

Pilgrimage to the Sea



Rain-saturated and teeming with seafood, Spain's Galicia region lures not just pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, but also fisherwomen to its shores.

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A loud squelch escaped as I wriggled my feet into a chilly pair of thick rubber boots. They're not my normal choice of footwear for a trip to the beach, and yet here on the shores of Galicia, in the northwestern corner of Spain, I fit right in.

With a rusty garden-like tool in hand, I surveyed the mudflats before me, filled with several hundred women in waders and boots just like mine. For some three hundred years, these local fisherwomen – called *mariscadoras* – have made their way to Galicia's shores, driven by the tides to dig for shellfish.

Typically too far-flung a region for tourists to visit, Galicia gains much

of its fame as the final stopping point on the often-spiritual cross-country hiking trail, the Camino de Santiago. While a few carry on through rolling green hills that echo with bagpipe-filled tunes – challenging Iberian clichés of arid plains and flamenco soul – most exhausted pilgrims finish their voyage in the city of Santiago.

But many visitors don't realize that just a bus-ride away hides another worthy destination: the Rías Baixas (lower river inlets) – home to idyllic pueblos, fertile coastlines and the troops of fisherwomen that comb them.

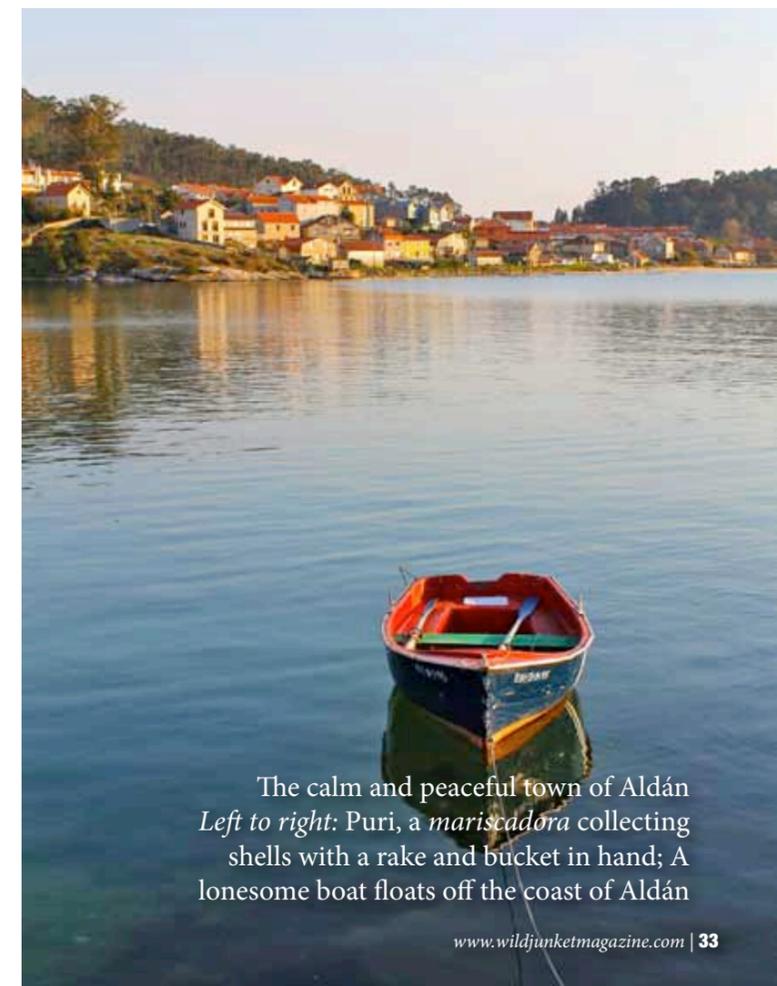
Beyond the Tide

My fascination with the fisherwomen

began a few years ago, while visiting the fishing pueblo of Aldán. I spent my trip gazing at the tide outside the granite window of an old fishery-turned-hotel. The morning sun kissed the port, its bobbing dinghies, and the lush, eucalyptus-lined shore that dipped from the low-lying hills into the water.

Eager to see more of the region, I left the comforts of my window on the fishermen world behind and traveled north from Aldán to a hook-like peninsula, arriving in the town of O Grove. A row of faded, terracotta-topped buildings lined the boardwalk, where Spanish grandmas and grandpas were taking leisurely *paseos*. Like so many other Galician coastal towns, it appeared sleepy when, in

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The calm and peaceful town of Aldán
Left to right: Puri, a *mariscadora* collecting shells with a rake and bucket in hand; A lonesome boat floats off the coast of Aldán

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It was also in O Grove that I first saw the *mariscadoras* digging for shellfish. Like panning for gold in a riverbed, they captured my imagination, but also unearthed memories of summers spent clamming along my grandparents' beach on the Puget Sound. So a year later – keen to learn more and maybe a little eager for a taste of home – I returned to join them.

