

Northern Spain by Rail (RSP 2014)

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TOUR **DURATION** 12



- Rail Journeys Crossing the Basque region and Cantabria by steam, diesel and narrow gauge railways
- Bilbao Visit the extraordinary Guggenheim Museum and the Basque Railway Museum in Azpeitia
- Picos de Europa Walking amongst the beautiful landscapes of Spain's oldest national park
- León and Santiago de Compostela Two of Spain's most historic holy cities.

Tour Essentials

Accommodation: 11 nights Standard

Hotel

Included Meals: 11 breakfasts, 0

lunches, 0 dinners

Start Point: Join tour: Bilbao **End Point:** Tour ends: Bilbao

Transport: Bus, Train

Countries: Spain

Northern Spain By Rail

This very special collection of narrow gauge rail journeys takes us along the spectacular coast of northern Spain and through the Picos de Europa mountain range. At the Basque Railway Museum we ride aboard an historic steam train and from Poncebos we climb high into the rugged mountains by funicular. We also enjoy Bilbao and the medieval cities of Santiago de Compostela and Leon.



Suitability

We've given each of our tours a comfort rating and a tour pace, walking or cycling grade to give you a general idea about the level of activity on each tour and the standard of accommodation you will be staying in at the end of your day's adventure.

Often you'll stay in different styles of accommodation during your tour; so we make an average rating across the entire tour. For more information on where you'll stay each night, please refer to the day by day tour itinerary.

Tour Comfort: Standard

Our mid-range accommodation offers a good level of service often with other amenities such as a restaurant, bar, garden or swimming pool. Generally rooms will be comfortable with en-suite facilities.

Tour Style: Classic

Packed with adventure, these tours offer inspiring destinations and authentic travel experiences at a reasonable price. Using all kinds of transport and accommodation, we'll take you off the beaten track to discover the true heart of the people and places you visit.

Tour Pace: Moderate

These moderately paced tours provide some busy days with plenty of experiences to enjoy, as well as time to relax along the way.

Your tour itinerary

Tour itinerary notes

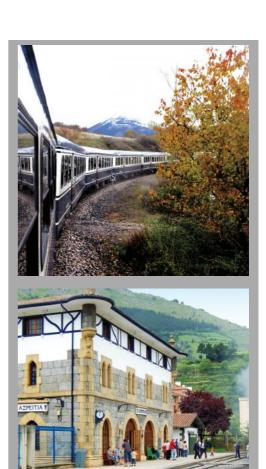
While our intention is to adhere to the day-by-day itinerary as printed below, a degree of flexibility is built in. Overnight stops may vary from those suggested.

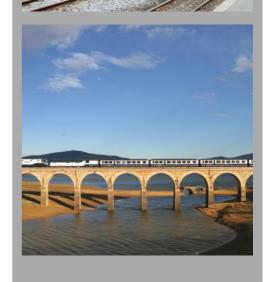
Your Tour Leader

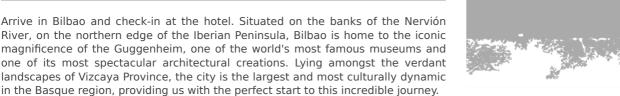
A Tour Leader is an integral part of any Explore tour and your tour will be led by one of our experienced Tour Leaders who have been handpicked and expertly trained. We believe that our Tour Leaders are the key to the success of our tours; they are passionate travellers who are bursting with first-hand local knowledge which they love to share. Your Tour Leader will also take care of all the planning and organisation throughout your journey. Their passionate approach will make this tour fun and inspiring, bringing the destination to life whether you're travelling alone or with others.

Join tour Bilbao

River, on the northern edge of the Iberian Peninsula, Bilbao is home to the iconic magnificence of the Guggenheim, one of the world's most famous museums and one of its most spectacular architectural creations. Lying amongst the verdant landscapes of Vizcaya Province, the city is the largest and most culturally dynamic in the Basque region, providing us with the perfect start to this incredible journey.









Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Bus to Azpeitia: visit Basque Railway museum

Early this morning we take a bus to the Basque Railway Museum, located in the old station at Azpeitia. The museum is considered one of the finest railway museums in Europe, its 25,000 square metres of tracks and pavilions housing a fascinating collection of rail memorabilia; with some 70 different vehicles on display, as well as an exhibition of railway clocks and one of the few remaining mechanical workshops to survive from the early years of the 20th century. Returning to Bilbao this afternoon, you will have free time to visit the Guggenheim museum.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Train to Santander; afternoon free

Heading west this morning we leave the Basque country behind us and take a train towards the mountainous landscapes of Cantabria and its elegant capital, Santander. A bustling port that looks out onto the waters of a deep bay, Santander is an engaging mix of the old and the new, its modern centre rebuilt after a devastating fire back in the early 1940s. Once a popular resort that attracted many of Spain's ruling elite during the early years of the 20th century, the city hugs the coastline around the Peninsula de la Magdalena and once we have checked in to our hotel, we will take a short walk to explore something of the bay. This afternoon has then been left free for personal exploration, affording a chance to visit the city's lovely Gothic-style cathedral, or perhaps wander through one of its museums. Santander can boast an array of fascinating exhibitions, from works by Goya and other 19th and 20th century artists, to Neolithic artefacts and rare whale skeletons, whilst the nearby Palacio de la Magdalena, once the summer palace of Alfonso XIII, reflects the town's 20th century links with Spanish royalty.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Train to Unquera; take funicular to Bulnes and walk in the Picos de Europa

This morning we continue west, following the coast of the fertile Costa Verde towards the old fortified port of Llanes. On arrival to the small village of Unquera we will make a direct transfer by bus up into the Picos de Europa, the beautiful mountain landscapes that lie to the south, whose towering peaks were the first comforting sight beheld by returning sailors to the European mainland. Arriving in the small village of Poncebos we then take the funicular railway (rack railway) up towards the remote community of Bulnes, where we can bask in the expansive grandeur of these mountains and take in the dominating heights of the Naranjo de Bulnes, at 2,519m one of the highest peaks in the national park. Spain's first national park, the Picos are made up of three distinct massifs that extend across Cantabria, Asturias and Castilla y Leon, offering a grand expanse of mountains and canyons that are home to a wealth of flora and fauna, including wolves, the last remaining brown bears in Western Europe and the ever-present chamois. We'll take an easy walk through this spectacular setting before returning down to Poncebos on the Funicular. Alternatively there is the chance to walk down into the valley through the dramatic Canal de Tejo Gorge (1,5h, 400m descent). Later in the afternoon we drive back on bus to Llanes to our hotel for an overnight stay.

Overnight: Standard Hotel Single Rooms Available



Train to Oviedo; afternoon free

The next stage of our journey takes us across the fertile plains of Asturias and onto the university town of Oviedo, the cultural and economic centre of the region. This was one of the few regions of Spain that didn't fall under the influence of the Moors and its medieval heart is still littered with examples of Pre-Romanesque architecture that dates back to the 8th-10th centuries. A free afternoon affords an opportunity to explore something of the city's past grandeur, especially around the grand Plaza Alfonso, which includes some finely preserved palaces and the Gothic facades of its cathedral. The church's exquisite interior contains the tombs of the Asturian nobility, as well as a superb 9th century chapel, the Camara Santa, which contains a dazzling wealth of Astrian art and golden relics. The city also contains an excellent art gallery and archaeological museum, whilst its outskirts are dotted with some superb Pre-Romanesque churches, including the magnificent Santa Maria des Naranco and the 9th century church of San Julian de los Prados, which is believed to be the largest of its kind left in Spain.

