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Basking in the Basque Country



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One of the great benefits of *educational travel* is the impact another culture can have on you. It's practically a given that you will learn critically important life lessons that influence you throughout the rest of your days.

This is my story of how a foreign culture taught me the value of *tradition* and how that lesson influences me still today.

Two months prior to the summer of 2012 I was informed that my internship in Asia fell through. For my bachelor degree in Ethnomusicology I was required to do my internship in a foreign country and I had two months to find an internship. Panicked, I accepted the first offer that came my way: the Basque Country (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_Country_%28autonomous_community%29) in Northern Spain. I didn't have a clue who the Basques were, but I was desperate for an internship, so I accepted.

I was then sent to a small town outside London where I met my "team."

There, we trained and studied together for our assignment: to lead a song writing workshop for a local Church.

In England, my team began to study Basque music (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_music) and history to better understand who we were interacting with. But there was nothing that could prepare us enough for the trip ahead of us. After two weeks in England we set off for the Basque Country.

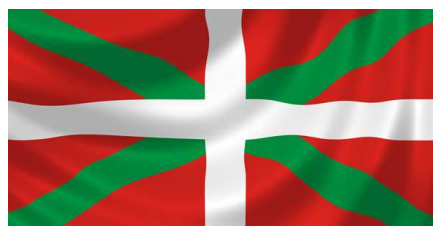


Right off the plane, I was shocked at how beautiful and green the mountains were, to which the only equal in beauty was the culture.

Being an American, I recognize how little it sometimes seems we have, by comparison to some cultures, when it comes to "Tradition." Up to that point, I thought of that as something of little consequence, but - big picture - the Basque people (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_people) introduced me to the great cultural and personal value that lives in Tradition.

It's life lessons like these that get straight to the heart of the value of educational travel.

The Basque are possibly the oldest society in Europe. So old, in fact, that their language is in its own category, unrelated to Latin/Romance or Germanic languages. This makes their history hard to trace and their origins somewhat of a mystery. It seems as though they may have just appeared from nowhere.



Basque Country is divided by the borders of Spain and France. This location has had its toll on the number of Basque (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_language) speakers – although recent efforts have brought the language back into more common use. The Basque people, along with their language, have had a rough history, but their culture and language have endured.

For the first week of our adventures we spent our time traveling through the area and learning about different aspects of the culture.



My group took Basque dance (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_dance) lessons from a local teacher.

I was honored to talk with her over a cup of coffee about the Basque people and their traditions. She told me, "One of the biggest reasons I love to dance these dances is because I know that my family for generations upon generations have danced this same dance the way I am dancing it today." I was dazzled by her enthusiasm for something so traditional.

In the Basque country, people hold on to everything that came from their ancestors. They feel their departed grandparents remain part of their lives as long as they keep their traditions alive: the dancing, the food, and the music!

Yes, it was all very European, but everything also had an intentional Basque twist to it that made things more challenging to learn for foreigners.

I dare not go into detail about how incredible the food was, because it makes me bitter that I might not ever taste it again. However, one of the most fascinating aspects about the arts in the Basque Country stems from their apple wine or cider, called sagardo (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagardotegi>).

The Basque people love their arts, and the connection between apple wine and their music is fascinating. The process that the apples go through to become wine is the father of a treasured instrument called the txalaparta (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Txalaparta>) (chah-lah-par-ta).



When making cider, the apples go through a process of being smashed through pieces of lumber by large mallet-like hammers. The planks of wood, they noticed, could be used to call people together to inform the village that the wine was ready! The Basque began to play these planks as a rhythmic instrument and in time actually tuned them to set notes.

The txalaparta is typically played with two or more people that interlock very complex rhythms. I was able to work with a txalaparta teacher in the area who was one of our group's leaders. He was a very passionate man who loved all things Basque (especially noted in his cooking!). He helped teach many people how to play the txalaparta, and I was lucky enough to be his student for a couple of weeks.

Basque music, though still European, contrasts to most other European-influenced music by the integration of complex rhythms that do not stick to a steady tempo.

Joxan ("ho-SHAHN"), my txalaparta teacher, told me you need to 'feel the music' - which is what all music students are told, everywhere. However, I realized that when I approached playing Basque music in the same way that I "felt" and played music in my undergraduate program back home, it sounded lifeless to them.

Most of our music is played in structures that can be built or under stood in 2s, 3s, and 4s. Basque music, on the other hand, is often counted in more awkward beats: 5, 7, or groupings of other rhythms that make the music sound unbalanced to most westerners.

The txalaparta is an instrument of team work and community, where more than one person is always playing and it functions to gather people together. It was exciting to learn about this instrument and see how it functions in their society.



I returned to America from my educational travel adventure with a renewed sense of tradition.

I envy those who have aspects of their culture wrapped in the ages of generations. I now see value in doing the old-fashioned thing. Not because

it is the most efficient, rather because the weight of history rides on the traditions that approach has crafted. I can take part in something larger than myself when I hold on to things that are a part of tradition.

The Basque culture is beautiful. I am happy that it has survived so long and that I had the opportunity to meet those wonderful people. Because of them and what they taught me, I will always take with me the value of tradition.

- ***What international traditions have influenced your life? Tell us in the comments section below.***

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