

Template for case studies

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Summary of Case study	THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ASTURIAS AND ITS LINKS WITH TOURISM: TANGIBLES AND INTANGIBLES
Organisations concerned	ARTE Y RUTA S.L.
Case study detail	<p>The Principality of Asturias is a 10,600 square kilometre region located on Spain's north coast, with a population of 1,100,000 inhabitants. 350 kilometres of Atlantic Ocean bathe its northern shores, whilst an imposing mountain barrier cuts it off from the rest of Spain to the south. The main human settlements huddle together in the centre of the region, with a more disperse population density existing on its eastern and western fringes, where traditional livestock- and agriculture-based lifestyles are best preserved. The heavily populated centre of the area underwent a process of coal- and steel-driven industrialisation towards the end of the eighteenth century that led to major changes in the countryside and in lifestyles. At present, like other regions of Europe, the area is immersed in the final stages of a reindustrialisation that will usher in major change. Tourism is viewed as a viable alternative in this context. Except for a few municipalities where tourism has flourished since the beginning of the</p>

twentieth century, the Principality can be catalogued as an emerging tourist destination in a pre-eminently tourism-based country like Spain. A wetter climate differentiates us from the Mediterranean coast and its traditional sun-and-sand holiday resorts.

Our **cultural heritage** and the **landscape and countryside** where it is located are surprising in their beauty, as you will appreciate as you see the images that illustrate my talk. This wealth of cultural heritage is extremely wide-ranging not only in terms of its physical distribution but also in terms of levels of conservation, accessibility, public awareness of its existence and so forth. It ranges from prehistoric sites and caves to more contemporary manifestations of life, all of which have unique characteristics as a result of the geography of the area and its people. These people are friendly but often somewhat hard-line in their approach, although at other times they view situations with a special sense of humour that has traditionally been berated as a tendency not to think things through thoroughly. This opinion fails to recognise that there is no deeper reflection than when you can joke about a problem that concerns you.

The **climate** is the final factor influencing tourism. It is just the right combination of sun, rain and humidity required to maintain the beauty of a countryside that makes the Principality unique as a tourist destination.

According to data published by the Principality of Asturias' Tourist Information System, the number of visitors staying at collective accommodation in 2003 – the last year for which full figures are available – stood at 1,600,000. If we add these to numbers staying in private accommodation and day-trippers, the total figure rounds out at 5,500,000 visitors that year. These numbers are highly seasonal, peaking in the two months of July and August, during the Christmas and Easter vacations and at weekends.

When asked in an opinion poll about the reasons for choosing Asturias as a holiday destination, 25% of tourists answered that they came because of its **Nature and environment**, 14% because they wanted **to know somewhere new**, 9% were attracted by its **gastronomy** and just 5% by its **cultural heritage**.

At the end of the day, each of the above reasons tie into **cultural heritage** if this is understood in the

broad sense of the term to include any natural or cultural, tangible or intangible, time-honoured or modern factor. Seen in this light, any tourism that exhibits an interest in any of the above factors can be considered to be **cultural tourism**. Nevertheless, as it is not always wise to allow numbers to speak for themselves, we will continue to pursue this analysis and to pinpoint in more detail certain points that will help to establish the link between Asturias' **cultural heritage** and tourism in the region

According to the above-mentioned survey, the **main activities engaged in during a stay**, the average length of which is 6.1 nights, are **visits to monuments**, which

38.6% of tourists do, and museum trips, which are undertaken by 17% of visitors. However, information which we consider to be fundamental, i.e., **the level of involvement of the visitor with the heritage site visited**, is not provided by the poll. Such information would clarify whether the visit included the inside of the building, whether an entrance fee was paid, time invested in the visit, whether a guide was hired, and so on. Such data would help to distinguish between the '**occasional cultural visitor**' – the one who only partially exploits what is on offer culturally and who merely 'does the sights' – and the **focused cultural visitor** – who visits expressly to steep himself in culture, who spends more, and who falls into the bracket of the 5% minority whose reason for travelling is our regions' **cultural heritage**.

If the term '**monument**' is taken to refer to any element of **cultural heritage** with a greater or lesser degree of historic and artistic interest, as the case may be, then Asturias can be divided into two broad groups of monuments:

- **heritage sites that are easily recognised as such by any visitor** because easily understood language is used either to describe or to name them and because they also exist where the tourist hails from. In this respect, cathedral, historic city centres/old quarters, places of worship and pilgrimage, castles and palace are all terms familiar to everybody and which everybody can equate with. This is what we call TANGIBLE HERITAGE, and it figures year after year as the kind of place most visited in our region. There are three major landmarks of Asturian cultural heritage:

- **The Basilica and Grotto of Covadonga**, a place of worship and a historic site located in an outstanding natural setting; a National Park, indeed

the first National Park to be declared in Spain.
 ○ **Oviedo** (the capital of the Principality of Asturias) with its old quarter, cathedral, palaces, churches and so on, making it eminently visitable.

