The Spanish Isles That Are Quietly A National Park

By Jennifer Bain
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To combat overtourism, the Atlantic Islands of Galicia Maritime-Terrestrial National Park in northern Spain has a daily cap on visitors/Jennifer Bain

"I guess this is the photo they took for the *Guardian*," says an excited trio of young tourists, pausing on a wooden walkway to admire a crescent-shaped beach with fine white sand and turquoise waters that feels more like the Caribbean than northern Spain.

They're half right. This is Praia de Rodas, the beach that the British newspaper once put in the number one spot of its "Top 10 beaches in the world" story, but the story that lives online features an aerial shot taken from the other end of the Cies Islands.

What's fascinating, though, is that the article came out in 2007 and people are still talking about it 18 years later. I ask Pepin (José Antonio) Fernández Bouzas, director of the Atlantic Islands of Galicia Maritime-Terrestrial National Park, whether the ongoing global attention is a good thing.

"No, very bad," he replies. "Many, many people see the park as a beach and it's not a beach — it's a national park."

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In 2007, the Guardian newspaper in England named Galicia's Praia de Rodas the most beautiful beach in the world/Jennifer Bain

While parts of Spain have been rocked with overtourism protests, I've come to visit a national park that successfully balances tourism and conservation. It's in Galicia, one of four northern regions that call themselves "Green Spain" and are popular with nature enthusiasts.

It's early May, low season, and that means only 450 people can visit the Cies Islands each day — and only with a licensed tour guide. During Easter week and high season (May 15 to Sept. 15) that number rises to 1,800, sometimes with another 500 in the seasonal campground. The park is made up of four archipelagos — Cies, Ons, Sálvora and Cortegada — and the other groups of islands have much stricter caps.

"Today you have paradise almost alone for you," promises Pablo Mariño Lustres, manager of Bluscus, a company that offers boat trips along the Galician coast. He sends our group of seven off by speedboat for the half-hour journey from Baiona to Cies. "It's a national treasure, and also very good at protecting the cliffs and biodiversity."

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The Cies Islands, part of a national park in Galicia, are a mix of white sand beaches, cliffs and forest/Jennifer Bain

The Cies Islands is the second most visited destination in Galicia after the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in the region's capital. People on spiritual journeys and walking holidays travel from all over Europe along the Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrimage routes that lead to the tomb of the Apostle Saint James.

The islands are part of a 21,000-acre "national park hidden under the water" that's 86 per cent marine waters and just 14 per cent land.

What strikes me is how well the rules are conveyed and obeyed.

You can only get to this park by boat and you must get authorization from the Xunta de Galicia, the regional government. That means going online up to 90 days in advance, filling out personal details and getting a free QR code that lets you buy boat tickets on ferries or with private companies. There are no entrance fees at any of Spain's national parks.

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Tour guide María Chamadoira shows off a map of the Cies Islands, which are part of a national park in northern Spain/Jennifer Bain

Cies draws 300,000 of the park's 514,000 annual visitors.

"Every year thousands of people visit this island so each individual's actions is multiplied by thousands," interpretive signs explain once you arrive. "That is why it is so important that you take these regulations into account."

There are no trash cans here so you must take your garbage — especially cigarette butts — home.

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A young Yellow-legged gull hangs out by the famous fine white sand of Rodas beach/Jennifer Bain

Other rules are similar to those in North America. You can't disturb the wildlife or make any noise that may disturb the peace. You can't pick flowers or fruit, collect shells, stray from the paths or bring animals except guide dogs. Fires, drones and kites are banned. You need permission to sail, anchor or scuba dive, and can only camp at official campsites.

"Use only the water you need. If you waste water, the island will dry out," park signage warns.

"Please pick up any tissues and wipes you use. Their presence degrades the landscape."

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The protected dunes on the Cies Islands shelter nesting seabirds, plants and butterflies/Jennifer Bain

So can you still have fun? Absolutely.

We get dropped off at the northern Monteagudo island, which is linked to the middle island Faro by the Rodas sandbar. It's hot enough to flop on the famous beach — which boasts white sand made from very old quartz — or a nude one nearby. But the ocean is too frigid for more than my toes, so we set off on one of four hiking routes with tour guide María Chamadoira.

The wooden walkway goes from the pier, past a restaurant that serves fresh fish and octopus, and across dunes that protect marram grass, sea holly, sea daffodils and threatened Spanish festoon butterfly nesting grounds.

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European shags are a well-loved type of cormorant in Spain/Jennifer Bain

We've already spotted European shags on the boat ride over but now signs welcome us to the "Seagull's Islands." This was once the home of the world's biggest colony of Yellow-legged gulls, but the population has been dying here and across Europe and nobody is sure why.

