



Typical village and vineyard in Rioja province

Back Nines & Rioja Wines

By Andrew Marshall



Logroño's La Redonda Cathedral



Hotel Marqués de Vallejo in central Logroño

Spend a few days in La Rioja's capital Logroño, to discover a region rich in wine culture, local cuisine and golf among the grapes...

Located in the north of the Iberian Peninsula and well away from the main Spanish tourist trail is La Rioja, which just happens to be one of the biggest and best wine-producing regions in the country. Logroño, the provincial capital, is an attractive and prosperous city of around 150,000, and with an old quarter of tree-studded plazas, elegant streets and hidden corners, all presided over by the distinctive twin spires of the magnificent 16th century Santa María de la Redonda cathedral, its a pleasant place to spend a few days while exploring the region.

One of Logroño's big drawcards is its inherent wine culture that's around every corner. There are literally hundreds of wineries or bodegas to visit (close to the city and further afield), ranging from cutting-edge architectural designs to more traditional ones, where you can learn everything and more about Rioja wine production. There is even the Battala del Vino (a wine battle) in the wine town of Haro, and held in Logroño

every September, is the Fiesta de San Mateo which coincides with the annual vendimia (grape harvest), which features traditional grape-treading methods, floats and wine tasting.

The region's varied local cuisine pairs beautifully with La Rioja's world-class wines, and Logroño in particular is rapidly gaining a culinary reputation to rival anywhere in Spain, only enhanced by its 'Gastronomic Capital of Spain' award in 2012. But it's not just gastronomy and grapes that reign supreme in La Rioja province. There is also golf among the grapes, with a fine quartet of challenging courses all situated within an hour's drive of Logroño.

Our base in Logroño is the excellent boutique hotel Marqués de Vallejo, housed within an historic building dating from the 19th century. This member of the Great Small Hotels group enjoys a fine location right in the heart of Logroño, and is just a few steps from the city's lively medieval old quarter offering countless restaurants, taverns and pinchos (tapas) bars (more about these later). After checking in, we head to the hotel's lounge bar to enjoy a welcoming glass of Rioja. We take a sip, grin at each other and raise our glasses – it's a great start to our wine, golf and gastronomy trip.

Rioja Alta Golf Club

Our first eighteen holes is at Rioja Alta Golf Club

located between the villages of Cirueña and Ciriñuela, 45 kilometres west of Logroño. The course is routed through a gently undulating landscape dotted with four man-made lakes and fringed by a large area of centuries-old oak forest. Rioja Alta's layout is well-balanced in terms of both distance and level of difficulty, and each of the two nines contain two par-3's, five par-4's and two par-5's. My pick of the most memorable holes from each nine would be the visually appealing par-4 5th, a gently curving dog-leg to a raised, two-tiered green surrounded by gnarled and twisted oaks, and the shortish, uphill par-4 16th, which after a decent drive will leave only a short pitch to the contoured green.

A unique feature of Rioja Alta, is the fact that the famous Camino de Santiago (also known as the Pilgrim's Way or the Way of St. James) goes right past the golf course as well as through the streets of Logroño. Starting at Roncesvalles just over the border in France, the 750-kilometre Camino de Santiago employs walking trails, farm tracks and minor roads to cross northern Spain, weaving through sweeping plains of wheat in Navarra province, vineyards in La Rioja, past ancient castles in Castilla y Leon, into the verdant hills of Galicia, and finally, the ultimate goal – the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. "Some pilgrims on the route call in for a round of golf and then get back on the trail," says Xavi Muñoz, managing director of the club.

El Campo de Logroño

Situated just 5 kilometres from Logroño, this is the closest eighteen holes to the city centre. With its wide, open fairways, El Campo de Logroño is driver friendly, and its generous greens allow for a decent percentage of greens to be hit in regulation. In the 2006 Spanish Professional Championship, Miguel Ángel Jiménez broke the course record with a round of 60 strokes (-8). He most likely enjoyed a fine Cuban cigar and a couple of nice glasses of Rioja after that fine effort.

The 4th hole is the longest in Spain and one of the longest in the world. The hole rises steadily along its length of 619 metres from tee to green, and with the prevailing wind normally in your face, plus the two strategically-placed bunkers at the front of the green, a score of par is well-earned here. However, for mere golfing mortals like ourselves, just reaching the putting surface in four blows and taking two putts for bogey is a decent enough effort. Other facilities at the course include a driving range, practice putting green, a par-27 9-hole course, paddle tennis and restaurant.

