



Basque Country, Navarra & La Rioja

The jade green hills and drizzle-filled grey skies of this northeast pocket of Spain are quite a contrast to the flamenco- and castanet-filled clichés of the south. The Basques, the people who inhabit this corner, also consider themselves different. They claim to be the oldest Europeans, speaking the original European language and living in this mountainous fold on the borders of France and Spain since the days of prehistory. Whether or not this is actually the case remains unproven, but what is beyond doubt is that they live in a land of exceptional beauty and diversity. There are mountains watched over by almost-forgotten gods; cultured museums and art galleries; the finest surf breaks in Europe; street parties a million people strong; and the best food in Spain (some say in Europe). But despite all of these attractions, it's probably the people who'll leave the deepest impressions: kind, flamboyant and welcoming, the Basques are nothing if not proud. There is no denying that they are right when they say they are a special people in a special land.

Leave the rugged and wild north behind and feel the temperature rise as you hit the open, classically Spanish plains south of Pamplona. Here you enter the world of Navarra and La Rioja. It's a region awash with glorious wine, linked by geography to the more temperate north, yet persuasively Mediterranean in its sunburst colours; its dreamy landscape of vineyards, grassy hills and bone-white limestone escarpments; its medieval monasteries and enticing wine towns.

Wherever you choose to go in this remarkable region, one thing is assured: the experience will not be easily forgotten.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Play on a perfect beach, gorge on fabulous *pintxos* (Basque tapas), dance all night and wish you could stay forever in stylish **San Sebastián** (p484)
- Wish that you too could paint like a genius in the galleries of **Bilbao** (opposite)
- Get barrelled at **Mundaka** (p482) and recreate the Guggenheim in sand-castle form on a beautiful Basque **beach** (p483)
- Learn the secrets of a good drop in the museums and vineyards of **La Rioja** (p511)
- Roll back the years in the medieval fortress towns of **Olite** (p509) and **Ujué** (p509)
- Climb mist-shrouded slopes haunted by witches and vultures in the Navarran **Pyrenees** (p505)
- Pretend you're Hemingway during Pamplona's week of **Sanfermines** (p502) debauchery



■ AREA: 22,670 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH
28°C, LOW 12°C

■ POP: 3.04 MILLION

BASQUE COUNTRY

No matter where you've just come from, be it the hot, southern plains of Spain or gentle and pristine France, the Basque Country is different. Known to Basques as Euskadi or Euskal Herria (the 'land of Basque Speakers'), and called El País Vasco in Spanish, this is where mountain peaks reach for the skies and sublime rocky coves are battered by mighty Atlantic swells. It's a place that demands exploration beyond the delightful and cosmopolitan main cities of Bilbao, Vitoria and San Sebastián. You travel through the Basque Country always curious, and always rewarded.

History

No one quite knows where the Basque people came from (they have no migration myth in their oral history), but their presence here is believed to predate even the earliest known migrations. The Romans left the hilly Basque Country more or less to itself, but the expansionist Castilian crown gained sovereignty over Basque territories during the Middle Ages (1000–1450), although with considerable difficulty; Navarra constituted a separate kingdom until 1512. Even when they came within the Castilian orbit, Navarra and the three Basque provinces (Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya and Álava) extracted broad autonomy arrangements, known as the *fueros* (the ancient laws of the Basques).

After the Second Carlist War in 1876 all provinces except Navarra were stripped of their coveted *fueros*, thereby fuelling nascent Basque nationalism. Yet, although the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV; Basque Nationalist Party) was established in 1894, support was never uniform, as all Basque provinces included a considerable Castilian contingent.

When the Republican government in Madrid proposed the possibility of home rule (self-government) to the Basques in 1936, both Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya took up the offer. When the Spanish Civil War erupted, conservative rural Navarra and Álava supported Franco, while Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa sided with the Republicans, a decision they paid a high price for in the four decades that followed.

It was during the Franco days that Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA; Basque Homeland and

Freedom) was first born. It was originally set up to fight against the Franco regime, which suppressed the Basques through the banning of the language and almost all forms of Basque culture. After the overthrow of the dictator, ETA called for nothing less than total independence and continued its bloody fight against the Spanish government. A fight that, according to estimates by the Spanish government, has left some 800 people dead.

Today, despite several false ceasefires by ETA the violence continues – though there is almost no chance of a foreign visitor being caught up in it.

BILBAO

pop 354,200

Bilbao (Basque: Bilbo) had a tough upbringing. Growing up in an environment of heavy industry and industrial wastelands, it was abused for years by those in power and had to work hard to get anywhere. But, like the kid from the estates who made it big, Bilbao's graft paid off when a few wise investments left it with a shimmering titanium fish called the Museo Guggenheim and a horde of arty groupies around the world.

The Botxo (Hole), as it's fondly known to its inhabitants, has now matured into its role of major European art centre. However, in doing so, it hasn't gone all toffee-nosed and forgotten its past: at heart it remains a hard-working and, physically, rather ugly town, but it's one that has real character. And it's this down-to-earth soul, rather than its plethora of art galleries, that is the real attraction of the vital, exciting and cultured city of Bilbao.

History

Bilbao was granted the title of *villa* (a city-state) in 1300, and medieval *bilbainos* went about their business in the bustle of Las Siete Calles, the original seven streets of the old town, and down on the wharves. The conquest of the Americas stimulated trade, and Basque fishers, merchants and settlers soon built strong links to such cities as Boston. By the late 19th century the smokestacks of steelworks, shipbuilding yards and chemical plants dominated the area's skyline.

From the Carlist Wars through to the Spanish Civil War, Bilbao was always considered the greatest prize in the north, largely for its industrial value. Franco took