

Glory in the Basque

A mysterious cultural island where peppers and pelota rule, the French Basque Country has a personality all its own. Amy Egan celebrates a land like no other.

In a valley flanked by emerald hills, a stream of figures in crimson and gold robes and elaborate hats spills from a stone church. Organ music drifts with the parade as it weaves through the graveyard and disappears into the village beyond. The tableau appears timeless, as though it could have been unfolding centuries ago, but every detail ties the scene firmly to the present-day Basque Country, from the conversations in French and staccato Basque to the crosses marking each grave and the red and white village façades. Even the distinctive shaggy sheep grazing the hilltops are found only in this tiny region on France's south-west border with Spain. But what really confirms we're in the French Basque Country are the pennants carried by the congregation. Each bears the emblem of one of the region's specialties: Espelette peppers, Irouléguay wine, sausages, snails and, importantly, the cherries of Itxassou.

We have arrived by chance at the festival of the Confrérie de la Cerise d'Itxassou, the Brotherhood of Cherries of Itxassou, a joyful gathering at the town's 17th-century L'église Saint Fructueux. The existence of a cherry brotherhood says a lot about the culture and character of this border community, about its fierce reverence for tradition. Almost

every crisp white façade here and elsewhere in the region is clad with timber beams painted in the Basque colours of red or green; every village is built around a pelota court where the Basque national game is played with fervour. And every road has signs for farms selling Bayonne ham, pigeon, Ossau-Iraty cheese or cherry jam, all farmed and prepared according to centuries-old customs.

The Basque Country typically brings to mind the Spanish city of San Sebastián or Bilbao's landmark Guggenheim, while southern France conjures images of Provence. Yet here in the verdant hinterland, the French Basque Country belongs to both these places, but remains a world unto itself. About 300,000 of the Greater Basque region's residents live in France; they're less militantly separatist than the Spanish Basques, who suffered under Franco's rule. Administratively we're in France, yet many residents feel at least as Basque as they do French.

The Basque Country is a difficult concept to define: a land occupied by people who share the Basque language, history and culture but live in different countries and otherwise speak their national languages. Mark Kurlansky opens his fascinating 1991 book *The Basque History of the World* with the words of Basque scholar William Lewy d'Abartiague: "The Basques are one of the unique people-islands to be found on the face of the earth," he wrote in 1896, "completely different in every sense from the peoples around them, and their language, surrounded by Aryan languages, forms an island somehow comparable to those peaks which still surface above the water in a flood zone."

As mysterious as the language is the origin of the culture. Kurlansky surveys a raft of theories and concludes "the Basques like the idea, which most evidence supports, that they are the original Europeans, predating all others".

Even more remarkable in Kurlansky's view is how strong the Basque culture remains in a globalised world. He attributes this strength to the Basques' ability to protect their traditions while remaining open to others. "The Basques are determined to lose nothing that is theirs, while still embracing the times," he writes. "Their food, that great window into cultures, shows this. With an acknowledged genius for cooking, they pioneered the use of products from other parts of the world. But they always adapted them, made them Basque."

We arrive in French Basque Country from Spain, following the Route de la Corniche beyond Irun, a windswept coastal road hemmed by cliffs worn into jagged layers by the wild Atlantic. Lightning cracks above us as if on cue, as we turn at a sign for Château d'Abbadie. On an isolated headland, at the end of a long drive, is a castle in the neo-Gothic style with carved limestone snakes slithering around windows and snarling stone crocodiles guarding the front door. Below us, fields of wildflowers sweep down to the seaside village of Hendaye; behind us, impossibly green hills stretch inland to the Pyrénées. Looking back towards the border at the apartment blocks that mar so much of the Spanish coast, we feel we have arrived somewhere neither Spanish nor French.

At nearby St-Jean-de-Luz, where whaling began in the 11th century, we wander the docks of one of France's busiest fisheries. Once a feared pirate enclave, and the picturesque location of Louis XIV's wedding in 1660, it's now a popular resort with turreted 17th-century houses lining the port. While St-Jean-de-Luz feels like a French coastal village, there are glimpses of Basque identity: stately red and green façades along the beachfront; boutique windows dressed in signature Basque striped linen. Even the dazzling Église Saint-Jean Baptiste has Basque timbered galleries.

It's not until we head inland, along country lanes winding through wooded hilltops, that we feel we are in the heart of Basque Country. From the village of St-Pée-Sur-Nivelle we take a tree-lined road to L'Auberge Basque, which appears every inch the traditional Basque hotel. Inside, the charm of this 17th-century inn blends with an elegant contemporary interior. At its heart is a Michelin-starred restaurant wrapped around an open, state-of-the-art kitchen, with a wall of glass facing a terrace and the patchwork landscape of the Rhune Valley.

The owner and chef, Cédric Béchade, dreamt of opening a restaurant here during his first job at the opulent Hôtel du Palais in Biarritz. Born in Limoges, he moved to Basque Country, then to Paris and a glittering career at Restaurant Alain Ducasse and as head chef at Plaza Athénée. A decade later he was still drawn to the Basque culinary culture and landscape.