Sometimes Kentish plovers nest on the world-famous beach and park staff help with protective cages that let them come and go while keeping large predators out.

Why is there such a diversity of birds here in such a harsh and stormy environment? Because of the abundance and variety of food that lives in Galician waters.

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From a bridge connecting two of the Cies Islands, you can spot marine life on the quiet lake side of the dam/Jennifer Bain

We cross a stone bridge that links the north and middle islands and serves as a dam that lets marine life pass between the ocean and a small lake.

Peering into the water is like looking into a giant aquarium where everything from octopus and moray to spider crabs and grey mullets might swim by and where invasive Japanese seaweed abounds. There are signs warning that this bridge can be closed depending on the tides, so you need to make sure you don't get stranded and miss your boat back to the mainland.

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At a campground on the Cies Islands, you can rent tents with mattresses and sea views/Jennifer Bain

Next we come to a campground where you can bring your own tent or book one with mattresses. There's even a restaurant, snack bar and small supermarket plus kayak and snorkel equipment rentals. Since the park is a "Starlight Destination," there's often a chance to do guided astronomy activities.

But the campground isn't open for the season and my base at Parador de Baiona — a restored Neo-Gothic castle with views of these islands — is in the town where the *Pinta* famously docked in 1493 bringing news of the European discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.

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From the Parador de Baiona, you can just make out the Cies Islands in the Atlantic Islands of Galicia Maritime-Terrestrial National Park/Jennifer Bain

I never do make it to the park's visitor center near Baiona in the port city of Vigo, and the information point inside the former San Estevo Monastery here on the middle island is closed. But I learn how this park preserves ruins of Celtic and Roman settlements, monasteries, ancient graves, forts, salting factories and lighthouses.

The Romans called the Cies Islands "Deorum Insulae" — the Islands of the Gods. Pirates and privateers visited. Sir Francis Drake, the English explorer and privateer, anchored his fleet here in 1585 to lead an attack on Baiona but then raided Vigo.

"To live here was very hard," says Chamadoira. "Even now, there are days when the ferries can't dock."

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Pepin (José Antonio) Fernández Bouzas is director of the Atlantic Islands of Galicia Maritime-Terrestrial National Park and is shown at the park's visitor center in Vigo, Spain.

The islands were declared a natural park in 1980 and upgraded to national park in 2002.

The director tells me the park is well-funded by Galicia, Spain and the European Union, and staff are researching the archaeology on land and in the sea where there are shipwrecks and even a sunken German sub. A new interpretation center is planned inside one of the lighthouses. There is work afoot to tackle the invasive seaweed, and to make the park more welcoming to people with autism and other challenges.

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Guide Maria Chamadoira explains the rock formation called Pedra da Campá/Jennifer Bain

Wherever I go now, I try to work in a national park visit, even when I'm pressed for time.

Here, I've got just 2.5 hours for a hike that takes us as far as Pedra da Campá, a rock formation that serves as a window overlooking the sea. It's called tafoni here and honeycomb weathering or Swiss-cheese rock elsewhere.

There's a warning sign, of course. "Climbing up the rock is dangerous and damages this singular rock formation," it says. "Observe and photograph without jump on it."

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Nobody knows what's causing Yellow-legged gulls to die across Europe/Jennifer Bain

Then it's on to the O Peito Bird Observatory, where we spot more Yellow-legged gulls and read about European shags. Cousins of the much-despised Great cormorants, they nest on cliffs and in fumas (marine caves). They boast a crest of feathers during breeding season, and there are reportedly 2,000 breeding pairs here.

Soon it's time to turn back to catch our speed boat for the half-hour journey back to shore.

On the way back to the beach, we see where park staff are replacing Eucalyptus trees, an introduced species, with Spanish oak "to recover the original natural environment." The goal is to protect biodiversity, conserve the water cycle and reduce erosion. "Less invasive flora means more space for birds, insects, bats, and other species to graze," signage explains.

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Skinks (also known as wall lizards) abound along the trails in the Cies Islands/Jennifer Bain

Skittish Bedriaga's skinks line the path, but I'm thrilled to finally spot a lone ocellated lizard basking in the sun. Also known as a jewelled lizard, this vibrant creature glows green with multi-colored scales that form a pattern of ocellated or eye-like marks.

The largest of European lizards tolerates our presence, and our cameras, for a few precious moments before disappearing into the greenery.

Some consider the lizard an icon for the park, so when I remember my afternoon here, I'll be reminiscing about this emerald beauty instead of the famous white sand beach.

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An ocellated lizard makes an appearance along a path in the Cies Islands/Jennifer Bain

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