"Did you enjoy your round," says Golf Director David Bedia Reventún, as we enjoy a couple of well-earned beers on the clubhouse terrace, with wonderful views of the course and the surrounding mountains. Over a leisurely lunch of pinchos paired with various wines,



A golfer walks along the famous Pilgrim's Way past Rioja Alta GC



3rd hole - Rioja Alta GC

David gives us more information about the course and speaks with great pride about his association with his great departed friend, Seve Ballesteros. "I grew up in Pedreña, the same village as Seve," he tells us. "When I was about ten years old, we used to practise together at Real Golf de Pedreña." Apparently many other players have followed in Seve's footsteps too, with the little village of Pedreña reputed to have produced more professional golfers per head of population than anywhere else in Spain.

Izki Golf

A 35 kilometre scenic drive north of Logroño into the mountainous Basque Country province of Álava, and we arrive at the small town of Urturi, home to Izki Golf designed by Seve Ballesteros. Nestled within the Izki Nature Park, the lush fairways of this 1994 layout wind their way through dense woodland, offering excellent panoramas of the surrounding Álava Mountains along the way. The course is especially scenic in autumn, when the leaves of the mainly oak and beech trees that line the fairways turn red, orange and gold, and the forest floors are dotted with a myriad of weird and wonderful fungi.

On the inward half there is a lovely sequence of holes from 3 to 6, in particular the right dogleg par-4 5th, and also the par-3 6th, a great little three-shot hole played from an elevated tee to a green protected by two large bunkers. On the back nine is the quirky par-4 13th, arguably Izki Golf's signature hole, where you must negotiate a creek that twice cuts across a narrow fairway. The Challenge de España tournament on the European Challenge Tour was held here in both 2017 and 2018 adding to Izki Golf's credentials.

Nearby are the woods of Izki, the largest European reserve of the Pyrenean Oak, and popular outdoor activities in the surrounding area include trout fishing, mushroom picking, truffle hunting, cycling, trekking and birdwatching.

Sojuela Golf Club

"Great idea that you are taking a buggy, it's a tough course to walk," says club member Jaime Ravina who joins us on the first tee of Sojuela Golf Club, the final course of our trip. This scenic 6,296 metre track, situated 16 kilometres south-west of Logroño, rambles up, over and across a mainly forested hillside with plenty of elevation changes along the way. Jaime, who hits the ball a country mile is a Spanish young gun who holds the course record of 64 (-8). "It's a strategic type of golf course where you need to plot your way around," he tells us. "And to score well you really need to make your score early, and then protect it by negotiating your way through the Amen corner." The Amen Corner he refers to is the trio of challenging par-4's, namely the 359-metre 9th (stroke index 4), the 415-metre 11th (stroke index 1), and the 354-metre 11th (stroke index 2). Holes 10 and 11 in particular are two of the most memorable on the scorecard.

After our round we visit nearby Finca de los Arandinos, a unique designer project combining a cutting edge hotel with spa alongside a restaurant and winery. An inspiring place designed by David Delfin, its white, pronounced lines, sit on top of a small hill in the foothills of the Sierra de Moncalvillo, surrounded by vineyards, olive trees and mountains. The winery forms an integral part of the complex and visits to the on-site bodega ends with a tasting of finca's portfolio of wines. Equally



Logroño GC famous 4th hole



Vivanco – Museum of Wine Culture



Sojuela GC 17th with views



13th at Izki GC

good is the Tierra Restaurant (recommended by the Michelin Guide) serving delicious locally-sourced cuisine alongside local wines.

Away from the courses

In between morning rounds of golf, we make some wine-related excursions in the afternoons. There are several wineries within a short drive of Logroño including Marqués de Vargas, Campo Viejo and the architecturally stunning Marqués de Riscal in the walled medieval town of Elciego. A mix of innovation and tradition, the oldest winery in La Rioja was redesigned by Frank Gehry (the architect of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao) a few years ago, and its futuristic design wouldn't look out of place in outer space. The bodega specialises in full-bodied reds produced from old vines, and it's worth taking the tour of the old underground facility and to see the hotel close up. There's also a Michelin-star restaurant on site.

Underneath the streets of Logroño are several fascinating underground wine cellars called calados, an excellent example being St Gregory's Cellar (Calle Ruavieja 29), an amazing 30-metre long cellar built with blocks of stone in the 16th century. Not to be missed is the superb Vivanco Museum of Wine Culture in Briones – a winery combined with a massive educational centre devoted to the relationship between man and wine over 8,000 years of history. This world class museum deserves a full day to fully appreciate the multitude of wine artifacts, art works, displays, plus gift shop and wine tasting corner, set out over 4,000 square metres and six rooms.

