

TRAVEL

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DETOURS

Mark Andrews

Duck season

Our approach to the shoreline is uneventful, apart from the swaying, quite unbecoming a pensioner. There are no snipers, machine guns or artillery to shatter the peace today, but in Beatrice's youth on the beaches of Normandy, things were different. Today, Beatrice and her fellow retired second world war amphibious vehicles lead far more sedate lives, carrying passengers on London Duck Tours.

Countless tourists choose an open-top bus or a river cruise if they want to see Britain's capital. London Duck Tours combines the two. Its 75-minute trips waddle and wade past all the major London landmarks, with tour guides recounting tales of intrigue and folklore concerning the sights, accompanied by groan-inducing jokes. You travel through centuries of history while you sit in a piece of it.

More than 21,000 DUKWs, known as ducks, were built during the second world war. The prototype was designed and built by General Motors and given its name based on the General Motors code of D for 1942, the year of manufacture; U for utility; K for front-wheel drive and W for dual rear-driving axles.

General George S. Patton recognised the vehicle's worth and demanded it be used in the invasion of Sicily in 1943. Employed mainly for ferrying supplies from ship to beachhead, it was also used in the Pacific war as an assault craft. But its hour of glory came with the Normandy D-Day landings in 1944, in which 2,000 DUKWs took part.

London Duck Tours operates five converted ducks, including Beatrice, although the vehicles bear little resemblance to their original form. Painted rubber-duck yellow, they have been given roofs and seats and comply with safety standards. A four-litre diesel engine has replaced the original petrol plant.

