

9 PICOS DE MACONDIU: JITO DE ESCARANDI

- VAO DE LOS LOBOS • CASETON DE ANDARA • (POZO DE ANDARA) • JITO DE ESCARANDI

Map pages 106-107

Distance: 16km/10mi; 4h40min (for the 3km return detour to the Pozo de Andara add 1h).

Grade: Moderate-strenuous; a 200m/655ft descent followed by a level section, then a gradual climb of 550m/1805ft and a descent of 400m/1310ft back to where you started. The whole route follows an old mining track, and is easy underfoot. A word of warning: *the higher section of this route is often snowbound between November and May.*

Equipment: stout shoes (preferably walking boots), sunhat, thick cardigan, raingear, picnic, water, compass, whistle

How to get there and return: 🚗 park at the junction called Jito de Escarandi, about 3km east of Sotres, where the road veers left towards Tresviso. No bus access.

Alternative, longer walk: Beges — Horno del Doblillo — Vao de los Lobos — Casetón de Andara — Jito de Escarandi — Vao de los Lobos — Beges. 28km/17.5mi; 8h50min. Strenuous: the complete circuit is only suitable for the fittest walkers, as the total ascent/descent is almost 1200m/3940ft. Access: 🚗 PALOMERA (Tel. 942-88 06 11; Potes-Santander route; timetables on the reverse of the fold-out map). Disembark in La Hermida (journey time from Potes about 25min), then take a taxi to Beges (about 6km/3.75mi). On your return to Beges, telephone for a taxi back to La Hermida, in time for your return bus. (See details of last bus to Potes on the reverse of the fold-out map.) Or 🚗 park in the turning circle at the entrance to Beges. Equipment and season as above. See notes on pages 110-112.

This superb walk takes you across some of the least-visited limestone terrain in Andara — the eastern massif of the Picos de Europa. Although fairly long, the gradient is never excessive and the whole circuit takes place on a well-marked track, carved out of the living

Moss campion (Silene acaulis) thrives on the higher reaches, below Macondiú.



rock in the last century to provide access to the zinc mines in the heart of Andara. Choose a clear day in early summer and you'll be rewarded by breathtaking scenery and an incredible diversity of wildflowers, but best of all, you'll hardly meet a soul.

The walk starts at the **Jito de Escarandi**, from where you follow the track heading almost due east, leaving a couple of rather unattractive breeze-block huts with corrugated-iron roofs on the right. The surrounding heathland is dotted with the trunks of dead trees and usually occupied by an immense herd of goats. Follow the main track, which zigzags down some 200m/655ft into a grassy hollow known as the **Vega del Tronco**: 'A Beges', painted on a block of limestone, will reassure you that this is the correct route (**20min**).

You soon enter the beech forest, as the track contours around the Sierra de la Corta for a couple of kilometres. Several grass-covered, little-used trails diverge to both right and left, but stay on the main track until you emerge from the forest onto a heath-covered slope. From here you can see the *majadas* of La Cerezal and La Llama down to the left. *Majadas* are groups of barns where livestock is kept in the summer, surrounded by walled pastures for the cows, sheep and goats whose milk is converted into artisan cheeses. In Beges and Tresviso an exquisite blue cheese — *queso picón* — is prepared from a mixture of milk from all three types of livestock, then matured for up to three months in high-level limestone caves.

Back among the beech trees the track crosses two arms of a stream, the **Riega del Torno**, before arriving at a junction (**1h10min**): the left-hand fork leads down to the *majadas*, so stay on the upper track. From here, it is an easy 15-minute walk in the cool depths of the forest to the spring and water trough at **Vao de Los Lobos (1h 25min)**. Take note of a sharp turn back to the right about 20m/yds *before* the spring; it is your onward route. (*The Alternative walk joins here.*)

Vao is the Asturian version of *vado*, which means 'ford'. The flora here is truly superb in early summer, dominated by hundreds of purple, one-sided spikes of dragonmouth, while the cliff at the back of the spring literally drips with clumps of large-flowered butterwort, an insectivorous plant whose sticky, pale green leaves trap small invertebrates. Fill your water-bottle here; surface water is a rare occurrence on the limestone.

