Maribel’s Guide to the País Vasco ©
The Basque Country Including the Rioja Alta and Alavesa

Highlights/Must Sees of the Basque Country

The capitals of the three Basque Provinces of Spain are San Sebastián (Donostia) in Gipuzkoa, Bilbao (Bilbo) in Bizkaia and Vitoria (Gasteiz) in Alava.

- **Laguardia**, capital of the Rioja Alavesa wine region and the back door drive on the A 2124 through Peñacerrada from Laguardia to Vitoria, past the scenic viewing spot, the **Balcón de la Rioja**, where on a clear day you can see the entire Ebro valley.

- The coastal villages of **Hondarribia, Zarautz, Getaria, Zumaia** (Gipúzkoa) and **Lekeitio, Mundaka, Elantxobe** (Bizkaia).

- The Biosphere Reserve of **Urdabai**, north of Gernika with its pretty beaches of Laida and Laga, plus the caves of Santimamiñe and the adjacent Ibarrola painted forest, the Bosque Pintado de Oma and spectacular sea views from the **Shrine of Gaztelugatxe**.

- **Gernika**, the spiritual homeland of the Basques and home of moving Gernika Museum of Peace, commemorating the saturation bombing on market day, April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War.

- The “Swiss Alps” of the Basque Country, from **Amurrio** to **Balmaseda**.

- The **Duranguesado** valley; the seigniorial village of **Elorrio** and hamlet of **Axpe**, south of Bilbao, in the Valley of Silence.
Preparations for your trip

About the language

The Basque language of Euskara, or alternatively spelled Euskera, is an incomprehensible (to non-Basques), non-Indo European language of unknown origin spoken for more than 4,000 years and now by about 700,000 people on both sides of the Pyrénées, the Pays Basque (French Basque) and País Vasco (Spanish Basque). On the Spanish side, in the last twenty years the percentage of Basque who speak euskera has increased, and now about 30% of the population is Basque speaking. The Basque language existed in this part of the world before the Greek, Latin, Slavic, Germanic, Celtic languages. When the Romans arrived, they told of encountering a people who had lived here “since the dawn of time”. Basque is extremely difficult to learn as an adult, and it has a spelling with mostly consonants that looks like a typing exercise gone wild, has twenty cases, twelve declinations, but pronunciation is phonetic. It has many different regional dialects, as well.

As a traveler, all the Euskara you really need to know are the Basque names for the towns/cities you plan to visit, as you'll see road signs always written in Euskara, replacing the Castilian names: Donostia, rather than San Sebastián, Iruna or Iruña rather than Pamplona, Gasteiz rather than Vitoria, Basteri instead of Laguardia and Hondarribia, in place of Fuenterrabía will be used on road signs. Bilbo for Bilbao is the easy one. Euskadi is the politically correct term for the Basque Country or the more historically inclusive Euskal Herria, which means the Basque Lands, including Navarra and the 3 French Basque provinces. A euskaldun is a speaker of the Basque language.

An inexhaustible source for everything to do with the Basque language and Basque culture can be found at: buber.net.

Here is a mini-dictionary that should help see you through your travels in the Basque country.

- **Polite expressions:** Hello (Kaixo), goodbye (agur), yes (bai), no (ez), thank you (eskerrik asko or milesker), please (plazer baduzu or mesedez), How are you? (zer moduz), good morning (egun on), good night (gabon), welcome (ongi etorri), excuse me (barkatu)

- **Place names:** Restaurant (jatetxea), house (etxea), street (kalea), city center (hirigune), beach (hondartza), road (bidea), mountain (mendi) valley (larran), ocean (itsasoa), tourist office (turismoa bulegoa), outdoor market (azoka), airport (aireportua), city hall (udaletxea), toilets (komunak), super market (merkatua), parking lot (aparkalekua)

- **Road signs:** Danger (kontuz), closed (itxita), exit (irteera)

- **Food and drink:** Small beer (zuritoa), glass of red wine (ardo beltza), cider (sagardoa), water (ura), wild mushrooms (perretxikoak), breakfast (gosaria), lunch (bazkaria), dinner (afaria), fish (arraina), bread (ogia), bakery (okindegia), ewe’s milk cheese (ardi gasna)
The Basque police force is called **Ertzaintza**. They wear blue dress shirts and snappy red berets.

**Maps**

I urge, beg, implore you to buy the very detailed regional Michelin map **#573, País Vasco, Rioja, Navarra**. I guarantee you will find it to be a godsend, as it has the Basque as well as Spanish names for the places you will want to visit. Available at Rand McNally travel shops (randmcnally.com) as well as most of the better bookstores. Or you can purchase the Michelin maps at gas stations throughout Spain. Also stop at any tourist office and pick up their handy road map of Euskadi, which is even more detailed than the Michelin map, as well as any other information that may be available. Their brochures are well done. And ask for their **Dua Euskaraz** Basque dictionary.

**Useful web sites**

- [www.paisvascoturismo.com](http://www.paisvascoturismo.com)
- [www.basquecountrytourism.net](http://www.basquecountrytourism.net)
- [www.gipuzkoa.net](http://www.gipuzkoa.net)
- [www.bilbao.net](http://www.bilbao.net)
- [www.sansebastianturismo.org](http://www.sansebastianturismo.org)
- [www.bizkaiacostavasca.org](http://www.bizkaiacostavasca.org)
- [www.biadasoaturismo.com](http://www.biadasoaturismo.com)
- [www.laguardia-alava.com](http://www.laguardia-alava.com)

**Guide Books**

- Footprint Bilbao and the Basque Lands
- Cadogan’s Bilbao and the Basque Lands
- Hachette Vacances The Basque Country (great cultural info)
- Petit Futé Pays Basque (in French)

**About lodging**

In the Basque Country, you’ll find accommodations for all budgets, from two castle-Paradors (in Hondarribia, Gipúzkoa province, and Argómaniz, Alava), to 5 star hotels, moderate to budget hotels, apartments, and rural homes or B&B’s called “casas rurales” or “agroturismos”.

These “casas rurales” are similar to the agroturismos of Italy and the “gites” or “chambres d’hôtes” of France, all located in the countryside; some owners are farmers, some are not, but they all have received grants from the EC to renovate their homes and have done so with style, and they may not rent out more than six rooms. A double room costs from 40-60 euros per night. A few even have pools, some can be rented whole, some offer Internet access, but very, very few are equipped with air conditioning. The houses belonging to the official Nekazalturismoa Association are of a high standard and can often be as comfortable as a 2, even a 3-star hotel. You’ll find further information, a list of all properties and eight pictures of each house at [nekatur.net](http://nekatur.net). To
reserve at any of these rural homes, email the association at agroturismo@nekatur.net or call the agency directly at Tel: 902 130 031 or fax: 943 326 700. There is a handy Nekatur office located in the Kursaal Center in San Sebastián where you can pick up a catalogue of these homes.

**My favorite “casas rurales”**

**In Guipúzcoa province**

- **Hondarribia**
  - **Iketxe** or the **Artizarra**, (for a whole house rental of 3 bedrooms/3 baths, living room, garden with picnic tables and lounge chairs-no kitchen, just microwave and tiny fridge)

- **San Sebastián**
  - **Kanpoeder**, in the hills 3 km. above the city
  - **On the coast west of San Sebastián**
  - **Casa Landarte**, very artistically decorated, owned by a television personality
  - **A few minutes below the coast in Aia**

- **Txangiluenea Etxea**, a lovely house rental that sleeps 10.

**Bizkaia province**

- **In the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve, near Gernika**
  - **Txopebenta** or for an apartment, the **Urresti**
  - **Onxtene** (new and beautiful)

- **Near the coast, northwest of Bilbao, within an easy drive of the Urdaibai**
  - **Larrakoetxea** (as comfy as a hotel, complete with a/c, internet access and restaurant)

**In Alava province**

- **In the “Switzerland of the Basque Country”**
  - **Iruaritz** (for romantics) or the **Usko** (for families - has a pool)

- **Ibaizar Baserria** and **Casa Maribel**

**About ETA**

Although the terrorist group ETA (stands for Basque Homeland and Freedom in euskara) sadly, has brutally assassinated almost 900 people since 1968, their victims have been overwhelmingly members of the military, police and politicians, representatives of the Spanish government. Spain receives 45 million tourists every year. Not one single American tourist has been a seriously wounded by ETA. And now with their proclaimed ceasefire holding and their negotiations with the current government, you should feel particularly safe in planning a trip to the Basque Country. You may encounter an occasional demonstration, either anti or pro ETA in San Sebastián, Bilbao or Vitoria, but there will be a very heavy police presence there to make sure the demonstrations remain peaceful. There are small pockets of the Basque Country that are very outwardly, “in your face” pro-ETA or pro independence, primarily the heavily industrial,
working class enclaves of Eibar, Errentería, Hernani, Astigarraga and Mondragón (30 jailed ETA members hail from this town, where 50% of the population speaks euskara). You may not feel comfortable with the pro ETA sentiment seen on signs, posters, graffiti if you happen to land in one of these communities, but you will be in no danger, ETA’s struggle has forever been with the Spanish government, not with tourists to the Basque Country.

July jazz festivals

If you’re a jazz lover, the three capital cities of the Basque Country celebrate major jazz festivals during July, attracting some of the world’s greatest jazz musicians. The Bilbao International Jazz Festival is celebrated in the upscale suburb of Getxo on the coast at the beginning of July, followed by the Festival of Jazz in Vitoria-Gasteiz and Jazzaldia, in San Sebastian-Donostia, at the end of the month.

Schedules are posted on jazzeuskadi.com.

San Sebastián - Donostia

Compact, elegant, sophisticated and stately, San Sebastián is a Parisian looking city filled with Belle Époque architecture, called “La Bella Easo”, and is considered one of Spain’s most beautiful destinations, the pearl of the Cantabrian Sea. You’ll marvel at the elegance of both the spectacular turn of the century homes and the setting along the beautiful crescent shaped La Concha beach, which along with El Sardinero in Santander, is the prettiest stretch of sand in Spain. San Sebastián was made famous during the second half of the 19th century by the Spanish Royal Family who came here to take the waters. It became the official summer residence of the Spanish Court.

Tourist Information

The TI is located on the right side of street at the end of Zurriola Bridge going towards the bay. There you will find a friendly young staff who can answer your questions in English, provide you with maps, info on touring, maps, adventure sports, inexpensive lodging in agrotourist homes. A stop here is obligatory. Open in summer from 8:00 am – 8:00 pm, except Sundays when it opens from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm, and from 3:00 – 7:00 pm. See: sansebastianturismo.com.

When to visit

July and August are the busiest months of the tourist season, when most Spaniards take their month long vacations; so lodging will be at a premium. Please book ASAP. The winters are very rainy. September is the ideal month. Early June is also good, as the high season rates don’t start until July 1 or even July 15. The water will be warm enough for swimming (although it’s a bit too nippy for timid tastes), but it does rain quite a bit-for every four days in San Sebastián, perhaps one will be a great beach day! When you arrive head straight to the helpful tourist office across from the Victoria
Eugenia Theater and pick up a copy of Donostiaisia, your guide to culture, gastronomy and leisure in the city.

Festivals

The **International Jazz Festival** is held in late July. See the schedule at jazzaldia.com. If you find yourself in the city in July, please be sure to take advantage and attend a concert. We’ve had wonderful experiences, having recently seen such greats as Wynton Marsalis, Chick Correa, Bob Dylan (peace concert), Rubén Blades, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, Neville Brothers, Caetano Veloso. There are two outdoor venues: one facing the beach behind the Kursaal Center and one in the tiny Plaza de la Trinidad in the Old Quarter. Remember that the “reserved” seating is first come, first served, so be sure to arrive at least 1 hr. before the concert starts, if not earlier, particularly for the miniscule Plaza de la Trinidad, if you hope to grab one of the folding wooden chairs. If not, be prepared to stand for the entire time.

The **Quincena Musical** (quincenamusical.com/index-c.html) is a month long classical musical and dance program that goes from first week of Aug. to first week of September. In 2003 it featured the Philharmonics of Israel, Berlin, Ballet of Monte Carlo. It is recommended that you purchase your tickets in advance.

**Semana Grande** in mid-August features fireworks, bullfights and parades.

**Regattas** of the thirteen-member “trainera” boats are held in the bay on the first two Sundays of September.

Also in late September is the prestigious **International Film Festival**, now in its 52nd year (sansebastianfestival.ya.com). Stars, such as Jessica Lange, who was honored last year, stay at the venerable Hotel Westin María Cristina. Tickets may be purchased at the Festival Ticket Office at the Kursaal Center.

**La Tamborrada** - January 20. Participating in San Sebastian’s La Tamborrada festival is easy; all you have to do is bang on a drum. For 24 hours from the first stroke after midnight on January 20, St. Sebastian’s day, the city’s culinary societies of the Old Quarter parade in full 19th century military regalia through the streets with a non-stop ear-splitting whacking of drums that keeps everyone awake, in honor of their patron saint. Some say this dates back to 1720, when a baker filling water barrels from a local fountain began to sing, and passing girls banged on the barrels to accompany him. Others claim the event recalls how the town’s laundresses mocked invading Napoleonic troops during the 1800s Peninsular War by following them around banging on their washtubs. The procession kicks off in Plaza de la Constitución and is phenomenally noisy. The drum beating itself used to be the domain of males only, but although some groups are still holding out, there are now female participants, too. It’s becoming increasingly popular: in 1967 there were fewer than a dozen teams and by last year the number had risen to over 90. Today over 8,000 "Txoko" (gastronomic society) members dress up as chefs and soldiers to re-enact this event. There’s also a children’s section in which several thousand youngsters get to have the time of their lives. If you’ll
be in S.S. at this time, find issue #65 of Saveur magazine, which has a great article about this even, “Land of the Marching Cooks” by Fodor’s George Semler.

**Sightseeing**

Take the seaside promenade down beautiful *La Concha beach* from one end of the bay to the other, a distance of only 2 km. On a sunny summer day, everyone will be out on the beach doing the same brisk beach stroll. The two favorite activities of the “donostiarras” (inhabitants of San Sebastián) are walking and eating. Walk from the beginning of La Concha beyond the fishing quarter to the end, then over to Ondarreta beach down as far as the Chillida sculpture, the Comb of the Winds. One of Europe’s finest beach strolls!

Ride the 1920 funicular railway, with its wooden carriages, painted red with Coca Cola ads, a 5-minute ride, from a station behind the tennis club at the very far end of the Ondarreta beach up to *Monte Igueldo* at sunset for lovely views of the bay and mountains. There is also a small amusement park there for children. The Funicular runs from 11:00 am to 10:00 pm. daily. Roundtrip tickets are 2€. Look for the famous Chillida sculpture, “El Peine de los Vientos” at the very far end the bay past the Branka restaurant.

Visit the 19th century *Cathedral Buen Pastor* in the modern quarter of the city, the side of many a summer wedding.

Stroll through the grounds of the *Palacio Miramar*, the former summer home of Spanish monarchy in the 19th century.

In the morning don’t miss a visit to the fishermen’s quarter (puerto pesquero), also called “el muelle” for a visit to the new little *aquarium* right at the pier, which has a walk-through tunnel displaying aquatic life. Admission is 10€

Open July 1 - August 31 daily from 10:00 am – 9:00 pm.

For other dates see the web site at: [aquariumss.com/en/aquarium/visitas/visitas.htm](http://aquariumss.com/en/aquarium/visitas/visitas.htm).

In summer, till August 31, take the free microbus to the top of *Monte Urgull* sitting on the eastern end of the bay above the Old Quarter. The top of Monte Urgull is a city park, closed to traffic and is crowned by the semi-ruined Mota castle and a huge Franco era sculpture of Christ. The bus service departs from the Victoria Eugenia Theatre every 30 minutes, from 11:00 am -1:30, then 5:00 – 8:00 pm.

San Sebastián is one of Spain’s most delightfully walk-able cities, but if you find yourself just too tired to walk....

See the city by taking the *Donosti Tour Bus Turístico* that departs from the Victoria Eugenia Theater. It has two routes, route 1 is the city route, Donostia Clásica and route 2 takes you to the wonderful Chillida Leku outdoor sculpture museum in suburban Hernani. Because the bus runs infrequently for route 2, I suggest that you take a city bus instead to the Chillida Leku.
If you decide to use the Donosti Tour Bus, just buy a ticket for route #1, which costs a rather pricey 12€. Along with your ticket you’ll receive a 10% discount for several attractions, including the Aquarium, Chillida Leku Museum, Monte Igueldo funicular, guided tour of the Kursaal Center and La Perla spa, plus 10% discounts at my favorite handicraft shops, Saski-Naski and Alboka.

Or take a bicycle taxi for two through the city from the square, Alameda de Boulevard, leading into the Old Quarter.

Also visit the two amazing, bustling city markets, trying to hit them between 10:00 am – 1:00 pm. First Mercado de la Brecha in the "Parte Vieja" (Old Quarter), now underneath a two-story shopping mall where you’ll rub elbows with the culinary star chefs of the Basque Country (such as Martin Berasategui, Pedro Subijana and Juan Mari Arzak) who will be choosing the freshest of fish for their famous Michelin-starred dining emporiums that day. This market, along with Bilbao’s Mercado de la Ribera, rivals Barcelona’s La Boqueria in the amazing variety and quality of food on display.

Then move on to downtown to the newly inaugurated Mercado de San Martín on the corner of San Marcial and Loyola. This market has an exciting look and a great buzz to it and is housed on two floors, with gourmet boutiques plus meats/vegetable/cheese stands on the ground floor and the fishmongers in the lower, basement level along with a handy supermarket with coffee bar, “Barrentxeea”. In the same building you’ll find a Zara clothing store and FNAC plus Bar SM with lively outdoor terrace. A creation of the Bar SM won the 3rd place award in this year’s annual pintxos competition.

The Museo de San Telmo, housed in a Dominican convent in the Old Quarter, has a Renaissance cloister and minor works by El Greco, Rubens, Ribera and Goya plus rooms dedicated to the Basque post-impressionist Ignacio Zuloaga, and some very interesting rooms dedicated to Basque ethnography, but parts may be under renovation. Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm and again from 4:00 to 7:30 pm. It’s open Sundays and Holidays from 10:30 am to 2:00 pm. In July - August open Tuesday - Saturday from 9:30 am - 8:30 pm, Sunday and Holidays from 10:30 am – 2:00 pm. Closed Monday. Admission is free.

While in the Old Quarter, also visit the Iglesia de San Vicente on Calle 31 de agosto. This 15th century church is the oldest monument in San Sebastian. Also in the Old Quarter you should pay a visit to the Baroque church of Santa María del Coro, the patron saint of the city, particularly for Sunday mass with organ music. The Santa Maria directly faces the Iglesia de Buen Pastor in the new town.

In the evening sit at a seaside "terraza" for cocktails and music, such as the Bar Basque on Miramar #5 or the newer La Perla.

Try the spa and thalassotherapy (seaweed) treatments at the beachside La Perla Spa. Its restaurant is a very well recommended place to dine overlooking the bay. They offer a spa treatment and dinner package, or a 1 hr 45 minute thalasso treatment for 18. See la-perla.net. A Monday - Friday set lunch is available for only 15,50€.
When it reopens, check who’s performing at the ornate Teatro Victoria Eugenia. (Currently closed for renovation)

You can also check out what’s doing (or take a back stage tour) at the controversial design (giant blocks of glass cubes) by Navarra architect and Pritzker Prize winner, Rafael Moneo, the Kursaal performing arts center (kursaal.org), where opera and ballet are sometimes held. Also where the Jazz Festival is held in late July and International Film Festival is held in late September. Guided tours at 1:30 pm weekdays and on weekends at 11:30 am, 12:30 pm and 1:30 pm.

If you are a sculpture lover, please, please take a bus or drive to suburban Hernani, 12 km. from the city, to visit the wonderful open-air sculpture museum, opened in 2000, of Eduardo Chillida (who died in 2003), the Henry Moore or Alexander Calder of Spain and native son of San Sebastián (eduardo-chillida.com).

Chillida Leku, the museum-sculpture park, is a peaceful haven on a beautifully manicured hillside amongst the oaks, chestnuts, cedars, and beech and apple trees. “Leku” in Basque means “space” or “place”, so this is Chillida’s Place.

Stroll among his wonderful, 40 odd monoliths made of iron, steel and granite (you’re free to touch) on 30 acres of wooded grounds then visit his open, wall-less, cathedral-like-space, 16th century farmhouse-museum, “Zabalaga”, a sculpture in and of itself, where you can view his smaller pieces of stone, translucent alabaster and steel (no touching here) and his drawings, many are tributes to fellow artists, on the 2nd floor. You can rent an audio guide at the shop before you begin your tour. The Garayar bus G2 to the museum leaves from Calle Oquendo in San Sebastián every half hour. A visit is particularly beguiling on a summer Sunday morning when you may be serenaded by a classic quartet playing next to a sculpture while you’re wandering the grounds. If you come in August, check the schedule for the Quincena Musical, as the farmhouse is one of the venues for these classical music concerts.

**Tapas (Pintxos) Hopping in the Old Quarter**

Your most essential "must do" in San Sebastián occurs in the evening at around 21h00 (9:00 pm), but before then, stop by the tourist office and pick up their Pintxos Guide. On a very empty stomach, you should head straight to the "Parte Vieja" (just follow the crowd), which has the largest concentration of bars in all of Europe (a total of 500!), for the required tapas stroll, called here the "poteo" or “txikiteo" in Basque. The custom is to have one drink (either a “zurito” or a “txakoli” (see below) and one pintxo per person in a bar, then move on to the next and do the same, and so on. Most Spaniards do this with a group of friends their “cuadrilla”, and count on hitting as many bars as members of their group. Most San Sebastián’s pintxos bars are self-serve. You help yourself to whatever on the counter appeals to you and tell the bartender how many you’ve consumed to get your check at the end. You never, ever pay as you go. It’s the old honor system, and it works well, surprisingly enough. But it’s best for one person in your group to do all the ordering, to help the bartender out, as they do have a remarkable way of keeping track of your order in the controlled chaos that is txikiteo time. In some bars, when ordering hot pintxos from the kitchen, the bartender will ask...
for your first name so as to call it out when your order is ready. And the pintxos sampling is usually done standing up, but there are a few bars that do have long, communal tables for sit-down pintxos sampling. And a few even have waiters that will take your order if it’s no during rush hour.

"Txikiteo" comes from the word "txikto", which is a wide rimmed, short glass in which the local drink of choice, “Txakoli”, a young, apple-tart, slightly fizzy white wine produced in the fishing village of Getaria, is served. It’s poured with a flourish, from above head height, falling into wide rimmed tumblers, which gives it its fizz or bounce. It’s low in alcohol and fresh, with the slight taste of apple and acidic. Or have a “zurito”, which is draft beer served in the same glass. A “clara” is a draft beer cut with La Casera, a sweet soda, similar to the French panaché or a shandy. In the narrow, lively and noisy streets of the old quarter you'll find dozens and dozens of pintxos bars, one trying to outdo the other in the sophistication and presentation of the tapas served, and each one proudly displays the gastronomic awards (the berets or “txapelas” it has won. San Sebastian and Bilbao have the most refined, gourmet tapas of anywhere in Spain. They’re truly an art form, haute cuisine in miniature!

A Primer on the Art of Pintxos hopping by Burt Wolf

“The land of the Basques runs along the northeast coast of the Iberian Peninsula with three provinces in France and four in Spain. Surrounded by the Pyrenees Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, their history goes back for tens of thousands of years. In fact, the Basques have the most ancient culture in Europe and accordingly the most ancient local flavor.

The local flavor of the Basque kitchen reflects the history of the region. The ancient Romans did a little trading with the Basques and introduced wheat, olive oil and wine making. Which was rather important since all three elements are essential to one of the great gastronomic traditions of the Basques—a tradition known as the pintxos bar.

Most pintxos bars are standing room only (no tables or chairs) street front establishments offering quick snacks, beer and wine. The pintxos bars I visited were about 15 feet wide and 30 to 40 feet deep, with a bar running from the big open front door to the back wall.

Like the Spanish tapas, a pintxo is similar to a small open sandwich or an appetizer on a toothpick; each sized to give you one or two bites. A pintxo might be a wedge of onion omelet, a purée of tuna on a small slice of crusty bread that’s topped with a grilled fresh anchovy, or a mini Bayonne ham and cheese sandwich on a tiny roll. A pintxo could also be stuffed baby squid on a skewer served in its own ink or two perfectly grilled shrimp. The most famous pintxo is called a Gilda. It consists of olives, local peppers and fresh anchovies threaded onto a toothpick. The name comes from the 1946 movie in which Rita Hayworth slowly peeled off her evening gloves. It was a hot and spicy film that shocked the nation. The hot and spicy Gilda pintxo is a companion work.
Dozens of different pintxos cover the top of the bar and you help yourself to whatever you want. The variety is enormous. The bartenders pour small glasses of wine or beer and refill the pintxos plates. Pintxos-eating reflects Basque traditions in that the form offers great freedom of choice, unrestricted movement and the honor system, all essential elements in Basque culture.

Pintxos eaters travel in groups with a more or less established route. Each pintxos bar has a dozen or so specialties and the groups have agreed on which ones they like. If one member of the group has missed the opening round he or she will know where the second or third round will be taking place and can easily catch up. The ritual begins each evening at about 7 o’clock and continues for two hours. The streets of San Sebastián’s old city are packed with pintxos groups moving from bar to bar.

It’s your responsibility to keep track of how many pintxos you eat and to announce the total when you are ready to leave, at which point the bartender will tell you how much the group owes. In some groups each individual pays for a round, in others there’s a communal purse that is replenished throughout the evening and maintained by the individual with the best math skills.

Pintxos bars take part in annual competitions and proudly display their medals. You can get a list of winners to guide you but the easiest way to spot a good pintxos bar is to look inside. If the place is full, the bartenders are busy, people are constantly going in and out, and you see things you want to eat, you’ve found the right place.

Three or four bars and you have had a wonderful meal at which point you can head to the town square for coffee and a pastry."

My personal favorites are the new, fantastic, “don’t miss” La Cuchara de San Telmo at the far right end of an alley, No. 28 next to the church and Asador, off 31 de agosto, for fabulous foi gras with apple marmalade, pork rib laced with Modena Balsamic vinegar and a dozen more gastronomic delights written up on the chalkboard menu. Two young chefs, Alex Montiel and Iñaki Gulin here prepare everything fresh for you in the kitchen. You will not just help yourself to a groaning board of pintxos on the counter, as every pintxo here is a made to order creation. One chef is Basque; the other is from Barcelona and trained with Ferrán Adriá at El Bulli. Please go early to La Cuchara, as the word is out, it’s extremely popular, the interior space tiny and crowds spill out into the square on most evenings.

Another not to miss pintxos bar is Goiz Argui on Fermín Calbetón, 4, serving the best shrimp in town. Also El Tamboril on Calle Pescadería, 2, at the square is quite popular. Look for Txepela on the same street, Pescadería 5, for anchovies with spider crab. Astelena, on corner of the square, Plaza Constitución, for pintxos or a sit down meal and the most typical, the most Basque of all, La Cepa, Calle 31 de agosto, with a creative new chef. Others to look for on 31 de agosto are Ormazabel (No. 22) and Martinez (No. 13) and La Viña, a new wine bar at No. 3. There is also Casa Vergara on Calle Mayor No. 21, Bar Gambara for wild mushrooms on San Jerónimo #21, and try one of our favorites, Borda Berri, Fermín Calbetón # 12, for foie gras on toast. Just choose the most crowded pintxos bar you see anywhere
along 31 de agosto, Fermin Kalbetón, Pescadería, Aldamar, or San Jerónimo. Follow the crowds and your nose.

**Note:** in the Parte Vieja, street signs say Kalea in Basque rather than Calle in Spanish for street.

**Pintxos sampling by day in El Centro, downtown**

**The bar** - Hotel Europa - Calle San Martín is always filled with upper middle class locals and lawyers from the Palace of Justice across the street. Very nice selection of hot and cold pintxos plus little earthenware dishes of squid, stuffed red peppers, stuffed mussels, mushrooms with ham and anchovies, all at very reasonable prices.

**La Espiga** - San Marcial, 48, a few blocks from the Hotel Europa, is the next best downtown bet, which quickly fills up with locals at noon.

**Bar SM** - at the new Centro Comercial San Martín between San Marcial and Arrasate has a very “happening” outdoor terrace and designer pintxos. This bar won the 3rd place award in the prestigious annual Donostia pintxos competition.

**Alex** - Larramendi, 10. Elaborate pintxos and a well-chosen wines-by-the-glass list. You can also have “raciones”, larger plates to share among two or three, “tostas” (canapés) and sweet pintxos. Try the creamy Ravioli with wild mushrooms and turkey. Closed Sunday.

**Pintxos as haute cuisine in the Gros quarter, near Zurriola beach**

N.B: If you tire of the gridlock on the streets of the Old Quarter and want to do your pintxos sampling in a less hectic, more relaxed, slightly “off the beaten path” environment, head to this area of the city, easily walk-able from the downtown hotels. This is a place where you may have room to sit down at communal tables or even have a pintxos tasting lunch or dinner in the dining room section (Bergara and Patio de Ramuntxo) for under 25€.

In the Nuevo Gros section, just across the Zurriola Bridge and beyond the Kursaal performing arts center, are 3 gourmet “don’t miss” pintxos bars that have been featured in numerous food and wine magazines. **Aloña Berri** ([alonaberri.com](http://alonaberri.com)), at Bermingham, 24, has received many gastronomic prizes for its creations. It’s the bar of all bars, and offers some of the prettiest pintxos in town, as does **Bergara Bar**, at Gerneral Artexe, 9. Both bars have congenial owners who take enormous pride in the beauty of their establishments (witness the fresh flowers that decorated the bar) and the quality of your experience. They serve miniature haute cuisine pintxos not meant to be shared, as each little jewel-like morsel consists of no more than two mouthfuls. Amazing. To reach these two coming up from Calle San Francisco, turn right on to Calle Bermingham for Bergara, then continue on past the square, usually filled with children at play, to Aloña Berri. There’s a great fish market and charcuterie across the street and a fine
wine store, La Vinatería de Gros, across the street. Aloña Berri closes Sun. night and Mon.

Also in the Nuevo Gros section, but nearer to the Kursaal center is yet another pintxos bar award winner with restaurant in back, the **Patio de Ramuntxo on Peña y Goñi #10.** It has a large chalkboard menu of designer pintxos, most around 3€ plus menu of wines by the glass. There are a few wine barrels with stools for sitting, and one can have a pintxos tasting menu for 24€ in the air conditioned dining area in the rear. Closed Sun. Across the street at #13 is La Bodega Donostiarra, which is a classic in this quarter and very busy before concerts at the Kursaal. Its signature pintxo is the canapé of salmon and prawns. In the same area, walk down Peña y Goñi and take a left onto Paseo Colón to #15 (left side) to the new Hidalgo 56. Look for the yellow awning. Here you can sit out on the terrace or feast inside on pintxos or raciones or have a tasting menu of pintxos. Its specialty is the artistically presented “Begi-aundi”, which is a large squid filled with a ratatouille made also with squid, accompanied by a little shot glass of green onion foam! You can finish off your pintxos crawl in this section of Gros by returning to the corner of Hidalgo and Trueba, walk down Trueba, take a left on San Francisco, then right at Padre Larroca, where at #2, corner of P. Larroca and Carquizano, you’ll find Iraeta, whose specialty is foie, particularly “foie al caramel de Martini” plus other creative dishes and baguettes (bocadillos). There’s an outdoor terrace during the summer months.

You’ll quickly see that dining is truly a municipal obsession! In your daily walks in the Old Quarter you will probably pass by a Sociedad Gastronómica, commonly referred to in Basque as a “txoko”, the traditional gastronomic social clubs strictly for men only whose members, food lovers or tripasais”, gather to relax and to prepare amazing meals in kitchens often filled with equipment that equal those found in the finest Basque restaurants. They originated as places where men could gather to drink and play cards, but evolved into associations where members of different brotherhoods (cobbler, fishermen, metalworkers, mechanics, lawyers) would meet. Later, groups of friends from these brotherhoods began to cook for each other. The oldest “sociedad” was formed in 1870. Now, in San Sebastián alone, there are more than 200 sodierdads and over 2,000 in the entire French/Spanish Basque Country. Some clubs have hundreds of members, others only 20 to 30. The clubs are also known for their fine singing, and many a fine choir, orfeón, has originated in a gastronomic society. The most famous Sociedad is “Gaztelubide”, whose headquarters are in the Old Quarter. Most of the famous Basque chefs first honed their skills in these all-male eating clubs. As Food and Wine magazine has said of the city: “San Sebastián has the best food you’ve never heard of”. And remember the old Basque saying: “To know how to eat is to know enough!” There are slightly more Michelin starred restaurants per capita in the Bilbao-Pamplona-San Sebastián-Hondarribia triangle than anywhere else in Europe.

**Pastry shops**

Pastelería Otaegui - in the Old Quarter on Garibai, 23, and downtown there are several branches of Pastelería Barrenetxe, near the FNAC on Arraste, plus at
Plaza de Guipúzkoa 1, and also downstairs at the Centro Comercial San Martín in the supermarket they have a handy coffee bar.

**Gourmet Shop**

**Solbes** - Calle Aldamar, I, in the Old Quarter, across from the La Brecha shopping center. Another branch can be found on Calle Bermingham in the Nuevo Gros quarter. Good selection of txakoli, the refreshing, slightly fizzy Basque white wine. Look for the Uriondo, Talai –Berri, Agerre or Txomin Etxaniz labels from the D.O. Getariako.

**Cheeses**

**Aitor Lasa** – Aldemar, 12, down the street from Solbes, has a large selection of artisanal cheese.

**Wine Shop**

**La Vinatería** - in the Gros quarter at General Aretxe, 2, very near the other branch of Solbes and the Aloña Berri pintxos bar.

**Cooking Schools**

**Luis de Iriazar** - in the Parte Vieja, but he has a waiting list a mile long. He’s featured in the San Sebastian chapter of Anthony Bourdain’s “Kitchen Confidential” book, “A Cook’s Tour”. The TV chef, **Karlos Arguiñano**, offers classes at his hotel in nearby Zarautz.

**El Txoko del Gourmet** ([eltxokodelgourmet.com](http://eltxokodelgourmet.com)) - in the Parte Vieja is new and in the same building as **Casa Nicolasa** on Aldamar.

**Gourmet Tours**

**Tenedor Tours** ([tenedortours.com](http://tenedortours.com)) - is expertly run by Connecticut born, former New Yorker, Gabriella Ranelli, an American married to a Basque pelota player, who has lived in San Sebastian for 10 years. She knows all the chefs and their kitchens intimately and is a fantastic culinary resource. Gabriella also does pintxos tours of the Old Quarter and runs trips to the txakoli vineyards of Getaria. She’s highly personable - a great guide. Burt Wolf used Gabriella for his PBS special on San Sebastián and the Basque Country in the Local Flavors series.

**Restaurants**

Restaurants traditionally close between lunch and dinner. You’ll find them open for lunch at 1:00 to 1:30 pm at the earliest. They then close at 3:30 pm or 4:00 pm at the very latest, opening again for dinner at 8:30 pm, some not until 9:00 in the evening. Most Spaniards won’t even think about going out for dinner until 10 p.m. Most restaurants will take their last orders at 11:30 pm. On the French side, the hours differ.
significantly and are more rigid. Lunch is served from noon to 2:00 pm while dinner is from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm.

Specialty dishes of the Basque Country

- **Marmitako** - hearty, very filling stew of tuna and potatoes.
- **Txangurro** - spider crab, usually baked in a gratin sauce.
- **Bacalao al pil-pil** - cod in an emulsion of garlic, olive oil and hot pepper.
- **Merluza en salsa verde** - hake prepared in a sauce of olive oil, garlic and parsley.
- **Kokotxas** – delicacy, Hake “cheeks”.
- **Pencas** - Swiss chard baked in a cream sauce.
- **Revuelto de setas (or perritxikos)** - scrambled eggs with wild mushrooms.
- **Menestra de verduras** - stewed vegetable medley with little bits of ham
- **Potxas** - white beans usually prepared with ham or chorizo.
- **Cogollos de Tudela** - lettuce hearts used in salads with red pepper and anchovies
- **Alubias rojas de Tolosa** - red beans usually prepared in a clay pot with pork chorizo or morcilla (blood sausage).
- **Txistorra** - spicy sausage, the Basque chorizo but thinner.
- **Pastel Vasco** - more popular across the border in France, known as gâteau basque, a cake filled with pastry cream or black cherry jam. Totally irresistible!
- **Idiazabal con membrillo** - a delicious Basque ewe’s milk cheese served with quince paste, a dessert.
- **Cuajada** - ewe’s milk curd with a slightly burned taste, served in a little brown clay pot.