From near the London Eye



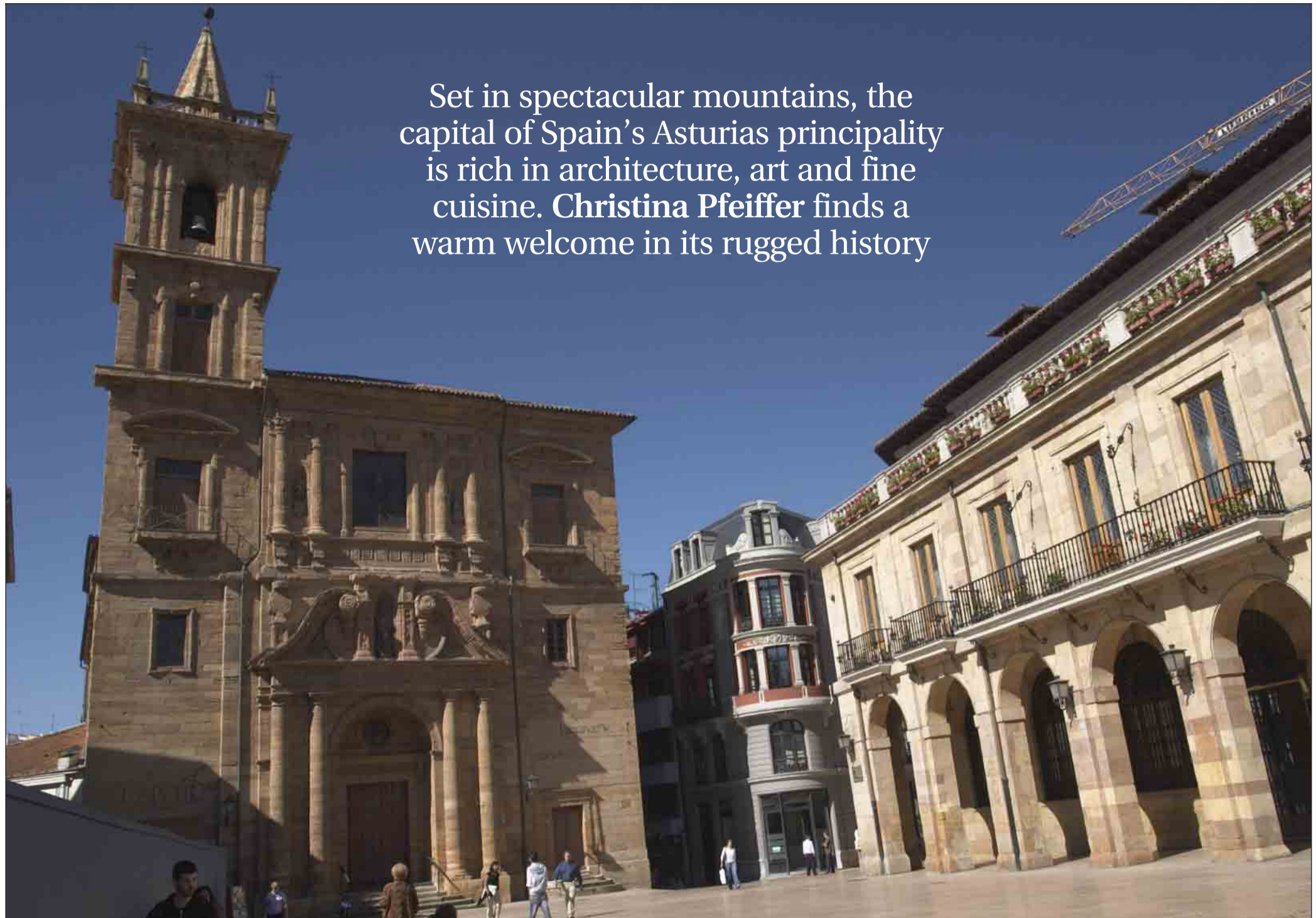
PHOTO: MARK ANDREWS

(above), Beatrice's route passes the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, Downing Street, Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square, operating via Green Park.

The big splash happens at Vauxhall from the ramp next to the M16 spy headquarters, but I suspect James Bond would turn up his nose at a craft that manages only 80km/h on land and 8km/h on water. The duck chugs its way up river and turns back after Westminster Bridge, emerging from the water with much aplomb, if little grace.

On my trip, the passengers are mainly British and, surprisingly, many are from London. One couple says: "We've often seen them and thought it looked fun. We've just been waiting for an opportunity with good weather to take the tour."

Trips operate year round, except in high winds, until dusk, with half-hourly departures leaving from Chicheley Street. Adults pay £17.50 (HK\$253), children (under 12) £12, senior citizens and students £14 and families (two adults and two children) £53. Reservations are recommended during peak hours (www.londonducktours.co.uk).



Set in spectacular mountains, the capital of Spain's Asturias principality is rich in architecture, art and fine cuisine. Christina Pfeiffer finds a warm welcome in its rugged history

There's so much to see in Oviedo, from the classic architecture of the historic Plaza de Trascorrales (left) to the bustling colour (below) of the former capital of Christian Spain. PHOTOS: CHRISTINA PFEIFFER

PERFECT 10

Oviedo

1 Gothic splendour

The Cathedral of San Salvador is an imposing Gothic building with touches of pre-Romanesque, Romanesque and Baroque designs. Work on the cathedral began towards the end of the 13th century and, like many significant buildings of that period, took a couple of centuries to complete. The cathedral's ultimate jewel is the Camara Santa (holy chamber), comprising the remains of a ninth-century church that was once the original place of worship around which the cathedral was built. The Camara Santa consists of a chapel and crypt that contains statues of Jesus and the Apostles, jewels such as the ninth-century Cross of Angels and the 10th-century Cross of Victoria, a glittering treasure made from gold and precious stones. It's also known throughout Spain for its tombs of Asturian kings (www.spain.info).

