

Being Basque



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/krodeghier@daillyherald.com

Steel sculptures by Eduardo Chillida stand on the grounds of his museum outside San Sebastian, above. The promenade in San Sebastian passes the beaches and City Hall, originally built as a casino, below.

On the cover: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao

Modern art and ancient traditions come together in northern Spain

BY KATHY RODEGHIER

Daily Herald Travel Editor
Krodeghier@daillyherald.com

Heads turn when passing the sleek, silver curves of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. An audible gasp can be heard in its atrium as arriving visitors crane their necks to gaze up on the play of light on glass, metal and stone.

The art museum, housed in a building that is a work of art itself, has become a symbol for Bilbao and, in some respects, for modern Spain. It seems ironic that it and other examples of cutting-edge art and architecture should be found among one of the oldest civilizations in Europe.

The people of the Basque Country, which covers three provinces of northern Spain plus a small area of southwest France, may stem from Europe's aborigines. Their blood group differs from other Europeans and an abundance of prehistoric remains, tombs and cave drawings leaves no doubt that

early man lived on this soil, which remained free of glaciers during Europe's ice age.

But just where the Basques came from, no one knows. One popular theory says they lived here before the Celts arrived some 3,500 years ago. Wave after wave of invaders — Roman, Visigoth and Moor — might have driven them into the nearby mountains of the Pyrenees, from which they emerged when the coast was clear.

What is known is the Basque language, Euskara, is the oldest living language in Europe and unrelated to any spoken today. Banned following the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s (the Basques were on the losing side), it was spoken in secret by some Basque families, especially in rural areas. Basque native David Elexgaray remembers visiting his aunt and uncle as a child. They hid books of Basque art and language in their home and would discreetly allow him a look as a reward for being a good boy.

After Spain's Basque region was granted limited autonomy in 1979, Euskara was recognized as the region's official language,

along with Spanish, and taught in schools. Today, Basque children can speak it, as can their grandparents, but many of their parents' generation lost the language.

Seeds of discontent

Oppression of the Basques by Spanish dictator Francisco Franco spawned the Basque separatist movement, which seeks independence from Spain. The most radical among them form the terrorist group ETA, or Euskadi ta Askatasuna. Though it has been responsible for more than 800 deaths since the 1960s, the Basques insist visitors to their homeland have nothing to fear.

"They don't go for tourists at all. Tourists are respected," says Esther Vazquez Arribas, who lives in the Basque resort town of San Sebastian. The U.S. State Department backs her statement and has no travel alerts or warnings for the region (however, tourists were threatened in 2001 prior to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.).

The ETA targets political enemies, says



An island sits at the entrance to the bay of San Sebastian, serving as a natural breakwater.

Arribas, and when they organize a demonstration they publicize it in advance. Those who support them show up; those who don't — and tourists — stay away.

"There are a lot of people who want independence, maybe 60 percent," guesses Arribas, but the movement now is not for a complete break from Spain, but for self-determination, which has been opposed by the central government. It's no coincidence that Spain was one of the few European countries not to support Kosovo's declaration of independence earlier this year.

Traditions survive

Just as the Basques of old maintained their traditions against invaders, Basques today proudly hold on to the culture that sets them apart from the rest of the Europe. This culture, and the modern art blossoming in the region, draws visitors to Spain's Basque Country.

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Basque Country of Spain

GO: If you are interested in cultural traditions; if you enjoy modern art and good food

NO: If you are looking for a warm winter destination

If you go



Getting there: Iberia Airlines flies nonstop between O'Hare and Madrid. You can board a connecting flight to Bilbao or take the train to Bilbao and San Sebastian (<http://horarios.renfe.es/hir/ingles.html>).

When to go: The northern coast of Spain has a maritime climate that is humid along the coast with rain more frequent in summer and fall. Average temperature is 68 in summer, 45 in winter. July and August are the most crowded times of the year in San Sebastian.

