

CULTURAL TOURISM: MUSEUM IN ASTURIAS

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In the last few years there has been a substantial transformation in the demand for cultural tourism, as well as an increase in the offerings of cultural tourism as key points of local development, in rural areas as much as in urban areas. It follows that this situation occurs more frequently in the zones that offer more concentrated and important sites of historical importance (palaces, castles, cathedrals, historic cities, museums), and that seek to make equally profitable other more heavily-consumed aspects of tourism. Cultural tourism has changed, in very little time, from being minority and elitist to being heavily practiced, currently representing from four to six percent of the GDP of developed countries, Spain among them.

Museums are currently a significant element in the process of the commercialization of culture, especially in bigger cities with a large variety of cultural attractions for tourists. The objects contained in the museums are elements of fundamental importance in the cultural development of the modern world, and, together with archives and libraries, contain testimonies to the work realized throughout history. The first museums were created by the Greeks, and public museums have their origin in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, which was inaugurated in 1683 by the University of Oxford.

At the time of the contemporary age, the majority of museums were created by their respective states, though in the last decades private museums have been extended due to the constant growth of the number of visitors arriving from other countries or regions. This trend is confirmed by the statistics of museums in Paris, Barcelona, Bilbao, Toledo, Madrid, as well as in a good part of the Asturias museums analyzed here, and it is equally true for museums located in urban or rural areas.

Approximately half of the foreign tourist who visit Spain enjoy some type of cultural activity during their stay, with focus in visits to the more than two thousand museums existing in 2010, a maximum of one hundred thirty-two of them in Madrid. The number grows because, more and more, everything is within the scope of museology. Now museology consists not only of conserving patrimonial sites but also of connecting the greatest number of people possible with expositions, tours, etc.

To better understand the phenomenon of cultural tourism in some large cities, it is necessary to take into account the large number of visitors attracted by the most

established museums in Europe: the Louvre in Paris; the National Gallery in London, the Hermitage in Leningrad; the Gaudi in Barcelona; the Guggenheim in Bilbao; the Prado, Reina Sofia and Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid; etc. These giant are already considered key to attracting tourists.

In Asturias, the number of museums has increased considerably in recent days, almost to the point of doubling in the last decade. The growth of these museums has converted them into a focal point of the tourist attractions of Principado, complementing the beach resorts, protected spaces, salmon fishing, descent of the Sella river, visits to agricultural industries, rural tourism, cultural conservation (the Cathedral, Covadonga, convents, etc.). The functions of these museums are diverse: providing frequent temporary exhibitions, improving the knowledge of greatly varied spaces, promoting other leisure attractions surrounding the museums, and sponsoring school visits (a key element in passing on cultural knowledge to future generations).

The proliferation of museums and their growing thematic diversification, both keys to assessing the Asturian cultural heritage, have caused us to group them in seven categories: maritime, minerals and industry, natural history, gastronomy, ethnography, art, and others.

The maritime museums are located in port cities and are in expansion like the rest of coastal tourism. They center on the knowledge of ports, sailing vessels, fishing nets, types of bait, conservation industries, and aquatic species like octopus, salmon, etc.

The mining and industry museums reflect vital aspects of the Asturian economy in the last few centuries, with special emphasis on the Museum of Mining and Industry, located in El Entrego (San Martín del Rey Aurelio), one of the most visited mining museums in Spain; the Museum of the Steel Industry in Langreo; the Mining Museum in Riocastiello (Cangas del Narcea), and the Gold Museum in Navelgas (Tineo).

Among the natural history museums discussed, the Museum of Atlantic Botany in Gijón stands out with a great number of visitors, who are attracted by the many species of vegetation that can be viewed; also of note are the Forestry Museum in Muñalén (Tineo), the Museum of Wood in Veneros (Caso), the Birds of Santianes (Pravia) and the Museum of the Capercaillie in Murias (Aller).

Eighty-two percent of the Asturian municipalities organize gastronomic workdays to showcase the primary food products of Principado and to offer tourists the opportunity to sample them. To complement these showcases, one can visit museums like the Cider Museum in Nava, the Dairy Museum in Nava, the Cabrales Cheese Museum in Arenas, the Wine Museum in Cangas del Narcea, etc., in order to taste these well-known and prestigious products.

Numerous ethnographic asturian museums are consolidated. The Ethnography of the Orient in Porrúa, and those of Quirós, Grado, Gijón, Somiedo, Puerto de Vega and Grandas de Salime. The Vaqueiro Museum in Naraval (Tineo) deserves a special mention for promulgating information about a traditionally marginalized group of western Asturias. In 2001 the System of Ethnographic Museums of Principado was launched, integrating fourteen museums.

The offering of art museums in Asturias is ample and varied, and include those located in Oviedo (Museum of Fine Arts of Asturias, the Archaeology Museum, and the

Museum of the Church), Gijón (the Juan Barjola Museum, the Museum and Birthplace of Jovellanos, the village of Asturias, the Museum of Nicanor Piñole and Evaristo Valle), Candés (Antón Museum and Sculpture Center), Cobertoira in Lena (Educational Center for the Interpretation of Early Medieval Architecture), an Tineo (Museum of Sacred Art), etc.

Other museums permit one to explore further aspects of Asturian culture: the Jurassic museum of Asturias in Colunga, the Archive of Indians in Colombres, the House of Water in Sobrescobio, etc.