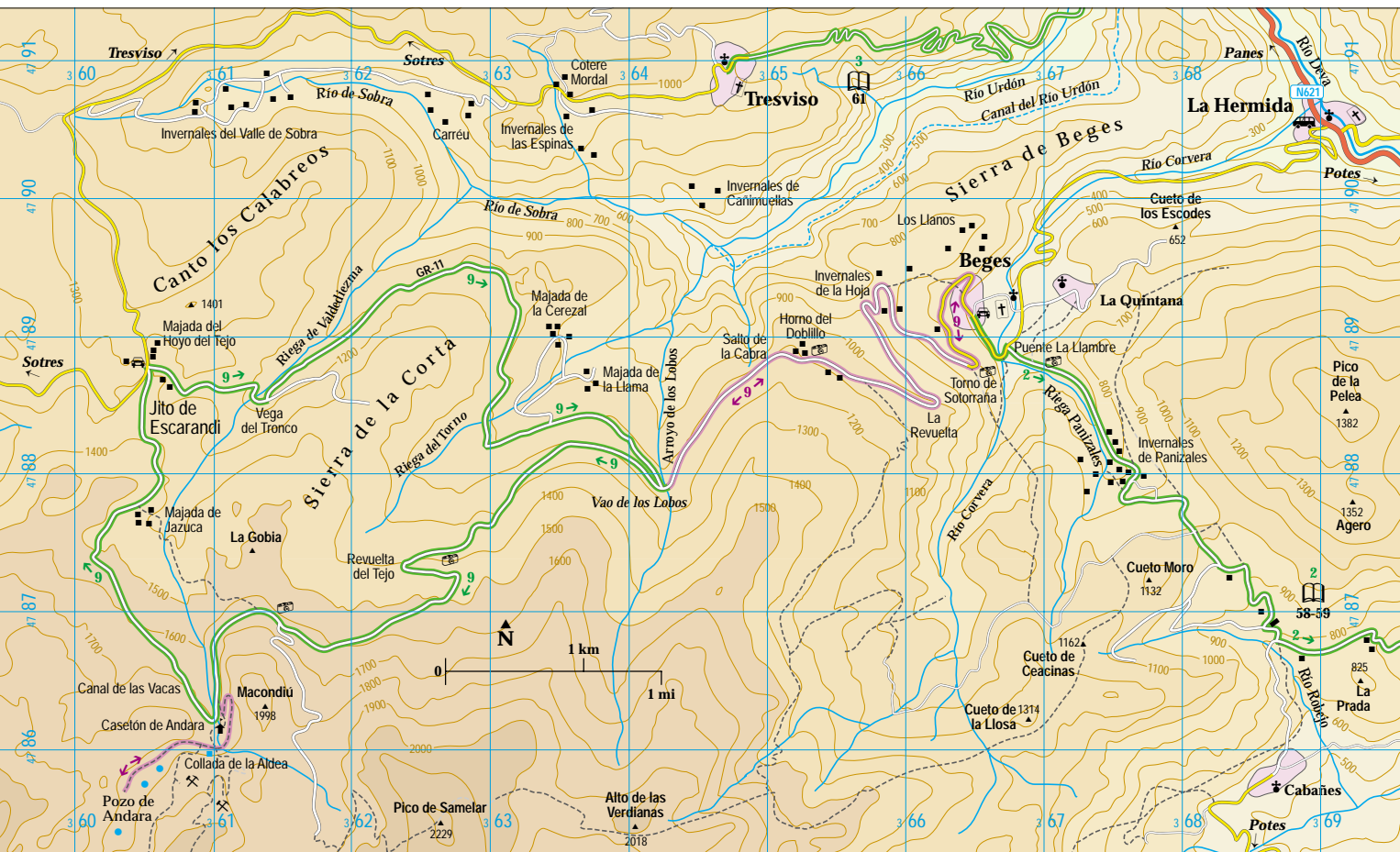
From the spring, retrace your steps 20m/yds to the right turn passed previously (now on the *left*), and follow it up into a cool, shady beech forest, populated by untidy, multi-stemmed trees that sprout directly from crevices in the limestone. Rocky outcrops amid the trees are chock-a-block with trumpet gentians (see page 91), the lilac 'pompoms' of leafless-stemmed globularia, and sprawling clumps of *Linaria faucicola*, a toadflax unique to the Picos de Europa (its tiny, deep purple flowers, shown on page 113, resemble miniature snapdragons). Red squirrels are often seen here, although other denizens of this forest — garden dormice, wildcats, beech martens and wild boar — are more secretive.