Overnight: Standard Hotel Single Rooms Available



Free in Oviedo

With more free time today you may choose to continue exploring Oviedo and its environs, or perhaps make the most of the time by taking some journeys by rail further afield. You might like to visit Colanzo or Laviana in the Rio Nalon basin, or else take the train to Gijon and visit the Asturias Railway Museum, built on the site of the old Renfe (Spanish railways) station that dates back to the 1870s. The museum was conceived to preserve the railways unique history in the region and its permanent exhibition provides a fascinating

insight into the relationship between the railways and the cultural and economic development of Asturias over the past century and a half.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Train to Ferrol, Galicia; bus to Santiago

Boarding the early morning train to Ferrol we head next for Spain's remote northwestern corner and the fertile landscapes of Galicia, a region whose inhabitants are fiercely proud of their Celtic origins and whose traditions and language offer an interesting contrast to much of the rest of mainland Spain. Arriving in Ferrol this afternoon (interestingly enough, the birthplace of General Franco) we then continue our journey by bus to the beautiful city of Santiago de Compostela, a city that during the Middle Ages was (after Jerusalem and Rome) the most important place of pilgrimage anywhere in the Christian world. On arrival we will transfer to our hotel, after which the rest of the afternoon is free to perhaps enjoy something of the elegant ambience of this historic city.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Exploring Santiago

Today has been left free to explore more of this most enigmatic of cities at your own pace, its historic centre being small enough to explore on foot. The 12th century Baroque cathedral, towering over the surrounding city streets amidst the majesty of the Praza do Obradoiro, is one of Christendom's holiest of shrines. Lying at the end of the famous pilgrim route of the Camino de Santiago, its crypt is believed to hold the tomb of St. James himself and the building's rich fusion of Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque styles is truly a work of the most exceptional architectural craftsmanship. Alternatively you may prefer to wander the city's narrow streets and visit some more of the myriad of architectural treasures that are dotted around the city. In the Convento de Santo Domingo de Bonaval you will find a folk museum dedicated to the Galacian region, whilst the Monasterio de San Martiño Pinario and the Palacio de Gelmirez are just two of the other jewels in this dazzling crown. And, at the end of the day, what better than to relax with a reviving drink on the Praza das Praterias and watch the world pass by.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Train to Ponferrada

Taking a taxi to the railway station we will board the morning train to Ponferrada in the Castilla Y Leon region, a landscape of expansive plains and rolling hills dotted with historic castles. Ponferrada's name stems from pons ferrata, a medieval bridge (reinforced with iron) that was constructed to aid the passage of pilgrims travelling along the Camino de Santiago towards the sacred city. Its imposing fortress, constructed by the Knights Templar between the 12th and 14th centuries, was built to protect the pilgrims, and in its time was considered one of the largest citadels in northwest Spain. Arriving this afternoon affords us an opportunity to take a walk along part of the pilgrim route after lunch, enjoying something of the idyllic landscape and quite villages as we walk in the footsteps of the countless devotees whose feet have trodden these trails for centuries.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**



Train to Leon; afternoon optional visits to cathedral and historic centre

This morning there is an opportunity for a stroll through Ponferrada and a chance to see the Templar Castle (closed on Mondays) before we board the late morning train to Leon, a city that once lay at the heart of the region's reconquest from the Moors during the 11th century. Once the centre of Christian Spain, during the time that two thirds of the peninsula was under Muslim rule, the two central buildings of the city are its great Gothic cathedral and the equally superb Romanesque Basilica de San Isidoro, both of which are without doubt two of the finest examples of their kind to be found anywhere in Spain. This afternoon there will be an opportunity to explore these remarkable edifices, along with the historic heart of the city. The cathedral is unique for the quality and magnificence of its stainedglass windows, which span seven centuries of history and cover subjects as diverse as religion, mythology and even medieval life, whilst San Isidoro is the final resting place of dozens of Christian kings and noble families, buried over centuries, beneath the stunning 12th century frescoes. Radiating out from the Plaza Mayor, the narrow streets are also filled with cafes, churches and old houses that provide a diverting choice of options for an afternoon of fascinating sightseeing.

Overnight: Standard Hotel **Single Rooms Available**

Morning free; afternoon narrow gauge train to Bilbao

After a free morning we will take the narrow gauge railway (the Ferrocarriles Espanoles de Via Estrecha) that runs from Leon and into the Basque region back towards Bilbao. The FEVE network encompasses the most extensive metre gauge system in mainland Europe and this section of the journey takes us some 7 hours, crossing through Vizcaya and Burgos and a small stretch of Cantabria as we make our way back across the Basque country to journey's end back in the port of Bilbao. The line was inaugurated in 1894 and brought coal from the Castilian mines around La Robla to the thrieving Basque industrial centres. The spectacular scenery is very mountainous with the highest point being at 700m altitude before the train gradually descends towards the coast.