2 World Heritage monuments

Once the capital of Christian Spain, Oviedo, about 30km from Gijon in the northwest of the country, can trace its history from 761, when two monks built a church dedicated to Saint Vincent of Saragossa. The capital of Asturias, one of the few Spanish territories to avoid invasion by the Moors, Oviedo has a unique collection of well-preserved, pre-Romanesque ninth-century buildings that are now World Heritage listed (whc.unesco.org). Among them are the churches of Santa Maria del Naranco, San Miguel de Lillo, Santa Cristina de Lena, San Julián de los Prados and the



Oviedo's full of good food (left), but the dinosaur museum (right) could be a surprise

Camara Santa. Also on the list is La Foncalada, a rare ninth-century water-supply system comprising a pond, a chapel and a water channel.

3 Museums galore

Housed in what was once the 16th-century Benedictine monastery of San Vicente is the Archaeological Museum, with its array of prehistoric, pre-Romanesque and Romanesque exhibits. There are mosaics, epigraphs and ceramics, as well as altar stones from the churches of San Miguel de Lillo and Santa Maria del Naranco. The Fine Arts Museum of Asturias (www.museobbaa.com), housed in the 18th-century Velarde Palace, has 8,000 works on display. Admission to both museums is free.

4 Sculpture trail

The whole of Oviedo is an open-air sculpture park, meaning countless works can be found in plazas throughout the city. Some of the more well-known sculptures are *Maternidad* by Fernando Botero, which is located at Plaza de la Escandalaria; *El Regreso de William B. Arrensberg* by Eduardo Urculo, at Plaza de Portier, and *La Regenta* by Mauro Álvarez, which graces the Plaza de Alfonso II el Casto and provides an eye-catching contrast to the Cathedral of San Salvador in the background. There's even a life-sized statue of Woody Allen erected by the city after the American filmmaker won the Prince of Asturias Award (the www.fpa.es) for his contribution to the arts in 2002.

5 Gastronomic delights

The rich soil around Oviedo produces a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables, including peppers and



artichokes. Oviedo's restaurateurs take great pride in using the readily available fresh local produce to complement meals of seafood or sausages. The region is well-known for its cider, served in *sidrerías*, or cider houses, scattered throughout the city. Watching the waiters pour cider is even more fun than drinking it and every waiter is an expert. It's poured from a bottle held with one arm fully extended above the head into a glass held with the other arm fully extended near the hip, usually without looking at either bottle or glass. Cold meats and varieties of local cheese are served as appetisers with the cider. Try the Cider House Tierra Astur.

(www.palaciodecutre.com), in a remote rural area a short drive from Oviedo. Its hidden staircases, tower and chapel add to its appeal.

7 Follow the river

Navigating the rapids and shallow spots along the Sella River, a winding waterway that provides picturesque vistas at every turn, is oodles of fun. There are a number of professional adventure operators along the river that have kayaks for hire and offer guided kayak tours. To reach the Sella, you must first brave a few winding roads through mountain passes, picturesque slate-roofed villages and orchards, with fascinating detours to lakes Enol and Ercina.

6 Top of the world

The Picos de Europa (Peaks of Europe) mountains were named because the towering rocks were the first sight of Europe for homecoming Spanish sailors. Energetic activities here include rock-climbing and hiking. The Fuente Dé Cable Car, which makes a 900m ascent from Fuente Dé, carries visitors up to a rocky plateau with panoramic views of peaks and valleys. You can also enjoy views of the mountains by booking in to one of the many country manors in the area. A fine example is the beautifully restored 16th-century El Palacio de Cutre

8 Jurassic playground

Outside Oviedo, near the village of Colunga, is one of the most comprehensive dinosaur museums in the world: the Jurassic Museum of Asturias (www.museojurасico.asturias.com). Shaped to resemble a giant dinosaur's three-toed footprint, the museum has extensive displays of prehistoric fossil remains and life-sized replicas of dinosaurs that roamed the area 65 million to 280 million years ago. There are also educational workshops for children. The museum is set on a stretch of coastline known as the Dinosaur Coast, where remains and fossilised footprints were discovered.