The Michelin starred temples for “foodies”

**Arzak** - can be found at Alto de Miracruz, 21, on the outskirts of the city. Juan Mari Arzak’s daughter Elena now runs the kitchen. The restaurant, in a townhouse, has elegant décor but a small dining area so one must reserve far in advance. Try the menu de degustación (tasting menu) for 95 Euros per person. We thought the portions were a bit small on our last visit, but Arzak’s wife, who runs the house with great aplomb, offered the gentlemen at a table next to ours a complimentary second meat course when he commented. The service was flawless (Arzak’s wife takes your order) but rather rushed. You can be in and out in 1-1/2 hours. A finely tuned, well polished Relais Chateaux engine, but somewhat lacking in soul. But their sommelier will guide you to a reasonable and fabulous wine. Juan Mari and Elena come out to greet each table. Elena’s creations are bold, inventive and highly deconstructed these days, as she’s spent time with Ferrán Adriá, the Dalí of Spanish cuisine at El Bulli. Arzak has always been considered one of the top restaurants in Spain with 3 Michelin stars. You can reserve a table at: paisvasco.com/arzak/. There’s a tiny parking lot in the back with a valet to guide you.

**Akelarre** - Paseo del Padre Orcolaga, 56, on the slopes of Monte Igueldo, has 2 Michelin stars and offers beautiful terrace views of the sea in a lovely chalet with
extremely well spaced tables. It, as well as Arzak, is a member of the prestigious Relais & Chateau Gourmand restaurant group. Go for lunch, book well in advance and request a window table. Pedro Subijana's cuisine is sublime! He and Arzak were the fathers of the “nueva cocina vasca”. This is the overall favorite of Tenedor Tours owner, many San Sebastian chefs and other Spanish food critics. His famous dishes: sea bass topped with gooseneck barnacles and gin and tonic ice cream are accompanied by a great wine list. He offers two tasting menus, which are extraordinary. If you go as a couple, order both to experience the very best of Subijana’s cooking. Subijana comes out to greet each table during the meal, and he is charming. If you buy his cookbook, he will gladly autograph it for you.

Other notable gourmet dining experiences

**Casa Nicolasa** – Aldamar, 4, in Old Quarter, on the second floor above the Txoko del Gourmet cooking school and next to Solbes gourmet shop (ensusalsa.com). Elegantly simple, old fashioned dining room. Try any fish the chef recommends, or the filet mignon with foie gras (“solomillo de buey”). This is a personal favorite of our friend, San Sebastián born Joséba Jiménez de Jiménez, owner of The Harvest Vine in Seattle and a regular contributor to Food and Wine magazine. The friendly, English speaking chef, José Juan Castillo, will take good care of you. This classic restaurant has for years attracted the elite of San Sebastián, the old money crowd (and not many tourists), thus it is not inexpensive, but the dining experience is guaranteed to be memorable. Closed all day Sunday and Monday evenings. Try the menú del día at 46€ per person. Receives 1 “sol” from the Campsa guide.

**Agorregi** - in the Igara Tennis Club (agorregi.com), is from another insider tip from Tenedor Tours. The two chefs, Gorka Areclus and his wife Beatriz, are alumni of Arzak and Akelarre who offer warm hospitality, an unbeatable lunch day menú del día for only 14€, and the desserts are quite acclaimed. They also get lots of great press. Closed Sunday and Monday plus Tuesday nights, two weeks in February, and two weeks in December.

**Urepel** - is located at Paseo de Salamanca, 3, in the Parte Vieja, the Old Quarter. It’s family run, prettily decorated with clocks and other antiques. NOT fussy/dressy. Charming (sansebastianturismo.com/urepel/). In the same price range as Casa Nicolasa and receives one “sol” from Campsa and an 8/10 from Gourmetour. It has an excellent quality to price ratio and a noteworthy dessert cart. Closed Sundays, Tuesdays and 1st weeks in July plus 15 days at Christmas and all of Holy Week.

**Casa Urola** - Fermin Calbetón, 20, in the Parte Vieja is another fine choice and like Nicolasa and Urepel, is known for its high quality, hearty, market driven, traditional country Basque cuisine (restauranteurola.com). It has its own shellfish tanks. A well-priced wine list! Closed all day Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

**Rekondo** - Paseo de Igeldo, 57, (rekondo.com) on route to the top of Monte Igueldo is an authentic Basque asador (a place for grilled meats and fish) and a wine lover’s heaven. It boasts one of the best wine cellars in all of Spain with over 100,000
bottles. Reservations necessary. Expect to pay about 40€/person. Closed Tuesday night, except in high season, and Wednesday.

**Moderately priced fine dining in the Old Quarter**

**Kokotxa** - at end of 31 de agosto and Campanario 11, next to Santa Maria Basilica, is yet another tip from Tenedor Tours ([restaurantekokotxa.com](http://restaurantekokotxa.com)). Here you can have a fantastic degustación menu for only 32€ per person as opposed to 90+€ at the Michelin starred restaurants. Or have the simple menu del día at lunch during the week for only 16€. This is one to watch. Receives one “sol” from Campsa.

**Bodegón Alejandro** - Fermin Calbetón, 4, is supervised by the famed 3-Michelin stared Chef Martin Berasategui ([martinberasategui.com](http://martinberasategui.com)). It's the family restaurant where he got his start. Walls are decorated with photos of traditional Basque sports. Wonderful country bread! Closed Sunday night, Mondays and Tuesdays night, except during July and August. This is a Bibi Gourmand choice for high price to quality ratio in the red Michelin guide. The weekday lunch menu costs only 13€.

**Juanito Kojua** - Portu, 14, also in the Parte Vieja, since 1947, is popular with locals, immaculate, warm/homey, has nautical theme, ship’s lanterns upstairs, downstairs stone walled dining room has a farmhouse décor: [juanitokojua.com](http://juanitokojua.com). Very reasonable prices for gargantuan portions! Menú del día costs 24€. Great rice pudding!

**Astelana 1997** - Euskalherria, 3, is the restaurant branch of the very popular Astelana pintxos bar on Plaza de la Constitución of the Old Quarter. Good price to quality ratio and great homemade desserts ([restauranteastelena.com](http://restauranteastelena.com)). They have a gourmet tasting menu for 30€. It's located at the eastern end of the quarter, just 3 blocks from the Kursaal Center and Zuriola bridge. Closed Sunday night, Monday and in winter on Wednesday night as well, the 1st two weeks of October and the 1st two weeks of February.

**Restaurante Kursaal** - in the Kursaal Performing Arts Center, is one of six restaurants supervised by 3 Michelin star chef Berasategui. Chef is Raúl Cabrera, who offers very creative, contemporary Basque cuisine. Downstairs you'll find a pintxos bar and area for their menú del día. Upstairs is the gourmet restaurant with windows looking out on bay and Victoria Eugenia Theater. At mid-day, Tues.-Fri. and downstairs it offers a 2-course lunch for 13€ and 15,60€ on Sat./Sun. Receives one “sol” from the Campsa guide [restaurantebersal.com](http://restaurantebersal.com)

**Style-fun-creative cuisine at the beach**

**Branka** - located in a contemporary class and steel building next to the indoor courts of the Royal Tennis Club ([branka-tenis.com](http://branka-tenis.com)), at the end of Ondarreta beach before reaching the Chillida, “Comb of the Wind” sculpture (Paseo Eduardo Chillida, 13). It has simply spectacular views of the bay. Go here for a mid-morning coffee or designer pintxo at the bar, for lunch of lobster salad on the outdoor terrace or at night for romantic dining in the luminous upstairs dining room. Or later, after 11:00 pm for an
after dinner drink and to listen to jazz. Great food and lots of fun! Try the soufflé of Idiazábal cheese with quince paste for dessert.

Casual outdoor dining at the pier

La Rampa - next to the Aquarium at the pier, No. 26 is an informal, open air seafood “shack” with tiny interior dining room, with paper tablecloths and napkins, but offering prime ingredients for 30€ to 34€ per person. And it offers quick service, if you don’t have the time or inclination for leisurely dining. Favorably reviewed by Rafael García Santos, Spain’s foremost food and wine critic. Try their squid croquettes, “croquetas de txipirón” and grilled grouper (mero), sole (lenguado), or rodaballo (turbot). Closed Tuesday night, Wednesday and October 13 - 29, December 8 - 15 and 10 days in April.

Gastronomic splurges for gourmets outside the city

Mugaritz - Outside of the heavily industrial town of Errentería, down a narrow country road past fields dotted with haystacks and old stone farmhouses, at the top of a hill, impossible to find without the detailed directions from their web site, you’ll find an equally famous 34 yr. old chef, Adoni Luis Aduriz, at work in a remote, informal, but state-of-the-art Basque farmhouse, who’s dazzling the food critics. Gault Millau and Gourmet magazine (Jan. ‘03) called him “the best young chef in Europe”, “revolutionizing haute cuisine, one plate at a time”, and his restaurant, Mugaritz (mugaritz.com) has 2 Michelin stars, but both he and his place are very low keyed. He’s the one to watch! He’s a protégé of both M. Berasategui and Adriá of El Bulli. Featured in a New York Times Magazine article on revolutionary Spanish cooking.

There is a traditional a la carte menu, but you’d be missing his genius if you don’t opt for one of the two market driven tasting menus of 8 small dishes plus an amuse bouche for 80€ or 105€. It's like nothing else you've ever experienced. Expect a warm welcome from the friendly maitre, an extraordinary sommelier, perfect service from the serene, black suited wait staff who seem to glide effortlessly across the room carrying their bamboo trays to deliver each course, a slightly Asian, minimalist décor, lots of “zen”. You'll never leave uncomfortably full, just very content. And you keep your menu as a souvenir. Not busy at night. Plan on 2-1/2 to 3 hours for the tasting menu justice. Taxi fare from San Sebastián to Mugaritz is about 16€, one-way.

Zuberoa - Outside Oiarzun you’ll find one of Spain’s most highly praised traditional Basque restaurants, Zuberoa (zuberoa.com), in a 600 yr. old country house, run by the Arbelaitz brothers, one brother is the chef, and the other runs the house. Boasting 2 Michelin stars, it is rated a 9.5/10 in all the culinary guides. It's beautifully decorated and has a lovely terrace for summer dining. The chef, Hilario Arbelaitz, is considered one of the top four Basque chefs working today. Tasting menu is 85€. Closed Sunday night, Mondays, 1st two weeks of January, May 26 to June 10, the last two weeks October. Difficult to find, so be sure to print out the directions from their web page.
In same area, right down the road from Zuberoa you will also find another caserío, Basque farmhouse restaurant, **Matteo** ([restaurantematteo.com](http://restaurantematteo.com)), which serves creative food and ample portions with gentler prices than Zuberoa. Closed Sunday nights, Mondays and during the Christmas holiday season.

**Martín Berasategui** - In Lasarte, where the racetrack is located, there is another 3-star Michelin temple, Martín Berasategui ([martinberasategui.com](http://martinberasategui.com)). You'll find this to be a very relaxed, comfortable and friendly space in the country. It's a little hard to find so ask for specific driving directions. The restaurant looks like a nice, modern suburban villa. You must reserve at least one week in advance. On Sundays it's filled with families. During summer almost always closed on Saturdays due to weddings. Not stuffy or formal. Take the wine advice of Iñaki, the sommelier. Several menus are offered for different budgets. The full degustación menu costs 88€. The only caveat is that the chef may very well not be there, as he's very busy tending to his every-growing restaurant empire: Grupo Berasategui, which supervises the kitchens of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Kursaal center in San Sebastian the restaurant of the NH Aránzazu Hotel in San Sebastian and El Amparo in Madrid and his parent's home restaurant, where he got started in the San Sebastián's Old Quarter, Bodegón Alejandro.

**Restaurante Fagollaga** - outside the grim, industrial village of Hernani, you have another country hideaway in a pretty Basque farmhouse, or caserío, founded by the chef’s great grandmother in 1904. Restaurante Fagollaga ([fagollaga.com](http://fagollaga.com)). “Fagollaga” means “place of many beech trees” in Basque. Just follow the signs to the Goizueta highway. The restaurant is on that road, has a beautiful glass enclosed terrace and has one Michelin star. Of all the gourmet temples in this area, this one is the most reasonably priced, with a fixed menu degustación menu for 70€, rather than 110€ at Arzak or Akelarre. It also has a very good pastry chef. Offering fine service with ample portions. It was featured in the June '05 issue of Gourmet. Closed Saturdays at noon, Sunday nights, Monday and all of Holy Week. The NY Times Magazine just named 30+ yr. old chef Isaac Salaberría one of the top two young creative chefs in Spain, along with Andoni Aduriz of Mugaritz. And “The Best of Spanish Gastronomy” voted him Chef of the Year in '99.

**Lodging**

**Budget**

**2-star Hostal Alemana** - is a small, immaculate, quiet family run hotel (“hostal” in name only), very well located in the heart of downtown on Calle San Martin, across from the Hotel Europa and just two blocks from La Concha beach ([hostalalemana.com](http://hostalalemana.com)). It's on the top floors of a fin de siecle townhouse, has simple, but pleasant-for-the-price rooms, complete with trouser press and mini-bars, and a very nice, sunny breakfast room that serves a buffet breakfast included in the rate. The family rooms are large and worth the extra euros even if you are just two. It's a featured hotel in Alistair Sawday’s "Special Places to Stay in Spain" - 21 rooms with private bath. Room 105 is the largest.
2-star Pensión Kursaal - is a member of Pensiones con encanto group and has a quiet location across the river on a side street facing the Kursaal center, within an easy walk of the beach, Old Quarter and downtown (pensionesconencanto.com). It has 10 very well priced doubles, for 76€ high season, 60€, shoulder and 49€ low season, all with private bath, hair dryer, iron, satellite TV, WiFi and charges only 3€ for a continental breakfast. No a/c, but I prefer the location of the Kursaal to its sister, the Aida.

2-star Hotel Galería - is a B&B (hotellagaleria.com) often featured in travel magazines and in the “hotels of charm” guides. Although it’s located in the posh residential neighborhood of “La Diplomática” on Infanta Cristina 1, just steps from Ondarreta beach, its’ a good long 15-20 minute walk from the center of the city. Housed on 4 floors in a 19th century mansion built with mansard roof in the French Revival style, this hotel has charm if you enjoy antique filled small "artsy" type hotels, but the lobby area is very dark. Each room is named for a painter and the upper floor rooms have bay views. Rooms are on the small side but the baths are nice. 23 rooms with a/c, satellite TV, mini-bar and hair dryer. There is space out in front behind the gates for four cars.

2-star Pensión Aida - Iztueta, 9, is in the Gros section, across the Urriola Bridge, past the Kursaal Performing Arts center. It’s another member of the “Pensiones con encanto” group (pensionesconencanto.com). Not near La Concha, but only four blocks from the surfers’ beach of Zurriola. San Sebastián is so easily walk-able that for 76€ for a double, during high season (60€ shoulder and 49€ low season) it doesn’t matter that much. If you need budget lodging and the Hostal Alemana and Kursaal are full, don’t hesitate to book here. This new little place was just selected in El País as one of the top value budget hotels in Spain. Good quality materials used in the construction and nice wood beamed ceilings, bare white walls and wood floors. Its nine rooms have private bath, hair dryer, iron, satellite TV and WiFi. It’s only a short walk to the train station.

Upper budget to moderate

3-star Hotel Niza - Zubieta, 56, (adegi.es/hotelniza) is a white, 1920's building facing the beach and bay owned by the Chillida family. Eduardo Chillida, who died in '03, was Spain's most important and prolific sculptor, a contemporary of Henry Moore. Chillida's famous work, the “Comb of the Wind” can be found at the end of the bay, while in the village of Hernani, just south of San Sebastián, is a museum housing his works, the Museo Chillida Eku (eduardo-chillida.com). The Niza has a Belle Epoque style, a cage elevator, wooden staircase, and lots of marble, chandeliers. The 41 comfortable but not large rooms are decorated in a simple, but pleasant blue and yellow color scheme, with bare wood floors, unadorned walls and small, but nicely renovated baths. Some rooms have wonderful bay views. This is an excellent value. Not fancy, but very friendly with a great downstairs bar, attractive formal parlor for relaxing and reading, and nice desk staff.
3-star Hotel Europa - San Martín, 52, one block inland from La Concha beach, is in a pretty neoclassical building. It’s a member of the Husa and Sercotel marketing groups (hotel-europa.com). The Europa is very comfortable, with a lively bar downstairs serving excellent pintxos and small earthen casseroles, always crowded with locals. The hotel has 65 traditionally furnished rooms with all the requisite bells and whistles including bathrobes and trouser press. It’s also a member of Estancias de España, a collection of small and charming hotels, kind of poor man’s Paradors. Check for discount rates through utell.com.

4-star Costa Vasca - Avenida Pío Baroja, is resort-like hotel sitting above Ondarreta beach, offering parking, tennis courts, gardens and a pool. It’s a 15-minute walk to downtown, but a shuttle service is provided. Well run member of the Aránzazu chain, along with the Hotel Ercilla in Bilbao. This is the hotel that houses most of the jazz musicians during the International Jazz Festival in July. Good discount Internet rates. Perfect for a family. 200 rooms.

Upper Moderate to Expensive

4-star Abba de Londres y de Inglaterra - a white wedding cake looking, Belle Epoque building with 140 rooms, decorated in a rather bold Victorian style (bright colors), with an enviable location facing the water. This is where we send our friends who want San Sebastián’s very best location (hlondres.com). The public rooms have been recently freshened, and it has a nice downstairs bar and very good gourmet dining in the Mari Galant restaurant. Facing the bay, the hotels offers great views of La Concha beach and is a fine choice and much better value than the venerable but dowager María Cristina. The fourteen VIP suites, with beach views, are the best. The 2nd floor is non-smoking. We recently received a tour by the management. Room 505 is a nice room with traditional reproduction furniture; safe, flat-screen satellite TV, WiFi and balcony (no seating - just a walk-out balcony). All rooms have well-kept, renovated bath and flat screen TV. There is a junior suite on the 3rd floor with connecting suite. The breakfast buffet is priced reasonably at 13.50€, and there is complimentary coffee before 7:00 am. The hotel has its own garage parking.

Luxury

5-star Westin María Cristina – is a beautiful Belle Epoque structure on the Urumea River, commissioned by King Alfonso XIII, it opened in 1912 and was designed by the same architect who created the Ritz in Paris and in Madrid. This is a Grande Dame of hotels with old world charm, where the celebrities stay during the International Film Festival, however, the location and views of the Abba are more appealing. Now a Westin Hotel (westin.com), member of the Starwood group. Fine dining in the Easo restaurant. Even with it’s Persian rugs, Carrera marble and charm of days long ago, the Westin needs to renovate it thoroughly. The public rooms are showing their age, the decor of the rooms needs updating, the bathrooms refurbishing, and a new ventilation system is lacking in the public rooms downstairs. Stay here only if
redeeming Starwood points or using Bancotel or Halcón Viajes / Viajes Ecuador coupons.

Beaches
It rains quite a bit in San Sebastián so for every four days there, perhaps one will be a great beach day. But when the sun comes out, everyone heads to the beach (go early!). There are three of them; you will most likely want to spend your time at the gorgeous, golden crescent shaped "La Concha" (in front of the De Londres y de Inglaterra hotel) or its western extension, the smaller and more crowded "Ondarreta" (below the Hotel Costa Vasca), where you can rent a beach chair (there is a small pool for children) and while away the hours contemplating the scene. The third beach, "Zurriola", in the Nuevo Gros, area is for surfers. These are public beaches and rather conservative, as most northern Spanish beaches are (not so much topless bathing as there is in the Med); everyone is welcome, and they're kept very clean. They're also extremely popular with walkers, and on a sunny summer day, everyone heads to the beach in the morning for a long walk.

Shopping
The most upscale shopping can be found in the boutiques in and around Avenida de la Libertad. For stylish footwear, look for Ayestarán. For inexpensive clothing, go to the new Zara store in the Centro Comercial San Martín. For traditional Basque handicrafts, ceramics, linens, look for Alboka in the Old Quarter (Parte Vieja) on the square on Plaza de la Constitución. For pricier items head for Saski-Naski, with 2 floors on the corner of Boulevard and San Jerónimo, where you'll find prettier, more refined Basque handicrafts, pottery, sweaters and Artiga linens. You'll also find a branch of Kukuxumusu of Pamplona, Running of the Bulls memorabilia, in the Old Quarter on Calle Mayor. For articles and gourmet food items from the French side of the Basque country, go to the Biarritz store in the Kursaal Center. You'll find foie, duck confit, hams, cider, txakoli and wines. Open daily.

Coastal Excursions
West of San Sebastián
The beach at Zarautz, is a kind of mini-San Sebastián, large and crescent shaped with bathing tents and makes for a nice family beach day. Beyond Zarautz, there is a very scenic drive along the coast between Getaria and the fishing village of Zumaia, where in the afternoon you can visit the Zuloaga Museum, open April thru September, Wednesday through Sunday only 4 pm to 8 pm. Zuloaga, a Basque, native of Eibar (ignaciozuloaga.com) was one of Spain's greatest painters and portrait artists of the late 19th century, a contemporary of Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec, whose works are quite somber and haunting in tone. He is well known for his portraits of the "typical" Spanish characters of his day, peasants, bullfighters and gypsies.
There is also a new **Museum / Shop of Artisanal Basque Products** in Laia across the road from the Zuloaga Museum.

Getaria was founded in 1204 and is one of the oldest villages in Gipuzkoa. During the middle Ages whale hunting was the village’s main pursuit. Getaria is also the birthplace of Juan Sebastián Elcano who circumnavigated the globe, finishing Magellan’s voyage and Domingo Bonaetxea, the conqueror of Haiti. The **Iglesia del Salvador** in the town center has a heavily tilted wooden floor, so that the altar sits high above the pews, and the tomb of Elkano. Getaria is also known for its grilled fish, and outside all the restaurants at the pier you’ll find outdoor charcoal grills for their famous grilled sardines and anchovies. There’s a “txakoli” festival in Getaria (where it’s produced) on the first Sunday of August, if you find yourself in the vicinity at that time. In Getaria you’ll also find a small fashion museum displaying the costumes, ball gowns, and couture creations of the Guetaria native, Parisian fashion designer, **Cristóbal Balenciaga**, next door to the txakoli wine shop on the main highway. In this modest but fascinating display, you’ll find ball gowns designed for various and sundry aristocrats and the wedding dress of Generalísmo Francisco Franco’s granddaughter, Carmen. A larger, permanent museum dedicated to the creations of Balenciaga is to be opened in the Aldamar Palace by the Fundación Balenciaga ([fundacionbalenciaga.com](http://fundacionbalenciaga.com)) in September of ’07, a full five years behind schedule.

**Elkano**, on the main drag, in the center of Getaria, offers fabulous seafood dining. The rodaballo (turbot) here s superb, as is the bogavante (lobster). All of the fish are grilled on the outside parrilla. They also have a fine wine list. This is one of the best and most comfortable seafood restaurants along the entire coast!

**Visiting a Gipuzkoa txokoli vineyard**

The **Bodegas Talai-Berri** vineyards high in the hills above Zarautz, 3 km from the town center on the road towards Orio, are open to visitors by prior appointment. Have your hotel call 943 132 750. If you take a vineyard tour with Tenedor Tours in San Sebastian, this vineyard is on their regular itinerary. In addition to their production of white, this bodega also produces a red, “tinto” and an eau-de-vie, “orujo”, as does the **Doniene Gorrondona** txakoli vineyards in Bakio, Vizcaya. In the U.S. these wines are available at The Spanish Table, with stores in Seattle, Santa Fe, Berkeley and Marin County.

**Using Getaria as a base**

If you find yourself in this area during July or August, and no lodging is available in San Sebastián, you can use Getaria (or Hondarribia to the east) as a base to explore the Basque Country, as a new, well-priced and very appealing hotel opened in early ’06, the **Hotel Saiaz** ([saiazgetaria.com](http://saiazgetaria.com)), right in the village of Getaria itself, with rooms overlooking the sea from above tiny Gaztetape beach. The rooms in the original 15th century “casa-torre” structure have exposed stone, soft salmon colored walls, beautiful polished wood floors, Persian rugs, 4-poster beds (rm. 26), free WiFi, and the rooms in the modern annex have floor to ceiling ocean views. Some are lofts. There’s a cozy
antique filled sitting room, terrace facing the sea for drinks, computer downstairs to check email, small garage for only 3 cars (must reserve) and a friendly manager who speaks very good English. To reach the hotel coming from Zarautz, take a right turn up the quite, narrow street at the salmon colored house directly across the street from the Elkano restaurant. For those looking for a little hotel of charm right in a picturesque fishing village on the prettiest section of the coast between Bilbao and San Sebastián, it makes a very nice choice.

**East of San Sebastián**

If you have the time, on the drive between San Sebastián and Hondarribia, pay a visit to the picturesque fishing village of Pasajes de San Juan, now known as **Pasai Donibane** in Basque. You can even reach it by a one-minute ferry ride from Pasajes San Pedro. Or.... it's easier to reach from Hondarribia, taking the road (following the brown Jaizkibel signs) up to the top of Mount Jaizkibel to the Shrine of Guadalupe (with spectacular views and a lovely church) and continuing on this same road, the G1 3440, beyond Guadalupe, where you'll have even more expansive views of this area on the left hand side of the road, at the second semi-ruined stone watchtower.

After enjoying the dramatic views at the watchtower, continue down this road until it ends at **Pasai Donibane**. The village consists of one long street that actually passes under the upper floor of a few of the villages houses, and it's typically Basque and atmospheric (Victor Hugo lived there for a while). There's a charming place to eat, **Casa Cámara**, at the entrance to the port, next to the water. At the center of the restaurant you'll find the fish tanks. They keep the lobster and spider crab (txangurro) pots under the floor and raise them up to the diners to make their selections. Hake cheeks (kokotxas), monkfish and seafood bisque are specialties—reasonable prices. It's a classic. Closed Sunday nights and Mondays. **Txulotxo**, San Juan, 71, a casual place with terrace offering excellent port views, offers Txangurro al horno, baked spider crab, and impeccably grilled fish. Closed Tuesdays.

**Staying in Hondarribia**

**Hondarribia**

This city is widely considered one of the most picturesque coastal villages in all of Spain with it charming and colorful La Marina quarter, the much photographed fishermen's homes of Calle San Pedro with their green, blue and red shutters and geranium bedecked balconies. It's featured in “The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain”. The handsome historic walled medieval quarter overlooks the city and is filled with aristocratic mansions and the Castle/Parador Carlos V. The wide beach winds along the river to the coast and has nice facilities (and clean restrooms) for a family beach day. Hondarribia makes an excellent small town base where one can spend several days exploring the Pays Basque, the lush valleys of Navarra and inland Gipúzkoa. Whether you decide to stay in grand style at the 10th century Castle Parador on the Plaza de Armas in the medieval quarter, or opt for something simple, but comfortable, in one of
the six agrotourist homes, you'll be rewarded with lovely views, fantastic gourmet food, a lively fishing quarter for great pintxos (tapas) in the evening, nice shopping and a friendly populace.

You can buy food and wine for a picnic at Solbes, the gourmet food purveyor across from the Tourist Office, or at Urdai-Azpikoak, Jon Alzaga (great ham and cheeses) on Calle San Pedro, 45, and the best baguettes (called leñas) I've every tasted in Spain at Ogi, Artesanos del Pan also on Calle San Pedro in La Marina, between Gran Sol restaurant and the laundry. Don't buy bread anywhere but here! For groceries and everyday staples there is an Erroski market with good prices very near the airport, but surface parking in front of the store is limited due to the ongoing construction in the area. There is however, an underground parking garage located in front of the store, but is poorly marked.

Have an inexpensive breakfast (yummy "tostadas" topped with orange marmalada and “ladrillos”) at Cafeteria Kai-Alde, on the main drag, Calle Zuloaga, across from the magazine & newspaper shop (that sells the IHT). At the end of Calle San Pedro there's also a handy laundry (lavandería), which provides us with very good, usually one-day service, during our stay. The owner's daughters are very friendly and have friends they visit in NYC each year.

There is also a very modern indoor sports complex, a yacht harbor and new fishermen’s pier, with restaurant, on the way to the beach, as well as several children’s playgrounds. Plus for nightlife, on the road towards the beach, there’s a bar and dance club, Truck, where one can have a nightcap in a pretty garden.

**Agroturismos**

*Great for budgeters or those who want to “cheap sleep and eat well”*

I highly recommend the friendly and warm Iketxe, a house that the owner built entirely from scratch. It has only 5 rooms, but they’re spacious, filled with handmade country furniture, pleasantly decorated with kilim rugs on polished wood floors, private baths, with hair dryers. Room No. 3 downstairs has its own large private terrace, while room #1 has an enclosed sitting area. Upstairs, room No. 6 is quite spacious. The outgoing Patxi speaks no English but his wife, Fátima, does speak some English and is fluent in French. The home has a downstairs kitchen where Patxi prepares breakfast with fridge for guests to use, a small library with books and brochures about the region and a breakfast room and lounge with TV for the guests’ exclusive use. Tel: 943 644 391, or email: iketxe5@terra.es

If the Iketxe is full consider the immaculate Maidanea (Tel: 943 64 08 55), or the 17th century Artoz Enea (phone: 943 642 319. But here ask for the largest and nicest room, No.4, with a balcony.

If you are traveling with another couple, or as a family needing 3 bedrooms and 3 baths (but no kitchen), consider the lovely Artizarra (artizarra.com), which has one huge upstairs bedroom with sofa, round table and chairs, small balcony, also with table and two chairs, and downstairs, two smaller bedrooms (all with private bath-showers only)
which are off the living room with TV, mini-fridge, microwave, fireplace and breakfast table. We recently rented this home with another couple for two weeks. The owner, Lurdes, who is learning English, couldn’t have been more helpful. She did our laundry, served us bountiful breakfasts of homemade cakes, breads, fresh fruits, platters of chorizo and hams, coffee and fresh juice, all for only 4€ per person. We also had lounge chairs and two picnic tables in the front lawn, where we dined on gourmet products picked up in the markets every other night. And every night we soaked up the indescribable views of the sacred mountain of La Rhune and the lights of San Marical from our living room window.

All of the homes are located in the countryside, only 2 minutes from the center of Hondarribia as the crow flies, but 7 minutes down very narrow, country roads that you’ll share with farm tractors and people out for a walk. Best to ask the owners either to send you a very detailed map, or have them meet you at the Hondarribia airport to guide you to the properties. Do not attempt to find them at night. You may be able to pick up directions to all the agrotourist homes and a guide at the Hondarribia Tourist Office. See pictures of all at nekatur.net. The first three homes are featured in Alistair Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay/Spain” guide.

**In the Old Quarter**

The castle/fortress Parador de Carlos V (parador.es) with 8 ft. thick stonewalls dates from the 10th century. Ferdinand and Isabella and their son Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor once resided here. One of the most atmospheric castle Paradors in the entire network, filled with antiques, suits of armor, tapestries. Reserve a room with view of bay below. Room 301 has views of the bay and the Old Quarter and has a sitting room, attic and two balconies. Room rates for ’06 are 190€, year round. There are 36 rooms, but no restaurant.

The 15th century archbishop’s mansion that houses the 3-star El Obispo has 17 rooms with décor done by the designers of Artespaña (hotelobispo.com). Rooms have TV, mini-bar and pretty views of the estuary. The best room is No. 202 in yellow with a black wrought-iron headboard and two French carved wooden chairs. Room 204 is also very nice. Some upstairs rooms share a walk out balcony overlooking the town. The buffet breakfast included in the room rate is served in a cheerful, salmon and cream-colored downstairs breakfast room or the inviting outdoor terrace. There are six parking spaces for guests in front of the hotel, and parking is also available at a nearby garage. It sits on a newly renovated square in a quiet corner, off the beaten tourist path.

It seems lighter, airier, more inviting, less dark and gloomy than its neighbor, the Pampinot, because it is set on this open square and the hotel is air conditioned and equipped with free WiFi. It also offers room service, Nestles chocolates, breakfast brought to the room, baby-sitting services, and the free use of bikes. Owners are friendly, the property is immaculate and extremely attractive, prices moderate, and they respond to emails quickly. Owner: Victor Alza Lekuona. Breakfast is extra. This is my favorite small hotel of charm in the area!
Another palatial mansion is the 3-star **Pampinot** ([hotelpampinot.com](http://hotelpampinot.com)), which housed Maria Teresa, daughter of Philip II, before her wedding to Louis XIV in St.-Jean-de-Luz. It has an austere stone façade, but the reception is a spacious area with massive stone floor and exposed stonewalls with two huge altarpieces. But the antique look to me seems quite dark and somber. There’s also a little bar tucked into what was once the fireplace and a dramatic staircase leads up to the eight bedrooms, four on each level, each decorated differently. But it may be too heavily ornate for your taste. Breakfast is extra and there is no car park.

A sweet little new hotel, very inexpensive, on Hondarribia’s prettiest plaza of the Old Quarter, la Plaza de Gipuzkoa, is the **Hotel Palacete** ([hotelpalacete.net](http://hotelpalacete.net)) a renovated mansion, with doubles from 60€ (low) to 85€ (high season). Breakfast served on the attractive private terrace for 7€. Rooms have satellite TV, Internet access, safes, and baths with a hair dryer, but no a/c. Book the largest room with a wall of windows facing the square. Featured in Pays Basque magazine.

**In modern Hondarribia**

Within a longish walking distance of the village, the 4-star, minimalist design but very attractive **Hotel Jaizkibel** ([hoteljaizkibel.com/jaizkibel.htm](http://hoteljaizkibel.com/jaizkibel.htm)), right on the road to Mount Jaizkibel offers very comfortable modern rooms for a moderate price. It also has private parking, a restaurant, bar and all the modern conveniences. Opened in ‘03.

**Family apartments**

The **Hotel Jauregui**, a member of the Husa chain ([hoteljauregui.com](http://hoteljauregui.com)), down in the port, on Calle Zuloaga, has apartments on the top floor of the hotel that can be rented by the day or week. Nothing fancy but good for families on a budget.

**Dining**

**Hermandad de Pescadores** - on the main street directly across from the old wharf, is a rustic, bustling, convivial place for impeccable seafood. You’ll dine at communal wooden tables, but you’ll need to reserve ahead of time, particularly on weekends when the French arrive in droves via the ferry from Hendaye. Try the “merluza en salsa verde” (hake in green sauce), the house specialty. Don’t opt for the menu del día. It’s inexpensive, fun and informal, and always crowded.

**Alameda** - For fine dining at a **Michelin star** treat, choose the family run restaurante Alameda ([restalameda.com](http://restalameda.com)), across from the road leading up to the Old Quarter and the Parador. Considered by gastronomic critics as one of the finest spots in all the Basque Country. The owner / chef, Gorka Txapartegui, is one of the country’s rising stars. He serves a phenomenal gastronomic menu for 62€. Closed Sunday and Tuesday nights and all day Monday. Also closed the third week in June and third week in October, and from December 23 - January 10.

**Ramón Roteta** - For a more formal and traditional haute cuisine meal in an elegant setting try Ramón Roteta. The restaurant is housed in a pretty villa with a lovely
terrace for alfresco dining and can be found on the main road leading into town. Tables boast beautiful china and crystal. The food is refined, and the chef creates fine desserts, particularly homemade ice creams. Closed Sunday nights and Tuesdays except during the summer. Closed the last two weeks in February and all of November.

**Sebastián** - For something in between, choose restaurante Sebastián, on the Calle Mayor in the Old Quarter ([sebastianhondarribia.com](http://sebastianhondarribia.com)). It’s on the way to the Parador, on your right past the town hall. This restaurante is in a former tobacco shop and has a cozy downstairs dining room with open beams, frescoes painted by Montes Iturrioz and a fireplace with walls covered with paintings by local artists. The chef is from Andalucía, not Basque. The tasting menu here will only set you back 39€. Closed Sunday nights and Tuesdays, and all of November.

**Arroka-Berri** - For something less well known but very nice, serving traditional Basque cuisine with a creative twist, my new Hondarribia favorite is the Arroka-Berri ([arrobaberri.com](http://arrobaberri.com)), in the upper town on the right side of the road to the Cabo Higuer lighthouse at Higuer Bidea, 6. It’s housed in a salmon colored, typical Basque farmhouse, recently remodeled. There’s ample car parking across the street.

**Pintxos dining**

There are several recommendable pintxo bars located in the fishing quarter. The first and the most outstanding (an equal to Sanse’s La Cuchara de San Telmo), is **Gran Sol** located along the pedestrian Calle San Pedro, which is one short block behind the main street downtown. The bar, run by two young men, has won numerous gastronomic awards for their creative pintxos. They compete and win, coming in 1st, 2nd or 3rd in the annual Donostia pintxos competition. Go early, particularly on summer weekends, when the crowd quickly spills out onto the terrace, where barrel tables have been set up for the overflow crowd. For evening pintxos, it opens at 7:00 pm with cold pintxos covering the bar, but the kitchen doesn’t begin to prepare the most impressive, hot creations until 7:30. The food here has received such accolades, that the owners have opened an adjacent restaurant, where one can enjoy their highly creative fare on the outside terrace (1€ extra) or inside. We recently had a memorable lunch here, choosing the 3-course menú del día for a very reasonable 15€ per person. Reservations are essential.