Where to stay:

Sheraton Bilbao, Bilbao, (800) 325-3535, www.sheraton.com/bilbao
Silken Amara Plaza, San Sebastian, (011) (34-943) 46 46 00, www.amaraplaza.com
Maria Cristina, San Sebastian, (800) 937-8461, www.westin.com/mariacristina

Where to eat:

San Sebastian's three-star restaurants are Akelarre, P. Padre Orkolaga, 56, (011) (34-943) 31 12 09, www.akelarre.net; Arzak, Alto de Miracruz, 21, (011) (34-943) 28 55 93, www.arzak.es; and Martin Berasategui, Loidi kalea, 4, (011) (34-943) 36 64 71, www.martinberasategui.com. Dozens of places serve pintxos, but one that stands out is Bar Bergara, General Artetxe, 8 20002, San Sebastian, www.pinchosbergara.com.

In Bilbao, recommended restaurants include Guria, Gran Via, 66, (011) (34-944) 415 780, www.restauranteguria.com, and Getaria, Colon de Larreategui, 12, (011) (34-944) 232 527, www.guetaria.com.

— Kathy Rodeghier

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Pintxos are placed on the counter of a bar in Bilbao, left. In the old quarter, some older men still wear the Basque beret, above.

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Tourist Office of Spain, 845 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611, (312) 642-1992, www.spain.info; www.basquecountrytourism.net

Basque:

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Basque poets who improvise verse, known as bertso-laris, still perform here, as do folkloric dancers and musicians. Some older men still wear the traditional Basque beret. Sports are big in Basque Country, where the locals are said to bet on anything that moves. Traditional rural sports contests, such as stone lifting and tug of war, continue, while almost every Basque town has a fronton (court) where pelota (similar to jai alai) is played.

And then there is the food. Basque cuisine ranks among the best in Europe, with an emphasis on local fish and seafood. San Sebastian alone boasts three Michelin three-star restaurants, the most per square mile on the planet.

About 150 gastronomic societies, many dating back to the 1800s, meet in San Sebastian, mostly in the old quarter. Traditionally men-only clubs, members gather to prepare meals and enjoy camaraderie while they dine. Only recently have a few of these male havens allowed women into the kitchen.

But you don't need to be a member, or have a three-star budget, to walk into a bar and buy a few pintxos. In the rest of Spain, appetizers such as these are known as tapas, but Basque Country bars serve pintxos (PEEN-chos), miniature dishes that can be consumed in two bites while standing up.

Locals gather in bars between 1:30 and 3 in the afternoon, then again from 8 to 9:30 p.m. before going home to dinner. They spend only a few minutes at each establishment, elbowing their way to platters of pintxos placed on the counter. They pay for what they consume and move on to next bar.

This bar-hopping began in the 1950s among men meeting in midday after work for a beer or glass of wine. "It was a way to drink and not get drunk," says Arribas. The custom became more popular in the 1970s among both men and women, locals and visitors.

The first pintxos might have been just an olive and an anchovy on a toothpick (pintxo means pierced), but have evolved into a sophisticated form of miniature cuisine. Each bar has a specialty and competitions between them are fierce. At San Sebastian's



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Bar Bergara in San Sebastian has won prizes for its pintxos, above. Bars around Bilbao's Plaza Nueva are popular spots for socializing over drinks and pintxos.

Bar Bergara, a frequent winner, a pintxo might be puff pastry stuffed with shrimp and mushrooms. Others might be made from squid and caramelized onion or monkfish with creamed leeks.

In Bilbao, pintxos and bar-hopping is especially popular in the Casa Viejo, the Old Town, which dates back to a walled city from the 1300s. While this long history of the Basque Country's largest city is treasured, Bilbao's modern section stole the limelight after the Guggenheim Museum opened in 1997.

Art sparks rebirth

The Guggenheim, designed by celebrity architect Frank Gehry, drew 1.5 million visitors in its first year. A decade later, it still receives 1 million annually, double what it anticipated, and has set off revitalization in Bilbao. The gleaming structure rose from what had been a gritty industrial site and abandoned shipyards and it drew so much attention that other notable architects submitted designs for city projects.