9 Fishing village

Take a day trip to the village of Llanes, once a major fishing and whaling port. Spend the day exploring quaint historic palaces and chapels, catching waves at the beach or watching fishermen mend their nets. One of the highlights of the town is Ibarrola's *The Cubes of Memory*, a striking, multicoloured sculpture that stretches along the shoreline (www.llanes.com).

10 To market, to market

The El Fontan Market in the heart of Oviedo's historic quarter sells everything from honey to bottles of extra virgin olive oil, pigs' trotters and fresh bread. The best time to visit is during La Fiesta de la Ascension, the May festival that celebrates farming life in the Asturias. The festival includes agricultural displays and livestock competitions, with lots of stalls selling traditional cuisine. Many locals add to the atmosphere by dressing up in Asturian folk costumes.

BIG DEAL

Peter Walbrook

If you can travel by October 31, \$2,750 will buy you three nights' accommodation in Colombo and round-trip, economy-class flights with SriLankan Airlines. The hotel at this price is the Grand Oriental (www.grandorientalhotel.com), a

19th-century property that has seen better days, but for \$2,990 you can stay at the grander, more modern Taj Samudra (www.tajhotels.com). Other choices are the Cinnamon Grand (www.cinnamonhotels.com) and the Hilton (www.hilton.com), for \$3,050.

Call Westminster Travel on 2313 9800, or e-mail travel@hkwtl.com, quoting reference number 4951. tchecks@gmail.com

ENTRÉE

Rachael Oakes-Ash

Melbourne

SOS

Level 3, 211 Latrobe St (www.sosmelbourne.com.au)

It's vegitarian. The "aquarian" refers to ethically harvested seafood, which means no overfarmed fish. The veg aspect is organic, where possible. This is fine dining for those with a conscience, with starters of gelato di parmigiano reggiano (cheese gelato), followed by pan-seared calamari with squid ink sauce and pea puree or handmade ravioli. The Italian origins of chef Riccardo Momesso at SOS (right) are obvious, and the oven-roasted silver perch essential. Finish with rich chocolate custard cream served with pumpkin foam



and expect to pay about A\$55 (HK\$320) for three courses.

Mr Tulk

328 Swanston St (www.slv.vic.gov.au) A bookworm's delight, Mr Tulk is inside the Victorian State Library's heritage building. Chef Andy Kubale, formerly of the Melbourne Wine Room, knows his stuff. This is one of the few

cafes in the central business district serving porridge (cinnamon style with sultanas and rhubarb). Literophiles bury their heads in books; hungerphiles just chow down on hearty comfort food of baked beans and ham hock, crusty baguettes filled with caramelised onions, hummus, eggplant or tuna. Set out like a traditional library reading room, Mr Tulk is designed to be tongue in cheek, with colourful stools and arched windows. It makes for an inviting breakfast, lunch or munchies destination, with main courses from A\$7 to A\$13.50.

Taxi Dining Room

Federation Square, cnr of Flinders and Swanston streets (www.transporthotel.com.au) There's only one thing better than a barista in Melbourne and that's a chef, especially if that chef is the



award-winning Michael Lambie, who put Taxi (above) on the map. The fare is modern Australian-Japanese, with an on-request degustation menu to dine for, featuring Mexican tempura sushi, lemon grass mussel broth, tuna sashimi and the like. A la carte

mains such as roast hapuka fillet or tempura flathead come in at A\$36.50. The place has been fully booked for the past two years, so you might consider ringing ahead.

Vue de Monde

430 Little Collins Street (www.vuedemonde.com.au) Every city has a serious dining institution and in Melbourne it's Vue de Monde. Dust off your pearls and sit up straight for Shannon Bennett's French grub (just don't use that term in his presence). Put your tastebuds in his hands because menus don't exist. Foie gras and truffle appear often on his nightly degustation menu, but you never know what to expect. A two-course lunch menu, including a glass of wine, costs A\$38. The Vue de Monde lunchbox (gourmet sandwich, salad, dips, savoury treats and cupcake) to go costs A\$15.

For entertainment advertising

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