The second bar, found on Calle Zuloaga, the main street, is **Yola Berri**, a local hangout with long wooden communal tables and benches, and a bar covered with pintxos from 11:00 am on. There’s also an upstairs dining room that serves huge portions at very moderate prices, and is a favorite of the locals. This bar/restaurant is across the street from the Hotel Jauregui at San Pedro, 22. The hotel has its own fine pintxos bar, the **Enbata**, which is very handy for late night pintxos dining, as the kitchen doesn’t close until 11:30 pm. Although the Enbata won second prize in the ’06 pintxos competition, the dishes of Gran Sol are more elaborate, more “miniature haute cuisine”.

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Internet access

The English Corner is on Calle Zuloaga, about half way down the main street of the village. Friendly Basque-American owner Charo Azkue offers tours of the Bidasoa area, a full day tour of the Pays Basque and even daylong trips to Bilbao and the Guggenheim. ([hondarribiatours.com](http://hondarribiatours.com))

You can take a little ferry, “navette maritime”, the Marie Louise, from the old pier/parking lot area in downtown Hondarribia to the port of neighboring Hendaye, just across the Txingudi Bay in France, where you can walk to the expansive family beaches. The ferry departs every 30 minutes and cost 2,80€ round-trip.

The Heart of Cider Country

The vast majority of the traditional, rustic Basque cider houses, or sidrerías, called sargardotegiak in Basque, are located in Gipuzkoa, and open starting in December, but the actual cider season starts in January. Most open the last two weeks in January. Some stay open all year long. The apples are harvested in August; their juice is left to ferment from September to November. Between January and March before the cider is bottled, the ritual tasting of the cider is carried out. Cider has been consumed in the Basque Country since at least the 12th century and an emblem of its culture. These cider houses are quite rustic and most located down narrow country roads, difficult to find. All cider house menus are the same: tortilla de bacalao (cod omelette), sometimes a cod with green pepper dish (bacalao con pimientos verdes), a massive chuletón, or T-bone of veal or ox, Idiazábel cheese, walnuts and honey and quince paste for dessert, all the hard cider you can drink for a fixed price, about 28€ - 35€ per person. A few cider houses also serve a la carte fish dishes.

Cider is ordered by the bottle in a restaurant, not by the glass, but in the cider houses the custom is to stand while eating (there are no chairs), the plates of food are placed on long wooden communal tables, and when the gigantic wooden barrels of cider lining the walls are unplugged, and someone yells "mojón" in Spanish, or “txotx” in Basque (txotx meaning the wooden plug of the barrel), diners rush with glass in hand to the barrels, the cider gushes out in a arc stream and everyone queues up to fill his glass, but always holding it at knee level to create froth and release its bouquet. The more height on the pour, the better, since it gives the drink some fizz, and it should be drunk in very small amounts and downed immediately. Then diners go back to the tables to continue their eating until the next "mojón", or unplugging of the barrel. It's a very dress down affair because you'll be splashed again and again- it's quite messy. One should also wear sturdy shoes.

There are also a couple of cider houses in Alava, in and around Vitoria, including the "Soka Tira" in Vitoria itself. There are around 45 cider houses in the Basque Country. The largest concentration can be found in the town of Astigarraga, outside of San Sebastián. One of the most noted here is Zapiain, but open only in the evenings from January 19 - April 30, except Sundays, when it’s open year round.
In neighboring Hernani, there’s also the Zelaia on Martindegii 29, again, only open January 19 - April 30, except Sundays, when it’s open year round.

If you don’t make it to the cider country, but want to try a typical cider house meal in San Sebastián, then try the Sidrereía Donostiarrar on Calle Embeltran, 5, open year around, and featured in Burt Wolf’s “Local Flavors” show on San Sebastián. The city of Bilbao has its own typical cider house, open all year, the Sidrería Kiskia, on Pérez Galdós, 51, near the San Mamés soccer stadium. Closed on Sundays and Monday evening.

Outside of the grimy industrial town of Usurbil, southwest of San Sebastián in the Barrio Txoko Alde, there’s a famed traditional Basque cider house with rough-hewn walls and long wooden tables called Illumbe, recently featured in the Williams Sonoma magazine. The chef, José Angel Aguinaga is the cider maker and chef. There is nothing better than one of his huge chuletóns, or T-bone steaks.

**Excursion into the Basque Heartland**

A drive south from San Sebastián on the NI will take you inland into the Goierri, a region surrounded by the Aralar Mountains. Continue to follow the NI south to the attractive and very Basque town of Zerain, which lies midway between Donostia and Vitoria, passing by heavy industrial areas to Tolosa, the red bean town where the wicker baskets, "chisteras", used for pelota and jai alai, are produced, and Idiazábal (the ewe’s cheese town) for a gastronomic tour.

**Tolosa** has one of the best asadores/sidrerías found anywhere in the Basque Country, a true red meat temple, called Casa Julián. This 50-year-old carnivore’s delight is housed in a reconverted garage on Santa Clara, 6, at the bridge, serves huge grilled veal chops. Their menu is very limited, as is typical in all cider houses: jamón ibérico, asparagus from Navarra, Tudela lettuce hearts, Lodosa red piquillo peppers, a veal chop, and for dessert, Idiazábal cheese, Tolosa almond biscuits (“tejas”) and ice cream. It has a great selection of Rioja wines and excellent Cuban cigars. The current chef-owner is the son of the original Julián. It's rated highly in all the Spanish gastronomic guides and has a counterpart in Old Madrid, Julián de Tolosa on Cava Baja. Closed Sundays. Tolosa's famous market day is Saturday and it’s the largest in the Basque Country.

Just across the bridge on the other side of the river at Avenida Zumalacárregui, 7, you'll find another great asador, Casa Nicolás. Less rustic then Casa Julián, it delivers a fantastic meal in slightly more upscale surroundings. The chef, Pedro Ruiz, will take your order and deliver you a fabulous, but not inexpensive, meal. Plan on spending at least 40 euros per person for this superb but simple meal. We didn’t see a menu. Typical of the style, the chef rattled off what dishes he was preparing that day. We chose the lomo de bacalao (cod loin) to start, then a chuleta de buey (ox chop) and a homemade dessert of rice pudding, plus a bottle of red Rioja, Viña Izadi.

And please don’t think about leaving Tolosa without seeking out Spain’s best and most famous confectionary shop, Gorrotxategi, at Plaza Zarra, 3. There used to be a number of pastry and confectionery shops in this town, but they began closing down
one after the other, unable to compete with the cheaper industrial products. José María Gorrotxategi, who’s very much interested in Basque lore, began buying all the sweet-making equipment in those shops. One of them, Xaxu, had been operating in the same building since the 17th century. José María bought the building and twelve years ago installed and opened the very interesting Gorrotxategi Pastry Museum with a display of over 400 traditional confectionery utensils. One of his creations, the xaxu, is a confection of marzipan and egg yolk.

**Ordizia** is a small medieval village a few minutes south of Tolosa with an old quarter filled with lovely homes and a famous Wednesday market in the large covered square that dates back to 1512. It is also very pro-Basque independence. You’ll find great dining here as well at restaurante Martínez, Santa María, 10, whose young chef, Xabier Martínez, is taking his mother’s classic asador in more contemporary and creative directions. There is a great 3-course menu for only 8,50€ and a tasting menu for only 19,50€. Excellent value for such high quality!

From Ordizia, you can venture west on the GI 632 through Zumárraga then down the GI 2630 into the Valley of Iron to Legazpi and 1 km from the town, visit the Park of Mirandaola, a complex that includes an iron mill from the 18th century (can see it at work only on Sunday) and farmhouses where bread and Idiazabal cheese are made. Open in summer, Tuesday - Friday from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm and from 3:30 – 6:00 pm, Saturday from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm and 4:00 – 8:00 pm, Sunday from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm. Shorten hours in winter. Closed Monday. See pictures at: lenbur.com.

Returning to San Sebastián from the tiny village of Zerain, population 250, retrace your steps on the NI north, then taking the road to Beasain, up the scenic GI 2635 to Azpeitia, then on the GI 631 to Zestoa to the E5/A8/E70 superhighway.

**Bilbao**

Or Bilbo in Basque, the locals call it “Botxo”, is widely considered Spain’s "city of the future". It’s definitely a very prosperous city on the move, invigorating, sophisticated, highly underrated, and no longer the grey, grimy, polluted, ugly industrial eyesore it once was, although the grey, gritty suburbs don’t give a good initial impression. Once you arrive on the Gran Vía López de Haro, Bilbao’s partially pedestrianized main boulevard, you’ll see that Bilbao is quite cosmopolitan, very well to do and the place to be. Notice the gorgeous rotunda at the Plaza Moyúa, the elegant shops on Rodríguez Arias and Maximo Aguirre. Sit on a park bench in the beautiful little square, the Jardines de Albia next to the Café Iruña, and look around. You’ll think you’re on Manhattan’s tony Upper East Side.

And don’t be afraid of visiting the city because of what you may have read about terrorism. Yes, the political tensions with ETA sadly go on unabated in the Basque Country but tourists have never been targeted and are basically unaffected by it, although you might find yourself at some point in the midst of a massive anti-ETA street demonstration. We’ve spent considerable time traveling recently for business and
pleasure in the Bilbao area and have always had a wonderful time. The "Bilbaínos" are friendly, helpful, warm, outgoing—just great folks. I feel very comfortable there.

**Sightseeing**

Your first stop in this increasingly popular city should be Frank Gehry’s titanium masterpiece, the **Museo Guggenheim**. Gehry’s building is a fascinating, awe-inspiring work of art, although I admit to having been quite underwhelmed by the permanent collection, which is clearly a work in progress, but I do enjoy Richard Serra’s monumental sculptural pieces downstairs. Actually, very little of the permanent collection is usually on display, but there are always special exhibits, so check on-line at guggenheim-bilbao.es. Be sure to rent an audio guide. Make sure to check the web page for dates of the special exhibits. The exhibit coming up in October, which will run through February, is “100% Africa”.

After touring its special exhibits don’t forget to stop in at the upstairs bar to try the designer tapas by a disciple of renowned chef Martin Berasategui. Try to arrive at 11:00 am when they bring out all the fresh tapas, or try a gourmet lunch in its restaurant. Before you leave, make sure to cross the bridge, the Puente de la Salve, to see the museum from the other side of the river, the Deusto area. It’s even more spectacular from that vantage point. Behind the museum is their newest acquisition, a sculpture of a spider called “Mama”, a complement to Jeff Koons’ famous “Puppy” which sits in front, at the main entrance. Don’t be startled if you see and hear a little “explosion” in the river. It’s part of the museum experience; a group of gas jets timed to erupt on queue. Open Tuesday to Sunday from 10:00 am to 9:00 pm. In July and August the museum opens daily at 9:00 am.

Before or after touring the Guggenheim, cross the Calatrava designed Zubi Zuri bridge to the opposite side of the Ría, then take a left on Campo Volantín, then a right up Múgica y Butrón to catch the 1915 **funicular of Artxanda** that will take you in just 3 minutes up to the summit where you can admire spectacular views of the city. Hours of operation are from 7:15 am -10:00 pm, Monday - Saturday, and on Sunday and holidays from 8:15 am – 10:00 p.m. Trains depart every 15 minutes.

After visiting the Guggenheim, you may want to walk to the unheralded, but very prestigious **Museo de Bellas Artes** with its fine collection of Spanish Baroque. They recently added a brand new modernist wing. You will also find paintings by El Greco, Goya, Murillo, Ribera, Zurbarán, Van Dyck, Gauguin, Fortuny, Zuloaga and even Mary Cassat. It has some fine temporary shows. I saw a major Rodin exhibit there and last summer a wonderful Herrera to Velázquez show. The museum also has a very tasteful museum store and a handy bar/cafeteria with outdoor terrace. The gourmet restaurant **Arbola-Gañá** with young, avant-garde chef Aitor Basabe, is on the top floor of the new wing, and the room, decorated in minimalist style, looks out onto the Parque de Doña Casilda de Irurita next door. For summer dining there is also an outdoor terrace. Note: Dining here is by reservation only and restaurant often closed in July.
You can purchase a joint ticket for the Guggenheim and the Museum of Fine Arts, the “Bono Artean”, for 10€, but remember the Museo is free on Wednesdays (museobilbao.com). Open Tuesday to Saturday from 10:00 am to 8:00 pm, and Sundays from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. Closed Mondays.

Nearby, under the Euskalduna Palace, you'll find the Museo Marítimo de Bilbao (museomaritimobilbao.org). It sits on what used to be the dock area of the Euskalduna shipyard in the Abandoibarra, the symbol of the new Bilbao. Check for special exhibits, as last summer it hosted a major show on the Titanic, and its current show, “Sharks” can be seen until January 15, '07. It also has a good café belonging to the Iruña group. Entrance costs 4€ and it's open Tuesday – Sunday from 10:00 am – 8:00 pm. Closed Tuesday.

Take a ride on the ultramodern subway-metro with stations designed by Norman Foster. You can take the train all the way to the beaches of Plentizia. Also try a short hop on Bilbao’s new and colorful tram, the EuskoTran, which takes you from the Old Quarter all the way to the Guggenheim.

Take the metro to the Areeta stop across the ría to Las Arenas, the home of the wealthy Basque industrialists to take a ride on the world's oldest transporter bridge, the Puente Colgante or Puente de Vizcaya, the “Hanging Bridge” designed by Alberto de Palacio and inaugurated in 1890, uniting both sides of the Nervión River-the working class Portugalete and bourgeois Las Arenas (puente-colgante.com). It's a cross between a bridge and a ferry-a bridge for pedestrians and a ferry for pedestrians and cars. You can cross the ría to the working class suburb of Portugalete on this bridge in two ways, either on the “gondola” with space for passengers and cars, or if you’re not a sufferer of acrophobia, go up 50 meters and cross via the suspended footpath, like a walk around the first tier of the Eiffel Tower. Or cross via the footpath to Portugalete, and return via the gondola. While in Las Arenas area, you might like to have pintxos in this sophisticated, bourgeoisie ‘hood at one of the local watering holes. I’d suggest Bar Cosmo on pedestrian Andrés Larrazabal, 5, open from 9:00 am – 11:00 pm. Sit on the terrace and watch the preppy locals at play.

Take a short walk across the Nervión River on the Arenal Bridge, past the neo-classical Arriaga Theater, a copy of the Opera Garnier in Paris, into the atmospheric Old Quarter, the Casco Viejo. You can check to see what’s currently playing at the theater at: teatroarriaga.com. Tickets for the Teatro Arriaga can be purchased on-line at: generaltickets.com/.

Wandering around the Casco Viejo, it’s hard to imagine that up until the turn of the century this maze of ancient stone palacios contained all the enterprise of this ambitious city. Founded in 1300, Bilbao accreted out of just seven parallel streets, the Siete Calles, which run down to the riverfront and still serve as the neighborhood’s heart. Indeed, this city’s antique half remains wonderfully alive. Bilbaínos work, shop, and live in these austere edifices, which are crammed with bars, cafés, restaurants, bakeries, tobacconists, hole-in-the-wall groceries, furniture shops, and boutiques.
The Cathedral of Santiago is mostly 14th - 15th century Gothic with a later 19th century facade and it has been beautifully restored. Make sure to visit the cloister. Open Tues.-Sat. from 10:00 am – 1:00 pm, then from 4:00 – 7:00 pm. On Sundays it opens from 10:30 am - 1:30 pm. At Christmas time it displays a fine collection of “belenes”, Nativity Scenes.

One of the prettiest spots in the Casco Viejo, a dramatic change from its crooked, narrow streets, is the Plaza Nueva, a great square enclosed by grand 19th century apartment buildings and an arcade crowded with cafés, bars, and shops. It's a great place to rest your feet after a day of exploring and to sample some pintxos. Pay a morning visit to the Mercado de la Ribera next to the river while in the Casco Viejo. It's a 3-story feast for the senses. Downstairs on the 1st floor are the fishmongers. The meats and cheeses are on the 2nd floor, while upstairs you'll find fruits and veggies. It's the largest covered market in Europe. The market is scheduled to undergo major renovations but will still be open during the renovation. When completed, it will offer parking, and a café on the top floor.

Also, if you won’t get to the city of Bayonne in the Pays Basque, the French Basque Country, then visit the cultural and ethnological Basque museum, the Euskal Museoa on Calle Cruz, 4 (euskal-museoa.org). It came into being in 1921 and its collection brings together both the prehistory and archaeology of Bizkaia and the ethnography of the Basque people. Learn about the Basque navigators, the farming system, shepherding, their pottery and textile industry, and see a mockup of a typical Basque farmhouse or “caserío” and Basque furniture. There is a museum store that sells reproduction pieces. Open Tues-Sat, 11:00 am – 5:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 – 2:00, closed Monday, but free on Thursdays.

There’s also a small bullfighting museum, Museo Taurino de Bilbao in the bullring, Plaza de Toros Vista Alegre, on Martín Aguero, 1. The exhibition records the history of bullfighting in Bizkaia and includes bullfighting costumes, capes, swords and original posters. Open Monday to Friday from 10:30 am to 1:00 pm and from 4:00 to 8:00 pm. Entrance is 1,20€. You can check the bullfighting schedule at: www.torosbilbao.com.

A One-day tour of the city

Bilbao is quite compact, so it's possible to take a walking tour of the city. We start ours at the Guggenheim at 10 am, when the doors open. Pick up a map at the tourist office out front, stay right, strolling down Alameda Mazarredo to the very pretty Doña Casilda de Iturriazar Park, where you'll see the Museo de Bellas Artes, then down Máximo Aguirre to the flower-filled Plaza Moyúa rotunda. Turn left past the Plaza Moyúa and head down the semi-pedestrian, beautiful Gran Vía López de Haro, an excellent place to shop. There are more stores on Rodriguez Arias and Máximo Aguirre. Cross the Nervión River on the Arenal Bridge past the fin de siecle Arriaga Theater and into the Old Quarter with its warren of lively streets, south of the cathedral, the "7 calles". End your long walk with a rest on the Plaza Nueva before visiting the Mercado at the very end of the Old Quarter next to the river. You can return to the Ensanche, the new quarter, either via the nifty subway, or the new EuskoTran tram, which will take you
back to the Guggenheim. Between the new city and the old quarter is the Café Iruña where you might enjoy an informal and quick lunch. Try to be there around 1:00 pm, before it becomes packed. It's a great value.

(There is a new tourist office in the Plaza del Ensanche, not far away from Jardines de Albia and the Café Iruña. The address: Oficina de Turismo Bilbao, Oficina Central, Plaza Ensanche 11, Tel: 944 795 760, Fax: 944 795 761, Web: www.bilbao.net, Email: bit@ayto.bilbao.net. It only opens during the working week, unlike the ones by the Guggenheim and in the Teatro Arriaga)

**Tapas (Pintxos) Hopping**

**In the new city, the Ensanche**

After trying out the bars of the Plaza Nueva on your first night, take a stroll down Licenciado Poza Street, behind the Gran Vía, in the Indautxu area, to the corner of Maestro García Rivero, between 7:00 and 8:00 pm, for a second night’s tapas adventure. On this small pedestrian street, an area called “pozas”; you'll see several bars filled to the rafters with people, some spilling out into the street, enjoying Bilbao’s gourmet tapas. One of my favorites here is **El Huevito Frito** on M. G. Rivero 1. Its specialties include zucchini filled with ham and cheese. Another favorite is **Estoril** on Plaza de Campuzano 3, which specializes in croquettes and chorizo tortillas. It also is to have the very best martinis in town. If you enjoy seafood, stop by **Serantes** at Licenciado Poza, 16, for “rabas”, fried squid rings.

**Saving the best for last**

After everything else is done, head to the pedestrian Calle Diputación for two unique treats, the **Viña del Ensanche** at Diputación, 10, for great "jamón ibérico" of the Joselito brand, the silkiest ham in the world, better than prosciutto. This is a chic local hangout where everyone drinks “cariñena” red wine to go with the ham, foie and cheeses. You can simply have pintxos, hot or cold, including ham croquettes, grilled mushrooms, tempura of baby green asparagus, little lima beans sautéed with ham, grilled filet mignon. Or have a mozzarella and tomato salad, a carpaccio or a gazpacho. Or order whole meal, choosing among several degustation menus for two, costing from 44€ - 62€, which includes five small courses. They have a gourmet shop just around the corner.

From here you move to **El Globo**, across from "La Viña", which is open all day for great tapas and good wines. Here you can experience treats like scrambled eggs with mushrooms and roasted red peppers in earthenware dishes that make for a great 4-star meal. It’s filled with locals, popular with business folks in the morning hours. It also features a wine of the month. Great gazpacho! **El Globo** often wins the yearly tapas competitions with its very original creations. This is very much a local yuppie watering hole, but just can’t be beat.

Another recommendation on the same street is **Lekeitio** whose specialty is a 3-tiered tortilla, a rather large omelet.
In shopping at El Corte Inglés, walk around the corner in Aldameda de Urkijo to another great pintxos bar with an English theme. It is located around the corner from “Casa del Libro”, and it is called **New Inn**. It belongs to the Urrestarazu people, with a nice bakery nearby.

If you happen to visit Bilbao in July when the **Viña del Ensanche** (above) is closed and would like a wonderful sit-down meal built around Spain’s famous jamón, head straight around Alameda de Urquijo, past the post office, before reaching the intersection with General Concha to the fantastic **Colmado Ibérico**, at No. 20, which is a bar – restaurant – delicatessen - wine store combo ([colmadoiberico.com](http://colmadoiberico.com)). We had a recent lunch here in the pretty back dining room, feasting on scrambled eggs with ham, ham platters, gazpacho with a complimentary glass of cava (bubbly) to start off our meal. Nice service, reasonable prices. You can order as much or as little as you wish, just a starter (ham croquettes, Piquillo peppers stuffed with ham), a large salad, a dish of scrambled eggs (with ham, wild mushrooms, baby asparagus, limas, etc.), a meat course (their grilled pork loin is dynamite) or a homemade dessert. They’re open Mon.-Thurs. till 11:00 pm, Friday and Saturday until midnight. Closed **Sunday**.

**In the old quarter, the Casco Viejo**

My favorite haunt in the old quarter is **Víctor Montes**, one of the oldest and liveliest of the square’s restaurants and bars, which have a wonderfully jaunty Belle Epoque décor that are all black and white and gold. Start off with some rabas, fried squid rings, and a txikito of Rioja. The txikito is a sturdy short glass with a thick stem and a small hollow that holds only a few sips of wine. After the last sip it’s Basque custom to move on to the next bar. The Bilbaínos believe in “little and often” and in each bar order only a short “txikito” or “zurito” and one pintxo that they knock back in a minute or two before quickly relocating to another bar. The plaza has so many that you may never get beyond the square before the evening’s over.

Another favorite is the next-door **Café Bilbao**, which always wins prizes in the annual “pintxos” competition. On Sundays you can see three generations of a family making their way through the neighborhood bars drinking Rioja in sips and feasting on pintxos.

In the “Siete Calles” section, be sure to take your map along, those seven parallel, narrow, pedestrian streets running south of the cathedral. On Santa María, 10. Look for **Bar Gatz**, another bar that regularly wins awards for their creative pintxos. It’s next to the hostal **Iturrienea Ostatua**.

On the same street you can check out **Irrintxi** if you like sushi. Two other contenders in the “Siete Calles” area include **Xukela** and **Río-Oja** (for casserole dishes), both on Calle del Perro.

But our two favorite bars in the Old Quarter, which are welcomed havens when we need to sit and rest, are the fantastic **Bar Bertón**, on Jardines, 11, running off Santa María, which offers some of the best pintxos around IMO, made with high quality ingredients (-try its “solomillo con foie”-tiny filet mignon on toast). It has table seating.
We also enjoy its sister next door, Sasibil, at Jardines, 8. Both offer a well-priced menú del día. Both are closed Sunday night and Monday.

**Gourmet Dining**

**Aizian** - is the gastronomic restaurant of the Sheraton Hotel, which is run independently by the Asúa family of the Michelin, starred Andra Mari of Galdakao ([restaurante-aizian.com](http://restaurante-aizian.com)). We had a truly spectacular meal here this spring as guests of the Basque Country Tourist Board. For our group of twelve, the chef, José Miguel Olazabalaga, pulled out all the stops, and presented us with extraordinarily creative dishes, that were the highlight of our week’s visit, courtesy of the Basque and Riojan governments; tourist bureaus. The restaurant’s décor with its wood walls is minimalist, but it’s a very relaxing space, with the finest of linens and china, well-spaced tables, quiet and refined ambiance. On a normal day the restaurant offers two menus, one traditional, at 45€ and the other a 54€ tasting menu. This chef may soon win a Michelin star. It’s only been open for three years and already has been awarded two Campsa “soles” (suns).

**Guggenheim Bilbao** - not the informal bar/cafeteria of the museum, but instead the Martín Berasategui supervised restaurant, where his chef, Josean Martínez has become known as one of Spain’s top young chefs (**restauranteguggenheim.com**). Featured in Wine Spectator, it offers a great wine list with unusual selections. There are three tasting menus at 45€, 50€ and 54€. Martínez also prepares a great value menú del día at 14€ for the cafeteria side. Closed on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights, the last week of December and first week of January. Has received one Campsa sol and a 9/25/10 rating in Gourmetour.

**Etxanobe** - is the beautiful, top floor dining room of the Euskalduna performing arts-convention center ([etxanobe.com](http://etxanobe.com)). A lovely and romantic dining spot with a degustación menu by chef Fernando Canales. He offers a degustation menu for 50€ and a gastronomic menu with wines and coffee for 60€. It closes Sunday, Holy Week and August 1 - 15. Receives 2 Campsa suns and 1 Michelin star.

**Zortziko** - at Alameda Manzarredo, 17, near the Guggenheim, is arguably the most famous and priciest in Bilbao but offers special tasting meals; the inexpensive "menu del trabajo", or the "menu de degustación" and the "menu de celebración". Very formal in the old European style with heavy, grand French Empire décor of lime green walls, crystal chandeliers, alabaster fireplace, gilt mirrors, gorgeous floral arrangements, waiters, all who speak English, in white jackets, formal and flawless service, even the beer is served elegantly, but you can go casually dressed. Frank Gehry’s favorite hangout when in Bilbao. Locals come to dine in shirt- sleeves. I ordered chef Danciel García´s 5-course “menu de degustación”, priced at 75€, but it wasn’t my best meal in Bilbao. Huge selection of coffees, teas, Armagnac, brandy, cognac, and eau de vie. Closed on Sundays and Monday nights from August 23 to September 15. Receives 2 suns from the Campsa guide. Featured in Wine Spectator. Reserve at: [zortziko.es](http://zortziko.es).
Goizeko Kabi - Particular de Estraunza, 4: nouvelle Basque in a cozy, rustic setting, offering potato ravioli stuffed with cod, hake cheeks (goizekokabi.com). The kokotxas are legendary. Desserts like runny white chocolate cake and rice pudding with Grand Marnier ice cream. If you miss this one and are heading to Madrid, the capital has two outposts, manned by Jesús Santos, restaurateur extraordinaire, one in the Wellington Hotel. 1 Campsa sol. Closed on Sunday and the first two weeks of August. Their tasting menu goes for 48€. Featured in Wine Spectator.

Gorrotxa - Alameda Urquijo, 30, is located in an odd, dark, shopping gallery lined with bars and pubs, but don’t judge a book by its cover. Gorrotxa offers elegant, luxury décor, recently praised by NY Times, F & W, and Condé Nast Traveler. Try the cod, “bacalao al pil-pil”, the monkfish (rape), or the lamb chops (costillas de cordero). Generous portions. Has a tasting menu for 56€. Closed Sunday, Holy Week, August 27 - September 11.

Asador Getaria - on Colón Larreategui 12, is a great place for seafood. A Bilbao institution and a good place to have a pintxo de tortilla in the morning with your coffee.

Yandiola - across the river from the Guggenheim in Deusto on Paseo Campo Volantín 15 (next to the Hotel Conde Duque) is getting lots of praise from gourmet critics for its highly inventive dishes (yandiola.com). This has been, of late, our favorite gourmet lunch in the city. Decor is hip-trendy-minimalist, very stylish, but the space is very relaxing, the service is attentive, and we found the price to quality ratio is very high. I highly recommend it!

The spot for carnivores

Asador Ripa - on Muelle Ripa near Príncipe (asadorripa.com), close to the river, is one of the great “asadors” (grill houses) in the country, along with Extebarri in tiny Axpe (see below). The house specialty is the T-bone steak, a chuletón, along with perfectly grilled fish, and a large wine list. Closed Sundays and Monday nights.

Casual Dining

For the best lunch, at the lowest price in the most atmospheric setting you can find, head to the lovely, flower filled Jardines de Albia Park. Across the street you’ll find a Bilbao legend, founded in 1903, Café Iruña, at Calle de Colón Larreategui, 13, is directly across my favorite square. The Café Iruña offers extravagant Moorish décor, coffered ceiling, slow-moving Arabic wooden fans and lamps, mosaic tiles and murals. This restaurant is extremely popular and has great tapas all day at the bar. Just point to what looks good. Also try the “pintxo moruno”, a type of shish kebab. The dining room fills quickly around 1 pm most days as the locals drop in to enjoy the great value. A three course “menu del día” with wine only costs 12.25€, Monday - Friday and 14.25€ on weekends.

You’ll see people standing outside talking on their cell phones, reading off to their friends and family what’s on the menu for the day. It’s a kind of a Parisian brasserie with
a heavy touch of the Alhambra. This makes the perfect lunch stop. If you happen to be there on the 6th of July at noon you can join in on their San Fermín celebration, complete with “chupinazo”. Be sure to dress in your best red and white.

**Asador Oteixa** - Licenciado Poza, 27, has another very well priced "menú del día" at lunch. Is very informal.

**El Viejo Zortzi** - Licenciado Poza, 54, is a little bistro and a less expensive way to sample the Garcia family's Zortziko. This is gourmet dining in a more informal setting.

**Abaroa I** - Plaza del Museo, directly across the street from the Museum of Fine Arts. It is always packed to the gills at lunch due to its amazingly good value menú del día, for only 9€. If you’re considering a quick lunch here after a visit to the museum, please put your name on the list before your museum visit. If you opt for the a la carte menu, they serve delicious “huevos rotos con pisto”, which are scrambled eggs with ratatouille, a nice goat cheese salad and a great steak (“chuletón a la piedra”)

**Colmado Ibérico** - Alameda de Urquijo 20 (see description above).

**Breakfast or Coffee Break**

**Abando y Barra** - on Iparraguirre, is just a block from the Guggenheim. Tiny and sophisticated for an excellent coffee break, or several different continental breakfasts, on your way from the Guggenheim to the Museo de Bellas Artes. Lovely canapés. They serve a delicious Baqué brand coffee. As you leave, check the beautiful cheese, fruit and vegetables at Gamazo, across the street.

**Shopping in Bilbao**

**Clothing**

Designer boutiques are located along the Gran Vía and Rodríguez Arias. Look for Zara for designer styles at discount prices. The boutique of the Galician designer, Adolfo Domínguez, the Spanish Armani, Cortefiel and Massimo Dutti for smart casual ware, can be found here. The huge El Corte Inglés department store, the main department store in Spain, is also located on the lower end of the Gran Vía with a separate store for books, CDs, electronic equipment on the opposite side of the Gran Vía.

**Books**

For a fine selection of Spanish books visit one of the two branches of the Casa del Libro. The largest branch is located on Alameda de Urquijo, 9, near the El Corte Inglés department store.
Basque Handicrafts

The Basque cultural store Basandere (basandere.com) is located close to the Guggenheim at Iparraguirre, 4. This is one of my very favorite Basque handicrafts stores. Here is where you will find Jean Vier linens (if you’re not headed to the Pays Basque), gourmet products, such as pates, beans, jams, honey, Basque music, pottery, handcrafted jewelry, and books on Basque culture. One of my favorite items is the hand carved wooden “kaiku”, a milking jar. They are hand carved from birch and come from the Bztán Valley of Navarra. The large ones are used to milk sheep and the smaller ones are used for making and serving “cuajada”, the clotted ewe’s milk custard, and a popular dessert in Euskadi.

Music

If you enjoy Celtic music you might enjoy the music of Kepa Junkera, who plays the diatonic accordion (kepajunkera.com). The sound is part folk and part rock. Members of the Chieftains have collaborated on some of his recordings. Look for “Bilbao: 00:00h”, “Maren”, which won a Latin Grammy, and his latest release, a live performance recorded at Arriaga Theater, “K1, K2”. A new CD will be released in September. Great stuff.

Chocolates

The Basque Country’s best hand made chocolates are Saint Gerons from Mendaro, and their shop is found at Licenciado Poza, 14, in the Indautxu area, near the Abba Parque hotel. A brand new shop has opened on Rodríguez Arias, 15, Alma de Cacao, which also has a branch at the Sondika airport.

Festivals

Herri Kirolak

Definitely not for wimps, is Bilbao’s annual rural sports games that make Australian Rules football look tame by comparison. Typical events include tree-trunk chopping, hay-bale tossing, iron bar tossing, grass cutting, tugs of war, ox-cart lifting and relay races with heavy sacks of corn. There is also something called aritopeka, which is a bit like cockfighting, but featuring sheep. However, for displays of unadulterated brute strength, there is nothing to beat the stone lifter, or harrijasotzaile. Dressed in leather padding, contestants repeatedly lift a series of granite and lead filled stones weighing up to 315 kilograms in a timed contest. Refinements include dragging them, or twirling them round their heads. The sport is believed to have originated with the huge weights traditionally lifted by farmers laboring on their land. “Harria” means stone in Basque.

Semana Grande, or Aste Nagusia

This event takes place in mid August. It’s Bilbao’s yearly week-long, 24 hour party, which includes special concerts, parades with traditional folkdances accompanied by the
"txistu" (a 3-holed flute), fireworks, food stales, the Herri Kilorak (above) and bullfights each afternoon featuring Spain’s leading matadors.

**Lodging**

**Expensive**

5-star **Gran Domine** - a design hotel opened in 2002, a creation of Javier Mariscal and Philippe Starck, plus other hot designers who contributed the shower stools, sinks and scarlet sofas. It has 145 rooms (14 suites) on five floors. Kind of whimsical, pop artist on the inside; the centerpiece is an atrium lobby with a 7 story wire mesh cage of stones, 26 meters high, called the Cypress Fossil, a touch of Andy Warhol. Each floor is color-coded. There are two restaurants, the informal café with Bauhaus red and white chairs and the gourmet Beltz the Black (with fair prices). Run by the Silken Hotel chain (granhoteldominebilbao.com). The piece de resistance is the top floor terrace, for guests only, which overlooks the Guggenheim, and where breakfast is served (in summer Beltz the Black moves up to the penthouse terrace).

This is my favorite deluxe hotel ANYWHERE in Spain-absolutely perfect. The extremely comfortable and amply sized rooms are decorated in soothing brown, gray, cream and black. The beds have soft, cream, wool-cashmere spreads, and there is a pillow menu, Internet TV. We choose the superior executive room which has a view of the Guggenheim Museum plus a huge bathroom with separate stand-alone shower room with teak floor and a floor to ceiling window separating it from the bedroom, which thankfully has blinds for privacy! The bath is outfitted with huge, thick towels and toiletries that seem to go on and on. The room is also equipped with a CD player with selection of mood music, umbrella, and bag to leave your shoes out for complimentary evening shoeshine, high quality bathrobes and slippers. Turn down service gives you black squeeze toys for the bath and chocolates. Our room is so spacious and comfortable, that we want to stay forever! Because our rate includes breakfast, and we usually have to leave for the airport before the breakfast service begins, they send up coffee and pastries to our room at no additional charge. There is a garage, and a gym. When it opened it was featured in the British Condé Nast Traveler’s “The Hot List: 50 of the Coolest New Hotels in the World” and is a member of Leading Hotels of the World.

Read the Departures magazine review at [www.departures.com/bb/bb_1102_bilbao.html](http://www.departures.com/bb/bb_1102_bilbao.html)

5-star **Sheraton Bilbao** - Opened early ’04, designed by famed Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, across from Euskalduna palace and adjacent to park. It” directly across the street from the Zubiarte shopping mall and in front of the Doña Casilda de Iturrizar park, also across from the Palacio Euskalduna Performing Arts & Convention Center. Only a 10-minute walk from the Guggenheim, there is a tram stop near hotel to take you to the Old Quarter. Dramatic, soaring atrium lobby, rooms outfitted with leather furniture, all the imaginable amenities. Small lap pool and fitness center, business center, located on the sixth floor, downstairs bar, Café Chillida for casual fare (offering a daily low cost menú), formal, gourmet Restaurant Aizian (fantastic)
and garage. We have inspected all types of rooms, here, including the penthouse suite. Floors 6-10 are non-smoking and there are ice machines on each floor. Of course all rooms have the Sheraton-Westin Heavenly Beds (sheraton.com/bilbao). The deluxe and premium rooms have 25 inch TVs and ADSL Internet access. The suites have Jacuzzi baths. Room 914 is a nice jr. suite with great views and beautiful bath. Room 803 is a suite with living room, dining area, 1-1/2 baths. No. 1011 is the enormous presidential suite, connecting to rooms 1019 and 1018 with two large plasma TVs, cordless phones, CD player, upstairs bar with patio plus kitchen. Room 1020 is a premium suite with balcony. Bath products are from Escada. Well reviewed in El País. Rates beat those of the Gran Domine.