Overnight: Standard Hotel Single Rooms Available



Tour ends Bilbao

Tour ends after breakfast. If there is time you have another chance to explore some more of this vibrant city, perhaps visiting the famous Guggenheim Museum.

Accommodation and Meals

Food & Drink

Included meals: 11 breakfasts, 0 lunches,0 dinners included in the price of this tour. Please be prepared to pay for non-included meals. Please note that costs for drinks and meals can vary depending on location.

Budgeting for your Tour

You will need some extra money to cover meals and drinks not included in the tour price, any optional sightseeing, souvenirs and items of a personal nature such as laundry.

Other Sightseeing & Activities

The following excursions and/or activities are usually available and may be arranged locally. Estimated costs are provided below for guidance only, are on a per person basis unless shown otherwise, and may depend on the number of participants. Prices quoted are correct as of the date these tour notes were originally issued but may change at any time due to currency fluctuations.

Please note: These activities are booked and paid for direct with the supplier and do not form part of your Explore holiday contract.

Optional Excursions

Bilbao

Guggenheim Museum - 11 euros; special exhibits 13 euros

Altamira

Visit to Cave Museum - 10 euros rtn (time permitting)

Oviedo

Asturias Railway Museum - 2.40 euros

Leon

Cathedral entrance fee - 5 euros; guided visit (including entrance) - 10 euros Walk along section of Camino de Santiago - 25 euros (depending on numbers)

Tipping - Tour Leader

At your discretion you might also consider tipping your Tour Leader in appreciation of the efficiency and service you receive.

Tipping - Local Crew

Although entirely voluntary, tipping is a recognised part of life in this region of the world. Some local staff will look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided. Accordingly, you should allow approximately €10-20 for tipping.

In order to make things easier for you, the Tour Leaders may organise a group's tips kitty and if this is the case, they will account for it throughout the tour.

Foreign Exchange

Spain

ATM Availability: Your tour leader will advise you on arrival.

Credit Card Acceptance: Visa and Mastercard are generally accepted in larger restaurants and some shops.

EXPLORE The Adventure Travel Experts available online 24/7

Travellers Cheques: Not recommended.

Local Currency: Euros

Recommended Currency for Exchange: We recommend you take the majority of your spending money in Euros cash.

Where to Exchange: Your tour leader will advise you on arrival.

Joining your Tour

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Booking a land only package with Explore

For passengers making their own travel arrangements, please ensure you join the group as described on day one of the tour itinerary. If you are considering purchasing your own airline tickets, you can book these through any travel agent, directly with an airline or through an online flight consolidator. In all cases, we would be happy to arrange transfers to and from the joining point of your tour if required.

Joining Tour Abroad

Clients booked on 'Land Only' arrangements should make their own way to the joining point. Please refer to separate 'Joining Instructions' for time and place of rendezvous with tour leader

Booking a flight inclusive package with Explore

We have a good selection of flights not only from London but from many regional airports around the UK allowing us to compare fares between scheduled carriers as well as low cost and charter airlines. Our dedicated flights team will match the best flight options to your arrival and departure airport.

On our website we display a UK flight inclusive package guide price which is generally based on a London departure. To avoid paying supplements or to secure your preferred flight option, we recommend booking as early as possible, especially for peak travel dates.

Important Information

Travel Insurance

It is a condition of joining any of our tours that you must have valid travel insurance. It must indicate that you have cover for (at least) medical expenses and emergency repatriation in the event of illness or injury. Medical and repatriation insurance cover is not mandatory for UK residents who are travelling in England and Scotland. We also strongly recommend your policy includes curtailment, personal effects and cancellation protection as all deposits paid are non-refundable.

