Park, in the central part of the province. The Saja and Besaya rivers along with other small tributaries flow through deep valleys between the mountains and through woods and pastures alike. The mass of forest within the reserve, considered to be one of the most important in the whole of Cantabria, has many woods that are typical of the region: beech tree groves, wild olive tree groves and oak woods are just a

few examples. They provide shelter for different species including roe deer, wild boar, wolves, chamois, and the stag as well as some birds of prey. Saja-Besaya is also one of the most important hideouts of the capercaillie in the whole of the eastern side of the Cantabrian coast.

Although the area is immersed in nature in does not detract from the fact that it has an excellent infrastructure for tourists. There are three official campsites, and it is easy to find rural accommodation as well hostels throughout the different towns in the area.