4-star Hotel Miró - is another designer hotel (mirohotelbilbao.com) in a modernist townhouse down the street from the Guggenheim and one block south of Gran Domine, created by Barcelona’s fashion designer, Antonio Miró. The 50 rooms are done in minimalist style in beige and black and have mohair blankets on the beds, leather sofas, excellent bedside lighting and black marble baths with square basis and jazzy showers, but no door between bedroom and bath, only a velvet curtain, so one needs to be very at ease with one’s travel partner! The street facing rooms now have floor to ceiling windows but views of a huge construction site, but this is ongoing in the every changing Abandoibarra area of Bilbao. It’s only 200 meters from the Guggenheim. The hotel has a downstairs library-lounge and a basement gym providing free apples, granola bars and mineral water, plus a Hamman and sauna. The desk staff is fantastic and offers superb service. 44 rooms.

Moderately expensive

5-star López de Haro - was Bilbao’s leading 5-star boutique hotel (before the opening of the hip, trendy Miró and Grand Domine) with a perfect location and a kind of a posh, British style private club décor. Very quiet! Its dining room, the Club Náutico is one of Bilbao’s finest restaurants. There is a downstairs bar/lounge for light meals. Expect perfect service from concierge staff. Low rates through Expedia. Large, marble baths with lots of toiletries, power showers, and thick towels. Furniture is showing its age, though. The staff provides very warm, attentive, caring service. Although it may be upstaged by the flashier kids in town, the Domine, Miró and Sheraton, it still exudes class.

5-star Carlton - the classic “wedding cake”, Belle Epoque building with stained glass domed lobby, located at the flower filled rotunda, the Plaza Moyúa, the prettiest square in Bilbao. It has 144 rooms (seven suites) on six floors (aranzazu-hoteles.com). This 5-star hotel’s recent guests include Pavarotti and Pierce Brosnan, while filming scenes of “To Die Another Day”. Guests of days long gone by have included Hemingway. It’s Bilbao’s dowager, a bit old school, but often has very attractive rates. Popular with groups, as well.
Upper budget to moderate

**High Tech Petit Palace Arana** - is a brand new entry in the Casco Viejo belonging to the budget-hip High Tech Petit Palace chain ([hthoteles.com](http://hthoteles.com)). Lots of bells and whistles for little money! Computers in most rooms along with halogen lighting, bare wood floors, exposed wood beams and showers with hydro-massage with a seat. It sits next to the classic **Arriaga Theater**, and near the river.

**Abba Parque** - has a handy location on Rodriguez Arias, behind the Gran Vía, with its upscale shopping, tapas bars, nearby restaurants and a pleasant 15 to 20 minute stroll to the Guggenheim. This is an old-time classic completely remolded and given a very fresh, modern look in 2003 ([abbaparquehotel.com](http://abbaparquehotel.com)). The 171 rooms (5 jr. suites) have a/c, safes, hair dryers, satellite TV, WiFi access and modern baths. There’s also a downstairs gym, Turkish bath, a rooftop solarium with lounge chairs, a restaurant and cafeteria, and a Cyber Corner in the lobby to check email. There is also a convenient parking garage. It offers non-smoking rooms and rooms especially designed for women. I’ve stayed here several times when traveling alone and can enthusiastically recommend it as a solid moderate choice.

**Budget**

**Iturrienea Ostatua** - on a pedestrianized street in the “Siete Calles” area of the Casco Viejo, with its lace-curtained French windows and wrought-iron balconies dripping with geraniums, is as picturesque as can be, and the prices are equally as inviting, with its 21 rooms going for no more than 75€ - 80€ a night. Best rooms: No. 3 or 7.    Tel: 944 161 500 Fax: 34 944 158 929

**Luxury Lodging near the airport**

**Palacio de Urgoiti** - We recently treated ourselves, after a month of Basque Country travels, to two luxurious nights at the stunning 4-star Palacio de Urgoiti ([palaciourgoiti.com](http://palaciourgoiti.com)), only 4 km from the Bilbao International Airport, in Mungía, very easily accessible right off the BI 631 highway at the Artebakarra-Laukariz exit. The 17th century Palace sits on a lovely 10-acre estate, complete with 9-hole golf course. It has been elegantly restored and converted into Parador style lodging. One feels like a guest in a very stately home, yet the 43 rooms have all the modern comforts, including bathrobes, slippers, Penhaligon toiletries, power showers, free mini bar, flat screen TV, WiFi internet access, free shoeshine, one day laundry service and room service.

There is also an indoor heated swimming pool open from 7:00 am – 11:00 pm, a gym, baby-sitting service and a fine, gourmet restaurant elegantly decorated with original art, serving large portions of creative Basque fare plus traditional dishes, such as a delectable filet mignon. Breakfast can be taken in one’s room or from the downstairs buffet. Ours was a superior room decorated in soft pastels and fine prints, one of six with a private balcony complete with white wrought iron chairs and table overlooking the pretty patio, where we took our breakfast. The suite is grandiose and has a large terrace facing the
main entrance and golf course. There is a downstairs formal parlor/sitting room done in soft pink and cream where one can read the newspaper. If you have an early flight, the hotel offers early morning coffee service. The Palacio makes a perfect last night splurge, and it takes under 10 minutes to reach the airport, a very easy drive. Although we could see the airport lights in the distance in the evening, we were never bothered by airport traffic noise. It was a quiet haven. Highly recommended!

Excursions from Bilbao

To the beach

On that rare sunny day you take the metro out to the Neguri stop, then walk down among the enormous, extravagant turn-of-the-century mansions of the industrial elite of Getxo to the Paseo, which takes you down to the Puerto Deportivo. Here you will find movie theaters, tapas bars and one great restaurant, Cubita Kaia, and the beach. You can either dine at Cubita Kaia, or at one of the more casual restaurants, or return to the metro and head up to neighboring Algorta. The Bar La Graniola is also open for lunch.

A pretty inland drive

If you have a car, take a morning drive to the scenic Duresangado valley, or better yet, spend an incredibly tranquil night in this beautiful, out of the way spot with a visit the picturesque town of Elorrio, with its noble homes, beautiful gardens, stone crucifixes and an unusual cemetery at the hermitage of San Adrián de Argineta above the town, with 9th-10th century sarcophagi. Once there, take a short detour to the tiny hamlet, just a blip on the road, of Axpe-Atxondo. This is a wonderful find if you like being in the country. The village is secluded in a misty, green valley with the Amboto peak hovering above and consists of a stone church with a unique Basque porch, the requisite frontón and one truly marvelous, unforgettable restaurant.

There are two ancient stone farmhouses on the side of the hill overlooking the village. The Mendi Goikoa, another great Michelin stared restaurant, and the Mendi Bekoa, a lovely bed and breakfast. The names mean “upper and lower mountains” in Basque and make a perfect overnight stay.

You can read more at www.specialplacestostay.com. It's featured in Alistair Sawday's Special Places to Stay/Spain. Tel: 946 820 833 Fax: 946 821 136

Mendi Goikoa's slogan is "where the silence is heard", while the Mendi Bekoa’s slogan is “where the silence sleeps”. It is said that Mari, a witch who watches over the Basques, lives atop the mountain’s peak. When clouds hide the peak, Mari is at home. The restaurant is celebrated as much for it’s cooking as for its bucolic setting, and has attracted many notables. The King and Queen of Spain, Nobel Prize winners, and various Prime Ministers have all eaten in the dining room, which once served as a stable. People often drive up from Bilbao for lunch on Sundays. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Please reserve in advance, as the restaurant is VERY popular for wedding parties.
The rooms in the Mendi Bekoa are antique filled. The best room is number 4 with a long terrace overlooking the valley and beamed, open cathedral ceiling. No TV or minibar, but there is a phone. Stall shower. In the winter choose room No. 7 with a Jacuzzi shower, because room No. 4 gets rather cold when the wind comes howling through, but a more peaceful spot you couldn’t find anywhere. There's also a glassed in porch where a cold buffet breakfast of chorizo, fruits, breads, and cereals is served. It has a cozy bar. This is a perfect place to unwind after the madness of San Fermín, but in order to stay here over a weekend from March to October, you need to reserve far in advance, since it schedules many weddings where the wedding party takes all 11 rooms. Closed all of January.

The Etxebarri, in the center of the hamlet, next to the church and the fronton, is quite the gourmet find, but it has been discovered by the gourmet press, having been featured in Food and Wine, Gourmet, The Wine Spectator, even Vogue. There is no indication that it’s a restaurant from the outside, just the name written above the door of this pretty stone building. There's a simple bar downstairs where the locals hang out sipping cider and watching soccer on TV. The dining room is upstairs. You absolutely must reserve, particularly on weekends. You'll delight in fabulous food from Víctor Arguinzoniz, who has been called the Ferran Adrià of the grill, the world’s best master griller. He makes his own charcoal every morning. The grill area is a separate room off the kitchen with door leading outdoors, with six specially designed grills lined up in a row, as well as a few wood burning ovens. Praised in both Condé Nast Traveler and Saveur magazines—“some of the most original, compelling, honest food in Spain”. Try the clams (almejas), wild mushrooms, their special filet mignon with cheese sauce (solomillo con salsa de queso Idiazabal) and the Idiazabal cheese ice cream dessert. Fabulous! The hostess suggested that we try the local Txakolí made in Elorrio, the Mendraka, and it was delicious.

If you haven't reserved and both restaurants are full, drive back to Elorrio, then take the BI 2632 to Bergara to dine at the almost equally renowned Lasa, a delightful restaurant located along the banks of the Deba River in a 16th century palace, the Palacio Ozaeta, once belonging to the family of the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola (restaurantelas.com). The chef is Koldo Lasa and he prepares traditional fare with a creative touch. Specialties are game and smoked fishes plus stews and hake. The bread and desserts are homemade. The restaurant offers a special Tuesday - Friday 20€ lunch. Closed Sunday night and Monday.

This valley hasn’t been tarnished by as much industrial blight as other areas in the Bilbao-San Sebastian area. It makes a wonderful, idyllic day trip from the city.

**Exploring the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve**

**From Gernika to the coast**

**A daylong coastal driving tour**
Your first stop is in the historic city of Gernika-Lumo, the symbol of Basque nationhood and the site of the infamous saturation bombing by Hitler’s Condor legion, “a dry run” to practice the Luftwaffe’s theories of terror bombing in preparation for the saturation bombing prevalent during WWII. This historic tragedy occurred on market day, April 26, 1937. Picasso’s painting, displayed in the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, immortalizes this massacre. Visit the “tree of Gernika”, the symbol of Basque democracy, which survived the bombing. It can be found, still growing, next to the old Basque parliament building, Casa de Juntas. There is also a very moving and award winning, Basque Peace Museum at the Plaza de los Fueros, 1, which I highly recommend. Your visit there will leave you with a lasting memory of this tragic event and a greater appreciation of the Basque struggle for freedom to practice their language and culture. I would always include a visit to the Peace Museum in any trip to Gernika. I was so impressed that I bought the video (in English) and shared it with my Modern European History professor friends.

The museum (museodelapaz.com) is open Tuesday – Saturday, 10:00 am - 2:00 pm, 4:00 – 7:00 pm, Sunday from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm. In July and August it’s open from Tuesday - Saturday, 10:00 am – 7:00 pm, without interruption, and Sundays from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm.

Gernika remains a heavily industrialized town, considered a punishment by Franco after the civil war. Not much remains of its former glory, but it’s worth a visit nonetheless, particularly on Monday, which is the traditional market day, but to find a space to park, arrive early by 9:00 - 9:30 am.

You can read an interesting article about Gernika and the Spanish Civil War at: http://travel.guardian.co.uk/countries/story/0,7451,709580,00.html

While visiting Gernika, reserve a table for a great lunch at Zallo Berri, Juan Kaltzada, 79, just beyond the Red Cross building on the road leading out of town (zallobarri.com). Our friend, and Basque chef Joseba Jiménez de Jiménez, who owns The Harvest Vine in Seattle, first recommended this great restaurant to us. The new chef, Iñigo Ordorica, is making gastronomic waves with his impressive creations.

For a treat in a beautifully decorated, atmospheric Basque farmhouse, head a few Kms up the road to Forúa, the well-to-do suburb of Gernika, to the restaurant Baserri Maitea. Follow the signs up the hill through an upscale housing development. The road may seem more like a farm road, but a great meal awaits you at its end. We had one of our most memorable lunches here. Very creative food beautifully presented and a gem of a find.

Two coastal excursions from Gernika

Leaving Gernika, you can take the BI 2235 northwest towards Mundaka, Llaida beach, Bermeo and Bakio, or when you reach the fork in the road, you may want to keep right for the drive to Elantxobe and Lekeitio.
For the eastern coastal drive

Follow signs to Gautegui-Arteaga on the BI 2238 to the village of Kortezubi. There you will find two tourist sites, the first, the prehistoric caves of Santimamiñe, and second, the interesting Enchanted (painted) Forest of Oma. The caves are found above the bar/restaurant Lezika, where you'll find a large parking lot. I would no longer waste time on the caves, because, sadly, due to deteriorating conditions, the chambers of Paleolithic paintings of bison, horses, deer and bear have been now closed to the public. One can only visit the other rooms on a free, guided visit, but the guide takes only 15 people at a time, no reservations. We have enjoyed driving (not walking) up to the small car park, 2 km above the main road to access the painted forest, about a 1 km hike down a very steep hill. The artist of this work is Agustín Ibarrola. The eerily painted tree trunks are also showing quite a bit of deterioration, but the government is in the process of sprucing up the site.

From here you take the BI 3237 on to the cute little fishing village of Elantxobe, whose fishermen’s homes cling precariously to an almost vertical cliff. There’s only one road into and out of this cliff side village, with a bus turntable where the street ends in the village plaza. If you find yourself in need of a nice lunch, drive on towards the village of Ea and stop 3.5 Kms before Ea in Natxitua at the modest little Hotel Ermintxo overlooking the water. After lunch, continue driving east via the coastal road through Ea and Ispaster (a beautiful drive) to the large and picturesque fishing village of Lekeitio, impressive, as it is unique and your last stop, a very Basque, quite picturesque and very pro-independence fishing community. It’s well worth a stroll around the port and a visit to the Church of Santa María de la Asunción, an interesting example of Basque Gothic construction. Warning: Parking in the town is virtually impossible during the summer-expect to leave your car at the far end of town and walk.

If you have a day or two to spend in this area and want to use Lekeitio as your base, I highly recommend an overnight at the charming and reasonably priced Hotel Zubieta (hotelzubieta.com). It is run by the same owners as the Palacio de Urgoiti just east of Bilbao’s airport (see above), and is a charming, atmospheric 3-star inn. The hotel sits on the grounds of the Zubieta Palace, is the restored 18th century stables and has its own parking, a library and bar/coffee shop. All of its twelve rooms and eight suites are nicely decorated have a/c, safe, iron, and desk, satellite TV and Internet access. It also offers four apartments sleeping 4 persons each. The Zubieta sits away from the tourist crowds yet is an easy walk to the town.

For your western coast excursion

After leaving Gernika, take the BI 2235 up to the surfers’ paradise of Mundaka. I have enjoyed a quick visit to this surfing town with its famous left break, but I don’t recommend an overnight there. You’ll find far more charming lodging in other parts of the Urdaibai than the Hotel Puerto or Hotel Atalaya in Mundaka. Llaida beach, on the opposite side of the town, is quite lovely but gets horrendously crowded during the summer, especially on weekends. After a brief stop in Mundaka, I suggest you continue
on to the historic whaling port of Bermeo. To appreciate this working port town, you must explore the port area. Once there, take a walk around the village, checking out the well-kept cemetery overlooking the sea, maybe a quick visit to the Museum of the Fisherman, El Museo del Pescador. It’s open Tuesday - Saturday, 10:00 am - 1:30, 4:00 - 7:30 pm and Sunday 10:00 am - 1:30 pm. Admission is free. Many sailors from Bermeo accompanied Columbus on his 2nd voyage, and the ships for his second expedition were built here.

Then continue along the coastal road BI 3101 for 6 km until you reach the little islet of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe and its hermitage. For a real cardiovascular workout and extraordinary views, take the 231 steps up to the Romanesque chapel. This is a major pilgrimage site for locals. Many legends abound regarding the origins of the shrine. Some say that St. John himself disembarked at the port of Bermeo and with only three giant steps, he arrived at the spot where the hermitage now sits. Others assure that the pirate Sir Francis Drake conquered the rock, stole all the jewels of the hermit living there and threw him over the precipice.

After your workout, for a fabulous gourmet lunch with stunning ocean views, head straight to the restaurant-jatetxea Eneperi, right on the highway. This acclaimed restaurant (euskalnet.net/eneperi/) has a charming country décor, waitresses in regional costumes, superb cuisine by a woman chef. But you must reserve in advance for weekends, as it’s very popular among gourmands from Bilbao. We dined here on a Sunday in July, reserving several weeks in advance. Well worth the detour! They don’t accept email reservations; have your hotel call.

This scenic drive also passes the 11th century hermitage of San Pelayo on the left and stops in the beach resort town of Bakio (a bit blighted by ugly high rise condos but surrounded by beautiful soft hills covered with vineyards) where Bizkaia’s Txakoli wine is made. If you speak Spanish and hit the town in the late afternoon, follow the “txakolina” signs, which will take you up into the hills to the small, 14-hectare Doniene Gorrondona winery. In summer they offer free tasting of their young Txakoli white, their oak barrel fermented white, the (delicious!) and their red. The winery is open for tasting in the afternoons-check at the tourist office on the highway for exact opening hours. Gorrondona also makes a digestif, an “Orujo”, similar to a grappa. All are served in the U.S. at Seattle’s The Harvest Vine (owners are friends of Joseba Jiménez, the chef) and can be purchased at The Spanish Table in Seattle, Santa Fe, Berkeley and Marin County. The little Hostal Joshe Mari in town (also Joseba's favorite) offers spic and span, very reasonably priced rooms for 70€ and truly great meals by chef-proprietress Gregoria Renteria, and is extremely popular with locals. Stop at cute and cozy bar for a glass of txakoli, or coffee in the immaculately tended garden, if nothing else. In Bakio (bakio.com) there is a very well stocked tourist office in a reconverted mansion on the main road. The drive from Bakio to Bilbao is less dramatic and doesn’t always follow the coast, so you may want to turn back here.

Charming, inexpensive Rural Farmhouse Lodging outside of Bilbao

Maribel’s Guide to the Basque Country © 48
Near Gernika, on the road heading out towards the coast, in the small hamlet of Gautegiz-Arteaga, you'll find one of the very finest examples of the Basque Country's Agroturismos (B&B's - we've tried several). The Casa Txopebenta is a beautiful stone farmhouse complete with wood beamed ceilings, a charming sitting room with a corner fireplace for its guests, six small, but cozy, antique filled rooms, all with private baths. Your hosts offer homemade cakes, marmalade and cheese fondue for breakfast. Located only 4 Kms from the beautiful Laida and Laga beaches on the coast, and in the heart of the Urdaibai Nature Reserve with the famous painted forest of Oma, by artist Ibarrola, and the Santimamiñe (Paleolithic) caves. It's even listed in the ‘06 Michelin red guide and featured in Alistair Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay/Spain”. It's also on every critic’s list of Spain’s best casas rurales (nekatur.net) and is a favorite of cookbook author Teresa Barrenechea, author of “The Basque Table”. The house has been featured in Pays Basque magazine and in a German interior design coffee table book, which your hostess, Arantza will be happy to show you.

Caveat: The house is located along the highway, which was built after the house was constructed. And because it’s a log structure, made of old railway ties, sounds tend to reverberate. Ask for a cozy dormer room, either No. 4 or 5, as they’re quieter. Also the baths, with showers only, are tiny. The owners, Arantza and Txope, make up for these minor flaws with their warmth and genuine kindness. This is a very popular destination for people traveling through the area.

Phone/fax: 946 254 923 or email: txopebenta@jet.es

There are dozens of these very inexpensive, 55€ or less, small "caseríos" throughout the Basque country, which is still relatively unknown in the USA.

July and August are very busy in the Basque country as Europeans tend to plan their vacations far in advance, so you should plan on reserving a room as early as possible. If the Txopebenta is full, try the Urresti, which is right around the corner, down a short country lane, away from the traffic. It’s run by a younger, friendly couple that also rent an apartment on the premises. Both casas rurales are featured in Alistair Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay/Spain” guide. Or try the new and beautiful Ontxene (ontxene.com), high above the village of Bisturi (on the BI 2235 between Mundaka and Gernika), with sweeping views of the estuary and Llaida beach. It’s only 20 minutes from the Bilbao airport. It has only two double rooms with private bath and two suites, which all have TV/DVD, minibar, and hair dryers. Rates run from 57€ - 85€ and include breakfast.

Stay in a romantic castle outside Gernika

El Castillo de Arteaga - in the village of Gautegiz-Arteaga, reopened as a 14-room hotel in spring, ’04, housed in a French Gothic castle originally from the 13th century and ordered to be restored in 1868 by the Empress Eugenie de Montijo, wife of Napoleon III. She ceded it to her son, and specialists were brought from Versailles to aid in the restoration. Has a pool and acclaimed restaurant with woman chef, receiving
great reviews. Same ownership as restaurants Baserri Maitea and Asador Zaldúa.

See panaiv.com/baserri/baserrimaitea.html.

**Apartment rental and charming little hotel, above Gernika with spectacular coastal views**

**Hotel Gametxo** - We stayed here for three days in summer ’04 immediately after its opening. It’s a cute and very gently priced guesthouse with adjacent building housing family apartments. This little hotel has **truly extraordinary sea views**, as lovely as those at a 5-star beachfront resort. They offer no meals other than their buffet breakfast, but they will recommend and make reservations for area restaurants. It’s very near the two Urdaibai beaches of Llaida and Laga. The two best rooms have Jacuzzi showers and balconies facing the sea, #209 and #301 with 4-poster bed. The host speaks English. An amazing value! [www.hotelgametxo.com](http://www.hotelgametxo.com)

**Charming Farmhouse Lodging between Vitoria and Bilbao**

**Casa Rural Iruaritz** - Outside of Vitoria, about 1/2 hour northwest, in the heart of the Switzerland of the Basque Country, we found a little paradise. Our little "secret, discovered two years ago, is the Casa Rural Iruaritz. Little did we know it would be a 4-star country house hotel masquerading as an agrotourist home! It’s located in the country hamlet of Lezama, near Amurrio in the province Alava, but only 35 km from Bilbao.

Here’s their story: This little 5-room "casa rural" is actually one of the finest examples of 15th century restored farmhouses in all of the Basque Country. Primarily, because its owner is Jesuit priest Luis de Lezama, King Juan Carlos’ confessor and priest-turned-restaurateur, who has built an empire of restaurants/hotels/culinary schools, Taberna del Alabardero and Café del Oriente in Madrid among others, to support orphanages and to help underprivileged youth. He started with the original Taberna del Alabardero in Madrid and now has 5, including a branch in D.C., and in his restaurants and resort above Marbella, he trains impoverished young men to become waiters, managers and chefs. He bought this farmhouse in his birthplace, Lezama, and spared absolutely no expense in restoring it, to make it the headquarters of his "Fundación", calling it the Fundación Iruaritz (The 3 Oaks in Euskara). He then opened it as a bed and breakfast when it’s not in use for annual Fundación meetings. The priest maintains an apartment in the attic but is not often in residence. But he hired a manager, Francisco Hierro, who trained as a chef in his culinary school in Sevilla, to run the home and look after his guests’ every need. Francisco is very caring, speaks good English and runs the place as if it were a private home.

When we arrived he brought his drinks and snacks, we had the run of the house, he prepared us fabulous meals (breakfast/lunch/dinner, including a fantastic Entrecot grilled...
on the barbecue) and allowed us to explore the house fully. When we saw our room A, the one at the top of the stairs, we sighed: For 72 euros high season (60 rest of year) we weren’t expecting a huge room with polished wood floor, exposed wooden beams, beautiful antique bed, armoire, writing desk, sheep skin rug, a sitting area, china cups on a silver try for tea and coffee, mini bar (covered in chintz of course), TV, phone and best of all, sheep grazing under our window at night. Rooms D and E are smaller but equally lovely with gorgeous baths. Plus a chef at your beck and call! We stayed for 2 days but could have stayed for a week. Francisco and the rest of the staff are very sweet and so eager for you to enjoy your stay. Downstairs there’s a leather bound photo album showing the various stages of the reconstruction of the home, painstakingly done, also a leather agenda where the priest has written all the expenses incurred, plus more silver, framed pictures, more antiques and two parlors with fireplace in each where you can curl up and read or watch TV or have cognac after dinner. You may in fact, be the only guests; if so, you’ll think you’ve died and gone to heaven! In the fall and spring the house is used as a corporate retreat during the week and usually full.

To see pictures of the house, go to nekatur.net, and write in "Iruraritz" in the search box. The 4th picture shown is "our" room A.

Note: Very few Americans have explored this part of the Basque Country. I urge you to take the drive from Amurrio to Artiniega, enjoying the beautiful pastoral scenery, then on to an area called Las Encartaciones, which runs from Balmaseda into Cantabria.

If you have an interest in Paleolithic cave art, you can continue west into Cantabria to the prehistoric cave paintings below Ramale de la Victoria, which are still open for guided visits. Cantabria has a wealth of prehistoric caves, and the easiest to access from Bilbao are the Cuevas de Covalanas.

The best base from which to explore these would be the relaxing and refined 4 star Parador of Limpia (parador.es), just a ½ hr. drive west of Bilbao. This is one of the Parador’s newest and most comfortable properties, nestled in a park with outdoor pool.

Or for a lower tariff, choose the 10-room Posada Aire de Ruesga (airederuesga.com), with restaurant, a member of the Inns of Spain group (innsofspain).

Advanced reservations are absolutely necessary for these cave-guided visits, as only 60 visitors are allowed entrance daily in groups of 10. The front desk will gladly make them for you, giving them a few days prior notice. Because only 60 visitors are permitted each day, in groups of 10, one must reserve. Guided visits are in Spanish only and given October - April at 10:00, 11:00 and noon and from May – September at 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 4:00, 5:00 and 6:00 pm. Closed Monday and Tuesday.
Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of the Basque Country

Sightseeing

If you enjoy contemporary art the pay a visit to the brand new Atrium Museum. It has a few Picassos, Dali’s, Max Ernst, but the bulk of the collection is modern Basque art with which you’ll be unfamiliar (artium.org).

Open Tuesday to Friday from 11:00 am to 8:00 pm, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays from 10:30 am to 8:00 pm. Cost: 3€. (Spanish only)

The most interesting visit from an architectural point of view is to a construction site! Yes, it’s the massive, 10+ year, 300 million euro restoration project of the Cathedral of Santa María (catedralvitoria.com). On a guided tour, for which you must don a hard hat, you’ll first be shown a video, then be guided up and down the scaffolding and shown the archaeological and restoration work being carried out on this 13th century Gothic cathedral. For me the most fascinating work is the painstaking, inch-by-inch restoration of the polychrome carvings of the portico. The site is open from 11:00 am – 2:00 and 5:00 – 8:00 pm. You can call for reservations at 945 255 135.

There is also a small fine arts museum, the Museo de Bellas Artes, on Paseo Fray Francisco de Vitoria, just south of la Florida Park, which houses some painting by Ribera, Zuloaga and Picasso. The handy tourist office in La Florida Park will give you a list of sites and their opening hours and city map. Stroll through the ancient streets of the Old Medieval Quarter, from the Plaza de la Virgen Blanca to the medieval streets of Cuchillería, Fray Zacarias, Correría, Zapatería, Herrería. These streets were named for the craftsmen who had shops on them, knife makers, shoe makes, etc. This is a hangout for the young and supporters of the Basque Independence movement. Stop and peek into the ancient brick and half-timbered buildings, the oldest in Vitoria. One, El Portalón, on Correría 151, is a former 15th century warehouse and coaching inn with exposed wood beams, creaky floors, antiques and a very medieval feel, now housing a highly atmospheric and acclaimed restaurant. We were guests of the Basque government tourist board and the mayor of Vitoria for lunch here recently. For a perfect combination of medieval atmosphere, refined service and appealing cuisine, it just can’t be beat. Due to its popularity, particularly on weekends, one must reserve.

Lodging

Our favorite city hotel is the very well run NH Canciller de Ayala, right across the street from the pretty Parque de la Florida, a gathering spot for locals, complete with gazebo (nh-hoteles.com). The rooms are typically very functional, modern, with lots of bathroom goodies, and the hotel’s restaurant has been highly acclaimed. Can’t be beat for its attractive location facing the park, comfort, buffet breakfast, low rates and parking garage.
Or try the newer **Silken Ciudad de Vitoria**, in front of the Palace of Justice and a very short walk from the Old Quarter is another pleasant and stylish option. It offers an executive floor with a Club Silken, offering newspaper, self-service bar, office facilities and a fitness center ([hoteles-silken.com](http://hoteles-silken.com)). The hotel also offers WiFi access and solid promotional rates.

**Dining**

For a terrific meal, or just a few creative pintxos at the bar, in a casual setting, head to the new and very lively Basque cider house, the **Sagartoki**, on Calle Prado, 18, steps away from La Florida Park. You'll enjoy the huge portions of typical cider house cuisine. Fantastic salads. They have won prizes in the annual Basque Country pintxos competition. Try their creative pintxos such as the “milhojas de hongos” (mushrooms in puff pastry) or dine in the cider house on wonderful fish, such as porgy (besugo) or sea bass (lubina). Closed Sunday nights.

Also the fantastic **Asador Matxete**, located on Plaza del Machete, below the Old Quarter. It’s built into ancient brick and stone with casual pintxos bar downstairs and upstairs dining room. The roasted meats and fish dishes here are wonderful, and it’s moderately priced and a favorite of our friends who live in Vitoria. Closed Sunday evening.

**Rioja Alavesa**

The Rioja Alavesa is the one section of the three wine producing regions of Spain’s Rioja, which is located in the Basque Country. The other two are designated as the Rioja Alta and the Rioja Baja. A tiny section of neighboring Navarra also belongs to the Rioja Denominación de Origen. Arguably, the very best Rioja wines are produced in the Alava region. There are more than 400 hundred wineries in the Rioja D.O. region. This is a stunningly beautiful and ancient area dating from the Neolithic era, where you’ll find atmospheric fortress towns on the hill, some with their medieval walls still intact and filled with noble homes displaying their heraldic shields. There are enormous Gothic churches, each with its own amazing, wildly gilded Baroque altarpiece, but seldom seen, because these churches are kept tightly shut other than for mass. Ancient burial markers (dólmenes), scattered about the fields intermix with the 200 wineries, both boutique and large. You’ll also find a number of charming family run country inns and superb Riojan Basque cuisine. There is even a “Route of the Dinosaurs” in the Valle de los Cidacos, one hr. from Logroño, with its Museo Paleontológico de Enciso. Plus in the Rioja Baja you’ll find the ancient Monasteries of Suso (9th century) and Yus in San Millán de la Cogolla and the Monastery of Valvanera in the mountains below Anguiano, famous for its dancers on stilts. The pilgrims’ route to Santiago de Compostela passes through a section of La Rioja, and Santo Domingo de la Calzada (in La Rioja, south of Haro) is a major staging post for the pilgrims.
The most picturesque villages, some in the Rioja Alavesa, some in La Rioja Alta, can be found on the route from Haro to the west and Logroño to the east. We enjoy the following:

**Briñas, Labastida** (an impressive fortress town which celebrates the traditional 17th century dances to the Christ Child during Christmas), **Briones** (adjacent to the impressive new Dinastia Vivanco wine museum) just across the Ebro river from **San Vicente de la Sonsierra** (with its fascinating Good Friday procession of “Los Picaos”-drive up to the top of the village to the always closed Santa María la Mayor church for wonderful views of the area and the castle of Davalillo in San Asencio), **Abalos, Samaniego, Villabuena de Alava** (with an astonishing 33 wineries!), **Laguardia** the walled capital of the Rioja Alavesa, **Elciego** (where the new Frank Gehry designed hotel/pavilion for Marqués de Riscal is under construction) and **Oyón**, closer to Logroño.

Pick up a brochure in English at the tourist office in Laguardia, called **Rutas con Sabor**, which will provide you with an excellent driving tour of these villages and a description of each. Or if you begin your visit to the region in Logroño, at the handy tourist office right on the main square, the Espolón, pick up a highway map, (“mapa turístico y de carreteras) to take you from village to village. In addition, the Michelin regional map #573 of the Basque Country/Navarra/La Rioja is very detailed and helpful when planning your route to and from La Rioja.

**NEW:** The Rioja Tourism Board has just launched the “**Wine Bus**”, or **Vinobús** that runs currently on weekends until November 5. The bus offers three routes, “Wine Postcards”, **Potales del vino**, “The Road to Santiago”, **Camino de Santiago**, which runs along the pilgrimage trail to Santiago de Compostela and the “Art and Culture”, **Arte y Cultura** route. During the trip, an official Riojan tourism guide accompanies the group to give detailed explanations of the sites to be visited. This bus service leaves from the Rioja capital, Logroño. Tickets, which cost from 15€-30€, can be purchased at the Riojan Government Tourist Office on the Plaza del Espolón.

**Planning your visit**

While most wineries, “bodegas” in Spain, provide tours, many require a pre-scheduled appointment, usually just a day or two in advance, and the majority only conduct the visits in Spanish and French. The hours are restricted, mornings only, and bodegas are closed during siesta. The wineries are still strictly no-nonsense, business operations not yet set up for mass wine tourism like their sherry counterparts in Jerez de la Frontera, or the cava, Spain’s “bubbly” bodegas in Saint Sadurni d’Anoia in Catalunya, and certainly nothing like those in Napa Valley. But…the picture is slowly changing with the opening of new "designer" bodegas to attract larger scale wine tourism, such as Santiago Calatrava’s striking pavilion designed for **Bodegas Ysios** in Laguardia, capital of the Rioja Alavesa, the new **Bodegas Baigorri** outside Laguardia, the dramatic and enormous **Bodegas Juan Alcorta** outside Logroño and the Phillippe Mazières designed **Bodegas Viña Real**, outside Laguardia. The picture will change again, even more dramatically, thanks to the opening, on September 1, of the new **Frank Gehry**
designed headquarters for the oldest producer of wines in the region, Marqués de Riscal in Elciego. This complex, the City of Wine, boasts a forty three room, 5-star boutique hotel managed by the Sheraton Luxury Collection, along with a wine spa offering Vinotherapie, copied from Les Source de Caudalie on the grounds of Chateau Smith Haut-Lafitte in Bordeaux plus a restaurant supervised by Michelin starred chef Francis Paniego of Restaurante Echaurren in Ezcaray.

If you would like to have a guided tour of the Rioja wine district, and price is no object, contact cellartours.com or for a three-night tour of the Rioja, book at vintagespain.com for a customized visit.

In Labastida the ladies of Thabuca (thabuca.com) provide customized guided tours of the area in English.

The following websites may be of limited use for bodega info:

- www.lariojaturismo.com
- www.riojawine.com
- www.jrnet.com/vino/home.php3 (but the opening hours listed are NOT correct!)
- www.redrioja.com

**Rioja and its Wines** by Ron Scarborough, Survival Books (survivalbooks.net) is only six years old (published in '00) but already out of date. The opening times are not accurate, and it does not include the state-of-the-art new wineries. It is useful only for background information on the older, established wineries and sightseeing info on each wine village, and it does have a handy glossary of wine terms and a menu guide.

There is a new British guide (not available yet in the U.S.) by John Radford (Mitchell Beazley publishers), The Wines of Rioja, which you may find at Amazon.co.uk. Price: 20 British pounds.

If you read Spanish, the most up-to-date guide available for all the Spanish wine producing regions is the '05 Guía del turismo d el vino en España by Ignacio Medina, which you may now find available in a large Spanish bookstore. It is not available online. ISBN: 84-9776-134-0 (24 euros).

**Classifications of Rioja wine**

- **Crianza** is a 3-year-old wine that has spent 1 year in the oak cask and 1 year in the bottle
- **Reserva** is a 4-year-old wine, 1 year in oak casks and 2 years in the bottle
- **Gran Reserva** is a 6-year-old wine, having spent 2 years in oak casks followed by 36 months in the bottle.

**Classic Riojan cuisine**

The Riojan cuisine is traditional, wholesome and robust “home cooking”, more peasant food than haute cuisine, influenced by the bounty of fresh fruit and vegetables from the
Ebro Valley plus the abundance of excellent meats and game, along with fresh fish (trout from the Ebro) and shellfish from the Basque coast, just over an hour away. Look for the following classic Riojan dishes on restaurant menus: **chuletillas al sarmiento** (lamb chops grilled over vine shoots), **chorizo** (paprika sausages), **menestra** (stewed local vegetables in season, asparagus, peas, artichokes, with cured ham, chorizo and eggs), **patatas a la Riojana** (a stew of potatoes, garlic, chorizo, onions and peppers), **pimientos asados** (roasted red peppers fried with olive oil and garlic, **pencas** (Swiss chard in a cream sauce), **bacalao a la Riojana** (salt cold with red peppers and tomatoes), **cordero lechal** (roast suckling lamb) and **pochas** (fresh white beans cooked with chorizo to make an orange-tinged soupy stew).