If you require travel insurance for your tour, Explore Worldwide is an appointed representative of Campbell Irvine Limited, who is authorised and regulated by the Financial Services authority. Our travel insurance policy is specially tailored to the needs of the adventure traveller and will cover you for any included activity on any Explore trip. You can either purchase this at the time of booking or call us on 0844 499 0903 after you have booked.

Visa Information

Spain: Visas are not required by UK, Australian, New Zealand, US and Canadian citizens. Other nationalities should consult their local embassy or consular office.

All visa information is subject to change. You should confirm all visa related questions with the relevant Embassy prior to departure.

Vaccinations & Protection

Spain

Nothing compulsory. Tetanus recommended. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at http://www.explore.co.uk/Travelhealth/ and from your local healthcare provider. Vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed before departure.

Preparing for your Tour

Climate

Spain

Overall, spring, early summer and autumn are ideal times for a Spanish trip - though the weather varies enormously from region to region. The high central plains suffer from fierce extremes, stiflingly hot in summer, bitterly cold and swept by freezing winds in winter. The Atlantic coast, in contrast, has a tendency to damp and mist, and a relatively brief, humid summer. The Mediterranean south is warm virtually all year round.



Clothing

Lightweight cotton clothing is best from June to September, light rainwear may be needed at any time of year, but especially after the start of September, and a warm fleece/light jacket is recommended for cooler evenings and nights at the beginning and end of the season. Don't forget a swimming costume.

Equipment

A head torch (for use on day 4 of the tour), water bottle, sunhat and high factor sunscreen are all essential.

Footwear

Good comfortable trainers or lightweight walking shoes. Sandals for relaxing.

Luggage: On Tour

One main piece of baggage and daypack. Remember you are expected to carry your own luggage so don't overload yourself.

Luggage allowance on tour: 20kg

General Information

Food

The prices for meals and drinks can vary greatly depending upon location and the prices detailed below are an average guide. In general you would expect that drinks purchased in a supermarket or local bar to be less expensive, whilst drinks in an upmarket bar or restaurant may be more expensive. The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch £: 8.00 Dinner £: 15.00

Drink

Spain

Bottle of Beer £: 2.5 Water £: 1.40

Country details

Spain

Population: 46,030,109

Size of Country: 504,782 sq km

Major Language: Castilian Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Basque

Religion: Roman Catholic Time Difference to GMT: +1

Electric Supply & Plugs

Spain

2 Pin Round

Why Choose Explore

We've been creating award-winning pioneering adventure holidays for over 30 years, earning the trust of thousands of delighted customers, who feel safe in our hands. Our tour leaders have expert local knowledge and our tours are designed to take you off the beaten track to see the most exotic, inspiring and dramatic places in the world.

- With over 30 years experience, we are passionate about what we do.
- Pioneering small group adventures & tailormade holidays.
- Award winning tour leaders who you can trust.
- Responsible travel is and always has been one the driving principles of Explore.

Our adventure holidays are full of exciting things to see and do, exploring in small groups travelling by bus, boat, plane, rickshaw, camel, elephant, or any number of unusual forms of transport. Often you will stay in family run hotels and village houses and enjoy authentic local cuisine. In this way, it's easy to discover the true heart of the people and the place you travel to - and make some



new friends along the way. Each tour is uniquely different, so please feel free to browse through our tours to see what may whet your appetite.

Our commitment to the environment

We are passionate about sustainable travel and work hard to create tours where your holiday delivers real benefits to the local communities. We minimise our impact by travelling in small groups, respecting local cultures and traditional, reducing waste and offsetting 100% of the CO2 from our flights.

When you travel with Explore, you are directly contributing to local economies and helping empower the people you meet. We currently support a range of charities and good causes, including: The Sunshine Orphanage (which cares for abandoned children in Luxor, Egypt), Education for All (sponsoring children through their secondary education in Morocco), The Hope Foundation (helping an Indian Village to recover from the 2004 Tsunami) and the Mufindi Orphanage, which support AIDS orphans in Tanzania.