Searching for Shells

Nervous with anticipation, I crossed the two-lane bridge to nearby Toja Island, as famous for its resorts and spas as for the *mariscadoras* that frequent its shores. Most of the ladies around me had long passed their thirtieth birthday, which showed in their sun-weathered skin. Fanny packs

and rubber gloves accessorized their mismatched shirts and hats.

Some of them stood waist-deep in water, plowing a monstrous double-handled mechanism of sorts through the sediment, while others planted their boots into the wet soil, excavating the earth with a rake-like *rastrillo* – all with the same objective: to uncover edible delicacies, ranging from quarter-sized cockles to larger fan-shaped steamer clams.

While the ladies searched for shells, I looked for my *mariscadora* mentor, Puri Díaz Ríos. Radiating a smile matched only by the day's atypical sunshine, the 43-year-old approached me from across the crowd. She instructed me to join her at today's temporary office – a little mogul of mud topped with a bucket, an inflated ring to suspend it, and, of course, tools.

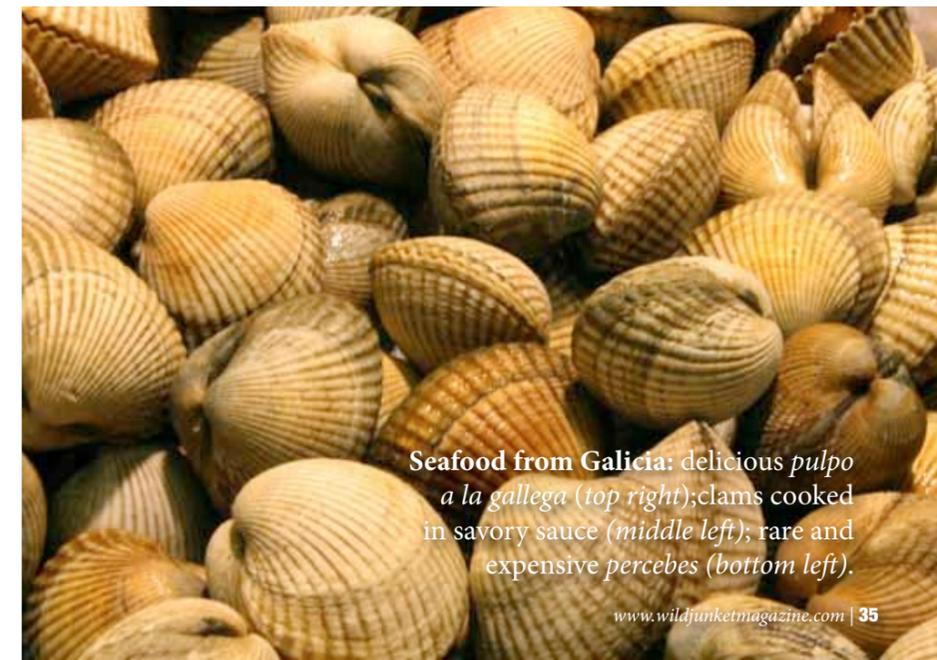
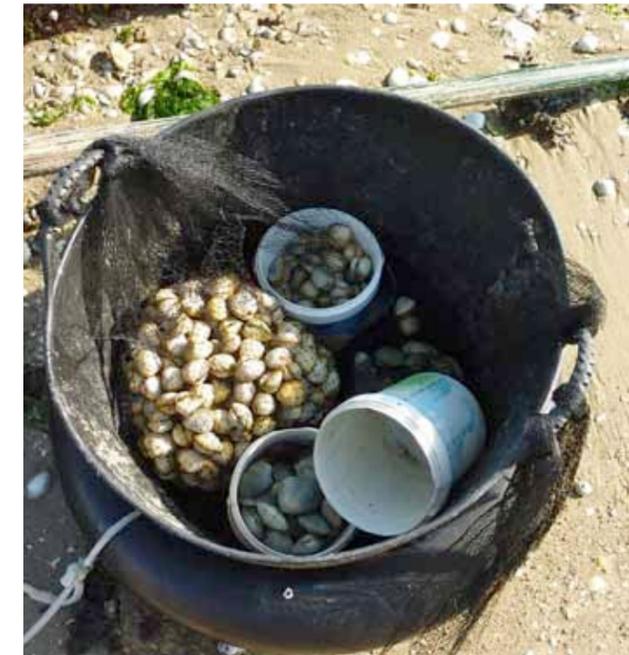
Getting straight to work, she demonstrated her favorite "art," as she calls it, in which she seeks out the sandy ducts formed by the clam bivalves. "I look for the two holes made by their necks, then just scoop them up!" she said in Spanish with her sing-songy Galician accent, as though sharing a trade secret. After a few sweeping movements of my rake yielded only pebbles, I conceded that it was indeed an art, and one that I had not yet mastered.

