



Uncommon Holidays

## Elegant mansions, cave art, and sandy beaches: seven reasons why you should visit Santander

Located in Spain's largely unexplored Cantabria region, Santander has much to offer - from spectacular scenery and delicious local food to a host of exciting places to explore, this small city packs a punch

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**Antonia Windsor**

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While British holidaymakers have long flocked to Barcelona, Madrid, or Seville for their Spanish city break, wise local tourists have another favourite: Santander, the capital of Cantabria. In this elegant coastal city on the Bay of Biscay, they spend mornings enjoying the bustle of the market, lazy afternoons on the beach and evenings on the terraces of pincho bars indulging in Basque-style tapas washed down with glasses of albariño. What's more, British tourists can reach Santander on a direct ferry – it docks in the city centre – from Portsmouth or Plymouth, which gives the potential added bonus of dolphin sightings in the Bay of Biscay. Although Santander is often considered the gateway to the rest of northern Spain, here are seven reasons why you should linger for longer.

## Lounge on the beaches of El Sardinero

Santander's most famous stretch of sand, El Sardinero (named after the large quantities of sardines that used to be found in the bay), is actually two beaches, separated by the Jardines de Piquío – a tranquil palm tree-lined pleasure garden created in the 1920s. Both beaches are broad, sun-drenched expanses of fine sand. Santander was a popular summer spot for nobility in the 19th century, when Spanish high society turned the area into a summer retreat and the first beach was benchmarked as their bathing ground, while the second was preserved for commoners. Today, both beaches can be enjoyed by everyone and an evening stroll along the promenade as the sun goes down is a pre-dinner delight not to be missed.

## Take in the views from Palacio de la Magdalena

Built as the summer house of King Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenie (the daughter of Queen Victoria's youngest child Beatrice), the Palacio de la Magdalena is a fusion of French and English architecture perched on a headland with sweeping sea views – Queen Victoria Eugenie felt it reminded her of childhood summers at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. The palace is no longer used by the royal family and part of the building is now a small museum showcasing the opulent interiors. Even without the museum visit, it's worth a walk up here to wander through the eucalyptus and pine trees that fill the surrounding parkland and enjoy some of the best panoramas in the city.

📷 Pick up the very freshest of local produce at the Mercado de la Esperanza. Photograph: Maria Galan/Alamy

## Join the locals at Mercado de la Esperanza

Just behind Santander's grand town hall, the bustling Mercado de la Esperanza

has been supplying the city with fresh fish and vegetables since 1904. The ground floor brims with the morning's catch; stalls heave with gleaming anchovies, plump prawns and langoustines and slabs of tuna. Upstairs stalls stock local cheeses, meats, and Cantabrian delicacies, such as *sobaos pasiegos*, a butter cake, and *orujo de Liébana*, a strong grape-pomace brandy with a grappa-like kick that's known as the local "firewater".

People-watching is best done early in the morning (the market opens at 8am), when local chefs and home cooks examine the catch of the day and exchange gossip. Alternatively, pop in later in the morning to purchase a picnic lunch to eat on the beach – the market closes at 2pm. On Thursdays and Fridays you can also visit in the early evening between 5pm and 7.30pm. The market is closed on Sundays.

## Gaze at contemporary art at Centro Botín

While the Palacio de la Magdalena is the building most people associate with Santander, the striking Centro Botín, designed by prize-winning architect Renzo Piano, is surely vying for that spot. Adjacent to the ferry port, its location means it's one of the first things you see when you arrive. Jutting out of the waterfront like two giant wedges of *nata de Cantabria* cheese, the building appears to float above the bay, with glass and ceramic tiles reflecting the shifting light. Inside, exhibitions range from Spanish masters to international contemporary artists, while outside, the surrounding Pereda Gardens offer shaded benches and green spaces where locals gather to read, chat, or simply enjoy the sea breeze. Beyond the exhibitions, the centre hosts regular film screenings, live performances, and creative workshops, making it a cultural hub for the city.

 The Centro Botín appears to float above the water. Photograph: Enrico Cano

## Marvel at prehistoric paintings at the Cave of Altamira

The Cave of Altamira, a half-hour drive outside the city, contains some of the world's most extraordinary prehistoric art and is easy to visit while staying in Santander. You don't need to hire a car as you can get the Alsa bus from Santander to Santillana del Mar – a medieval village with cobbled streets – from where it's a half-hour walk.

Although the original cave is now closed to protect its fragile paintings – which date from the Upper Palaeolithic period – the accurate replica at the nearby museum Altamira National Museum and Research Centre allows visitors to marvel at the vivid depictions of bison, deer, and horses, created more than 14,000 years ago. The museum is an excellent introduction to the prehistoric communities that once thrived in Cantabria, with interactive exhibits explaining the techniques used to create the paintings. The surrounding landscape gives a sense of the wilderness these early artists would have known.

## Order pinchos and pastries in the old town

Santander's old town is smaller than those of Spain's larger cities, partly due to a fire in 1941 that destroyed almost 400 buildings. However, it still packs a punch when it comes to food. Tapas bars serve up pinchos – small, tasty bites skewered on to slices of bread – alongside local favourites such as *rabas* (lightly battered

squid) and *boquerones fritos*, battered and fried anchovies. For a sweet treat, try *sobao pasiego*, a traditional Cantabrian pastry that resembles a sponge cake. The narrow streets around Plaza Porticada and Calle del Medio are the best places to start a pincho crawl, hopping from bar to bar sampling house specialities and washing them down with a glass of vermouth or cider.

📷 The Cabo Mayor Lighthouse is now home to an arts centre; no trip to Santander would be complete without ordering pinchos. Composite: Stocksy United

## Visit the Cabo Mayor Lighthouse

The Cabo Mayor Lighthouse is located in the most northeasterly point of Santander, where the Cantabrian Sea crashes against rugged cliffs. Built in 1839, it has guided sailors with its powerful beam for nearly two centuries and is the most important lighthouse in Cantabria. When the beam became fully automated in 2001, parts of the lighthouse and surrounding buildings were turned into an arts centre, in which historic maritime charts and faded photographs recount the lighthouse's long service. It's worth the walk up the winding path to watch the waves carve the coastline, and pick up one of the cliff paths to continue enjoying the panoramic views along the Mataleñas Path.

*To start planning your Santander city break, visit [brittany-ferries.co.uk](https://www.brittany-ferries.co.uk)*

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