We also care passionately about the world's wildlife. We are patrons of the Born Free Organisation, Travel Operators for Tigers (helping save the Bengal Tiger from extinction) and Friends for Conservation. We have also adopted a beautiful Sri Lankan Elephant called 'Serendip'.

We are delighted to have received a Five Star sustainable tourism status from the Association of Independent Tour Operators in recognition of our on-going commitment to sustainable tourism.

Cool Earth

Explore are delighted to support Cool Earth to reduce carbon emissions through preventing the illegal deforestation of the South America rainforest. One of the top sources of global carbon emissions, rainforest deforestation equivalent to the USA's annual emissions, it also destroys flora and fauna, sometimes to the point of extinction. It also degrades the lives and communities of the 350 million residents of the rainforest.

Cool Earth prevents the deforestation through its support of local communities as forest guardians and by focussing on areas in immediate danger of deforestation. It has so far protected over 350,000 acres of rainforest, with each acre saving an emission of 260 tons of CO2, as well as protecting rare animals and plants. When you travel on an Explore holiday we make a donation to Cool Earth that exceeds the impact of our customers flights each year. In addition to mitigating emissions, when you travel with Explore, you are helping to protect the source of 20% of the world's fresh water and oxygen, as well as the livelihoods of the 1.6 billion people who are reliant on the rainforest. www.coolearth.org

Earth Matters

- The Travel Foundation
 - Explore are active members and supporters of the Travel Foundation which has established a variety of sustainable tourism projects in destinations and works with industry to improve practice. Visit their website www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk
- Tourism Concern
 - Explore support the work of Tourism Concern who campaign for fairly and ethically traded tourism, and are part of its Ethical Tour Operator Group www.tourismconcern.org.uk
- For further information on responsible travel go to http://www.explore.co.uk/ResponsibleTourism/

Know before you go

We strongly recommend that you check your government's travel advisory for up-to-date information and advice about your destination: safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs. For UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Advice follow the link at http://www.explore.co.uk/essential-travel-information/travel-resources/travel-safety

Booking Your Holiday

Peace of mind - book with confidence

You can book your Explore holiday with confidence, as all monies paid to us for your trip are fully protected. Explore is a fully bonded tour operator licensed by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and by ABTOT.

The air holiday packages (Tours including flights) that we advertise are ATOL protected, since we hold an Air Travel Organiser's Licence granted by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is ATOL 2595. In addition, As a member of the Association of Bonded Travel Organisers Trust Limited (ABTOT), Explore has provided a bond to meet the requirements of the Package Travel, Package Holidays and Package Tours Regulations 1992. Please note that packages booked outside the UK are only protected when purchased directly with Explore.

Reserving your place

To reserve your place on this tour you will need to check availability on the Explore website or through our dedicated call centre based in the UK where you can. Our tours can fill up quickly so you are advised to book as early as possible. If your chosen date is 'Available' or 'Guaranteed' we will be able to provisionally hold you a space for up to 48 hours.

The easiest way to confirm your booking is through our website. When you are ready to book, we normally require a 10% nonrefundable deposit, but for some holidays this may be more to cover such items as permit fees, internal flights or other non-refundable services. If your travel starts within 60 days of booking, full payment will be required at the time of booking



100% No Surcharge Guarantee

The price paid for our holidays is no longer subject to change. Once booked and confirmed we will guarantee the price you pay will not increase, whatever the circumstances. You will not be approached to pay fuel surcharges unlike the vast majority of other adventure tour operators. The price guarantee applies to all new bookings departing between 1st January 2013 and 31st December 2014.

Tour Itinerary Versions

Itinerary details may vary depending on departure date and alternative itineraries for this tour may exist. Please refer to the dates and prices page on our website to check which itinerary operates on each departure date.

Please ensure that you have an up-to-date copy of these tour notes immediately before you travel, as from time to time our itineraries may be amended, either for operational reasons or in response to feedback from customers. You will be informed of any major changes to your tour but small changes may just be added to these tour notes.

Please note: 2014 itinerary versions are applicable to tours departing in 2014. 2015/16 itinerary versions are applicable to tours departing from 1st January to 31st December 2015.

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