**Laguardia-Biasteri**

The capital of this region, Laguardia, Biasteri in the Basque language, looming imperiously atop a hill halfway between Haro and Logroño, makes a wonderful and unusual base for your visit to this region. It's our occasional home away from home. This fortified bastide town, with only 1,500 inhabitants, was founded in the 12th century as a defensive fortress for the kingdom of Navarra. A sentinel, it was originally called La Guardia de Navarra and is dramatically perched high atop the hill, surrounded by medieval walls, two meters thick, complete with ramparts and thick gateways. Seen from below, the town is particularly striking, set between the vineyards of the Ebro valley below and the dramatic Sierra de Cantabria Mountains in the background.

There are only four medieval gate entrances to the village. Once inside the walls you'll find a picturesque village, very medieval in look and feel, filled with noble homes, their coats of arms still visible, laundry hanging from the balconies. There are only three long, narrow and dark, pedestrians-only main streets leading north and south. The entire walled town is closed to traffic except for delivery of butane via electric carts, only a dozen at a time, because below the village lies a warren of 320 wine cellars or “cuevas” excavated under the homes, 2 stories deep, some measuring 600 hundred meters in depth. Nearly all the houses have these wine cellars, so the subsoil is completely bored through like a Swiss cheese. Underground Laguardia is, in fact, larger in surface than the above ground village. In olden times the cellars were inter-connecting so that during sieges the villagers could go underground, survive for months and plot their counter attacks. These underground cellars have huge wine vats the size of small swimming pools where the villagers store their home brew. The pedestrian-only streets of Laguardia serve as the villagers’ front yard. Walk these dark, narrow streets and you will meet all the townspeople within an hour. Hanging from the facades of the houses you’ll see strings of red peppers drying in the sun, which are featured in the hearty local cuisine.

A monument very worth visiting in Laguardia is the impressive 14th century covered portal of **Santa Maria de los Reyes** church at the top (north end) of the walled village. Its larger than life, perfectly preserved, brightly colored polychrome sculptured statues of the Apostles, dating from the 14th century, are a true treasure. Inquire about a guided tour of the church at the tourist office on Sancho Abarca, right below the main
square, which also has ample information about winery visits, both in Laguardia and the surrounding towns of the Rioja Alavesa. The ladies of the tourist office give guided tours of the church daily at noon for 2 euros per person. The explanation is in Spanish, but translation sheets are provided for those who speak English. Tours may be given on weekends at 5:30 and 6:30 pm. This incredibly preserved portico is the jewel in Laguardia's crown, so inquire at the tourist office upon arrival as to the current times of the guided visits!

At the north end of town, outside the protective walls, is a lovely park/promenade, the **Paseo del Collado** with a little gazebo and statue of the fabulist, Samaniego (Spain’s Aesop), and offering gorgeous views of the Rioja.

If you have any interest in archeology, visit the small museum at the **Poblado de la Hoya**, on Camino de la Hoya, right below the town. You’ll see artifacts of the prehistoric settlement of La Hoya, 3,200 yrs. old, dating from the first millennium B.C, from the bronze to iron age, including a life size replica of a typical bronze age home. It’s **free**, and the guard will give you an explanatory brochure in English. There’s a short video, in Spanish only. Open October 16 to April 30, Tuesday to Saturday from 11:00 am to 3:00 pm, Sundays/holidays from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, and from May 1 to October 15, Tuesdays to Friday from 11:00 am – 2:00 pm and 4 to 8:00 pm, Saturdays from 11:00 am – 3:00 pm, Sundays/holidays from 10:00 am – 2:00 pm. But you must enter 1/2 hr. before closing time. **Closed Mondays.**

Another reminder of this area’s antiquity is its collection of seven prehistoric **dolmens** (ancient burial markers) scattered about the region. The most important and largest one, with 9 upright slabs, is the dolmen **la Chabola de la Hechicera**, just before the atmospheric village of Elvillar on the A 3228. The dolmens are marked with a symbol on the highways and easy to find. The tourist office provides a brochure with map to visit these ancient burial sites. Others are San Martín and El Stillo on the Leza-Laguardia road, A-124.

From Laguardia it’s only a short drive to **Vitoria**, the capital of the Basque Country. Take the back route, A 2124, through the Puerto de Herrera past the scenic overlook, the **Balcón de Europa** (not at all well marked-look for the picnic area sign on the road to your left, just a few minutes from the turn off, then drive down to the picnic tables and scenic overlook where on a clear day, you can see all 7 villages of the Rioja Alavesa. Unfortunately vandals have destroyed the plaque that identifies each village, but the views remain stunning, nonetheless. Stop at the picturesque Basque village of Peñacerrada, and then you’ll have a small stretch that’s actually in Castilla-León, then back to Alava. Return via the N 101/ A68 superhighway.

Two kilometers from LaGuardia, on the road to Vitoria at the Elvillar intersection, you’ll find the Ornithological Park of **Los Molinos**, which is open daily. One can see more than 150 specimens of birds from around the globe. Entrance: 5 euros, adults, 2,50 for children.

Laguardia’s official web page: [www.laguardia-alava.com](http://www.laguardia-alava.com)
Winery Visits in Laguardia

In Laguardia itself there are multiple opportunities for wine tasting.

Your first stop could be at the new Wine Institute, Centro Temático del Vino Villa Lucía, (villa-lucia.com) outside of Laguardia, across from the gas station, the Ertzaintza (police) headquarters and next to the Bodegas Campillo, on the road to Logroño. It’s a wine museum and offers tasting and classes. Open Tuesday -Sunday 10:00 am – 2:00 pm and 5:00 – 8:00 pm. It takes about 45 minutes to visit museum, and costs 4,21€ for a self-guided visit, 7.94€ for self-guided visit and tasting. Last visits are at 1:30 and 7:30pm.

Bodegas Campillo is one of the most impressive installations, but visits need to be arranged in advance. No walk-ins are accepted.

Next to the tourist office on Plaza San Juan, inside the walled town, is the Bodegas Fabulista in the Samaniego palace. Eusebio, the owner, conducts tours from 3:00 to 4:00 pm daily. The 1-hour guided tours, in Spanish or in French or English with advanced notice, take you to only one of warren of the over 300 underground cellars, your one chance to see Laguardia underground unless a villager invites you down to his private cellar, where the wine is made in the traditional way, pressing the grapes with one’s feet. These cellars were used during the many sieges of the village for the villagers to take refuge and plan their counter attacks or revolts against the powers that be. At the end of your tour there’s a tasting of two wines, not great, but passable. Book this either at the Villa-Lucia wine center, at the tourist office, or at the Bodegas. Eusebio runs these tours alone so they fill rather quickly, and he only produces young wines, so do not expect to sample a reserva or gran reserva. We visited in the spring of ’06 as guests of the Basque Country Tourist Board and were given an English tour by Eusebio’s delightful female partner, followed by a tasting and degustation of tapas.

For an impressive state-of-the-art winery, go west of town towards Samaniego, and follow signs to La Hoya (the winery sign to Bodegas Ysios may or may not be up) to the Bodegas Ysios, an ultramodern design of the famed Valencia architect, Santiago de Calatrava, Look for the undulating titanium roof waving in the distance. Pass the entrance door and park behind the lot to the left of the building. Visits usually start from the back entrance. Regularly scheduled tours are given Monday - Friday at 11:00 am, 1:00 and 4:00 pm. They are by appointment, but if you just show up you will be added to the tour. Sat/Sunday/holidays are extremely popular, visits only at 11:00 am and 1:00 pm. Tours and a tasting cost 3 euros. A crianza and a reserva are sold in their wine shop. For the weekend, it’s wise to call a few days ahead for reservations. Tel: 945 600 640. Pick up a brochure regarding visits to Ysios’ other stunning new winery, Juan Alcorta, outside Logroño. Domecq now owns both wineries.

You can take a virtual tour of both at: domecqbodegas.com/ingles/index.htm

The newest addition to the Laguardia bodega scene is the state-of-the-art; Phillippe Mazières designed Bodegas Viña Real, owned by C.V.N.E. It's located on the road to Logroño, km. 4.8. It looks like an enormous wine barrel, 56 meters in diameter and 16
If that doesn't suffice, the modern **Bodegas Palacios** below the town of Laguardia, on the road to Elciego, has scheduled visits Tuesday - Friday at 1:00 pm, Saturdays, at 12:30 and 1:30 pm. **Closed Sunday.** 3 euros per person. Their Glorioso and Cosme Palacios labels are nice. Have your hotel call them at 94 112 1195 to make sure of times. An excerpt from an article on about Bodegas Palacio: “The pueblo serves as the perfect base for a spot of bodega-hopping. Most of the surrounding bodegas (there are 250 in the region) need a day’s notice to show visitors around. The bodega of the Hermanos Palacio is an exception and conducts free tours twice a day as well as tours you can book which include more extensive tasting and lunch. Our guide Nuria whizzed us through the scientific process of winemaking. I had imagined a bodega to be a rustically charming place where old barrels were stacked in dusty corridors. This was a wine-factory with not so much as a grape pip out of place and endless rows of huge stainless steel vats holding millions of liters of wine. It was comforting to descend further into the chilly building and find hundreds of neatly stacked wooden barrels made from expensive French oak. Nuria explained the Spanish system of classifying wine: jóvenes are wines harvested one year and sold the next and are made to be drunk immediately; Crianza (the word means rearing) must stay at least six months in cask followed by two years of ageing; Reserves spend a minimum of three years in maturing with the specification that one year must be in oak and another in the bottle; and Gran Reserves use the best vintages and must spend at least five years in the cellar of which two must be in cask and three in the bottle.”

**Heredad de Ugarte**, 2 km west of Laguardia, towards Samaniego, on the Vitoria road, before tiny Páganos. You can’t miss it, as you’ll notice the fake dolmens at the entrance. This is a very popular bodega that gives guided tours Mon.-Fri. at noon, and Sat./Sun/holidays at 10:30 am, noon and 1:15 pm. 6€ per person includes tasting of three wines and a tapa. For weekend tours, call ahead. [www.heredadugarte.com](http://www.heredadugarte.com)

**Winery visits elsewhere in La Rioja**

From Laguardia you can take easy and short day trips to the many bodegas of the **Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Alta region.** Highlights include the charming villages of Briones, Samaniego and Elciego, plus the capital of the province of Rioja, Logroño.

**Elciego**

The highlight for wine lovers in this entire area is the oldest wine producer in Spain, **Marqués de Riscal**, dating from 1860. Bilbao’s famous Guggenheim Museum architect, Canadian-born Frank Gehry, has designed a new and spectacular, 33,000 square foot, $10 million project, the **City of Wine**, which includes a gift shop, restaurant and tasting pavilion and 5-star, 43 room boutique hotel with wine therapy spa from the Source de Caudalie of Bordeaux. The hotel is a member of the Sheraton
Luxury Collection and had its grand opening on September 1st. (see the description in lodging section below) See Gehry’s design on-line at marquesderiscal.com/frank/html.

**Visits are by prior appointment only.** Tours conducted Monday - Saturday. Cost: 6€. Closed during August. Visits conducted in French, English and Spanish. Call: 945 606 001

**Samaniego**

The state-of-the-art **Bodegas Baigorri** (bodegasbaigorri.com) is on the Vitoria-Logroño road at km 53. From the highway you will see the entrance which consists of a cubic design made of glass, which appears to be a giant observation pavilion, from which you can see the vast extension of vineyards surround the winery. Its installations are found 35 meters deep, a drop of seven floors, and friends say they are vertigo inducing. 

Visits in English are by reservation only. Contact Susi Franco by phone at 945 609 420. Cost is 6€ for tasting, and tapas.

**Briones**

A must-see destination of any tour of the Rioja is the highly impressive wine museum, **Dinastía Vivanco-Museo de la Cultura del Vino, (Museum of Wine Culture)** opened in April ’04 by King Juan Carlos, in the village of Briones, technically not in the Rioja Alavesa, but just over the border in the Rioja Alta. It is the **largest wine museum in the world**, an ambitious project of the Vivanco family, displaying their amazing private collection of wine materials, including ancient drinking vessels, centuries old pruning shears, massive 300 year-old wooden grape presses and all types of wine paraphernalia, sculptures, even Roman mosaics from the 2nd century, paintings (two by Picasso) plus 2,500 corkscrews. There are inter active exhibits explaining the role of wine in religion, how wine spread from its origins in the Caucasus, the fermentation process, how wine barrels and corks are made. And in the garden you'll find 200 different grape varietals. Tours are arranged by appointment, and we took a very informative two-hour tour at 11:00 am. Currently tours are given in Spanish only, but audio guides are available for rent in English, French, and German. Tours cost 6 euros, audio guides for 2. At the end of your tour, samples are given at the bar. The museum has an attractive shop offering tasteful souvenirs, wine guides and all types of wine paraphernalia

Vivanco also has a stunning chocolate and cream-colored gourmet restaurant looking out over the vineyard, where we dined on splendidly presented Riojan specialties (very inexpensive for the high quality), plus a cafeteria and a tasteful wine/museum store. The beautiful restaurant overlooking the vineyards serves 3 wines, two red, a crianza and a reserva, one white, at very low prices. Our bottle of crianza was only 6 euros! Dine on dishes such as wild mushroom and Idiazábal choose risotto, monkfish with mango and apple salsa. **DO NOT MISS THIS EXPERIENCE!**

Email for reservations: infomuseo@dinastiavivanco.es or call 34 941 322 323. For restaurant reservations, email restaurante@dinastiavivanco.es. The maitre is Jon Zubeldia. See pics on web site. Our tour ended at 1, we shopped in the museum store,
and then had lunch at 1:30 pm. A perfect morning. Closed Sunday and Monday. The museum is located right off the highway N 232 at kilometer 442.

Also in Briones, look for the opening, sometime within the next year or two, of the new headquarters of Bodegas Finca Allende, which is restoring the palace of the Marqués de San Nicolás, right on the Plaza Ibarra, and converting it to a state-of-the-art winery in Logroño:

Bodegas Juan Alcorta is another Bodegas y Bebidas production, now belonging to Bodegas Domecq and a sister to Bodegas Ysios of Laguardia. This magnificent and enormous winery on a plateau outside the city, on the old road to Fuenmayor, was opened in '04 and is yet another “must see” of any Rioja tour. We toured in late September during the Festival de la Vendimia (San Mateo) in Logroño. Open Monday - Friday with visits at 11:00 am, 1:00 and 4:00 pm, Saturday - Sunday at 11:00 am and 1:00 pm.

Take a virtual tour here: domecqbodegas.com/alcorta/ingles/bodega.php

Bodegas Ontañón, on Avenida Aragón, 3 (ontanon.es), is a very interesting bodega-museum with a private collection of sculptures, paintings and stained glass by artist Miguel Angel Sainz. Visits by appoint. Monday - Friday and Saturday mornings. We were recent guests here of the Riojan Tourist Board. Call 690 858 519 to schedule a visit.

Labastida

Bodegas Nuestra Señora Granja de Remelluri on an estate to the north of Labastida, east of town on the road, LG 316 to Rivas de Treviso, is open Tuesday - Saturday, but strictly by appointment.

Fuenmayor

Bodegas Age, which belongs to Domecq, has scheduled tours Monday - Friday at 9:00 am (the earliest tour offered in the Rioja) and 1:00 pm and then afternoon visits at 3:00 and 7:00 pm (the latest of all the visits in Rioja bodegas). For Saturday and Sunday you must call ahead. 941 293 500

San Vicente de la Sonsierra

Bodegas Peciña (bodegashermanospecina.com), Monday - Friday 9:00 am - 1:30 pm, 3:30 - 6:30 pm, Saturday and Holidays, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm and 4:00 – 7:00 pm, Sundays 10:00 – 2:00 pm.

Abalos

Bodegas Puelles, Monday - Saturday at 11:30 am and again at 5:00 pm. Visit takes about an hour, with tasting of five wines for 3€. Call ahead for Saturday visit.
Festivals

The **Fiestas de San Felices**, June 23-29, the feast day of San Juan to San Pedro/San Pablo. During this festival, twice daily “encierros” are celebrated, Pamplona style. Cows, rather than bulls, are run through cordoned-off streets, and in accordance with Alava regulations, the cows’ horns are covered, but these animals weigh 400 kilos nonetheless, and can still pack a powerful punch, if you are hit. In addition to the daily “encierros”, there are also visits by the “Chachimorro”, parades, and a small carnival for the children, churros, dancing to an orchestra at 11 p.m. each evening. The traditional drink of the festival is “zurracapote”, a type of sangria made of red Rioja, cinnamon and sugar.

Last week of September, the Wine Harvest, **Festival de la Vendimia**, which coincides with Logroño’s **Fiesta de San Mateo**, on September 21, which we attended in ’04. The city’s celebrations include a mini “running of the bulls” (cows), bullfights by major Spanish matadors in their new covered bullring, dancing, a public barbeque of lamb chops grilled over wine shoots, on the square in the city’s Old Quarter, special concerts at the state-of-the-art Rioja Forum, their beautiful performing arts center, which also houses a gastronomic restaurant, parades and fireworks at night. See the performing arts schedule here: [riojaforum.com](http://riojaforum.com)

Lodging in Laguardia

There are three small and charming, atmospheric lodging options here to suit every taste and budget, from sumptuous to quaint, plus a new 80 room, 4-star hotel, the **Villa de Laguardia**.

**Castillo El Collado** - is the most expensive, but also the most delightful option in this city. The exquisitely decorated former mansion, looking more like a small castle than a hotel, was lavishly refurbished, complete down to the radiators which were brought from the old Diana cinema in Logroño, during an 8-year labor of love and was a lifelong dream for its energetic owner, Javier Acillona, whose family also own the Restaurante Marixa down the street plus the Bodegas Santamaría López. This much-lauded 8-room gem is a personal favorite of ours. It is the original home of the wealthy Tapia family (of the Chimbo soap fortune) and later was turned over to the church to serve as a bishop’s residence, Each room is individually and fancifully decorated, with an exquisitely tiled bath, and named for a fable by Laguardia’s Aesop, the fabulist Samaniego: “El Ruiseñor”, “La Paloma”, etc. Each room has a framed poem on the wall celebrating Laguardia’s noble past. The rooms measure from 20 to 25 meters each. Ask for either the “La Fábula” (room 6), with a double bed, carved headboard brought from Madagascar and gorgeous Andalusian tiles in the bath, “Doña Blanca”, or the "Amor y locura" (Love and Madness) suite in the turret, which has a Jacuzzi behind the bed. The Collado was featured in the Spanish edition of Vogue in an article about luxurious but affordable boutique hotels and in the Spanish tome, “Nidos de amor” ("Love Nests"). It has a red designation for charm in the Michelin guide, plus lots of accolades from the international travel press. Javier Acillona is a fine chef, who serves traditional Riojan specialties, such as “pastel de puerros” (a delicious leek pie), “pencas
de acelga rellenas” (yummy crème filled Swiss chard) and roast baby kid, “cabrito asado” in the pretty, formal dining room boasting a beautifully decorated “artesonado” ceiling and oriental rugs. For dessert we love his homemade sorbets (“sobete de limón al cava”. (English menu) There is a bar area at the entrance, the original chapel is on the left, a wine cellar turned bar/disco is downstairs.

You can see pictures of this spectacular little abode on-line at lugaresdivinos.com or jpmoser.com/castilloelcollado-r.html, which has pictures and prices of the individual rooms.


**Antigua Bodega de Don Cosme Palacio** - now ten years old, is located below the village next to the Palacio winery, now belonging to Seagrams, on the road to Elciego. It's a small twelve room inn converted from a 19th century golden stone winery building with large, nicely decorated rooms (but baths showing their age just a bit), all located on the top floor down a long, hotel-like corridor. It's a wine lover’s delight, due to the downstairs sitting area in what were once the aging cellars and the adjacent tasting room, and it’s very quiet. But the views of the surrounding vineyards/countryside are "spoiled" a little by the adjacent concrete bodega, which obstructs the views. Ask for the most requested (and largest) room, “Tempranillo” (number 1), which is at the end of the corridor, which does have lovely views of the countryside and is the only room with mini bar. Or if not available, the first room along the corridor, “Viura” (number 10). The others face the concrete buildings next door of the modern winery. The staff is friendly and very helpful. Begoña Viñegra is a caring hostess and took time out of her busy day to give us a complete tour. Each of the rooms is named for a grape varietals, Sauvignon, Cabernet, etc. Two rooms can sleep a family of four. Their dining room, although not as atmospheric as Marixa, Castillo de Collado or Posada Mayor de Migueloa, has been receiving good reviews. After dinner you can have a copa, an after dinner drink, in the cellars, with their huge vats of wine, with walls decorated with frescoes depicting wine themes. Low tariffs for the quality. Guests also receive a free tour of the next-door bodegas.

Can be booked through secretplaces.com, or madridandbeyond.com.

**Posada Mayor de Migueloa** - a refurbished antique-filled 17th century stone mansion, the Palacio de Viana, was the pioneer entry in Laguardia’s charming lodgings and the only one located within the walled town, on its main street, Calle Mayor, which is closed to traffic. The 8-room Posada is quaint and charming rather than sumptuous, with exposed beams, polished wooden floors covered with oriental rugs, antiques, but beginning to show its age a bit. More like a nice upscale B&B, albeit a pricey one. Guest rooms have granite walls, bare, stone floors accent by oriental rugs, beamed ceilings, antique armoires, antique beds and nightstands and small baths. Owned by the Asturian, Jaime Guitiérrez, an enologist and U. of Logroño professor.

It has a friendly, atmospheric wine bar in the cellar with an ancient wine press where you can sample the owner’s own label of Rioja along with a small selection of pintxos at
the bar. Access the cellar bar from the street behind the main entrance to the hotel. This would NOT be a sound lodging choice however during the June 24-29 festival, as the orchestras play quite loudly at right from 11:00 pm – 2:00 am right below the hotel. But the dining here has been high praised by friends. Meals are served in three small dining rooms and the menu is Riojan-Basque. They offer a very well priced “menú del día” as well as a degustación menu. Homemade bread and desserts!

See it at [hotelconcaracter.com](http://hotelconcaracter.com). Popular among British travelers. It can also be booked through [secretplaces.com](http://secretplaces.com), [madridandbeyond.com](http://madridandbeyond.com), and [totallyspain.com](http://totallyspain.com).

For those on a very tight budget, there is a nice casa rural right outside the walls of the city, the **Erletxe**, on Mayor de Peraltal, 24, with three doubles with bath and two with shared bath. Rates: 45€. Yummy breakfasts and a friendly owner. Phone: 941 121 015. See pictures at: [nekatur.net](http://nekatur.net).

### 4-star full service hotel

**Villa de Laguardia** - this 4-star property with 80 rooms, on the Logroño highway, is the perfect option for someone who is not a B&B fan ([hotelvilladelaguardia.com](http://hotelvilladelaguardia.com)). It offers nicely decorated, spacious rooms (we stayed here as guests of the Basque Country Tourism Board in the spring), suites with sitting areas, and the hotel boasts a full service gourmet restaurant “Le Medoc Alavés”. Downstairs you’ll find Wi-Fi computer access, reading rooms, a wine store with unbeatable prices, plus easy, free outdoor parking (plus underground garage for fee), plus small outdoor pool (there’s a nice indoor pool in the lower village) and a desk staff who speak very good English. Ainhoa, the desk manager, is particularly helpful. The suites offer bathrobes and complimentary half bottles of wine. Buffet breakfasts for 12€ are served in the restaurant. This is an excellent option for families, as the jr. suites are spacious enough to add an extra bed easily. The most spacious junior suites are the ones ending in 15. Off-season rates are extremely low for the quality. Make sure to call to enquire about these seasonal and truly unbeatable specials.

### The new Frank Gehry designed luxury hotel at Marques De Riscal vineyards

The most eagerly anticipated event in the Rioja Alavesa took place on September 1st, in tiny, sleepy Elciego, just south of Laguardia. After years of delays, the inauguration of the luxury Gehry designed hotel adjacent to the Marques de Riscal winery finally came to fruition. The Sheraton Luxury Collection manages the luxury hotel, and it is the second most expensive hotel in the Basque Country after the Sheraton managed María Cristina in San Sebastián. This boutique property has 43 rooms, all offering plasma TV, DSL internet access, CD players, Jacuzzi baths, ADSL line, cordless phones, furniture designed by Gehry and pillow menus. They vary in size from 35 to 90 square meters and are priced at 400€ for the standard rooms, up to 1,350€ for the six suites. Superstitious Gehry opted not to have a room number 13. The library and terrace are located on the 3rd floor of the hotel and the Wine Therapy spa in an annex, the second Vinotherapie Spa in Europe, modeled after Les Sources de Caudalie at the Smith Haut Lafitte vineyards in Bordeaux. Wine therapy and massages cost from 51€ to 350€. In addition to therapy treatments, the spa has a fitness room.
and indoor pool. The hotel is one meter shorter in height than the village’s tallest building, as Gehry did not want to eclipse entirely tiny Elciego by his project. The restaurant is supervised by Francis Paniego of the famed Michelin starred Echaurren in Ezcaray, and it has opted for Baccarat water and wine glasses, costing 60€ and 90€ a piece and chairs by Verner Pantom and china by Puiforcat. This opening is guaranteed to turn the Rioja into a major international wine destination.

**Lodging in neighboring villages**

**Villa de Abalos** - in the tiny and sleepy wine village of Abalos, with only 280, very friendly inhabitants, has 13 wineries, is right next door to Samaniego, but is actually in the Rioja province of Alava ([hotelvilladeabalos.com](http://hotelvilladeabalos.com)). Only three years old, this 3-star rural hotel, called a “hospedería”, in a re-converted 17th century mansion, was our home for five days in November 2002 and five nights in March ’04 and for two nights in March ’06. Featured in a Rioja article in the October 2002 issue of Food & Wine. The hotel has only 12 rooms, half on the second floor, the rest are dormer rooms, all with new, lovely wood reproduction furniture, bedside wall mounted reading lights, monogrammed bed linens, sliding shutters (in dormer rooms) that keep out the early morning sun, large built-in closets, warm terra cotta tiled floors and pretty tiled baths or Jacuzzi showers. Sparsely decorated, but very tasteful. No mini-bar, but there is a cozy downstairs bar/TV area (soon to have a pot stove) for enjoying glasses of Rioja from the village of Baños de Ebro, for 2€/glass.

There is also a little shop selling gourmet items in the room across the hall. TV in rooms, but no CNN. The best dormer room on the 2nd floor (US 3rd floor) is No.8 with rose and cream walls. On the first floor, (US 2nd) room No.2 faces the garden and has a Jacuzzi shower, and No.5, “Garnacha” is the owner’s favorite and slightly larger, faces the village, also with Jacuzzi shower. There is an elevator and outdoor terrace for drinks/snacks in summer, car park, laundry service, an ample breakfast of melon and other fruits, ham, cheeses, rolls, toast, pancakes, cereal, omelets made to order or even eggs and chorizo or an omelet, served starting at 9:00 am. Included in the room rate. Evening meals are available from a limited tasting menu (two selections in each of the three courses) of Rioja specialties (we try to have dinner there at least one night during our stay), and they have a short but very well chosen wine list, exclusively of wines produced in and around the village.

One night we weren’t overly hungry, so the owner suggested that we share the tasting menu. José Luis is your host and sommelier, his wife, Merche, is the fine chef and has a professional kitchen in the annex, Jose Luis’s mother is the laundress, and his friendly and energetic sister, Maria, or the sweet and diminutive Julie will serve you breakfast, and Julie’s sister will clean your room. It’s a warm and welcoming family enterprise. The guest book is filled with words of praise from Spaniards, British and American guests, attesting to the inviting atmosphere and warm hospitality of the proprietors. José Luis will arrange visits for you to the Bodegas Juan Alcorta, the Centro del Vino Villa Lucia, the Bodegas Ontañón and the Bodegas Granja Nuestra Señora de Remelluri, all within easy driving distance. The Villa de Abalos has become our home away from home when
in the Rioja Alavesa. The Basque Tourist Board chooses it to host their FAM tours for Spain travel professionals and travel writers.

If you reach tiny Abalos but are not staying there, ask a villager to summon the keeper of the keys who will show you the amazing gilded 16th century altarpiece in the church of San Esteban. A masterpiece. The church is normally only open Saturday night at 6:30 pm and Sunday mornings for services.

**Señorío de Briñas** – is yet another rural hotel in the region. It is a little 18th century mansion formerly belonging to an Italian comandante during WWII, does have charm, but rooms simply do not compete with its sister hotel the **Hospedería Señorío de Casalarreina**, although done by the same decorator. The Hospedería is a converted Dominican monastery adjacent to the Convento de la Piedad, and its rooms are beautifully done but the town of Casalarreina is not nearly as charming as the above-mentioned Riojan villages and sits in a very drab and quite ugly plain south of Haro. See both at: hotelesconencanto.org. They are also members of Rusticae (rusticae.es). I would book the Señorío de Casalarreina only if lodging in Laguardia or Abalos were not available.

**Lodging in Logroño**

While I highly discourage you from making Logroño your base for a Rioja winery tour, as staying in one of the tiny wine producing villages is a much more enchanting option, if you come to the Rioja exclusively for the Fiesta de San Mateo on September 21 in Logroño, which is a pleasant market town (much more pleasant than Haro), I can recommend a very stylish and reasonable small hotel, the recently, spiffily renovated **Marqués de Vallejo** (hotelmarquesdevallejo.com), right off the main square, El Espolón. If you have a car, which is an absolute must for wine touring, you can drive down the tiny street in the Old Quarter to drop off bags, then park in the underground lot at the Espolón. It has a brightly decorated (reds and blacks) lounge downstairs with bar where a buffet breakfast and snacks are served. On the first floor there’s free Internet access and a library. The 51 rooms, decorated in tones of grey, white and cream have modern, functional Ikea style furniture, bare wood floors, have a/c, safe, mini bar, sat, TV, full bath with hair dryer, and some are non-smoking. We were guests here of the Riojan tourist Board in April ’06.

**For those who chose to stay exclusively in Spanish Paradors**

The older 4-star **Parador Santo Domingo de la Calzada**, in the very ugly (but historically important) Santo Domingo de la Calzada is, from the outside, one of the ugliest Paradors in the system, but inside there are impressive public rooms (save for the bar/cafeteria) with stone arched ceilings and is filled with antiques, a nice conservatory for drinks and pretty dining room. It takes bus groups. But it’s very hard to access, as the square where it sits is closed to traffic, so you have to find the entrance to this area for the Parador where there will be a mechanism with button to
push to lower the concrete cylinder, the “mojón”, or “bolardo”, that will allow you to drive your vehicle in, but only to unload luggage, then you must circle around yet again to find the Parador’s parking garage. Not at all convenient for touring the Rioja! If you absolutely must stay in a Parador while touring, the far better option is the brand new (opened late March) 3-star Parador San Bernardo de Fresneda, easily accessible on the way into town and easy street parking available across the street. We toured it the week it opened, and the public rooms are even more impressive here, particularly the bar area, although the cloister of the adjacent (and closed) convent isn’t yet a finished product. The restaurant here, with soaring, open ceiling, is a strikingly modern addition, with equally modern furnishings, similar in feel to the dining room at the Cáceres Parador in Extremadura.

Take a look at the tasteful rooms at www.parador.es

**Fine dining in the Rioja**

**Restaurante Marixa** - a Riojan legend, which sits on the hill outside the walled town of Laguardia on Calle Sancho Abarca, is owned by Javier Acillona of the Castillo del Collado and managed by his two nephews. One is the chef, Asier, the eldest, the sommelier. The main dining room has large picture windows affording great views of the area to the south and east. Highly regarded by the Michelin-starred Basque chefs and wine merchants for its hearty country Riojan fare. Try the “pochas”, white beans, “patatas a la Riojana”, a special potato dish, and “pencas”, which are Swiss chard filled with ham and cheese. Delicious! Make sure you also try the delectable desserts, particularly the ice creams. Put yourself in the hands of the owner/maitre/sommelier Asier, for your bottle of wine, selected from their vast list of the very best in Rioja vintages and wineries. Asier is co owner of the Vinoteca on the Plaza Mayor. Please be sure to tell them that Joseba Jiménez de Jiménez, of the Harvest Vine in Seattle, sent you! He’s a personal friend and contributor to Food and Wine. There’s a tasting menu for 25€. Marixa is a good bet for Sunday and Monday nights when other Rioja restaurants are closed.

**Casa Toni** - in San Vicente de la Sonsierra, a neighboring bastide town, on the main street, Calle Zumalacarregui 27. Highly acclaimed, one of the 3 top tables all of the Rioja. We love this restaurant! A family enterprise, the chef is Jesús Sáez Monge and his wife, Mariola, handles the dining room. We order traditional dishes such as the lamb stew and baby lamb chops, grilled over vine shoots (“chuletillas al sarmiento”) and one of their fabulous desserts, such as red wine ice cream! They offer Michelin star caliber cuisine with a degustación menu for 41,50€. It’s closed the last two weeks of July and September. It’s closed at night Sunday – Thursday and all day Monday except during July, August and September.

**Restaurante Medoc Alavés** – is the attractive dining room of the 4-star Villa de Laguardia hotel, right below the walled village. The proprietor of the Villa de Abalos hotel sent us here. We chose the degustación menu for 30€, which was a 4-course affair with appetizers, fish course (hake Cheeks, an acquired taste…), meat
course and truly wonderful dessert. The female sommelier chose a Vallobera Crianza 2001 for us (10.50€).

Asador Alameda - with a famed female chef, is on the main square, Plaza Félix Azpilicueta, in the rather dusty village of Fuenmayor, home to Bodegas Lan, AGE and Montecillo. It has two grills, one for red meats, and the other for impeccably fresh fish and offers homemade foie and yummy homemade desserts. We dined here upstairs during Easter week. I had a wonderful “cabrito”, roast kid, which was succulent and extremely tender—a house specialty. Just received a 7/10 rating from the famed gourmet critic, Rafael García Santos. Also try the oxtail stew, “rabo de buey”, or the asparagus filled with seasonal vegetables or their terrific stewed vegetable medley, the “menestra de verduras”. Closed on Mondays, Sunday evenings and all of August. Around 40€ per person. Tel: 941 450 044

La Vieja Bodega - in Casalarreina, 5 kms below Haro, is just before Santo Domingo de la Calzada (viejabodega.com). It's a lovely spot, housed in an ancient, 17th century winery with charming country décor, music and ambience. My husband dined here as a guest of the Rioja Tourism Department during the Wine Festival. Chef Angel Pérez Aguilar is making his mark here. They serve a tremendous value mid day “menú del día” for only 12€, a la carte plan on spending 35€. Closed Sunday night and all day Monday. Must reserve on weekends!

La Galería - in Logroño on Calle Saturnino Ulargui, 3, in the space that used to house Marón. It’s a combined art gallery and gastronomic restaurant run by two young chefs. Their house specialty: the seasonal vegetables with prawns with a thyme aroma. They offer a mid day “menú ejecutivo” for 22€.

Asador Txitxo – in the village of Elciego, the home of Marqués de Riscal, is a Riojan “asador”, or roasting tavern, serving your usually fare of Riojan potatoes, huge steaks, baby lamb chops, red peppers, vegetable stew, etc. Again, huge portions, low prices and very reasonable prices for wine. This village is another charming place with a pretty square filled with those noble homes bearing coats of arms, a fine church, the Church of San Andrés, which has one of the finest organs in all of Spain. Try to catch it open during mass or ask at the Ayuntamiento (city hall) when the church is open.

Palacio de Samaniego - at the entrance to tiny Samaniego. The chef/manager, Jon Ugalde of Bilbao offers a wonderful 36€ tasting menu on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings only which shouldn’t be missed. It's fine food with great wine pairings in a relaxed, comfortable setting.

Dinastía Vivanco Wine - And be sure not to miss the gastronomic restaurant of the Dinastía Vivanco Wine Museum in Briones with a young female chef, Maribel Frades, at the helm. Closed Sunday night and all day Monday.

Informal/inexpensive dining
The friendly, family-run restaurante Ariño, a local favorite of all the winery owners, is on the main street of the nearby bastide village of Labastida, next door to Haro. It’s
located just below the tourist office, on the other side of the street. From the outside it looks like a medieval, half-timbered home. Inside you’ll find exposed beams and rustic décor. The sister makes the desserts. She also prepares and serves the mid-day meal for the village’s schoolchildren, in the restaurant’s cellar. Your waiter will be her brother, while mom and pop man the stoves in the kitchen. Expect enormous portions of hearty Basque cuisine such as meat filled red pepper, huge T-bone steak for two, or more. The son recited the menu to us. His English is fair, but there is also a printed menu displayed at the door. We had a huge mixed green salad, scrambled eggs with wild mushrooms, “Revelto de setas”, the T-bone steak, “chuletón de buey”, a seemingly bottomless bowl of red bean soup, “alubias rojas”, homemade cheesecake, a bottle of the house red from ’01, a silver medal winner in France. This restaurante is a popular spot the locals. Open for lunch only and a winner! This excellent restaurant was recommended to us by the owner of the Villa de Abalos who told us that the family was a little crazy, and if the father likes you, he’ll bring his special “digestif” bottle around, sit down and have a drink with you.