Emerging from the trees, the view ahead (shown on pages 108-109) is stunning — dominated by the wedge-shaped peak of Macondiú itself. Here, at about 1400m/4595ft, the flora is correspondingly more alpine: low, straggling bushes of bearberry and dwarf juniper are

interspersed with velvety sheets of moss campion (photograph page 104), clumps of azure-flowered spring gentians and the delicate blue-tinged, white blooms of *Anemone pavoniana*, another Picos endemic.

Still climbing, you reach a hairpin bend to the left (called the **Revuelta del Tejo**) at **2h35min**. Here griffon vultures, with wing-spans of almost two metres, ride the thermals overhead, while wheatears, black redstarts and alpine accentors go about their business in the surrounding rocky outcrops. In high summer these rock gardens are populated by woolly-leaved rosettes of *Hieracium mixtum*, a member of the daisy family with yellow flowers, as well as alpine gypsophila, Pyrenean lousewort and the endemic columbine shown on page 109, *Aquilegia discolor*.

Keep winding steadily uphill for almost an hour. On approaching the east face of **Macondiú** (1998m/6560ft), which echoes with the rifle-shot calls of coughts, you





Left: Macondiú and the alpine rock gardens, just as you emerge from the beech forest. Above: *Aquilegia discolor*, an endemic columbine

arrive at a junction (**3h30min**): ignore the left turn and follow the main track as it contours round the north face of the peak. Looking north, on a clear day it is possible to see the sea from this point, particularly the estuary at San Vicente de la Barquera, over to your right.

The main track curves round to the left, to pass under the west face of Macondiú, taking you into a blind valley known as the **Canal de las Vacas**. At the head of this valley lies the **Casetón de Andara (3h50min)**, a rather unattractive building which was formerly the headquarters of the mining company but has been converted into a refuge for walkers and mountaineers. Just before you reach the refuge, a wide, stony path diverges up to the left: *this is the route to take for the detour to the Pozo de Andara, described below.*

Detour: The Pozo de Andara is one of the most beautiful picnic sites in the eastern massif of the Picos de Europa. Take the scree-covered path mentioned above, about 50m/yds *before* you reach the **Casetón de Andara**, and zigzag uphill; ignore a path off to the right which leads directly to the refuge before the first hairpin bend to the left. The second hairpin bend, to the right, lies adjacent to the west face of Macondiú: about five minutes after this bend, ignore a path down to the right, which also

leads back down to the refuge. Keep an eye out for some of the rarer scree plants in the Picos as you wind up through the mining spoil heaps, including yellow mountain saxifrage, spoon-leaved candytuft, Pyrenean bedstraw, alpine toadflax and the exquisite alpine snowbell. In about **20min** you arrive at a level area known as the **Collada de la Aldea**, with a walled pond on the left: go straight on here, ignoring the trail up to the left. A couple of minutes later, ignore a trail branching off to the left and a track to the right, and start descending, following a wide gully on the left of the track. Ignore a path which forks off up to the right about a minute later. The wide path takes you down to a lush marshland, ringed by peaks: the **Pozo de Andara (30min)**. There are small, spring-fed pools at either end of the marsh, which are all that remain of what was once a glacial lake: unfortunately the base of the lake was perforated during the extensive mining activities in the area. Today the marshland is a favourite haunt of water pipits, wheatears and alpine newts, as well as clouds of the rare Gavarnie blue butterfly in late summer. In the rock outcrop at the far end of the marsh, you will discover a veritable labyrinth of small cave dwellings, formerly used by the miners. Retrace your steps to rejoin the main route, arriving back at the **Casetón de Andara at 1h.**