"I fell in love with the Basque Country and I swore to myself I would return there," he says.

The Basque respect for local tradition and produce reminded Béchade of childhood holidays in Lozère, where his grandparents introduced him to the culture of enjoying good food. "Savoir-vivre and hospitality are cultivated here, and the culture of tradition is a priority," he says of his adopted home. "This is what gives this personality to the Basque Country."

We start with foie gras mousse with sugared croûtons and Basque piperade, a local specialty of red peppers from Espelette, tomato, onion and egg, served with melting slices of jamón Ibérico. The John Dory that follows is served with a delicate sauce of ham broth, onions and mushrooms; and the local veal with artichokes is exquisitely

tender. Béchade has found the "harmony and balance" he says he always strives for in his cooking. "There must always be something original, but always a reassuring touch."

While L'Auberge Basque has a miles-from-anywhere feel, we're less than 10 kilometres from the coast. We head inland and stroll the cobblestone streets of Espelette, famous for red peppers so revered they have their own Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, and they hang from almost every house and shop front. It's a lively village that sells peppers in every imaginable form: fresh, powdered, pickled, in pastes and mustards. We're told we must visit Antton Chocolatier, where it seems only right to taste the chilli ganache, the dark chocolate of which contrasts deliciously with the sweetish peppers.

Even Espelette's mild pace seems busy after the tranquility of L'Auberge Basque and we move on to the market in nearby Ascain. Rain threatens but the market folk seem oblivious as they hawk yet more peppers, including pepper-flecked honey. At a tiny stall we meet a cheesemaker named Marie Elizondo, who chats enthusiastically about the "Idoki charter", a cornerstone of the French Basque Country's farming tradition. She is one of about 100 farmers tending small privately owned properties dedicated to traditional farming practices. These farmers favour local animal breeds and plant varieties, raise stock outside on cereals grown on their farms, and sell only what they grow themselves, including the excellent Ossau-Iraty sheep's milk cheese, foie gras, veal, fruit, vegetables and jam. Elizondo gives us a map showing the location of Idoki farms, all of which sell direct to the public. As she describes the strictly controlled technique of making her sheep's milk cheese, she mentions the location of her farm and we realise we had stopped to admire her sheep the day before. The French Basque Country, we're beginning to realise, is a wonderfully intimate

place to visit.

We head south to St-Étienne-de-Baïgorry, closer to the Pyrénées and surrounded by mountains. A river ripples through the village, adding to its ethereal beauty. Our destination is the Hôtel Arcé, once a rest stop for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. From the elegant, airy dining room, once the local pelota court, we watch swallows diving in the river. And we enjoy another flawless meal: local trout with peas, shallots, carrots, bacon and broad beans. The lamb sweetbreads come with a garlic flan, wild mushrooms and yet more Espelette peppers.

Christine Arcé spent her childhood holidays in the region; now she manages the hotel and its bustling restaurant. "Every year, a big group of children would come and we would all run off into the mountains together," she recalls. She later married her childhood companion, Pascal Arcé, the hotel's chef and owner. "The way of life is very different here from the other parts of France," she says. "People here are authentic, close to nature and their traditions, but very open, curious and great travellers."

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port is the last rest stop along the French stretch of the Camino de Santiago before the daunting climb towards the Spanish frontier. We pass through the town's formidable city gates and enter an intact 15th-century streetscape. A steep trek takes us to the impressive Vauban citadel, with wide open views that conjure images of advancing troops.

We follow the Nive river north to Ostapé, pausing to watch a heated pelota game in picturesque Itxassou. A symbol of the Basque Country, the historic game of pelota is as popular as ever, and we mingle with a vocal crowd of three generations. An hour later we're snaking along the single-lane Pas de Roland, convinced we're lost, and we're delighted to

finally glimpse a discreet sign among the trees. We load our luggage into a silent electric buggy - no cars shatter the peace here - and enter the five-star retreat of Ostapé. Five Basque-style country houses are set in 45 hectares of rolling hills, and our airy apartment, one of 22 in the retreat, looks over a lush valley. Alain Ducasse was one of the founders of Ostapé, and while he is no longer on the board, the kitchen in the 17th-century farmhouse restaurant retains an excellent reputation. Bream in saffron sauce is served with asparagus, leeks and crisp chorizo; scallops and monkfish come with balsamic vinegar enlivened by tangy slices of green apple and ginger.

As we're checking out, Michel Heguy at reception tells us he recently returned home after 20 years in Paris. "It's hard to resist," he says of the Basque Country. "You are so completely surrounded by nature, but you're less than an hour from the resort towns along the coast, from the mountains, from Spain."

As we leave we follow a gorge where water rushes over boulders and, as Heguy suggested, we feel completely surrounded by nature. Yet within half an hour we've arrived in Ainhoa, officially one of France's prettiest villages. Among the boutiques and cafés are 17th-century houses with flower-laden balconies and intriguing details. The lintels above each door portray the history of the house, including one built with money sent by a son in the West Indies.