This so-called "Bilbao Effect" gave birth to a glass footbridge by Santiago Calatrava, who also designed the city's new airport. A sleek subway system became a work of art when Norman Foster designed its dramatic horn-shaped street entrances. Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta's Sheraton Bilbao Hotel stuns viewers with a gaping atrium, Mexican onyx lighting and daring colors: pumpkin, garnet, purple and pink. The wave of innovation also swept over shopping malls, performing arts centers, conference halls and entertainment complexes.

"Culture usually costs money, but in this case it's the

other way around," says Elexgaray, who works in Bilbao. Pollution has eased and transportation improved. "Bilbao now is a much cleaner, more efficient city."

With virtually no right angles, the Guggenheim is more sculpture than building, curving along on the banks of the Nervion River and under a bridge that's the main artery into the city. Its 33,000 pieces of titanium, treated with acid to dull the finish, are complemented by limestone blocks and 2,500 pieces of glass. Five gas "fountains" periodically burst into flame along the riverfront as dry ice shoots from the building, bringing together three forces of nature: air, water and fire.

Inside, 11,000 square feet of exhibit space wrap around a central atrium. Most of the exhibits change every three or four months and feature late 20th-century work by internationally known artists as well as lesser-known Spanish and Basque artists. Among the few permanent exhibits are Richard Serra's "Snake" and "The Matter of Time" comprised of huge pieces of bent steel that visitors walk in, through and around.

An exhibit intended to stand only for the museum's opening remains by popular demand. Jeff Koon's playful "Puppy" sculpture of a giant terrier sits near the street-side entrance. The topiary on steel substructure is covered with flowers that change with the season.

The Guggenheim makes such a bold statement that you might believe it overshadows Bilbao's other great museum, but it has not. The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, founded in 1908, has a collection second only to the Prado in Madrid, but was little known until the Guggenheim brought the art



world to Bilbao. The two museums now complement each other, with the Fine Arts Museum offering 7,000 artworks from the 12th century to the present day.

In San Sebastian, the art world focuses its attention on the works of native son Eduardo Chillida. Modern sculptures made of steel, granite, iron or alabaster are displayed in his museum, Chillida-Leku, a short distance from town. Forty of the biggest pieces stand in a grassy field, inviting visitors to walk around and through them. Smaller works can be seen in a 400-year-old Basque farmhouse on the property.

Royal resort

Another Chillida work rises from the rocky coast of the Atlantic. "Wind Comb" consists of three iron "arms" reaching out to the crashing waves. It sits on the far west end of San Sebastian where four beaches beckon visitors. The most popular, La Concha, takes its name from its almost perfect seashell shape.

San Sebastian's status as a popular beach resort can be attributed to Spanish royalty. In the 1800s, Queen Isabella II arrived on doctor's orders to seek relief from a skin ailment in the waters of the Bay of Biscay. The royal family made San Sebastian its summer residence and the aristocracy fol-

lowed. In the early 1900s Queen Maria Cristina installed the court in Miramar Palace, and San Sebastian entered its belle epoque. Europe's elite flocked to its beaches, casino, luxury hotels and restaurants, making it the Monte Carlo of Spain.

Today the royal family is gone, the palace gardens open to strollers, but San Sebastian remains a popular resort with more of a family feel than the French Riviera. Old women walk arm in arm along the beachfront promenade with its intricate wrought-iron railing. Couples push baby strollers as bicyclists and roller-skaters weave around the foot traffic. From June to September, boats ferry passengers to Santa Clara Island, which resembles a turtle basking in the sun at the entrance to the bay.

The best view of San Sebastian is just a funicular ride up Mount Igeldo where an amusement park offers a roller coaster and pony rides for kids. From here the panorama of beaches, bays and mountains unfolds as it has since the days of ancient Basques. It's easy to imagine them here, ever on the lookout for invaders and ready to fiercely defend their way of life.

• Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the Tourist Office of Spain.