The town of Labastida is another gem in the Rioja with a gargantuan Church of the Assumption, housing yet another jewel of a Baroque altarpiece, but it can only be visited at noon, on a daily tour that’s given, in English, by the folks at the tourist office. Shepherd’s dances here are celebrated.

José Luis of the Villa de Abalos also recommended the Asador Hector Oribe in Páganos, just west of the village of Laguardia. Easy on the budget and very casual, but expect some changes as the chef is beginning to make a name for himself. He trained with Basque notables such as Juan Mari Arzak and Karlos Arguiñano. It offers a fantastic price to quality ratio with a degustación menu at only 30 euros and lunchtime “menú del día” for 10 euros and is a Michelin Bibi Gourmand. It’s open for dinner only on Fridays and Saturdays from 9:15 -11:00 pm, so a mid-week lunch from 1:15 - 3:30 pm is your only option. Closed Mondays. The village of Páganos is located one kilometer off the main road to Laguardia, on the west side, and the restaurant is signed once you approach the village entrance. Highly recommended and a favorite of the local winemakers.

Pintxos (tapas)

If you’re just in the need of a quick snack before a tour of Santa María de los Reyes church in Laguardia, or a hearty mid-day meal, then go to the end of Calle Mayor, 2, where you’ll find a Basque pintxos bar, El Pórtico was recommended in Food & Wine by our friend and chef Joseph Jiménez de Jiménez of Seattle’s Harvest Vine Basque Restaurant. We stopped in recently for pintxos at the bar, which are far more delicious than they look when covered or wrapped. Once unwrapped and warmed, they taste fantastic! Chef is Tomás Aranda.

In Logroño’s Old Quarter, you’ll find the two block long Calle Laurel and Travesía de Laurel, with more than 20 old-style tapas bars, each serving its own specialty which will be listed on the door or window. The specialty of Casa Pali on #11 is fried eggplant with cheese, “berenjena con queso”; and Bar Soriano, on Travesía del
Laurel, 2, serves a huge, garlic mushroom topped with tiny shrimp, or “champi”. The best place to dine on Laurel is the Bar/Restaurant Tahiti whose female owner won the ’04 competition for best tortilla española (delicious potato and egg omelet) in the country.

**Wine shopping**

For your wine and gourmet purchases, head straight to the first shop you see as you enter through Laguardía’s medieval gates, the Vinoteca, expertly run by oenologist, Manuela, but she speaks only Spanish and French.

Or in Haro, head straight to the Catedral de los Vinos (also known as “Casa Quintín”) on Calle Santo Tomás, right off the main square, La Plaza de la Paja. We’ve made great purchase here. There is also Vinoteca Juan González, on the right side of now grungy Calle Santo Tomás.

In Logroño’s Old Quarter, right across from the covered market, at the corner of Laurel and Capitán Gallarza, Vinos El Peso has a fine selection and even better prices.

The ’94 and ’95 Riojas are terrific, and the 01 vintage is thought to be the very best year EVER, so far.

**Prestigious Reds worth seeking out**

- ’01 MC from Marqués de Cáceres (about 30€)
- ’01 Cirsión from Roda (very exp.)
- ’94 Muga Prado de Enea Reserva
- ’94 Cune Imperial Gran Reserva
- ’94 Barón de Ley Reserva
- ’95 Remirez de Gamuza Reserva
- ’96 Roda I Reserva
- ’96 Marqués de Vargas Reserva
- ’96 Barón de Chirel Reserva (fabulous!!!!!!) or the ’98
- ’95 Ramón Bilbao Gran Reserva
- ’94 Viña Turzaballa Gran Reserva
- ’94 Martínez Lacuesta Gran Reserva
- ’98 Torre Muga
- ’96 Bodegas Palacio Reserva Especial
- ’94 Pagos de la Sonsierra

For a classic leather wine skin, or “bota”, go straight to one of the region’s most famous “boteros”, Félix Barbero, whose “botería” has been in the same family for three generations. The shop is “Botas Logroño” on Sagasta 8 in Logroño’s Old Quarter.

For food shopping or just gazing, Logroño’s covered market, on the Plaza de Abastos, Sagasta 1, is a pretty early 20th century building where you’ll find the best of the Rioja’s bounty.
Haro, the capital of the Rioja Alta wine region in Old Castile, is a hard working town, pretty to a certain degree, including the Plaza de la Paja in the center of town, but it is also somewhat ramshackle. Most of the notable wineries are located north, below the town, in the Barrio de la Estación. Follow the signs saying Barrio de las Bodegas to the area near the railway, or F.C.C.E. station. Here you have Santiago Rioja, CUNE, and Muga. Paternina is past the bullring on the left on LR 111 heading south towards Santo Domingo and Carlos Serres is on the right. I wouldn’t bother with either. You can see the entire town of Haro in about an hour and a half, putting 7.50€ in the meter.

The city is an exceedingly sleepy place after the sun goes down. This is very much a working class town, as are all of the villages and towns in the Rioja Alta and Alavesa. While the Hotel Los Agustinos in Haro provides perfectly acceptable lodgings, with an “old style Parador” décor, I do not recommend staying in Haro, as it doesn’t have a great deal of charm and is confusing to navigate. Most of the town is a blue zone for parking, which means that to spend the night, you must leave your car in a garage. We go to Haro only for an occasional winery visit, to shop at La Catedral de los Vinos or to attend the Wine Battle on June 29. The easiest way to access the bodegas worth visiting in Haro is via Labastida-Laguardia on the A 3023, which will bring you into the town past the Barrio de la Estación area, where Muga is located, before hitting the Haro maze.

Winery Tours in Haro without appointment

The famed Muga winery, which makes terrific wines, gives slick guided tours on Mon.-Fri in English at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. They also give Spanish tours at 11:30 and 4:30, except for Fridays. The winery can be found by following the Estación Renfe signs. It and other wineries are located in the lower part of the town in the Barrio de la Estación. There’s easy covered car parking across the street. Closed weekends and holidays

Wineries requiring a prior appointment

Usually one-day in advance

CVNE has an 11:00 am English language tour Monday - Saturday by appointment only. Other Spanish language tours are at 10:00 am, 1:00 and 4:00 pm, except on Friday.

Rioja Santiago offers guided visits Monday - Saturday at 11:00 am.

Roda visits are by appointment only on Friday at 12:30 pm and Saturday at noon.

Dining in Haro

Las Duelas - has moved from its original location across the square to a newly renovated space in the Hotel Agustinos. It has a predictably excellent wine list and very reasonable prices for traditional, hearty Riojan cuisine. Chef is Juan Nales, formerly of La Vieja Bodega in Casalarreina.
See the menu at aranzazu-hoteles.com/carta.php?res=duelas

**Casa Terete** - at Lucrecia Arana, 17, one block up from the Plaza de la Paja, was first opened in 1877. It's in all the guidebooks, so they now have a menu in English. This legendary “asador” has long, unvarnished pine tables and pine benches on the floor above a butcher shop and is a very informal place to try a succulent roast baby lamb along with a Rioja selected from its vast wine list. The locals all order the same menu: “menestra de verduras”, a stewed vegetable medley, roast lamb and cheese cake, but there are additional items on the English menu. Closed Sunday nights and Mondays.

**Sightseeing outside of Haro**

On route N232 west of Haro, at the border of Castile, when you’re almost in the province of Burgos, you’ll find other picturesque medieval towns such as **Cuzcurrita del Tirón**, with private castle and beautiful San Miguel church with a façade in a waving Italianate style. Nearby, a few kms further along the LR301, is the village of **Sajazarra**, filled with old stone noble homes and small Romanesque churches. Its castle-palace (not open to public except during their summer music festival) is the finest preserved in the Rioja. They celebrate an International Baroque Music competition during the last week in August.

**Haro Festival**

**Fiestas de San Felices y San Pedro**, the most "festive" day (read sheer madness) in Haro, the capital of La Rioja Alta falls on June 29 when the famous **Batalla del Vino**, Wine Battle, takes place. If you happen to be in the area, be sure to stick around to see the thousands of people wearing wine stained white garb, completely soaked in vino tinto returning from their pilgrimage up to the shrine of San Felices at Riscos de Bilibio, all the while dousing each other with wine along the way from their wineskins (or anything else that sprays liquid). Thousands of liters of red wine are sprayed on the participants that day. Wear cheap, white, throwaway garments if you plan to participate!

**Doing the Monastery Route**

From Laguardia it’s also possible to make a day-long excursion following the Monastery Route, first to **Santa Maria la Real** in Nájera, which was built around a cave in which an image of the Virgin miraculously appeared. Its pantheon houses the tombs of the kings of Navarra. Take the very pastoral drive down to the 11th century **Monasteries of Yuso and Suso** in San Millán de la Cogolla, the birthplace of the Spanish and Basque languages. The 10th century smaller, pink stone mozarabic Suso is set on the mountainside with caves that were dug out to form chapels. Notice the horseshoe arches and the tomb of San Millán. Yuso is the lower monastery, built in the same stern and somber architectural style as El Escorial. It’s called the Escorial of the Rioja, as in its day it was a center of letters. Here is where the first words written in the Castilian language were found, the “glosas”, which were margin notes that a priest
scribbled in the vernacular rather than in Latin. The library is as important as the one in
the Escorial. Visits here are by 50-minute guided tour, in Spanish only.

Visitors must now purchase a joint entrance ticket at the tourist office in the village of
San Millán for both monasteries. You may access the tiny monastery of Yuso by minibus
only, which departs from the Yuso Monastery.

See monasteriodeyuso.org for additional details.

Drive further on through the beautiful Sierra de la Demanda to the 12th century
Benedictine Monastery of Valvanera, open from 10:00 am – 7:00 pm. The monastery
is set high in a thick mountain forest, and was built to shelter the statue of its Virgen,
the patroness of the Rioja. The statue is located in a private room reached via marble
steps on the right side of the church, high above the altar, then back to the 14th century
Santo Domingo de Calzada on the Camino de Santiago.

If you have the time, continue on south from Valvanera to visit the completely
unspoiled, untouched medieval rough stone village of 20 inhabitants, Vinagrera de
Arriba, and experience a trip back in time. At the entrance to the village, look for
graffiti on the walls denouncing the wolves who come down to prey on the village
sheep. Here there is the fantastic, beautifully rustic, family run restaurant of La Venta
de Goya, where a yearly international fly-fishing competition takes place. Its menú
costs a paltry 9€! The restaurant has been featured in Saveur magazine as well as the
new Spanish language cookbook, La Rioja: Mesas de Calidad, which I purchased in
the museum shop at the Museo Dinastía Vivanco in Briones. Legendary dishes offered
are trout filled with ham, wood pigeon with chestnut puree, and venison with wild
mushrooms. Wonderful food at an out-of-the-way destination!

On the trip back to Haro, stop at the village of Arguiñano, where on July 21 in the
morning, and on the 22nd and 23rd the village’s patron saint days, the 8 famed dancers
danzantes de los zancos) on 1/2 meter tall stilts perform, precariously climbing 45
meters down the narrow, and very steep, cobblestone streets. This is a four hundred
year old tradition and one of the most noteworthy traditions in the Rioja. This
precarious stilt dance is also performed the last Saturday of September. See pics at:
valvanera.com/danzas/anguiano.htm

Or from Santo Domingo de la Calzada you continue south on a gorgeous short drive to
the mountain town of Ezcaray. If you do land here by 3:00 pm and want the top
gourmet experience in the Rioja, be sure to dine at Echaurren (echaurren.com),
a restaurant/hotel on the square in the center of the village with a fantastic chef, Francis
Paniego, the son of the lady founder, seventy-two year old Marisa Sánchez, who’s called
the doyenne of Riojan cooking.

There are two kitchens here. Mom prepares traditional Riojan dishes such as her
signature chickpea potage with monkfish and clams and her irresistible chicken
croquettes in one; her son spins tiny cutting edge dishes at El Portal, (with a separate
entrance and 9 tables for only 40 diners), which just received a Michelin star. We had
lunch here in April and it was a spectacular meal, the best of our trip. We opted for the
menú degustación for 60€, which included one of mom’s special croquettes, plus nine
other small dishes, the must stunning being the shrimp brochette, the tomato tart with prawn and white gazpacho and the monkfish. There was an interesting selection of artisanal breads including wine and mushroom bread, accompanied by an exceptional olive oil from Alfaro. The menu changes with the seasons. They have an exceptional wine list with more than 300 offerings to choose from. We selected a Campillo Crianza '00 for 12.50€. On Wednesday in early April all of the tables, save one, were filled. There is a fireplace and well-spaced, huge tables. Our total bill for tow degustación menus (60€ per person) and wine was 151€. We made our reservations on-line. Closed Sunday night in winter and the last 20 days in November. Tel: 941 354 047.

The hotel has pleasant, traditionally furnished rooms.

Note: the beautiful Gothic-Plateresque Monasterio de Santa María la Real in Nájera reopened in May after extensive restoration. Open in winter from 10:00 am - 12:15 pm and in the afternoons from 4:00 – 6:00. Closed Mondays. In summer open daily from 9:30 am - 1:30 pm and 4:00 - 7:30 pm.
Maribel’s Guide to the Pays Basque

Excursions into the Pays Basque - southwest France

If you're without a car and just want to dip your toes into the French side at a more expansive and warmer beach, take the little yellow Marie-Louise ferry (navette) from the pier in Hondarribia across the bay of Txingudi to the town of Hendaye for a nice beach day. The ferry departs daily on the half hour and costs 1,50€ person. If you have a car and want to venture over the border into the Pays Basque, then it is about a 19 km (12-mile) drive via Irún on the border. Once you cross the border, take the coastal route, the Cornche D912, from Hendaye north to St.-Jean-de-Luz. If you have several days, couple the coast with wanderings in the lush, green, rolling hills of the bucolic Pays Basque countryside. The Pays Basque is rather small, with less than 200,000 inhabitants and easily explored in about four days.

The stars of the Côte Basque

St-Jean-de-Luz

Or “Donibane Lohizune” in Basque, is a charming, lively, sophisticated (but extremely busy in summer) tuna, sardine and anchovy fishing port-turned-tourist-draw, made famous as the setting of an historic royal event, where in 1660 a twenty two year old Louis XIV married the daughter of Phillip IV of Spain, María Teresa in the Eglise St.-Jean-Baptiste. After the royal wedding, the main church door was walled up forever. Don’t miss seeing this lovely Basque church with its 3-tiered wooden balconies, scale models of traditional sailing ships hanging from the ceiling and the most beautiful altarpiece in the entire Pays Basque. In summer there are often evening concerts offered by the Maurice Ravel Academy of Music (9:30 pm.) in the church, and there are Basque choral CDs for sale at the information desk. You can also visit the Maison Louis XIV on a guided tour, beside the Hotel de Ville. It was built for a wealthy ship owning family, the Lohobiagues, and was used by the Sun King as his temporary residence in the days preceding the extravagant wedding. Open June 1 - 30 and September 1 - 30 from 10:30 - Noon, 2:30 - 5:30 pm. Open from July 1 - August 31, 10:30 - 12:30 am and from 2:30 - 6:30 pm. Closed Sunday morning and holidays.

The principal shopping area is along the pedestrian, boutique-lined Rue Gambetta, which connects the fishing port to the beach. Unfortunately in and among the sophisticated shops, one will now find an abundance of tourist trinkets, and a July/Aug. day on the Rue Gambetta can mean complete gridlock. Nonetheless, there are lovely handicrafts and delicious Basque gourmet treats to be found. Look for caramels (kanougas) at the Pariès pastry shop (#9), all sorts of wonderful gourmet products at Maison Thurn (#32), white, red, and blue pottery and table linens of Créations Jean Vier (#37 - with another beautiful store next to the Wax Museum, Musée Grévin, at the port on 1 rue d l’Infante), or soft, cream colored Helena table linens and towels, robes, slippers (on rue Loquin 8), stylish t-shirts and casual sportswear at
64 (#79) and a branch of Bayonne’s L’Atelier du Chocolate (rue Loquin 12). Try the world famous "macarons", made here since 1660 at the Maison Adam on the main square, Place Louis XIV, even better than at Laduree in Paris. They were served at Louis XIV and Maria Teresa’s wedding. They also sell phenomenal gâteau basque. And next door on the Place, you’ll find yet another enticing linens and handicraft shop, the Maison Charles Larre, which sells the Artiga brand.

Don’t forget to visit the terrific covered farmers’ market, Les Halles, particularly on Tuesdays, Fridays and in July/Aug. Saturdays as well (go early, by 9:00 am, to be able to park in the lot across from the train station) when the purveyors of fine farm produce set up their outside stands. Pick up some Ossau-Iraty cheese, and Irouléguy wine is available across the street at the Nicolas wine shop for a picnic. Take a walk atop the seawall on the Promenade Jacques Thibault. Survey the sardine boats in the harbor or stroll along the beach, which is the very best way to appreciate the town’s fine architecture.

Take a stroll along the beach promenade from the end of Rue de la République to the elegant, Edwardian style Grand Hotel. St. Jean’s beach is very family friendly with several children’s beach clubs, plenty of tents and lounge chairs for rent and fine, soft sand, making for a perfect family beach day and safe swimming. But go very early in July and August, as it will be packed with sun seekers. Have tea in the elegant and newly restored Grand Hotel de Luz, which overlooks the beach. You can even have spa thalassotherapy (seaweed) treatments at Helianthal on the Place M. Ravel. And golfers can play at Golf de Chantaco (call 24 hrs in advance) 68€ for 18 holes, 45€ for 9. Par 70. Call 48 hrs in advance to reserve. 05 59 26 14 22

Nota bene: Although St-Jean-de-Luz has everything one could want in a Pays Basque coastal fishing village; pretty setting, interesting history, lovely beach with play areas for children, nice dining, upscale shopping, water sports, golf, spas, a lively market, painters at work on the leafy square, the Place Louis XIV, complete with bandstand, surrounded by outdoor cafes, little tourist train, cesta punta (jai alai) at the fronton, it suffers tremendous crowds in July – August. It’s the Laguna Beach of the French Basque coast. Go in early June or off-season!!! If you come into town during high season, the rue Gambetta will be as crowded as a wait to ascend the Eiffel Tower, so for lunch, I highly recommend taking refuge from the hordes, far away from this street, the Place Saint Louis and the touristy, “restaurant row” Rue de la République. We like to lunch above the madness on the boulevard Thiers, #30, at Olatua. They offer a very good value 3 course prix fixe lunch for 18€, or your choice of plat plus dessert (great desserts!) or entree plus plat for only 14€. Highly recommended by us and by the red Michelin. Garden dining in rear, olatua.com. For more casual fare such as tapas, salads or plats complets (lunch platters) try the atmospheric Bar Basque, with pink facade, green awning, and miniature haute cuisine tapas at the bar and out door terrace. A local hangout that attracted Hemingway and Ravel in their days.

If you come into St. Jean for an evening concert, have an early, 7:30 pm, dinner at a new, contemporary gastronomic restaurant tucked away from the fray, in a lovely mansion near the Musée Grévin (wax museum), the Zoko Moko, the “quiet corner” in Basque,
at 6, rue Mazarin. In high season it’s open for dinner only, except for Sundays and holidays. In low season, closed Saturday lunch/Sunday evening and Monday. Has menus for 23€, 28€ and 35€. Tel: 05 59 080 123

If you’re a fish lover, particularly of cod, and want an authentic, hearty Basque meal away from the madding crowd, we love the cute little Bistrot Pil-Pil Enea near the market and next to a girls’ school at 3 rue Sallogoity. It serves the freshest fish in town. Or if you want to escape St. Jean entirely, drive across the water to Ciboure, home of composer Maurice Ravel, to the seafood “shack” on the Nivelle, Arrantzaleak, a bit hard to find at 18, avenue Jean Poulou, chemin de halage de la Nivelle. Superb grilled fish, particularly the thon blanc, white albacore tuna - a Patricia Wells favorite. Special menu for 30€ and plats for15€. Closed Monday evening and Tuesdays, October - June. Closed Mondays, July – September. Closed from mid-December to mid-January. Tel: 05 59 471 075

Or for something new, a charming Basque Bistrot serving fresh fish in the port of Soccoa, just beyond Ciboure, head to the pretty, family run Kaiatxu, “little pier” in Basque, at 29, avenue de A. Passicot, right at the port, with outdoor terrace. Open every day from mid-July to September. It serves a very generous and well priced 3-course meal prepared by the women chefs for 25€. Recommended by Pays Basque magazine, saint-jean-de-luz.com.

### Biarritz

A quick 15 minutes up the road from St-Jean-de-Luz is the elegant, stately and once very staid 19th century gambling, golf, spa and international resort of Biarritz, the former playground of British and European aristocracy and the crown jewel of the Côte Basque with a climate similar to Carmel, California. It’s now inhabited in the summer by a mix of old money of the Belle Epoque style, and large contingent of young surfers of the bohemian persuasion, (International Surf Festival in July), making it less snobby, more friendly, hip and even affordable. While it doesn’t have as much true Basque flavor other than it’s Neo Basque architecture, it remains very posh, old money and a beautiful summer resort made famous by Napoleon III and his Spanish wife, Eugénie, all the while adopting to its new claim to fame as the surfing capital of France, and golfing capital as well. Think Cannes without the show biz glitz. Monte Carlo without the Grimaldis, mega yachts, and high-rise condos and heavy police presence. The long, immaculate beach of Grande Plage is one of Europe’s best surfing beaches, but for a swim, be aware of the tides. The former fishing port area, the Ports des Pêcheurs, has a small, secluded beach (for families, the beach of St. Jean de Luz is safer and easier). Below the Casino on the Grande Plage you can stop for an ice cream or a drink and survey the scene at Dodin or Café O with fairly reasonable prices, considering the prime real estate.

### Sightseeing

I always begin my Biarritz day with a 9:00 am visit to the animated covered market, Marché Couvert Les Halles, on the rue des Halles (open 7:30 am - 1:30 pm). I
enjoy it far more than its rival in Bayonne. Here you’ll find the finest in fruits, vegetables, fish, meats, including the famous Bayonne or Ibaiona ham at Maison Montauzer (or at Paqui, on the street outside the market), and gâteau basque at the Luz Tourtière stand. I have delicious coffee and a slice of Spanish omelet or homemade cake at the Bar Chez Etienne at the western end, in the right corner—a tiny spot with only 6 bar stools but a faithful, well-heeled clientele and amusing chef. It’s Michelin starred chef Alain Ducasse’s favorite spot for a snack, a Biarritz institution.

Be sure to include in your own tour a stroll over to the Rocher de la Vierge, Rock of the Virgin, and climb the steps to the top for dramatic views of the entire coast. Children will love the Musée de la Mer on the Esplanade. Open daily in season, 9:30 am - 12:30 pm and 2:00 - 6:30 pm, and in July and August from 9:30 - midnight! They feed the seals at 10:30 am, and again at 5:00 pm. There’s a 3€ English audio guide, and it’s great fun for all. Check out of season schedule at museedelamer.com.

If you tire of walking there’s also the Petit Train de Biarritz to take you around the compact downtown area (but only goes up to the lighthouse with groups). It departs from the Casino on the Grande Plage every 30 min. On your way to the Rocher, visit the charming neo Roman-Byzantine Eglise de Sainte Eugénie, facing the beach, which is the venue for weekly concerts in summer, both jazz, gospel and chamber music. The church is beautifully maintained. Then stroll down to the former fisherman’s quarter, the Port-des-Pêcheurs at the Port Vieux. You can have an exemplary outdoor seafood lunch looking up at the Eglise at the highly regarded Chez Albert for 38€. Closed Wednesday.

After lunch, take the longer walk up to the lighthouse, Le Phare St. Marin, for even more expansive views of the entire coast (and climb the 249 steps to the top for even more amazing vistas). On your walk to the lighthouse, past the opulent Hôtel du Palais, stop to visit the Russian Orthodox Church on avenue de l’Impératrice 8. Open daily from June – September, 2:30 – 7:00 pm only. In Biarritz’s heyday as the aristocrats’ playground, so many Russian czars and Grand Dukes came down by train from St. Petersburg that they found the need for their own blue-domed Byzantine church, which they built across the street from the Empress’s villa.

If it’s open, peek in at the Chapelle Imperial, on rue Pellot, an 1864 creation of Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie. Designed by Viollet Le Duc. Open every day in season, out of season on Thursday afternoons.

Shopping

You’ll find world class shopping radiating from the Place Clemenceau (park in the underground Place Clemenceau garage on Avenue Verdun) on rue Mazagran, rue Gambetta, rue Espagne and Av. Edouard VII.

There’s a branch of Hèrmes, a Mephisto shoe store offering styles not seen in the U.S. (in shopping gallery on Av. M Foch 4) and a branch of Galeries Lafayette.
For unique Basque gifts

Stylish linens are the best here - there's Jean Vier (on Edouard VII) and Helena, with two shops; on 27 av. Edouard VII and 33 rue Mazagran, Euskal Linge, more rustic linens at 14 rue Mazagran, plus very chic, contemporary linens of the Artiga brand at the Maison Charles Larre across from the market on 1 rue des Halles. Check their webs before you leave to compare styles and colors, and convert the measurements of your dining table to the metric system. The super star Parisian chef, Alain Ducasse has chosen Jean Vier table linens for his Auberge Iparla restaurant in Bidarray and their bathrobes for his new hotel there, the Ostapé.

jeanvierparis.fr / euskal-linge.com / artiga.fr / helena-lingebasque.fr

Les Sandales d'Eugenie - 18 rue Mazagran for lovely Pare Gabia espadrilles and sandals paregabia.com. There is another store in Bayonne on rue Argenterie.

Boutique 64 - On rue Gambetta below the covered market: for very “in vogue” t-shirts and other casual sportswear items for men, women, children and babies. They represent perfectly the casual-chic Côte Basque life style, and the co. is named for the department 64 of the Pyrénées Atlantiques. They have shops all over the Pays Basque: in St.-Jean-de-Luz on rue Gambetta, in Bayonne on rue Espagne, in Guéthary (home shop is on rue de l’église off the N10) in Bordeaux, Lyon, Paris, in the 6th at 16, rue St. Sulpice, and in Madrid at 64, Hermosilla, corner Velázquez. You can see their styles at teeshirt64.com.

Don’t miss the fine gourmet shop, epicerie Arostéguy (the Basque Fauchon), and cheese store, Les Mille et Un Fromages across from each other, up from the Place Clemenceau on Avenue Victor Hugo at #5 and #8 respectively (don’t miss!). For chocoholics, you’ll find great chocolates at Daranatz on du Marechal Foch, below the Clemenceau parking garage, on the left side, walking towards Place Clemenceau, plus Henriet and L’Atelier du Chocolate on the Place Clemenceau. For caramels (kanougas) there’s Pariès on 1 Place Bellevue. Biarritz also has a Musée et Plaisir du Chocolate, which offers 45 min. visits ending with sampling, at 14 Avenue Beaurivage (parking). Open Tuesday - Saturday and Monday during school vacations. Check the hours at lemuseeduchocolat.com.

The Celliers des Halles, 8 rue des Halles, across from the market, has a great selection of Irouléguy wines plus Gaillacs and Cahors. For typical Basque artisan wares, head straight to Zaleki, Produits Regionaux, the “comptoir du Pays Basque”, which offers linens, regional costumes, pottery, Basque food products, wines and brandies. It’s located at rue Gaston Larre, 5, in the Port Vieux quartier, just a short stroll from the Place Clemenceau.

For a shopping break, spot of tea or cup of hot chocolate with separate bowl of whipped cream, head straight to Pâtisserie Miremont, also on the Place Clemenceau. It has great views of the beach scene below. For nice lunch break, have the 25€ gourmet menu on the lovely terrace facing the ocean at Le Galion, attached to the Hotel Windsor (chef, Patrick Damman, son of the hotel's owner, is making
headlines). Or for a choice of tapas, gambas (shrimp), tortillas (omelets) or parrilladas (grilled fish), cross the street from the market to the always-lively Bar Jean, 5, rue des Halles (great atmosphere and flamenco on the stereo at night). Or for a simple salad as a main course head to the Place Ste Eugénie, next to the church and bandstand, to one of the outdoor terraces of the brasseries on the square.

For shopping in style, Suzi Gershman type, author of “Born to Shop”, recommends the luxury shopping tour in a Mercedes with driver, with delightful, American born Wendi Abeberry, owner of Pay Basque Privilege in Biarritz, whose staff will take you around for the day. Tel: 59 410 903

If you stay for a few days, get a copy of “Biarritz Scope and Shops”, which as a calendar listing the myriad summer events, including music, jai-alai rural Basque sports, etc. The tourist office is located on square d’Ixelles, above the avenue Edouard VII, open 8:00 am to 8:00 pm.

A short gastronomic road trip from Biarritz

Take the car and head the short distance beyond the train station in La Negresse quarter upward on the route to Arbonne. Before reaching Arbonne village, take a right at the sign marked Domaine de Bassilour (or Quartier Bassilour). When you reach the pink chateau, the Domaine, you’ll see another sign left towards the Moulin de Bassilour. There you will find a wonderful 18th century (1741) working flourmill, which makes the area’s very best gâteau basque (can purchase a whole gâteau or simply a miniature, choose from black cherry or pastry cream fillings), plus bread (pains de campagne), sablés (butter cookies), mieture (corn bread) and miches (sweet, anise-flavored bread). Recommended by Patricia Wells of The Food Lover’s Guide to France. Not to be missed. It’s open daily from 8:00 am – 1:00 pm and 2:30 – 7:00 pm. In the same neighborhood you’ll find the factory for the Henriët chocolates. You can watch them being made from Monday - Friday from 9:00 am – 1:00 pm and again from 2:00 - 4:30 pm.

Bayonne

For genuine, un-touristy Basque flavor, venture on to the quintessentially Basque city of Bayonne, the most important commercial port and the spiritual capital of the Pays Basque, straddling the Rivers Ardour and Nive. Founded by the Romans, it is still protected by ramparts, complete with a fort built by Vauban, Louis XIV’s military architect. Unlike Biarritz, Bayonne does not “pretty up” for tourists. It is what it is, doesn’t put on airs, and while the whaling merchants’ 19th century mansions facing the river may very much need a fresh coat of paint, and the city still shuts down for siesta, it’s a charming and totally authentic place to spend the day.

Bayonne has two major tourist attractions, besides the culinary ones of Bayonne ham, chocolates and Izarra liqueurs, that prove to be time very well spent. Both are located in the old quarter, Le Petit Bayonne. You can park in the municipal lot at the Place de la Républic (parking De Gaulle) and walk back across the bridge to Petit Bayonne.
First visit the fine arts museum, **Musée Bonnat** ([musee-bonnat.com/](http://musee-bonnat.com/)), a gift to the city from Leon Bonnat, a local 19th century salon artist. Inside you'll find paintings by Bonnat himself, Botticelli, Degas, Murillo, El Greco, Rubens (an entire room), Goya and Ingres. From May to October, open daily, except Tuesday from 10:00 am to 6:30 pm. From November - April from 10:00 am to 12:30 and 2:00 – 6:00 pm, closed Tuesdays. Open daily in July and August.

Afterwards see one of the finest and largest ethnographic museums in all of Europe, the **Musée Basque**, reopened in '01 after a 5-year rehabilitation. Allow at least 1-1/2 hrs for this amazing, twenty thematic room museum, which will educate you in the history, culture and way of life of the Basque people, explain how Basque society is organized and the role of the port of Bayonne in the 19th century. Explanations written in French, Spanish and Basque only, but buy an English guide at the ticket desk to help in your understanding. **This is a truly fascinating museum.** Open May - October Tuesday - Sunday from 10:00 am - 6:30 pm and from November – April, 10:00 am - 12:30 and 2:00 – 6:00 pm. In July - August open Monday as well, from 10-6:30. And in July-Aug., Wednesday evenings are free, from 6:30 - 9:30. You can purchase a combined ticket for both museums ([musee-basque.com](http://musee-basque.com)).

If you’re a foodie, set aside some time for a splendid lunch in Petit Bayonne at the **Auberge du Cheval Blanc**, 68 rue Bourgneuf. Housed in a former pony-express mail relay station, it is well deserving of its 1-star Michelin rating, but is neither formal nor fussy. We loved the cuisine of Chef Jean-Claude Tellechea, the service, the relaxing ambience and the great value, a “menu entre amis” for 35€. We had a confit of anchovies in orange vinaigrette, a tuna steak and strawberry coup with raspberries in a sabayon sauce made of Jurançon wine with vanilla ice cream plus an Irouléguy rosé wine from Ilarria. There is also a 28€ mid-week “menu du pays” consisting of Bayonne ham, duck confit and gâteau basque, plus a dish of petits fours. One of the best values in haute cuisine in the Pays Basque! Closed Saturday at lunch, Sunday nights, Mondays, February, the first week of July and first week of August. Tel: 05 59 590 133

You’ll also find the best Bayonne ham artisan, **Pierre (Chabagno) Ibaïalde**, at work in his shop on Rue des Cordeliers, 41, in Petit Bayonne ([pierre-ibaialde.com](http://pierre-ibaialde.com)). He gives a demonstration then a tour of the drying room, ending with a sample of his delicious wares. The Ibaïona hams come from year old pigs fed only cereal, and the ham is coated with a mixture of sea salt, garlic and ground red Espelette pepper powder before hung to dry.

Also before leaving Petit Bayonne, stop on the quai Corsaires at #52 for a sample at the **Loreztia** confiture shop, selling the best black cherry jams and honey in the Pays Basque.

While visiting Petit Bayonne, you may notice posters and flyers protesting the treatment of ETA prisoners on the part of the Spanish government, as well as other pro-Basque independence propaganda. This area was once a haven for fleeing ETA terrorists, as their French Basque sympathizers protected them until the crackdown by the government and greater cooperation of the French police in routing them out and extraditing them to Spain to stand trial. But regardless of everything that has happened...
over the past few years, pro-independence fervor remains strong here in the old quarter of this historic city.

If you don’t want to spend that much time or money dining, there are plenty of casual restaurants with outdoor terraces along the River Nive quai for an inexpensive lunch. Look for **Bayonnais** at 38 Quai Corsaires in Petit Bayonne, whose chef, Christophe Pascal offers a fine value menu for 15€, or **Itxaski** on Quai Jauregiberry in Grand Bayonne, the more lively quai. Great grilled sardines and salads at the latter.

**Other sightseeing**

Be sure to visit the northern gothic, twin towered **Cathédral Sainte-Marie** with its enormous cloisters (great photo op from here) and beautiful stained glass, and the area immediately surrounding it, the place Pasteur. Bayonne’s whalers funded the construction of the cathedral, as the bishops demanded from them one tenth of their profits. You may see modern day pilgrims here as well; as Bayonne’s cathedral is a staging area for the trek down to St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port to begin the Road of Saint James, to Santiago de Compostel. The view of the illuminated cathedral at night from the bridge to the St. Esprit quarter is lovely. Open Monday - Saturday, 10:00 -11:45 am, 3:00 - 5:45 pm, Sunday 3:30 - 5:45 pm.

**Shopping**

Stroll along the pedestrian **rue Port Neuf** where you’ll find Bayonne’s most famous purveyors of chocolates. Bayonne in fact introduced chocolates to France and at one time had more chocolate artisans than all of Switzerland. While there are far better known chocolate cities in Europe, Bayonne is the “unsung capital of cacao”. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the edict of Nantes allowed Jews in France to worship freely, and because Bayonne was a port city, the Spanish Jews, after taking refuge in Portugal, took refuge here, bringing their chocolate making skills and imported cacao from the New World, and began the chocolate industry in 1496, settling in St. Etienne, in the St. Esprit quarter, across the River Ardour, where a small synagogue still exists on #33 rue Maubec as well as a Jewish cemetery. The St. Esprit quarter became the Sephardic Jewish ghetto because Grand Bayonne was off-limits for residence by non-Catholics. The **Cazenove**, founded in 1854, and next-door **Darantz** chocolate shops, under the archways on rue Port Neuf, are world famous for their chocolate creations. The former will tempt you with their famous hot chocolate, “mousseux de chocolat”, made by beating the chocolate with fresh farm milk, and served along with thickly buttered toast, in Limoges china decorated with tiny pink roses. The latter is known for its chocolate bonbons filled with Cointreau, Cavados and Grand Marnier. The “Creole” is a dark chocolate filled with rum and ganache (mixture of cream and chocolate), and the “Moctezuma”, is flavored with Mexican spices and orange flowers. There’s also a branch of Biarritz’s **Pariès** at #14 which is famous for its “kanouga”, a chocolate caramel created for the visiting Russian dukes in 1905, flavored with coffee, vanilla and hazelnut. The oldest chocolate shop in Bayonne, since 1775, is **Pâtisserie Barrère** at No. 41. Their specialty is “Tête de Ghat”, a chocolate head of a cat filled
with almond praline, also millefeuille, and gâteau basque. But the new “petit prince” of the Basque pastries and chocolates is Thierry Bamas whose pâtisserie is located at #55 rue Pannceau in Petit Bayonne, across the bridge. Not to be missed! Most of the chocolate in Bayonne comes now from South America, whereas Belgian chocolate is imported from Africa. In Bayonne the unofficial “tasting hour” is at 5:00 pm.