○ The third landmark amongst the most visited places are the group of churches and civil buildings that form the **art of the Asturian Monarchy**. There are a number of buildings that date back to the ninth and tenth centuries and which constitute a unique, extraordinarily valuable heritage. They nevertheless had to be included in the UNESCO's World Heritage List before they became known beyond Asturias.

All the other elements of Asturias' cultural heritage on the visits statistics list, including the old quarters of the other two major cities in the region, its prehistoric caves and fishing hamlets, are on a far smaller scale.

- What we call **INTANGIBLE HERITAGE** constitutes a second group of monuments. These are of enormous value, but do not figure in the statistics on places visited. The role they play is inexistent, rather than secondary, in the promotion campaigns of the tourist authorities. Both **ethnographic heritage and industrial history sites** can be included in this large group. Their omission from the statistics is hard to explain in the light of the fact that few elements describe the identity of a social group more faithfully than one related to daily work, customs, folklore and the way that work and workplace relations are understood. Monasteries set in spectacular countryside and rural Baroque palaces, to name but two of the more salient examples, are omitted from tourist circuits.

Alongside our **cultural heritage** *per se*, there are also other cultural facilities for representation, exhibition or recreation purposes: museums, educational facilities, visitor reception and interpretation centres, and so forth. In the case of Asturias, two museums lead the field, despite the curious fact that they are not located in any of the region's major cities. These are the **Mining Museum**, in the river Nalón mining valley, and the **Jurassic Museum of Asturias**, on the east coast. The former recreates working conditions in coalmines, and also has an exhibition on the technical history of European mining. The latter capitalises on the discovery of several groups of dinosaur tracks in the area and offers a complete tour of the Jurassic Period in its 5,000 square metres. Museums that ought to be cultural

benchmarks, i.e., the Fine Arts Museum and the Archaeological Museum, both located in the capital of the Principality, are once again excluded from official statistics.

Both the Mining Museum and the Jurassic Museum are intended to contribute to boosting the local economies of areas with little tourist activity. However, the proliferation in our area of initiatives of this type may lead to erroneous tourism planning, which ought to focus on the interests of the region as a whole rather than allowing local issues to cloud the issues when decisions are taken. We are approaching a cultural saturation point sparked by an excess of cultural facilities. Furthermore, the launch of an initiative of this type in an area often generates expectations within the local population that are often not met in real terms.

Proper tourism planning should aim, in our opinion, at turning the Principality into an eminently cultural destination as a whole by highlighting the idiosyncrasies of each area. This requires, *sine qua non*, a range of action, although we will highlight only the most important ones, which are often overlooked in Asturias:

- An **inventory and catalogue** of every one of our cultural heritages sites without exception.
- A well-founded, strict **selection** of the ones that can become **tourist resources**. Selection criteria should relate to the value of the individual sites in terms of heritage, and sites that might physically suffer from tourist activity should be discarded. Conservation should outweigh profit.
- **Plans to enhance the perceived value and use of sites**. Such plans should not debase or decontextualize sites. Basic considerations include **maximum visitor capacity**, proper **timetabling and opening hours** and the **utmost respect for the natural setting and the local population** when they share the use of the site with tourists. Having a perfectly conserved monument in a degraded natural setting is a pointless exercise.
- **The participation of all sectors**, whether public or private, who have vested interests in the tourism issue. **Training**, not only for staff but also businessmen and even the public authorities, should not be forgotten.
- Finally, we must make sure that **cultural heritage** shakes off its secondary role in tourism. It has long been overshadowed by the relevance of our **natural heritage**, which has always been set aside as something unrelated to man's activities and their effects of the landscape. The slant that the

organisations responsible for promoting tourism in the Principality now want to give seems to involve designing a promotion strategy in which **landscape and culture** are two sides of the same coin, in which tangibles and intangibles come together, and in which the value of having a basic, over-arching concept is acknowledged. This is summed up in the term **cultural landscape**. Any nature space is marked by the hand of man. Learning about the way of life in an area that is different to your own but which nevertheless bears similar traits attracts the cultural tourist, because the language of culture is ultimately universal, and understanding it is greater when the sensitivity of the observer is allowed to play its part.