In addition to exploring the region's wine culture, the local cuisine is an important aspect of any golf travel experience and the gastronomy of La Rioja is rich and varied, traditionally based on the produce from its lands. Asparagus and peppers, vegetable casseroles (menestras), meat braised in red wine, roast lamb, pork, fresh fruit and desserts make up many typical dishes although fish such as salt cod, tuna and sea bream also feature on restaurant menus. If there's one dish that is famous for being typically Riojan, its 'potatoes with chorizo', one which has as many variations as there are chefs. Potatoes are also the main ingredient of 'ranchos and calderetas', a rustic stew made in an iron pot usually containing lamb and whatever ingredients come to hand.

On our final evening in La Rioja we take a short stroll from Hotel Marqués de Vallejo to Calle del Laurel, famous for some of the finest pinchos bars in northern Spain. Pinchos, also called pintxos, are the Basque region's take on tapas, basically snack-size portions of anything edible, and they could be anything from simple tortilla española (potato omelette) or anchovies on bread to more elaborate miniature creations of haute cuisine. They are called pinchos because many of them have a pincho (Spanish for spike), typically a toothpick or skewer holding the food on a slice of bread. There are dozens of pinchos bars and hundreds of pinchos to choose from, with some bars offering several varieties, while others are famous for just one. They are usually cheap, and when paired with a glass of local red wine, usually cost around 2.50 euros.



One of many bars offering pinchos along Calle del Laurel



Pinchos in a Logroño bar



Marqués de Vargas winery

Modern gastro-bars and old-world taverns rub shoulders with each other as we arrive at the start of buzzing Calle del Laurel. The choice of bars and their window displays of pinchos can be bewildering, but here's a selection to get you started: The house speciality at La Taberna del Laurel (Calle del Laurel, 7) is patatas bravas (potatoes in spicy tomato sauce), while La Tasca del Pato (Calle del Laurel, 24) offers white asparagus grilled with a wrap of Rioja cheese. Bar Lorenzo (Calle del Laurel, 4) majors on simply grilled chistorra (chorizo with sweet paprika and garlic) and lamb kebabs, while Bar Soriano (Calle del Laurel, 2) is famed for its delicious mushroom pinchos which have been served for the past forty years – three mushrooms grilled and smothered with a rich and buttery sauce of garlic and olive oil, skewered on a slice of baguette and crowned with a shrimp.

For an expert's view and to learn more about the marriage of Rioja and pinchos, we join José Ramón Jiménez Berger otherwise known as El Educador en Vinos (the wine teacher). José is a television personality and bit of a well-known character in Logroño, and one of his services is a guided tour of a selection of pinchos bars in and around Calle de Laurel, where a different Rioja is served alongside a different pinchos in each bar. "I think this is the best way to experience the life of the town," says José inside Bar El Muro. "Going out for pinchos is a great social activity, and I love nothing more than getting a group of friends together and visiting our favorite spots." As another pairing of Rioja and pinchos arrives on the bar's counter, we couldnt agree with him more....

FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY

- Hotel Marques De Vallejo (Logroño):**
www.hotelmarquesdevallejo.com
- Hotel Mercure Carlton Rioja (Logroño):**
hotel-carltonlogrono.com
- Hotel Gran Via (Logroño):**
www.hotelgranvialogrono.com
- Finca de los Arandinos:**
www.fincadelosarandinos

WHERE TO PLAY

- El Campo de Logroño :** www.golflogrono.es
- Rioja Alta Golf Club:** www.golfrioja.com
- Sojuela Golf Club:** www.sojuelagolf.com
- Izki Golf:** www.izkigolf.eus

WHERE TO DINE (LOGROÑO)

- La Cocina de Ramon:**
30, Calle Portales. lacocinaderamon.es
- Kabanova:** 9,
Calle del Benemérito Cuerpo de la Guardia Civil.
- La Quisquillosa:**
13, Calle Sagasta. www.laquisquillosa.com

USEFUL WEBSITES

- The Wine Teacher "El Educador en Vinos":**
www.eleducadorenvinos.com
- Vivanco Museum of Wine Culture:**
www.vivancowineculture.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.lariojaturismo.com
- www.logroño.es