Also make your way from the cathedral to rue d’Espagne to see the food shops, including the Pays Basque’s leading charcuterie, Pierre Oteiza, at #68, where you’ll find the finest in gourmet items plus Irouléguy wines, and at #66, the Pâtisserie Saveurs et Chocolat with its amazing chocolate fountain in the store window! The charcuterie, Maison Montauzer, on rue de la Salie #17 is yet another purveyor of the finest Bayonne hams.

For unique scents for both men and women: perfumes, lotions, soaps unique to this area, see Parfums et Senteurs du Pays Basque on #4 rue de la Salie. Their wares make nice gifts. parfumssetsenteursdupaysbasque.com (Stores also in Ainhoa, Espelette and headquarters in La Bastide Clairence)

For traditional Basque handicrafts, linens, hand painted ceramic dish ware, music, bèrets, you’ll find them all under one roof at Atmosphere Basques, on the rue Luc, which intersects rue d’Espagne.

There’s also a small branch of Galeries Lafayette near the rue Port Neuf and also a handy Monoprix for Woolworth type, cheap five & dime shopping. For beautiful Basque espadrilles and sandals, go to Pare Gabia on #1 rue Argenterie. paregabia.com

And don’t forget the covered market (Les Halles) along the quai Commandant-Rouquebert, open Monday - Friday, 7:00 am – 1:00 pm. Outdoor farmers’ market days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It’s less lively than Les Halles in Biarritz, but worth a visit and coffee break nonetheless.

Bayonne celebrates a Chocolate Festival May 10 - 22, a Cider Festival May 29, a Ham Festival three days before Easter, a mid July Jazz on the Remparts Festival and their famous Fetes de Bayonne (in ’04 from July 30 - August 3) with Basque brute strength sports, jai-alai, music, fireworks, parades of giants and bullfights, the most important corrida on feast day of the Assumption, August 15, when the entire city dresses in red and white, ala Pamplona’s San Fermín. If you’re in Bayonne in July, all the store windows will be decorated in red and white, anticipating the festival.

Monsieur Léoncini is one of the remaining three artisans who still hand make the famed “mahkilas”, the Basque walking stick with concealed dagger. His shop can be found in the old quarter of Grand Bayonne at No. 37 rue Vielle-Boucherie, near Place Montaut, the street found at the top of the rue d’Espagne. See bayonne-tourisme.com.

**Drives into the lovely, bucolic Pays Basque countryside**

**Full day excursion (if possible, divide into two days)**

From Hondarribia you can take an interesting daylong, country drive through dewy pastures and meadows, rolling hills, with the most handsome cream-colored cows in all
of Europe, to the incredibly picturesque inland Pays Basque villages. Your first stop should be at the well-groomed and prosperous Ascain. Here as in all the other Basque villages, in the square you’ll find the Holy Trinity of buildings: the pelota court (on this side of the border painted pink or salmon), the 17th century Basque church and the town hall, Mairie. Ascain’s pretty church has typical 2 story wooden balconies and a manicured, flower bedecked cemetery. In this, as in all the villages in the Pays Basque, the cemeteries are tourist worthy sights. Look for the unusual discoidal (round-headed) gravestones with what looks like a swastika, or four commas joined together, but is instead the ancient Basque symbol you’ll see duplicated on Basque handicrafts on both sides of Euskadi, the Basque Lands. It’s called the “lauburu”, the Basque cross, and represents the movements of the sun. Predating the Christian cross, it’s now come to be used as a symbol of good luck and fortune.

Note the beautiful porcelain flowers decorating the lovingly cared for tombstones. The two (or sometimes three) tiered balconies were the fiefdom of men only, being closer to God, while the women remained below, standing guard on the floor above the family tombstones.

In some Pays Basque churches you’ll find sculpted tiles on the floor of the nave. Each tile represents a house of the village. During services, the women were responsible for standing on their own family tile and would melt wax over the tomb in memory of the house’s dead.

“Etxea” means house in Basque. Traditionally, three generations of the family would live together under one roof, the family above, and the animals below. The eldest, either boy or girl, usually the first to marry, would inherit the home and take over the family affairs. The “etxea” was always given a name, which was frequently adopted by the family as their own. If you notice the names on the tombstones you’ll see many begin with Etche”, such as Etchevery, Etcheverria or Etchegory.

For shopping, Le Confit d’Ascain is a good place to pick up duck confit, foie and other gourmet items while visiting this village. If you happen to be in Ascain at lunchtime, treat yourself to a 25€ menu at L’Atelier Gourmand at the Place du Fronton. Every Sunday in July and August, you can attend a “bullfight” in which the bulls, or cows in this case, are not fought but instead jumped over by professional bull runners in a one-hour spectacle, the “Course de Vaches Royale”. The animals aren’t subjected to any cruelty or suffering, and it’s acceptable “theater” for children.

After Ascain you head for Sare, passing mid way through La Rhune (rhune.com), where there’s a delightful open-car, wooden, cog-railway, built in 1924, that takes you 1,000 ft up the sacred mountain (elevation: 3,000 ft.) to an unforgettable scenic viewpoint. It’s about a 35-minute ride with train moving at only about 8 km per hour. But if you decide to take the train in the summer time, arrive early, early, early and early so as to be in line at the ticket office by 8:00 am, to purchase your tickets when it opens at 8:30 for the first run up at 9:00. We arrived “late” at 8:30 and missed the first train but caught the second. By noon, all runs for the day can be sold out! It gets extremely crowded during the summer with tour bus groups, hikers, and families. Most hikers go early so that they can take the two-hour walk down while it’s still relatively cool.
atop the mountain, you’ll be rewarded with sweeping views of Navarra on the Spanish side and St.-Jean-de-Luz and the coast. There’s also a “venta” or “roadhouse” restaurant where one can have a quite decent lunch. Many hearty souls prepare a picnic, take a backpack, plenty of water and after training up, walk back down on well marked trails, a trek of a couple of hours. Train runs from March 19 thru Nov. 2.

On the road to Sare you’ll pass the Musée Gâteau Basque, a typical Lambouridan farmhouse, the Maison Haranea, where one hr. and 20-minute demonstrations are given of how to prepare this traditional Basque dessert, with ample tasting during and after-of the delicious dough and the final product. The demonstrations are given only in French, but the pastry chef, Bixente Marichular, does speak very good English and will chat with you afterwards. We’ve sat through the French demonstration twice, understanding very little (missed most all the engaging chef’s jokes) but enjoying the sampling and buying the special cake pans and a mini gâteau for our evening’s dessert. Fantastic!

- From April 10 - May 6, visits at 11, Monday - Saturday and also at 2:30 pm on Monday – Friday.
- May 8 - June 30: visits at 11:00 am on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.
- July 6 - September 2, visits at 11:00 am Monday – Saturday, plus 3:00 and 4:30 pm Monday – Friday.
- Sept 4-Oct. 20: visits at 11:00 on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.

Always closed Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday. legateaubasque.com

N.B.: While I firmly believe that Bixente Marichular bakes the best gâteau around, there are also two alternative and also fine sources, if the Museum is closed. In the Bidart countryside, in the Bassilour quartier, there’s the Moulin de Bassilour (see above) and if driving through St. Peé-sur-Nivelle, stop at Pâtisserie Pereuil. Their secret recipe dates from 1870.

Another tourist attraction nearby in Sare are the prehistoric caves, Grottes de Sare (grottesdesare.com), which can be visited via a guided “son et lumiere”, light and sound show tour lasting about an hr. It requires an easy ½ mile walk in this subterranean labyrinth, following a guide. While you won’t see any Paleolithic cave paintings a la Lascaux or Altamira, it makes for an interesting visit, nonetheless. Visit starts with a 15 min. video, in French, about the tiny bats inhabiting the cave, which you won’t see unless the guide points his flashlight into a crevice for you. Tour in French only, but an explanation sheet in English will be given to you at the ticket booth. Open February and March, November and December from 2:00 am – 5:00 pm and in April, May June and September from 10:00 am – 6:00 pm. July-Aug. from 10: am – 7:00 pm, October from 10:00 am – 5:00 pm.

If you won’t be visiting the Basque ethnographic museum in Bayonne, stop for a guided tour (alas, in French only) to a restored Basque farmhouse, circa 1660, the Maison Ortillopitz, 1 km off the road between Sare and Ascain, to get a sense of Basque rural daily life.

Open daily from April – October. Open May – June from 2:00 – 6:00 pm, July - August, from 11:00 am – 7:00 pm and September - October from 2:00 – 5:00 pm.
There is another 17th century Basque farmhouse, a “basseri” in Basque, la Maison Labourdine in Ustaritz, just 10 km from Bayonne that can also be visited. Guided one hour visits daily in July, August and September, 11:00 am, 1:00, 4:00 and 6:00 pm.

But neither are really equal substitutes for the truly impressive Museum of Basque culture in Bayonne. ortillopitz.com lamaisonlabourdine.com

The 3-flower village of Sare, one of “les plus beaux villages de France”, which became wealthy during the 19th century through the smuggling trade, or as the Basques called it, their “night work”, lies ahead along a road winding through the wooded countryside.

It’s separated from Spain by the Pyrénées, but the mountains have never constituted a barrier. They’ve served as a private link between the Basque families on both sides and have over the years seen a constant movement of sheep, contraband, war-time refugees, both from the Spanish Civil War and World War II, even ETA terrorists in the seventies and eighties.

Sare (sare.fr) is picture postcard perfect with its 2 frontons and lovely white homes decorated with geraniums and bulls blood red, blue, green or brown shutters. There are also sweet-faced, gentle Pottoka horses, breed only in the Basque Country, to ride at the Olhadea equestrian center. These ancient horses were formerly exported to Britain to work in the mines and were later saved from extinction, but only a few hundred still remain. There’s a Pottoka reserve in Bidarray to protect them. You can take a “promenade” in a caleche, a 40-minute carriage ride around the village during the summer. And you’re sure to stumble upon some sort of festival during July or August, a pottoka exhibition, a Basque brute (rural) sports contest, a jai-alai match, a choral concert or Basque dancers. There are a number of nice shops here for Basque linens and gourmet products. I’m particularly found of the hand painted Basque dinner wear in cream with red/green stripes, the “Amatxi” pattern, available at “Casa Piment” here in the village. The Hotel Arraya has a shop attached and even a stand on the street that sells its famous gâteau basque (but the Musée bakes a superior one). The village tourist office upstairs on the square has a bounty of information about the surrounding area and a brochure listing all the summer festivals. The Eglise Saint Martin in Sare is quite pretty as its cemetery with Basque tombstones is interesting.

If you visit Sare during the fall, you may be witness to “l’enfer des palombes” or wood pigeon hell, between Sare and Bera, Spain, on the old smugglers’ route. Miles and miles of nets are strung between the tress along the Lizarrieta Pass. As the unsuspecting migrating wood pigeons swoop down through the pass, they’re trapped, shot and roasted or preserved in glass jars and sold in the local boutiques.

After Sare, you head to Aïnhoa, which some say is one of the prettiest villages in all of France, and another 3-flower, “les plus beaux villages de France”, one street village, with 17th and 18th century half-timbered homes with asymmetric roofs, many bearing the family name and the year constructed carved above the door lintels. Look for the “Gorritia”. The church is particularly beautiful with its two-tiered wooden balconies and graveyard of discoidal tombstones.
There’s a very nice store here for Basque linens and handicrafts, the Cerises et Piments and a branch of Pierre Oteiza for gourmet items/wines. The Arts Populaires shop, as the name implies, sells a bounty of Basque handicrafts, books, and music, including my favorite hand painted ceramic dinnerware, the “Amatxi” pattern. There are Basque dances in the Place du Fronton from July 24 - 31. The annual village fete runs from August 15 - 18. If it's lunch time, the Hotel Ithurria has a fabulous and elegant dining room with Parisian-formal style service, awarded with Michelin macaron (star), an menu for 32€, if you’re up for a splurge and the best cassoulet with red beans and duck confit you might ever have! It’s considered one of the best restaurants in the entire Pays Basque. Or for something more moderate, the Oppoca on the Place du Fronton serves a delicious hearty Basque menu for 18€.

After Ainhoa, you’ll arrive at my favorite Labourd town of all, the red pepper village of Espelette, a colorful, captivating town of red, green and white, but you may want to save this destination for lunch at the wonderful Hotel Euzkadi. In October the village will be a riot of red, as the peppers are hung out in garlands to dry from hooks on the house facades. The piment d’Espelette festival is held on the last Sunday of October, which attracts thousands. These chili peppers were brought by the conquistadors from Haiti and grow well here because of the hot, humid summers, typical of the immediate area. They were baked in the oven and ground into powder, initially used as an ingredient in chocolate. Kids will enjoy the free samples at Atton Chocolatier, open March 1-Nov. 15. Try their ganache made with Espelette pepper. Market day is Wednesday. There is also a Pottoka pony fair in January.

We buy our favorite blue, white and sand colored Basque linens at one of the two Maison d’Artiga stores (artiga.fr) on the main street running through the village, local rustic yellow and red pottery at Agothea, a small shop around the corner, unusual perfumes and lotions (great gifts) at the Parfums et Senteurs du Pays Basque and the red pepper Espelette powder and paste, almost impossible to find in U.S., at one of the grocery shops along the same street, or at the Bipia factory in the next village, Larressore, right along the highway.

Your next stop along the road is Larressore, where you can visit and shop at the famous walking stick, or “Makhila”, studio of the Ainciart-Bergara family, who have been in business here for 200 years. These world-famous walking sticks (makhila.com), first used by shepherds and pilgrims during the Middle Ages, have beautiful silver or gold handles that can be monogrammed with ones’ initials and a motto of one’s choice, and all are still made by hand from the wood of the medlar tree. The branch is cut and dried for up to 12 years to increase its strength. You can see the artisans at work, and a lady will give you an explanation in English. Famous makhila owners have been members of royalty, popes and current and past heads of state, including Reagan, Churchill and de Gaulle. Makhila in Basque means “death giver”, as every makhila has a hidden blade in the handle. The lady in her explanation will unscrew the handle to reveal a tiny sharp spike. Some say the makhila was the inspiration for the Bayonne blacksmiths who invented the bayonet. One needs to have his makhila custom made. They’ll take your measurements when you visit, but you’ll have a 6-month wait before you receive you
perfectly balanced walking stick. One can also order one on the web. Prices **START** at 230€, going up to 550€!

Leaving Larressore, you can head south on the D 918 with a quick detour to the small black cherry town of **Itxassou**. Not much to see here but a few inns (all have great food) and the pink pelota court at the square, and their extremely pretty church with 3-tiered wooden balconies and lovingly tended, flower bedecked cemetery in the **lower town** (follow signs to Hotel du Chene). We always stop on the way out of town at a local farm, the Ferme Atharri Xola, (follow the “ferme cerises noires” signs), to pick up a jar of the town’s famous confiture de cerises noires, black cherry jam, and then at the Ferme Mirentxu Elissalde for Ossau-Iraty ewe’s cheese. But now there is a new shop next to the church in the lower town, which sells these items and is conveniently open on Sunday. The Hotel du Chene next to the lower church has a lovely shaded patio if you need a stop for a coffee or a panaché (beer cut with lemonade or sweet soda).

Continuing southeast on the D918 and crossing the boundary from the province of Labourd to Basse-Navarre, you follow the River Nive to **Bidarray**. In order to see the upper town, with its incredibly scenic views from the square, you must detour up to the top of the plateau, following signs to the Auberge Imparla restaurant in the heart of the village. This is well worth the detour for the vistas alone, plus a great lunch stop at the new venture of Parisian super chef, Alain Ducasse, the **Auberge Iparla**. It has a handsome dining room and also outdoor terrace, and a gourmet chef, Alain Souilac (see review below). This may quickly become THE destination in the Pays Basque countryside. The Bidarry church is unusual, as it is 12th century, without the ubiquitous, 3-tiered wooden balconies that were built later on. It once served as a chapel for pilgrims on the road to Santiago de Compostela. But it is surrounded by the usual cemetery with Basque crosses and has a stunning belvedere for fantastic views.

After Bidarray, you continue down on the D 918, following the course of the river Nive, past the **Poterie Goïcoechea**, famed pottery workshop in Ossès (look for the enormous clay water jugs outside). If you’re in the market for an attractive, hand painted clay wine cooler, this is the place to purchase it, or a hand painted vase. See their wares at poteries-goicoechea.fr. On the road here you’ll also pass the Arnabar shop, which sells duck confit, foie gras, and other Basque delicacies. You can also visit their farm in neighboring Irissarry to see the ducks themselves on Mon. and Thurs. from 10-12, July through Sept. But don’t make a stop here if it’s Monday, as you’ll see the Arnabar folks at the St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port outdoor market.

If you’re in need of espadrilles, stop in Ossés at the shop and museum, **Don Quichosse**, to watch them be made by artisan Jean Jacques Houyou.

Then on to the pretty, but always annoyingly crowded **St-Jean-Pied-de-Port** or **Donibane Garazi** in the Basque language. Spanning both sides the river Nive, this classic and ancient village boasts pink sandstone walls, red roofs and wooden, geranium draped balconies. It is also an important way station on the Camino de Santiago, the route of Saint James, and the “gateway” to Spain. In the summer the village fills with modern day pilgrims, resting and getting their credentials and gear in order before
starting off on their 800 plus mile journey, scallops shells, the symbol of St. Jacques, attached to their bags.

**Monday is the fabled market day**, and this is indeed the day to visit, as all the major Bergers, purveyors of farm products, set up their stands in the area above the main road, where “Donibane Garazi” is spelled on the hill with flowers. We find ample parking nearby on the hill. By hitting the town on market day, you need not stop at every farm along the route—the farmers come to you. It all ends around 1, so you’ll need to get an early start to your day, or divide this tour into two, one for Labourd villages, another for the Basse-Navarre, which is my recommended manner of seeing all the delights of the Pays Basque countryside. This market is a real treat!

Aside from the market, you may not want to linger here because of the omnipresent crowds and summer heat, but with kids in tow, there’s the 13th century Bishops’ Prison, **la Prison des Evêques**. You can visit the cells and the dungeon on a 30-minute guided tour. Open Easter through October, 9:30 am – 7:00 pm. You may also want to stop in for a look at the Eglise Notre Dame and the Citadelle, another fortification built by Vauban, Louis XIV’s military architect.

Across the bridge you’ll find shopping along the rue d’Espagne. Look for Basque linens and bérets at **Helena** on the rue at #7, or **Jean Vier** on the main road, #17 Place Charles Floquet. Handcrafted espadrilles from the village of Mauleon are available at the **Maison de l’Espadrille** (#2), Irouléguy wines or spirits, eau de vie, pear, raspberry or prune brandy or delicious coffee liqueur, for the person who has everything, at **Domaine Etienne Brana**, on the way to this shopping street at #2 rue de l’Eglise. (You can also sample the Domaine Etienne Brana wines and spirits at the winery, located to the left on the St. Palais road, right after the public pool. Open 10:00 am – noon and 2:30 – 6:30 pm every day from July 1 – 15 September.

For the kids, or for the kid in you, there’s memorabilia of the Running of the Bulls at the local branch of **Kukuxumusu**, which means “kiss of the flea” in Basque, where you’ll find amusing t-shirts and bull running related stuff, just like the wares sold at their main shop in Pamplona.

For lunch, 2 kms southwest of Pied-de-Port is a wonderful cider house, a cidrerie, in tiny **Lasse**, the **Auberge de Aldakurria**, a former pilgrims’ inn. Lunch inexpensively on the terrace in summer with all the cider you can drink included in the price.

From here you head due west for about 11 km to the even prettier and much more serene agricultural village of **St. Etienne-de-Baïgorry**, which means “beautiful view” in Euskara, the Basque tongue. The town sits in the heart of the Aldudes valley. Here you can sample Irouléguy wines, France’s smallest appellation, at the **Cave d’Irouleguy wine cooperative** (cave-irouleguy.com), which is to your left when entering the town. Nice sampling here of all the major producers, and one can also purchase an attractive, hand painted, clay wine cooler from Poterie Goichoechea, if you miss the factory on the D918 in Ossés. Closed on Sunday from October - April. Open daily from May – September.
You can also sample these wines at the source in the tiny village of Irouléguy at one of the three wineries open to visitors: the Ilarria, open 10 am to 12:30 pm and 2 pm to 7:30 pm. (look for Ilarria '02 or the Bixintxo '01), the Arretxea (Arretxea '02) and the Domaine Etxegaraya (they make a lovely rosé).

In St. Etienne, drive on to the square to visit the lovely Basque church with its beautiful gold Baroque retable and two-tiered wooden balcony with one very famous German Remy Mahler organ used in July-August for the Festival Musical de Basse-Navarre concerts by some of Europe’s most renowned organists. On weekends services are sung in Basque. There are Force Basque (rural Basque “iron man” sports) competitions in July.

You may still be able to take a 45-minute guided tour of the Chateau d’Etchauz (chateauinfrance.net), open from April 1 – October 30 with tours Monday - Friday afternoons at 2:30 and 4:30. It has been turned into a 7-room hotel, member of Chateaux & Hotels of France, and guests can spend the night in the Charlie Chaplin room (he was a frequent guest of the family).

The home base of the charcuterie extraordinaire, Pierre Oteiza (pierreoteiza.com), can be found 15 km south of town on the Route d’Urepel in the heart of the Aldudes Valley. This is a gorgeous drive that should be taken even if you’re not even vaguely intrigued by ham! Open for visits from 8:00 am to 7:00 pm daily. We recently had a magnificent, but quite simple lunch here, the most memorable of our entire stay, in the adjacent dining room, consisting of a platter of the delicious ham and sausage, a platter of Ossau Iraty ewe’s milk cheeses and rustic bread, along with a bottle of Irouléguy wine. Superb!! You can also visit the black hoofed pigs and piglets, resting or grazing in their fields below the shop.

Southeast from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port takes you on an equally scenic drive along the river Nive to Estérençuby to the Xaltoinia farm, which produces wonderful pure Brebis, ewe’s milk cheese.

On this route, at St. Michel you can take a short detour northeast, up to the miniscule village of Aincille for lunch at the wonderful, family-owned Hotel-Restaurant Pecoïtz, “a little corner of Paradise”, says a noted French gourmet magazine. It’s also a “Bibi Gourmand” in the red Michelin guide. Weekday lunch menus for only 17€ It’s open April 1 - January 1, but closed Thursday evening, Saturday mid-day and Friday, except for school vacations.

If that doesn’t fit, continue on the Estérençuby road past St. Michel and past Estérençuby, 4 km down to Béherobie to Les Sources de la Nive, a hotel-restaurant right on the banks of the river. Closed in January and on Tuesday from November 15 - March 1. Also recommended in the red Michelin and by travel writers.

We’ve sampled many of the above food and wine recommendations from to the culinary guide of Gerald Hirigoyen’s French Basque cookbook, “The Basque Kitchen.” He’s the chef of San Francisco’s Bocadillos and Pastis.
A shortened version of this drive would be from Hondarribia to Ascain, down to Sare, back to Spain via the Lizuniaba mountain pass to Bera in the heart of the Bidaso Valley of Navarra, then up the N121 back to Irún and Hondarribia.

**The shortened version of inland Pays Basque**

**For the garden and prehistoric sites lover**

**Ascain** to **Sare**, then **Ainhoa** and **Espelette**, the four prettiest villages of them all, before heading to **Cambo-les-Bains**.

In **Cambo**, visit Edmond Rostang’s (author of Cyrano de Bergerac) Villa Arnaga ([arnaga.com](http://arnaga.com)), which is a lovely Neo-Basque villa decorated in Belle Epoque style with exquisite formal, Versailles-style gardens. We very much enjoyed our recent visit here, complete with strutting peacocks. One can take an independent tour of the home—takes an hour to see the entire estate. In July-Aug. one can also take guided tour, in French only, of the formal gardens on Mon. at 4:30 pm and Thursday at 11:00 am, but at any time, you can wander them at leisure. The home has been kept very authentic, with family furniture, a minstrels’ gallery, newspaper clippings of Rostang’s theatrical works, his letters, and pictures with stars of his day and visiting celebrities, such as Sara Bernhart. A theater festival is held here the second week in August. Open daily from April to October 31.

**Hours** - April May, June and September from 10:00 am - 12:30 pm, 2:30 – 7:00 pm, July and August from 10:00 am – 7:00 pm and October, 2:30 – 7:00 pm.

From Cambo you head to Hasparren taking the D251 beyond **Isturitz** for a visit to the prehistoric, 40,000 year old caves, **Grottes d’Isturits-Oxocelhaya** ([grottes-isturitz.com](http://grottes-isturitz.com)) open daily from mid-March to mid-Nov., but with an obligatory 40-minute guided tour in French only. An explanation sheet is given in English. Sadly, the prehistoric cave painting rooms are closed off. You can only see picture, but the visit is interesting for its stalactites in human shapes.

March, April, May, October, and November: visits from 2-5, June & September: visits at 11:00 am, noon, then again form 2:00 – 5:00 pm and in July - August visits are from 10:00 am -1:00 pm and 2:00 - 6:00 pm.

Return to rather dull Hasparren to take the D123 to yet another delightful 3-flower village of **La Bastide Clairence**, another three-flower village and funky arts & crafts center and easily the least spoiled of all. Visit the Gothic church with Romanesque portico, lined with tombstones. Behind the church cemetery, look for the small Jewish cemetery, cimetière juif, with the remains of its 17th century simple grave stones barely visible. The Jewish community in the village was an adjunct to the Sephardic colony of Bayonne.

Also visit the nearby Benedictine **Abbaye of Belloc**, located off the main road (on the local D 510) from La Bastide Clairence to Urt, to purchase delicious Brebis cheese and religious memorabilia or Basque choral CDs from the monks in their store-follow
signs to “le magasin” and ring the bell. If you’re in luck, the monks won’t be at pray and will let you in. Open daily, 8-12, 1:30-6:30.

After La Bastide Clairence you head north to the motorway A64/E80 and back to the coast.

**Dining and Lodging on the Pays Basque coast**

**Lodging in St. Jean-de-Luz**

**Luxury**

5-Star Grand Hotel St.-Jean-de-Luz - This is a stately, recently renovated Edwardian era building ([luzgrandhotel.fr](http://luzgrandhotel.fr)) sitting right on the beach with every possible creature comfort and somewhat less stuffy, formal and expensive than the Hotel du Palais in Biarritz. And its Rosewood restaurant is equally elegant, offering a lunch menu for 32€. It's expensive, yes, but less so than the Hotel du Palais and perfect for families, as it directly faces the very family-friendly beach. It has an indoor pool, gym and sauna. Receives 3 red gables for charm in the Michelin guide. Closed March and November 15 - January 31.

Expensive

4-star Parc Victoria - This Relais Chateaux property is complete with gardens and a pool, an oasis of tranquility. This 19th century villa is decorated in Art Deco style; the proprietors are warm and friendly with a proud collection of cats. This would be my choice during the frenetic high season, away from the tourist tidal wave. Receives 3-red gables for charm in the Michelin guide. Closed mid-November to mid-March. [relaischateau.fr](http://relaischateau.fr)

4-star Hotel Zaspi (means 7 in Basque, for the 7 provinces of the Basque lands) - This is a brand new, hip, minimalist style, 7 room, design hotel owned by the Marriage Freres tea firm, in the heart of town on boulevard Thiers. **Roof top pool, a/c,** tea salon decorated in lime green with white modular chairs, outdoor terrace. Breakfast for an extra 12€, covered garage parking for 10€. Very “trendy-cool”! Continental breakfast and parking are extra. For the really died hard fans of design hotels. Again, only book here in low season. [zazpihotel.com](http://zazpihotel.com)

**Moderate**

3-star La Devinière - 5, rue Loquin, is a 5-story house with charming, private garden and a cozy salon with 10 antique filled guest rooms location off the pedestrian shopping street of Rue Gambetta, but without an elevator, a/c., TV, or mini-bar ([hotel-la-deviniere.com/](http://hotel-la-deviniere.com/)). But it does have a charming garden and tearoom. Bedrooms have fine fabrics, antiques, and lovely Basque beds. Excellent attention to detail! The living room has a highly polished piano for guests to play. Former guests have included Lorin Maazel and Herbert Von Karajan among other notable musicians. The owner’s
daughters’ oil paintings grace the halls. Featured in Sawday’s “Special Places to stay” and Karen Brown (karenbrown.com). Receives 2 red gables for charm in the Michelin guide. Closed for 2 weeks in January. I would only stay here in low season, as its location, on a heavily trafficked pedestrian street, gets virtually jammed during the summer.

Upper budget

3-star La Marisa - Located on a quiet street very near the beach. It has 15 simple, but pleasant, old-fashioned rooms with rates from 18€ - 145€. The best room is #3. Recommended by Gourmet la-marisa.com. Again, I would only stay “in town” during low season!

Flats to Rent

Villa Erogain - Located in the heart of the town. basquexplorer.com/villa-erdian.htm

Lodging next door in Ciboure

Villa Erresinolettean - 4, Rue de la Tour in Ciboure, is right across the bridge from St. Jean, beyond the blue gate, with panoramic views of the bay. It’s a B&B (chardiet.com) run by Elaine Chardiet and has three bedrooms, terrace and a pool. The porcelains, fine linens and décor are worth the detour. The Hortensia room has a sitting area, TV, queen bed and shower. The Louis XIII has a lounge, TV, queen bed and shower for 80€, including breakfast. The Romantique has a queen bed, TV and bath. Again, Ciboure is as busy as St. Jean de Luz during the summer months, so if you’re in search of tranquility, head inland or head to Biarritz, which is actually far less congested!

Urrugne

Chateau d’Urtubie - A fortified castle built in 1341 (chateaudurtubie.fr) under orders from England’s King Edward III and enlarged in the 16th and 17th centuries, is located just south of Ciboure. The host, M. Laurent, is the direct descendant of the builder of the castle and opened it as a hotel in 1995. It also operates as a museum and can be visited via guided tour from 10:30 am -12:30, 2:00 - 6:30 pm. Somber, and historic monument-like, with period furnishings, but comfortable, offering nine rooms with blessed a/c and Internet access. Largest room is the “prestige” on 2nd floor. It’s just a 5-minute walk from the beach. Featured in Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay”. And it’s a member of Chateau & Hotels of France. The charming and unspoiled village of Urrugne, with its 17th century fortress type church and very pretty square, is a “must see” with a noted gastronomic restaurant on the square, the Auberge Chez Maité.

Flosean Baita - Is an elegant manor home outside the village of Urugne, sitting in the countryside with views of the ocean, providing just three chambres d'hotes, B&B,
accommodations. The “Venice” room with king bed faces the pool and offers TV, minibar, ADSL and WiFi Internet access. Rates include breakfast. Two-night minimum stay required.

**Lodging in Biarritz**

**Super Luxury**

**Hotel du Palais** - With 124 rooms, 30 suites, it is among the most exclusive palace-hotels in the world with one of the most aristocratic pedigrees, the Grande Dame of Belle Epoque Biarritz. Prime real estate indeed, it sits in its own park, directly facing the beach, offering incomparable views of the entire coast. In 1855 Napoleon built an extravagant palace for his bride-to-be Eugénie de Montijo of Spain, and called it the Villa Eugénie, where the couple spent 16 summers. It was gutted by fire in 1881, the site was sold in 1893, and in 1912, and an equally grandiose red and cream building was christened as the Hotel du Palais. It has attracted a steady stream of movie stars, royalty, heads of state, aristocrats. The Second Empire, gilt-and chandeliers-gastronomic Restaurant La Villa Eugénie has 1 Michelin star. It has a simply stunning pool area with private cabanas, plus a children's pool, also poolside dining at L’Hippocampe.

The Restaurant La Rotonde offers Sunday brunch, lunch and dinner with music. And they have just opened a Guerlain spa with indoor pool, Hamman, fitness room and lounge area. This is very dressy, very Old Europe. This is the hotel in Biarritz where you still may find ascot wearing, aristocratic gentlemen walking their poodles. Room 307 is a deluxe sea-view double with balcony that was featured in Conde Nast Traveler’s “Room with a View”. Room 132 has views of the lighthouse. Book a first or third floor room with balcony and fourteen-foot-high ceilings. Avoid the garden view rooms. Hotel will pick you up at the airport in a Bentley. The hotel now belongs to the city of Biarritz. It’s a member Leading Hotels of the World ([hotel-du-palais.com](http://hotel-du-palais.com)).

**Upper moderate**

**4-star Mercure Thalassa Regina et du Golf** - A Second Empire style, 73 room hotel ([accorhotels.com](http://accorhotels.com)) on the road towards the lighthouse, above the Hotel du Palais, with sweeping views of the ocean and a golf course behind. It's a very good bet for golfing families, as it offers a pool and children's club for the kids, moms can indulge in spa treatments at the Sofitel Thalassa spa down the road (the two hotels share facilities and are connected by minibus), and it has an on site restaurant (with children's menu) plus room service and plenty of parking. The rooms, although “chain-like” are very pleasant, prettily furnished, well kept and fairly large, decorated in Edwardian style with safes, WiFi access (fee), a/c, satellite TV, video games, radio and minibar. It’s a member of the Accor hotel group.
Moderate

**Hotel Edouard VII** - Is a small and very attractive, sparkling clean and new B&B in a pretty, white, 19th century mansion with 18 rooms ([hotel-edouarvii.com](http://hotel-edouarvii.com)) and is only a 5-minute walk to the beach and very near the covered market. This is a great location away from the fray. Homey, inexpensive, same rates all year, and unpretentious with a warm welcome, good English spoken and lots of info regarding the area. All the rooms are light and airy with immaculate baths, good a/c (a huge plus in hot July and August), cable TV, Internet access, safe and mini-bar. Room 114 has an ocean view. Garden view rooms for families have bunk beds and sunning/breakfast area. The king bedroom is huge. We stayed happily for four nights in July '04 (in the chambre 2 featured on web site) and have sent friends here. Yummy breakfast with superb croissants served on the terrace: 9.50€. Warning: street parking only.

**Hotel Clos Fontaine** - 7, Avenue Maréchal Joffre, in a quiet upscale residential location near the Parc Mazon, new as of July '04 ([hotelabiarritz.com](http://hotelabiarritz.com)). We inspected this charming, tiny place, a reconverted '30s mansion, and it’s also been well reviewed by the Biarritz tour company, Pays Basque Privilege, who use it for even their pickiest of clients. It has only seven rooms, doubles cost 115€ in high season, breakfast an additional 10€. Room #1 has tub with hand held shower, #2 has shower, #3 faces the back and has shower. All rooms have satellite TV, safe and phone. Laundry service is also available. A very good value for a city where accommodations are pricey, but no a/c.

**Hotel Villavauréal** - At 14, rue Vauréal, above the Clos Fontaine and Edouard VII, is a new maison d'hôtes ([villavaureal.com](http://villavaureal.com)) about 8 blocks from the market and a 10 min. walk to the Grande Plage, but only 50 meters from a beach. Featured in many travel/interior design magazines, including Côte Sud. Only five rooms named for fruits, two double rooms (moderate) and three suites (mod. exp.) with large living room, 4 poster canopy beds, hardwood floors and decorative fireplaces. All rooms have kitchenettes with microwave. There is a 2-night minimum. Weekly rentals are possible at a reduced rate. It offers high-speed Internet access. Parking is available for additional 5€ in July and August, or 3€ during rest of year. Breakfast, consisting of fruit, breads, cakes, croissants, homemade jams, freshly squeezed juice and coffee for an additional 8€ and can be taken in your room or in garden under the sycamore trees. Closed January. No a/c!

**Luxury villa rentals with pool**

- [justfrance.com/properties/satlcoast.html](http://justfrance.com/properties/satlcoast.html)
- [lamaisontamarin.com](http://lamaisontamarin.com)
- [alternative-aquitaine.com](http://alternative-aquitaine.com)
- [villa-coriolan.com/en/villa.htm](http://villa-coriolan.com/en/villa.htm) (luxurious annex fantastic for group of 8-10)
Dining in the St. Jean to Biarritz area-on the coast
Nota bene: Restaurants in this resort area have different closing times, according to season. High season is generally considered mid-July, August to mid September.