A Labor of Love

Truthfully, though, I was less interested in digging at this point and more intrigued by Puri and the other women's stories. Growing up in Galician fishing towns, their lives have always revolved around the sea. Their tradition, in fact, goes back for generations. But the memories, like the Atlantic water, haven't always been so warm.

"My grandmother was once arrested for shellfishing off season," Puri chirped, reflecting on tougher times before regulations and fancy waders. With her characteristically cheerful spirit, she went on to share even the most disheartening memories with pride. "My mom used to shellfish barefoot, and my grandmother would pee in a bucket just to warm her feet!" she giggled. Unsettling thoughts as I contemplated my dry feet standing in a slushy puddle of dirt, rocks and shells.

But times have changed. Dedicated to the future of their profession, Puri and her colleagues rotate beaches every few months, reseeding and aerating them as they go. Then, on hot summer days, they take turns keeping watch as tourists and sunbathers



Seafood from Galicia: delicious *pulpo a la gallega* (top right); clams cooked in savory sauce (middle left); rare and expensive *percebes* (bottom left).

Essential INFORMATION

When to Go As the Spaniards say, the weather in Galicia is a lottery – it's often rainy, and sunshine is unpredictable. That said, with winter highs in the 50s, you're most likely to hit the "weather lottery" during spring and summer, when temperatures reach over 70°F (21°C) and sometimes higher.

Getting There You can reach fishing villages via buses that run from the region's larger cities, such as Vigo or Santiago de Compostela (both accessible by air). From Vigo, you can also shorten the journey (and simultaneously take

the scenic route) by catching a boat that crosses the bay into the town of Cangas.

Accommodation Stay at one of Spain's famous **Paradores**, in Cambados, where room rates start at €105 (US\$138). Or go more remote by visiting the rustic-but-chic **A Casa de Aldán**, where rooms begin at €71 (US\$93).

Shellfishing & More Those eager to live out their very own shellfishing experience can sign up via **Pescanatur**. For €7 (US\$10), visitors head to the beach with a *mariscadora* mentor to learn the tricks of the trade. Other excursions - from boat fishing, to a gastronomic route - are available as well.

attempt to steal the shelled treasures beckoning their bellies from the seafloor below.

Today women actually line up for what they consider an ideal career – one that allows them to be their own bosses, work part-time, and then return home to their families. “I shellfish four hours a day, fifteen days a month and, come on,” she paused with a sweeping gesture across the beach and sea, “this is where I work!”

Back on Dry Land

While my effort at pursuing a new profession had proven rather fruitless, the *mariscadoras* remained content with the day’s catch. One by one, the ladies dispersed the different varieties of clams into separate netted bags before walking, biking or driving back across the bridge.

Joining them, I entered the cavernous hall of the local fish market. Shells clacked as they sloshed through a sizing basket. Dirty rubber boots thudded on the cold cement floor. The banter of familiar greetings bounced off the bare concrete walls as the workday shifted from sea to

shore.

Hours later, in the bidding area, merchants silently placed their electronic bids on trays filled with a myriad of creatures – slimy octopus, wide-eyed sea bass, and algae-covered crab. Many still scampered and slushed around, seemingly prepared to escape their inevitable fate by scurrying, slithering and flopping back to the ocean only a few hundred feet away.

Puri and I eventually parted ways. She went home to her family, and I lost myself in the quiet streets of O Grove, where I ducked into a restaurant with views of the returning tide. On the menu: steamed clams, accompanied by a glass of Albariño white wine and a healthy helping of local pride.

Reflecting on the story behind the shells in front of me, I decided that while the Camino may end for most in Santiago, the true reward might just be found along the beaches of the Rías Baixas. *WJ*

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Women At Work: With their backs bent, these *mariscadoras* work hard to dig for shells on the beaches of Galicia.

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