Nearby Sare, another "pretty" village, apparently had a darker side. We're told the villagers were once famous for moving sheep and cattle over the border at night. The same routes were used by Spanish Basques escaping Franco and Allied spies headed in the other direction during World War II. From the terrace of Restaurant Arraya in the village square this traumatic history seems distant. Tables are set with blue and white Basque linen and the traditional cooking is excellent:

braised lamb, and roast pigeon with potato gratin. Nearby are the prehistoric caves of the Grottes de Sare, the famous train that climbs to the top of La Rhune, and a museum dedicated entirely to the gâteau Basque. I order a piece at Arraya and savour cherries encased in a rich, dense pastry.

Within half an hour's drive is Biarritz, where we arrive slightly shellshocked at the opulent Hôtel du Palais. Napoleon III built a summer palace for Empress Eugénie in the fishing village of Biarritz in the 1850s and international royalty soon flocked to the white sand beaches of "the queen of resorts and the resort of kings". In its maze of pedestrian streets, surfers stroll beside manicured women who meet at Miremont, a Biarritz institution with dazzling sea views. Edmond Rostand, the author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, observed: "At teatime, there are at Miremont fewer pastries than Queens and fewer rum babas than Grand Dukes."

After the laid-back pace of our rural sojourn, we're slightly daunted by Biarritz's cosmopolitan glamour, so we flee the shops and head for the coast. We follow the Rocher de la Vierge, an exhilarating coastal walk along bridges built by Napoleon connecting tiny islands, and return like time travellers to the Belle Époque of the Hôtel du Palais. Elaborate crystal chandeliers hang in marble halls, majestic staircases sweep between richly decorated salons, swimming pools overlook the ocean. Royalty and celebrities have rested and entertained here, from Queen Victoria to Archduke Victor of Hapsburg, Charlie Chaplin to Frank Sinatra. Our balconies open to the sound of Atlantic surf and as the sun sets, we watch the lights appear in the turrets of Belle Époque mansions across the bay.

We spend our last morning in Bayonne, the heart of the French Basque Country and a stark contrast to Biarritz's heady glamour. Eight

kilometres inland and at the confluence of the Ardour and Nive rivers, this laid-back city exemplifies the charm of the interior. Basque sailors have travelled the world from this city and returned with the spoils of piracy or whaling.

Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition settled here and established trades such as chocolate-making, for which the city is still famous. The scent of chocolate wafts along narrow streets around the extraordinary 13th-century Cathédrale Ste-Marie. Alleys are flanked by shopfronts with signs in the distinctive Basque script, displaying traditional makilas (Basque walking sticks) and palas (the bats used to play pelota). And in the city's central market we try the famous Bayonne ham, Iroulégué wine and an impressive array of local cheeses. As we watch old men in berets deep in conversation on stone bridges, surrounded by a brightly coloured 16th-century streetscape, we feel again that while time could be standing still, we couldn't be anywhere else in the world.

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GETTING THERE

Cathay Pacific operates more than 70 flights a week from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Cairns and Perth to Hong Kong, with connections to two direct daily flights to Paris.

The French Basque Country is best reached from Biarritz-Anglet-Bayonne international airport or San Sebastián airport. There are regular trains from Paris to Biarritz (five hours) and from Madrid to San Sebastián (five and a half hours). **Rail Europe** has tickets and timetables throughout France and Europe.

STAY AND EAT

Antton Chocolatier is rustic, irresistible and one of the best chocolatiers in a region obsessed with chocolate. *Place du Marché, Espelette.*

Hôtel Arcé is a small idyllic hotel. Its beautiful restaurant overlooking the river serves updated traditional favourites. *Rooms from \$189. Route du col d'Ispéguy, St-Étienne-de-Baïgorry, +33 5 59 37 40 14.*

Hôtel Arraya is a friendly, family-run hotel located in picturesque Sare. Its cosy dining room serves traditional specialties. *Rooms from \$137. Place du Village, Sare, +33 5 59 54 20 46.*

Hôtel du Palais is the height of opulence and long the haunt of royalty. This palace hotel has stunning ocean views, an extraordinary spa and the one-Michelin-starred Villa Eugénie. *Rooms from \$608. 1 Avenue de l'Impératrice, Biarritz, +33 5 59 41 64 00.*

L'Auberge Basque has 12 rooms, each with an individual rustic design. Book ahead for lunch or dinner at its one-Michelin-starred restaurant. *Rooms from \$170. Vieille Route de St Jean de Luz, Helbarron/St-Pée, +33 5 59 51 70 00.*

Miremont, more an institution than a café, exemplifies old-world Biarritz, with glamorous patrons and intricate pastries. *1 bis, place Georges Clémenceau, Biarritz, +33 5 59 24 01 38.*

Ostapé is located deep in the glorious green Basque hinterland. This intimate resort is as laidback as it is luxurious, and the restaurant serves excellent local specialties. *Suites from \$248. Domaine de Chahatoa, Bidarray, +33 5 59 37 91 91.*