Special dishes of the Basque Country

• Garbure-a thick soup of cabbage, beans, potatoes, vegetables and sometimes duck or pork
• Salmis de palombe-wood pigeon roasted then simmered in a wine, shallot and onion sauce
• Jambon de Bayonne-the locally prepared ham
• Torro-a fish stew, which usually includes hake and monkfish, and well as tomatoes
• Gâteau basque-a layer cake filled with pastry cream or black cherry jam
• Axoa-a veal ragout with red Espelette pepper
• Poulet basquais-chicken cooked with tomatoes, onions, peppers and white wide
• Piperade-scrambled eggs with Bayonne ham, peppers, onions and tomatoes
• Merlu a la koskera-hake with a sauce of peas, potatoes and asparagus
• Tournon de Bayonne-marzipan sweets with pistachios
• Ardi gasna-wee’s milk cheese

In St. Jean de Luz

The oldest, most “atmospheric” restaurant is Kaiku, on Rue de la République, “restaurant row”, but...better still is the daily 3-course lunch menu for 26€ menu at La Taverne Basque (latavernebasque.fr), also on the Rue de la République, whose Chef Benoit Sarthou is making headlines. Tables are fully booked daily, even after the tourist season. It’s Basque with a creative flourish with such dishes as merlu (hake), pumpkin soup and grilled eggplant with Spanish ham. His signature dish is confit de tomate for dessert, said to be better than Alain Passard’s tomato dessert at the 3-Michelin stared Arpege in Paris. Offers a selection of excellent local wines. Like Kaiku, is has a fireplace and heavy ceiling beams. Avoid during the day in high season, as this street will be jammed, a mass sea of humanity. Better at night and more tranquil low season. Open Wed.-Sun. Closed January 15 - February 15. Tel: 05 59 260 126

Olatua - On Boulevard Thiers, 30, is my favorite, a discovery from the Pays Basque magazine, and one block down the avenue from the Grand Hotel at the end of the beach. It was a true haven removed from the summer tourist hordes that invade St. Jean, and it offers a good value lunch menu du jour for only 18€, or for 14€, your choice of a plat & dessert (delicious desserts) or an entrée & plat. I had quenelles de morue (cod) and filets de perche with tiny mussels, and we enjoyed a bottle of lrouleguy red for 24€. It has a chalkboard wine list, and a pot lyonnaise (carafe) costs very little. The Guide Hubert gastronomic guide praises its high quality-price ratio. Non-smoking section. Garden dining. Never closes. Tel: 05 59 510 522

Pil-Pil Enea - Our favorite little place for fish, which Pays Basque magazine says serves the best merlu (hake) around, is a little hole in the wall bistro, filled with pelota and bullfight memorabilia. You can find it between the train station and post office, near
the market below the girls’ school on Rue de Sallagoiti. Has a terrific 3 course lunch menu for only 24€ per person, lunch plats for 8,50€ and a 2-course lunch formule for 12€. Huge portions! If you’re not a fish lover, try the typical Basque veal stew, the Axoa. In season, closed Wednesday - out of season, closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

At the port in Socoa

Chez Pantxua - 37, rue de Commandant Pasicot, highly recommended by the Guide Hubert and the San Francisco Basque chef Gerald Hirigoyen, author of “The Basque Kitchen” and owner of Bocadillos and Pastis restaurants. It offers a 23€ menu. Closed Tuesday in high season, Monday night and Tuesday out of season. Tel: 05 59 471 373

Kaiatxu - “Little pier” in Basque, has a lovely Basque farmhouse décor with Basque linens and was recently featured in Pays Basque magazine. Specialties include grilled hake; squid filled with anchovies, shrimp, warm cod salad accompanied by aioli. Open for lunch and evenings meals from Wednesday to Sunday. You can plan on spending around 30€ for a 3-course meal.

In Ciboure, across the bridge from St.-Jean-de-Luz

Arrantzaleak - Is a classic sea shack, or “fish house” on Avenue Jean Poulon 18, highly recommended in all the French gourmet guides and in Patricia Well’s “Food Lover’s Guide to France”. Closed Monday/Tuesday evening out of season Tel: 05 59 471 075

Inland Bidart, Guethary-Arcanges-Ahetze (gourmet-exp.)

La Table des Frères Ibarboure - In a contemporary hacienda, three dining rooms, with adjacent luxury hotel has one Michelin star, 2-stars from Le Bottin Gourmand, 2-red couverts from Le Pudlo guide and a 16 in the Gault Millau (freresibarboure.com). It offers several gourmet menus at 35€ for lunch, and 44€, 65€, 95€ for dinner in an elegant setting with refined service. The two Ibarboure brothers are the chefs. A tray of delectables is served with coffee, so you need not order dessert. And it boasts an exceptional wine list. Restaurant closed Sunday nights and Monday at lunch, from July 2 - 31, but call ahead to check. It is located off the D335 from Guèthary towards Ahetze. (It’s adequately signed). Sheer perfection. Well worth the splurge! Tel: 05 59 548 164

Le Moulin d’Alotz - Housed in a Basque farmhouse dating from 1694 with garden, off the road from Arcanges to St. Pée, on chemin Atotz-Errota, also with one Michelin star and 14 from the Gault Millau. Recommended by San Francisco Basque chef Gerald Irigoyen. These are the same owners as the Tavern Basque in St.-Jean-de-Luz. Allow 60€ pp. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday for lunch, also June 22 - July 5, November 14 - 29, January 2 - 31 Tel: 05 59 430 454
Moderate

Ferme Ostalapia - also along the route to the village of Ahetze, chemin Ostalapia, 2 km on the D855 from the RN10. It's a delightful country farmhouse restaurant, informal and charming, with red and white checkered tablecloths and chalkboard menu (ostalapia.com). Rates a “heart” from the Champerard guide. “Convivialité et bonhomie”. Traditional Basque cuisine! It has an outdoor terrace for dining in summer al fresco, facing La Rhune Mountain. Closed on Wednesday and Thursday, except Thursday night in high season. Tel: 05 59 547 379

Informal beachside dining - at a “guinguette” in Bidart-Guetrary

Le Blue Cargo - Frequent by Parisian vacationers! It’s quite chic and preppy on the Plage d’Ilbarritz in Bidart. This is the most elegant of the beachside restaurants. Recommended by Petit Futé and the Guide Hubert. Open May - September until midnight, offering drinks and dancing. Tel: 05 59 235 487

La Plancha d’Ilbarritz – can also be found on the Plage d’Ilbarritz in Bidart. Recommended by the Petit Futé guide and the Guide Hubert. Go to La Plancha for food, Le Blue Cargo for drinks. Open all year. Tel: 05 59 23 44 95

La Tantina de la Playa - On the Plage du Centre in Bidart, open daily in season, and serving the usual grilled sardines, squid, anchovies, daurade, and salmon. Tel: 05 59 26 53 56

Les Alcyons - Follow the signs in Guéthary village past the train station, down to the “Plages” and the Jetée des Alcyons. It’s a narrow, curving, one land road, traffic regulated up and down by a light. A typical “beach shack” that serves great grilled sardines, anchovies, daurade, tuna grilled before your eyes. Main courses go for 15€, as well as most wines, but they offer good value lunch platter specials for 11,50€.

Etxe Terra - Next door to Les Alcyons, down the same road. Open May 1 - September 30. Offers a lunch platter for only 15€, but compare the menus and ambiance at both before taking a table. Tel: 05 59 5481 64

Biarritz

Gourmet dining

Sissinou - At 5, Avenue Maréchal Foch, may just be the most acclaimed restaurant in town right now. Very contemporary, chic decor! Chef Michel Cassou-Debat offers highly creative cuisine at a good value in the 33€ menu at midday and plats for 15€. The chef worked at Troigros and the Hotel du Crillon in Paris. Don’t miss! Closed Sunday and Monday. Tel: 5 59 225 150
Le Clos Basque - 12, Rue Louis Barthou, is a tiny family owned bistro in the historic center of Biarritz with a cozy dining room decorated with Spanish tiles and lovely, shaded outdoor patio. Chef-owner Beatrice Viateau prepares delicious, homey Basque cuisine and great pain perdu with Armagnac for dessert. This is one of the best values for fine dining in an expensive city. There is a fixed price luncheon menu for 24€, in the evening for 28€. Closed Sunday night except from 1 July to 31 August 31, Mondays and for 10 days in June. We could dine here every night. It's a terrific value. Warm welcome. A Michelin Bibi Gourmand selection! Also highly rated by Gault Millau, le Pudlo, Guide Hubert, and Petit Futé. Reservations required, as it is very, very popular. Tel: 05 59 242 496

Le Galion - the restaurant of the Hotel Windsor at 17, boulevard Général-de-Gaulle. An equally fine value for their unbeatable, gourmet, 3-course 28€ lunch with wine on the terrace under the shade of an umbrella with the Grand Plage at your feet! From Spain we’ve taken clients here for lunch to impress, and it always does. Closed Monday and Tuesday for lunch.

La Maison Blanche - 58, Avenue Edouard VII, is a fashionable (maisonblanchebiarritz.com) new venue in the heart of town, in Le Tonic Hotel, stylishly decorated in white and earth tones. 30ish year old chef, Thomas Ainciart trained with Arrambide at Les Pyrénées and at the Crillon in Paris. Offering creative cuisine such as risotto of eggplant, pousses d’épinards, etc. and has a daily market driven menu, served from noon to 5 p.m. for 22.50€ and a gourmand menu for 39€. Closed Sunday evening and Monday from November - March. Recently reviewed in Saveur. Tel: 05 59 245 858

Informal and fun

Café Cosi - 9, rue Larralde, is the chic address that attracts the Who’s Who of Biarritz, a contemporary bistro run by Laurence and Patrick Héau. Open daily, all year round from 9:00 am to 11:00 pm. You can stop in for breakfast, just a salade composée, a hot platter, a club sandwich, and an apéro at the bar or just a dessert. If you’re looking for a chic snack spot, this is the place. Far nicer than the overpriced, tourist filled “brasseries” with outdoor terraces facing the Place Clemenceau.

Bar Jean - Located directly across from the covered market at 5, rue des Halles, is a lively bar/restaurant serving great value dishes, with bullfighting memorabilia decked the walls and flamenco on the stereo. It has a tiny front terrace. Always packed. Easy on the wallet and lots of fun! Dig in to platters of paella, shrimp, and cod with chorizo, pork loin with Piquillo peppers or a seafood mixed grill. Where the locals hang out. From April – September, open 7 days a week for lunch and dinner.

Cidrerie Hernani - 27, Avenue Maréchal Joffre (cidreie-hernani.com), is a very informal, very typical Basque cider house of the type found on the Spanish side. Dining on long, unadorned, wooden communal tables of 6€ - 8€ on fare such as anchovies, red peppers, mussels, chorizo, Serrano ham, gambas a la plancha (shrimp), chipirons (squid), Axoa (veal stew), rice pudding, crème brûlée, tarte tatin. Help yourself to cider from
the huge vats adorning the walls, or have local or Spanish wines or sangría. Bullfight scenes decorate the large space. Low prices.

**La Tantina de Burgos** - Place Beaurivage, on the back, beachside road to St.-Jean-de-Luz. Keep a look out for this small restaurant when driving up from the south on the D911 coastal road, otherwise you’ll pass right by this square, on a roundabout. Not walk-able from the city center. It has a Spanish bodega look with a few outdoor tables. Spanish ingredients abound in the simple menu. Casual and inexpensive, but be there early because the kitchen closes before 2:00 pm. Recommended in le Pudlo guide.

**Alternative lodging on the Coast, St-Jean to Biarritz**

*Nota Bene: A car is absolutely essential!*

**Moderate**

**3-star Villa L’Arche** - Is an attractive house on the sea in Bidart ([villalarche.com](http://villalarche.com)) facing Les Embruns beach with 8 rooms, one suite, run B&B style, with simply stunning water views, right at the edge of the water, with white wooden chairs perched overlooking the ocean. There are eight large and elegant antique filled rooms with TV and mini-bar. Tubs have hand held showers. Rooms 4 and 5 have lovely sea views. Breakfast (additional charge) is served in the large and sunny dining area/lounge. Off the coastal road to Biarritz on a side street, Chemin Camboénéa, rather hard to find but it’s signed. No pool, **no a/c**. Featured in Hunter Rivage “Charming Inns of France”. Receives two red gables for charm in Michelin guide.

**La Maison Tamarin** - Lovely traditional Basque farmhouse with eight beautifully decorated rooms and pool, right outside of St.-Jean-de-Luz towards Biarritz in the Quarter Acotz on Chemin de la Ferme Kokotia, overlooking the Bay of La Fitenia, a five minute stroll from a great surfer’s beach. English spoken ([lamaisontamarin.com](http://lamaisontamarin.com)). The room at the top of the house has a private terrace. Rates include breakfast. The house has high-speed internet access, and each room has phone and sat. TV. Laundry and dinner services are available upon request. In July-Aug, it’s usually rented whole for the entire month. It’s also available as a whole house rental on weekends. Featured in Karen Brown’s “France, Charming Bed and Breakfasts” guide.

**Budget**

**Irigoian** - 17th century white Basque farmhouse ([irigoian.com](http://irigoian.com)), the oldest along the coast, with traditional blue wooden shutters, is located outside of Bidart on Avenue Biarritz. From the A63 you take exit Biarritz then the N10 for 2 Kms. to the roundabout, then a right towards Biarritz. The house is 600 meters on the left and 30 meters from the beach, virtually on golf course and near riding stable. Very minimalist, but with pretty décor and absolutely lovely paintings by Uria Monzon decorating the upstairs halls. It has a sitting room and library downstairs. Upstairs are five huge, uncluttered, but very attractive rooms, each with a different color scheme, and called “the blue room”, “pink room”, etc. The rooms have parquet floors, mini-bars, phone, TV and nice baths. Gourmet breakfasts are served at a communal table for 8€.
The owner, a Basque journalist, lives on the ground floor. He offers a guided tour of the Guggenheim in Bilbao via minibus on Thursdays and Saturdays. Every morning you’ll find the special events of the day written on a slate board in the breakfast area. The owner also offers his guests a little booklet of the best in dining, shopping, sightseeing in the area and organizes your week in the Basque Country for you. He’s fluent in French, Basque, Spanish and English and is truly warm and delightful. A special place for those on a budget who still want a high level of comfort and style and enjoy this type of atmosphere. Featured in Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay” and in Pays Basque magazine’s “31 Maison d’hôtes de Charm”.

**Le Mamelon Vert** - Located at 1, chemin de Laborde, on the outskirts of Bayonne, is an elegant B&B in a park with lovely pool and welcoming owners. It rents just two rooms with private baths- the “blue” and the “red”, perfect if you’re touring with another couple. The house also offers table d’hôte meals for 40€, including wine and coffee. [www.mamelonvert.com](http://www.mamelonvert.com)

### Alternate lodging *inland* from Biarritz

#### Car necessary!

### Super Luxury - Exclusive

**Hegia** - If only the most exclusive, most expensive, most talked about country lodging will do for you then this is your place in rural Hasparren. It is new, opened last year by the former Michelin star chef of Les Plantanes in Biarritz, Arnaud Daguin and his wife Veronique, in an 18th century typical Labourdian farmhouse ([he gia.com](http://he gia.com)), renovated in very minimalist, highly avant guard style. It has been featured in Travel & Leisure, Food & Wine and has been lauded by Condé Nast Traveler as one of the world’s most exciting new hotels. There are only 5 bedrooms. One takes meals here in communal style, with a market driven dinner menu that the chef changes daily. The whopping 600€ tariff includes your room, breakfast and dinner, while for 700€ you receive lodging, dinner, breakfast and a pintxos style lunch. A room alone with breakfast will cost you 480€, but what’s the point?

**Ostapé** - Along those same lines but with less chèr, is super starred Parisian chef Alain Ducasse’s new auberge ([ostape.com](http://ostape.com)) in some exquisite countryside, on a 45 hectare estate, looking over the village of Bidarry, a full hour from Biarritz in Basse Navarre. The chef here is Alain Soulac, and he offers a fixed price, 50€ daily changing menu of regional Basque dishes. The 22 very large bedrooms are divided among several farmhouses and are beautifully furnished with antiques, and each has a living room and either balcony or private terrace. All rooms have a/c, DVDs, CD players, mini bar, and Internet access. The main manor home houses the reception area, library and restaurant. There is an outdoor pool. Member of Chateau & Hotels of France, of which, Ducasse is the director, a JP Moser ([jpmoser.com](http://jpmoser.com)) selection and a Karen Brown favorite ([karenbrown.com](http://karenbrown.com)).
Expensive

L’Hostellerie des Frères Ibarboure - Bidart-Guéthary, is where you’ll find this stunning 8-room paradise, 2-story, hacienda style salmon building with red tiled roof, next door to the famed Michelin starred Tables des Frères Ibarboure (freresibarboure.com) run by the Ibarboure brothers. Follow the D355 to the right off the N10, between Guethary and Bidart, heading towards Ahetze to Chemin de Ttalienea. Reserve at least 8 months in advance for high season! Rooms are enormous and simply exquisite with highly polished wood floors, with huge, luxurious baths in gorgeous marble and Italian tile. Room No.4 is a twin, 20’ x 20’ with 18’ high ceiling, glass enclosed shower plus huge Jacuzzi tub, robes and slippers, wrap-around terrace facing the pool. Room No.3 is a large double with small terrace facing the pool. Lovely country setting is blissfully quiet and very private. Beautiful landscaped gardens. Has a/c. Plenty of parking. Elevator. Exceptional in every way! Member of the Relais du Silence group (silencehotel.com) and another Karen Brown favorite (karenbrown.com).

Upper moderate

3-star Villa Catarie - Is in the center of the charming red and white village of Guéthary across from the city hall and frontón. A member of Chateau Hotels of France, this charming 18th century Basque farmhouse (villa-catarie.com) has been converted into a stylish, small, 3-star hotel with 14 rooms, 2 suites and pool. There is an ample car park. Breakfast is taken in the garden for an additional 12€. The beautiful décor in soothing, soft pastels provides a lovely hideaway for 3 to 4 days to exploring the coast and inland. Rooms have sat. TV, mini bars. Internet access. Elevator. No a/c. Receives 2-red gables for charm in the Michelin guide and is a selection of innsoffrance.com. Very highly recommended.

Moderate

3-star Chateau du Clair de Lune - Is a romantic 1902 country villa with lovely views, in 8 hectares of park-like grounds (lawn needed a good watering last time we were by) and a shaded terrace for drinks. Once owned by an American heiress married to a Frenchman, it is only 15 minutes from Biarritz. The poet Alan Seegar convalesced here and wrote the poem, “I have a date with death”. He died a few months later on the WWI battlefront. Its 17 very large rooms (chateauduclairdelune.com) were given poetic names, basil, vanilla and thyme and are individually decorated with fine antiques, lush fabrics, original art, pine floors, TV and mini-bars, but baths retain their original floors and sinks. There is an elegant dining room and a grand salon with grand piano and fireplace. Staff speaks very good English. Extensive gardens, but with a reflecting pool only. Breakfast (an additional charge) is served communal style at the formal dining room table. The Chateau doesn’t have it’s own restaurant But right next door is Campagne et Gourmandise, a 1-star Michelin. Request a room in the chateau rather than the Pavilion, hunting lodge annex (though annex rooms have terraces). No a/c. Member of Chateaux & Hotels of France.
Receives 2-red gables for charm in the Michelin guide. Located on Avenue Alan Seeger, on the road to Arbonne, just a few kms from the Biarritz train station.

**Upper budget**

**3-star Hotel Laminak** - Located in Arbonne, this is a comfortable 18th century country cottage converted into a full service hotel ([hotel-laminak.com](http://hotel-laminak.com)) with twelve rooms but without a restaurant. It sits in a tranquil setting on a quiet road, Route de St. Pée, about 2 km. from the train station in Biarritz. The rooms are pleasant, some on the small side, individually decorated with floral patterns and stripes, antique pine furniture, carpeted floors, mini-bars, safes and TV. There’s a fireplace in the sitting room and very friendly desk staff who speak very good English. The superior rooms are No.7, 10, 11 & 12 in the annex with outdoor sitting area facing the garden and pool, with beautiful views of the countryside. The attractively decorated and cozy living room has fireplace and leather furniture and plenty of brochures with touring advice. There is also a terrace and winter garden where breakfast is served. Owners run the place with a quiet, warm efficiency.

It’s a member of Relais du Silence ([silencehotel.com](http://silencehotel.com)) and featured in Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay” ([sawday.co.uk](http://sawday.co.uk)) and also highly recommended by the Petit Futé guide. Easy parking. Best rooms” No.7, with a sitting area, pictured on web page; No.11 in the annex has a private terrace. No a/c. Enjoy a continental breakfast for 10€. Meals prepared upon request, but there is plenty of fine country dining within a 5 to 10 minute drive.

**La Ferme Ostalapia** - This 17th century farmhouse and country restaurant ([ostalapia.com](http://ostalapia.com)) in Ahetze has five huge rooms, all with the original beamed ceilings and pine wood floors. The rooms are named for different Basque villages, some have terraces facing south toward the Pyrenees facing La Rhune mountain. The building was originally a pilgrims’ inn before becoming a cider house, barn, and bakery. The “Arcangues” room has enormous terrace overlooking the valley. The “Azcain” room is an equally spacious Art Deco room with a smaller terrace. Rooms on 2nd floor don’t have terraces, but do have lovely views. Chef Christian Duplaissy, who has been featured in many gourmet magazines, offers a chalkboard menu. There are two seatings, one at 8:00 pm with the second at 10:30. No a/c, but a great value. All of the rooms have TV and nice private baths. Recently featured in Habitania magazine’s supplement, “Hotels with soul”.

**Inexpensive**

**Domaine de Bassilour** - A Napoleon III style mansion surrounded by a large garden near the Clair de Lune, but simpler in style, more B&B, chambres d’hôtes, in a park like setting and within walking distance of the delightful Moulin de Bassilour, a 17th century mill famed for its gâteau basque ([lafarmedebassilour.com](http://lafarmedebassilour.com)). Built in 1870 by a nouveau rich explorer recently returned from Mexico as a gift to his childhood sweetheart, it has baroque ceilings, white marble fireplaces and post impressionist
paintings in its five rooms. Rooms are furnished with family antiques; baths have claw foot tubs, some with showers. Ample gourmet breakfast served for an additional fee.

You can also stay in the 16th century Ferme, which is run as a 3-star hotel. It has eight rooms, one duplex and a suite. No a/c. Featured in the Alistair Sawday guide and a member of Chateaux & Hotels of France and Chateaux and Country.

- touradour.com/towns/bidart/domdebsassi/gb/domaine_de_bassilour.asp
- chateauxandcountry.com/chateaux/bassilour/index.html
- maisonsudouest.com/doc-loc/Basque/Basl/intbas1.html
- chateauxhotels.com/public/phps/fiche_hotel.php?id_hotel_chf=441

**Dining and Lodging in the País Basque heartland - Labourd to Basse-Navarre**

**St-Pée-sur-Nivelle (Labourd)**

Inexpensive

**Bidachuna** - Is a white 19th century country farmhouse with baby blue shutters, a beautifully manicured lawn sitting on 30 hectares of forested peace and quiet behind an electric gate. There are only three rooms (bidachuna.com), each with a separate entrance. The entire house is non-smoking. You can expect a large Basque breakfast consisting of breads, fruits, and cheeses served in sitting room or on the terrace. Pleasant and refined with beamed ceilings, fresh flowers, antiques and polished chestnut floors. The three bedrooms have private baths (but no showers), TVs, phones, separate entrance and gorgeous mountain views. Only 100€ for a double, including breakfast! Rated a 4-epis, the highest rating for chambre d’hotes, by Gites de France. English spoken. Serious cossetting by owner Isabel Ormazabel. Tel: 559 545 622 Fax: 559 473 100

From the A63 at Bayonne take D3 to Arcangues then on to St. Pée, and then follow D3 towards Ustariz/Arcangues. It’s 4 miles from the village and about a 15 min. drive from Biarritz. 15 min. to the Spanish border. Featured in Sawday’s “Special Places to Stay - French Bed & Breakfasts” specialplacestostay.co.uk, plus in “Chambres d’Hotes de Charme ’05”.

**Louhossoa (Labourd)**

Inexpensive-budget

**Domaine de Silencenia** - 6 km past Cambo-les-Bains, a 25-minute drive from the beaches of Biarritz, and 700 meters from village square of Louhossoa, is a 19th century mansion in a 3-hectare estate by a spring water lake, with five pretty, but small bedrooms with canopied four-poster beds and private baths. They offer a breakfast of fruit, eggs, crepes, and pastries, and convivial, family style dinners with wine for 25€ per person, upon request. Your hosts, Krystal and Phillipe are renowned for their table
d’hôtes dinners and impressive wine cellar. Perfect for those who speak French or Spanish. It’s very reasonable at 70€ for a double, one of the most economical places to stay in a rather expensive area. It boasts a beautiful pool with marvelous country views plus a billiard room. A 3-epis Gites de France chambre d’hôtes also featured in "Sawday’s Special Places to Stay - French Bed & Breakfasts".

**Sare (Labourd)**

**Moderate**

**Hotel Arraya** - This friendly and very pretty, 20-room family run 16th century inn ([arraya.com](http://arraya.com)) with quaintly decorated cozy rooms, has a hidden garden in the back. Dining on the terrace under the plane trees is a delight. The beautiful antique and flower filled parlor with beamed ceiling makes an immediate welcoming impression. We recently had a spectacular 18€ 3 course lunch here, one of the best of our trip through the Pays Basque countryside. Don’t miss their yummy gâteau basque, sold at a stand outside the hotel. They also have a nice gift shop next door for Basque lines, wines and gourmet items. It’s a Karen Brown favorite and member of Chateau Hotels of France. No pool, no a/c.


**Inexpensive**

**Maison Olhabidéa** - This equally lovely B&B belongs to the Fagoaga family, owners of the Arraya. It has just three lovingly decorated rooms ([olhabidea.com](http://olhabidea.com)), absolutely beautiful decor and marvelous views of the Pyrenees. It’s a 4-epis Gites de France. Guillaume Fagoaga has now opened a restaurant in the home and from Wed.-Sun. offers table d’hôtes “surprise” luncheon and evening meals for 35€ but for only 30 guests. Reservations are essential. Highly recommended by Pays Basque magazine and the Petit Futé guide, which claims it “a little paradise”.

**Aretxola** - Is a converted 19th century farmhouse ([aretxola.com](http://aretxola.com)) on the route to the caves, but with only two charmingly decorated rooms, for an equally reasonable price including breakfast. A 3-epis Gites de France Chambre d’Hôtes.

The two B&Bs above are featured in “130 Chambres d’hôtes en France” for under 35 € per person. They’ve also been included in Pays Basque magazine’s “31 Maison d’hôtes de Charm”.

**Ainhoa (Labourd)**

**Moderate to Expensive**

**Hotel Ithurria** - A 400-year-old coaching inn ([ithurria.com](http://ithurria.com)) on the route to Santiago de Compostela, in this 3-flower village, is a destination for gourmands. It boasts one Michelin star, and offers very refined service from white-jacketed waiters in a beautiful, antique-filled dining room with highly polished tile floors, wood
beamed ceiling, salmon colored walls and salmon, flowered drapes, a grandfather clock and antique hunting rifles over the fireplace. Fine salmon colored linens and Bauscher china grace the tables. The cassoulet basque aux haricots rouges is fantastic, as is the Coupe à Stéphane for dessert consisting of homemade ice cream, meringue, almonds and warm chocolate sauce. It also has 26 nice rooms, some with balconies, and rooms in the new wing have a/c. There is a large pool behind the high walls plus fitness room and sauna in the pool house and ample parking. Have a drink on the terrace or in the front garden. Owned and run by the caring Isabal family. Open from mid-April to November. Restaurant closes Wed./Thurs. lunch except from July 1-Sept. 15, high season with fixed price menus of 33€ and 49€. Highly recommended!

**Itxassou dining (Labourd)**

**Moderate**

**Le Fronton-Hotel Bonnet** - Is in the upper section of this pretty, black cherry town, right at the frontón, offers menus from 17€ (during the week) to 28€. Chef-owner is Jean-Paul Bonnet. Reserve for summer weekends. And make sure to ask for table on terrace, which has magnificent views of the countryside. The 2-star hotel has a garden and pool.  [hotelrestaurantfronton.com](http://hotelrestaurantfronton.com)

**Le Chene** - In the lower town (follow the “eglise” sign), next to the lovely church with exquisitely cared for, flower filled cemetery, offers delicious gastronomic menus from 16€ to 28€, and is run by Chef Genevieve Salaberry. Rustic. Overlooking the mountains. One can also stop in for a café or panaché, as we recently did, on the covered porch or in the shaded garden. You can’t beat the peaceful setting.

**Espelette dining (Labourd)**

**Moderate**

**Hotel Euskadi** - Is an extremely popular; value priced and very typically Basque hotel and restaurant, which everyone loves for its genuine Basque-ness. You can’t get better food than this! Chef André Darraidou offers the quintessential Basque country cuisine and has several different fixed price menu options (large portions) at 16€, 23€, 27€ and 31€. Everything about this inn is quintessentially Basque, down to the décor, linens and regional specialties like Piperade (scrambled eggs and peppers), atxoa (veal stew) and gabure (vegetable soup) plus the ubiquitous gâteau basque. Adorable. Oozes Basque-ness! Highly recommended! A Logis de France member.

**Budget lodging**

**Irazabala** - If you’re a B&B fan, the chambres d’hotes Irazabala can be found at the top of a hill, in the Quartier Laharketa, 1,5 km. from the village, offering a 360-degree view of the Pyrénées. There are only three beautifully decorated bedrooms with fine antique furniture. One has a 4-poster bed, the “Artzamendia”. The sumptuous
farmhouse breakfast is served on the terrace overlooking meadows with grazing Pottoka horses. Horseback rides are available nearby. Doubles go for Featured in “130 Chambres d’hôtes en France a partir de 35€”. Marikita Toffolo-Fagoaga is the owner. English, Spanish and German are spoken. Very low rates. A 3-epis Gites de France. The house has been featured in Pays Basque magazine’s “31 Maison d’hôtes de Charm”.

Urt (Labourd)

If you enjoy fabulous, unforgettable gourmet experiences, then head straight north towards Bayonne on the A 63/E 5, then west on the A64 to the exit for Urt, and make your way to the Auberge de la Galupe (lagalupe.com), a “galupe” is a riverboat, down past the town and right next to the river. It’s a charming, whitewashed inn with blood red shutters and two dining rooms (one reserved for non-smokers) with fireplace, elegantly set tables with Limoges china, gracious service and well known throughout France, a member of Relais & Chateaux, a Relais Gourmand. Chef is Stephane Rouville, who took over several years ago from Christian Parra, and he just regained the restaurant’s Michelin star and is working on his second. We had the well-priced simple three course “menu d’Aran” for 30€ (available only at lunch during the week), precisely because we wanted to try the chef’s renowned “boudin noir” and the line caught “merlu” (hake), and we remember this as one of our most memorable meals ever in the French Basque Country, every bit on the par with Le Cheval Blanc in Bayonne, Les Pyrénées in St.-Jean-Pied-du-Port and Ithurria in Ainhoa. Must reserve, by phone or on line. Check web for closing hours, which vary by season.

While you’re in town, be sure to visit the lovely 16th century church on the square in the village. Market day is Wednesday.

La Bastide Clairence (Labourd)

One of the prettiest Basque villages of all but further off the beaten path, so often missed by those touring on the Sare-Espelette-Ainhoa circuit. Off of the A64 you head east towards Pau to this 3-flower village with one of the most lovingly cared for cemeteries next to the church that I’ve ever seen. And beyond the church cemetery, you’ll find another, ancient, gated cemetery, the “cimetiere juif”, and the Jewish cemetery dating back to the 1600s with a few unmarked tombstones barely visible. The Jewish settlement in La Bastide Clairence was an adjunct to the Jewish colony that settled in the St. Esprit quarter of Bayonne, fleeing from Portugal. The first Jewish families buried here were “marranos”, those who officially converted to Catholicism but in secret continued to observe their Jewish faith. During the 1700s practicing Jews could be buried here due to the protection of the Dukes of Gramont. In 1941 the Nazis destroyed most of the cemetery.

There is a helpful tourist office behind which was a gallery where we bought some nice watercolors of local artists. The monks of the Belloc Abbaye, just north of town, sell their delicious cheeses, plus choral CDs, tapestries and religious writings in a small store at the Abbaye open Tuesday – Saturday, 10:00 - 11:45 am and 2:30 – 6:00 pm. On
Sundays they open from 2:30 – 6:00 pm. Look for the sign to “Le magasin” and ring the doorbell. Pictures: [http://pro.wanadoo.fr/atelier.titanne/galerie.htm](http://pro.wanadoo.fr/atelier.titanne/galerie.htm)

**Bidarray (Labourd)**

The Parisian multiple Michelin starred chef Alain Ducasse reopened the Auberge de Iparla here at the top of the village in ‘03 along with partner Christian Parra (formerly of the Auberge de la Galupe above). It has an elegant Basque farmhouse décor, filled with cooper pots and pans, flowers, and serves hearty Basque country cuisine, and its boudin noir (black pudding) is legendary. We dined here recently and loved both the cuisine and the great value. The hill top village has truly breathtaking views. Chef is Alain Soulia. There are 80 different wines to choose from, including Irouléguy and Txakolí. Fixed price menu for 21€. Tel: 5 59 377 721. Member of Chateaux & Hotels de France. Email: iparla2@wanadoo.fr.

**St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port (Basse-Navarre)**

The 3 Michelin starred Les Pyrénées is for throw-caution-to-the-winds haute cuisine dining, but I would not spend the night this forever bustling town. For lodging with charm in a tranquil, stunning setting, move on just 11 kms west to St. Etienne.

**St. Etienne de Baïgorry (Basse-Navarre)**

Hotel Arcé is a lovely, incredibly restful inn, which I highly recommend. It’s less well known than Hotel-Restaurant Les Pyrénées, but delightfully Basque. St.-Jean-Pied de Port is a very, very busy, heavily visited place since it is a major staging area for the pilgrimage to Santiago, end of the road for the tourist train from Bayonne and the “gateway” into Spain, and on the truck route. St. Etienne is much quieter, less overrun during the season. This red and white hotel has been run by the same family for 5 generations, has a comfy, welcoming and prettily decorated flower-filled parlor with fireplace, antique-filled nooks, simple, but pleasant rooms, a tennis court and pool that you reach by crossing a private bridge over the river Nive. There are three rooms below the terrace restaurant housed in an annex “villa”, one that is a 2-bedroom suite with sitting room. It’s set in the Aldudes valley surrounded by spectacular mountain scenery.

The cuisine is quite nice (brought to you by chef owner, Pascual Arce), and evening lantern lit dining on their pretty outdoor terrace shaded by plane trees is a special, peaceful, romantic treat. This is a real find! If you don’t stay, please go for a meal, or just to see this charming, lovingly run place. It's a Karen Brown favorite and receives two red gables for charm in the red Michelin and is featured in "Europe's Wonderful Little Hotels and Inns". Well priced.

Also, just above the village in a large park, there’s the Chateau d’Etxauz, which dates from the 11th to 16th centuries, and is a historical monument open to tourists. It offers six rather expensive rooms; each named and decorated for an historical character and period, luxuriously appointed but strictly in period style. Don’t choose the Bertrand d’Etchauz room with its small 500 yr. old 4-poster bed if you’re tall. The King
of Navarre suite has a standard size bedroom with enormous living room where the
king held court. A must for history buffs, if not to stay, at least to visit. Charlie Chaplin
was a guest here. A member of Chateau & Hotels of France. chateauinfrance.net/

A recap of village farmers’ market days
Hrs. 7:00 am -1:00 pm
• Bayonne – Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday
• Biarritz - covered market open daily
• St.-Jean-de-Luz – Tuesday, Friday and Saturday in July and August
• Ciboure - Sunday
• Urrugne - Thursday
• Ascan - Saturday
• Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle - Saturday
• Espelette - Wednesday and Saturday only in July and August
• Cambo-les-Bains - Friday
• St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port - Monday

Local golf courses open for fee to non-members
Must reserve at least 24 hrs in advance.
• Golf de Chantaco, St.-Jean-de-Luz 18 holes for 68€
• Golf du Phare, Biarritz 18 holes, 70€. The second oldest course in France opened in 1888.
• Golf d'Ilbarritz, Bidart 9 holes, 35€
• Golf de Chiberta, Anglet 18 holes, 72€ (reserve 48 hrs. in advance)
• Golf d'Arcangues, Arcangues 18 holes, 60€
• Golf de la Nivelle, Ciboure 18 holes, 60€

Thalassotherapy (spa) treatments
Thalassa Miramar in the Sofitel Miramar hotel, Biarritz sofitel.com
Atlanthial in the Atlanthial Hotel in Anglet atlanthal.com

Useful links for planning your Pays Basque vacation
• biarritz.fr
• bayonne-tourisme.com
• saint-jean-de-luz.com
• guetary-france.com
• urrugne.com
• touradour.com
• pyreneesatlantique.com (French only)
• tourisme64.com (French/Spanish only)
Guide Books

- Cadogan’s Southwest France, Gascony & the Pyrenees
- Lonely Planet’s Southwest France
- Hachette Vacances Southwest France
- Petit Futé Pays Basque (in French)