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BASQUE IN GLORY | Spain's Basque country has so much more than just beautiful beaches

From contemporary art to high-tech wineries, there's a lot more to northern Spain than bulls and beaches



Deirdre overlooking La Concha beach in San Sebastian

IT'S one of the minor regrets of my life that I don't have a 'hat head'.

Pill box, beret, those big floppy straw ones: nothing sits quite right. It's a fact I was forced to accept after being immortalised in a mortarboard on graduation day.

And so, standing in the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria on a clear Sunday morning all these years later, I can but gaze in envy at the array of exquisite headwear that helped the Spanish designer get ahead in the world of fashion from the roaring twenties onwards.

Now who goes to the beautiful Basque Country, all undulating vineyards and Atlantic-kissing coastline, to look at hats, you might rightfully ask.

But 'The Elegance of the Hat' exhibition, continuing in the couturier's birth town until May, perfectly illustrates how there's far more to northern Spain than big, bold reds and running with bulls.

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Our whistlestop group tour of Euskadi, as it's known in Basque, began four days earlier though, when the city of Bilbao, where we had flown direct from Dublin in a little over two hours, showed off with a spectacular double rainbow following an equally dramatic downpour.

Of course, as home to the iconic Guggenheim Museum set by the vivid La Salve Bridge, the skyline has long since been a canvas for some of the world's most eye-catching creations.

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Deirdre at Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum with La Salve Bridge as a backdrop

We were meant to be getting lost in the thousands of contemporary works like Richard Serra's enormous The Matter of Time steel spirals inside, but spent just as long in thrall to architect Frank Gehry's traffic-stopping building on the

There it was again next morning, awesome as ever, as I drew back the heavy bedroom curtains of the five-star Gran Hotel Domine Bilbao, so close that you can admire Jeff Koons' colossal flower Puppy without even crossing the road, and from the dramatic foyer to museum-view bathtubs, practically a work of art in itself.

It's a common thread in the port city, where you'll also find food you might as well frame as eat. I decided to send the arty dish filled with a spicy chocolate mousse fizzing with gold nuggets back to the kitchen at La Despensa del Etxanobe empty in a bold act of minimalism to rival Miró.

And, coincidentally, because it was one of the most divine things I've ever tasted.



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Traditional pintxos, like the fat, green piquillo peppers and salty cod we sample the following day at El Portalón further south in the history-steeped Basque capital of Vitoria-Gasteiz are the most common fare in the autonomous community, though it's near impossible to resist front-loading on the fresh, crunchy slabs of bread that appear to herald every meal.



Some of the region's famed pintxos

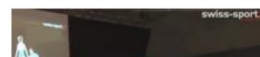
With its rustic brick rooms, wooden beams and entrance wide enough for a horse and cart, the 15th century tavern transports you right back in time, and just across the street, we get another glimpse into the way things were in a world long before live online mass during a tour of the Cathedral of Santa Maria.



The Gothic-style Roman Catholic church is currently in the thick of a

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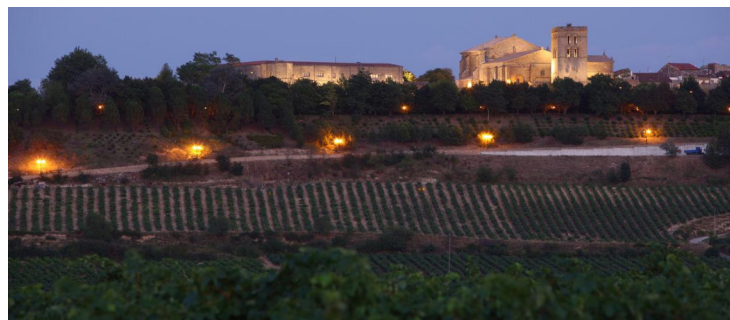


Putin's daught   Privacy

painstaking restoration, but cleverly has launched an 'Open for Work' project, allowing visitors from near and far to don a hard hat and explore from the bowels of the building right up to its cloud-grazing bell tower.

It's told that the walled medieval town of Laguardia, under an hour away in the heart of Rioja country, was built as a defence for the Kingdom of Navarre - after all, the name comes from 'La Guardia de Navarra', literally meaning 'the guard of Navarra'.

But I'm not convinced that they weren't just trying to keep all the best wine to themselves, and honestly, I couldn't blame them.



Historic Laguardia village by dusk

An estimated 300 wine caves, otherwise known as bodegas, lie underfoot as you stroll around the perfectly preserved municipality, many of them still producing wine today.

Leave the snobbery at the fortress gate though, as winemaker Carlos San Pedro tells us during a subterranean tour of his family's 600-year-old bodega that the best wine is simply the wine you like best. Mine's a 2016 tempranillo.

As a comparatively small fish in a big boozy pond, Bodegas Carlos San Pedro Perez de Viñaspre produces around 40,000 bottles of wine per year the squashy, old-fashioned way.

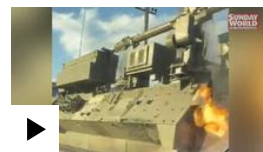
Stitched seamlessly into the landscape of nearby Samaniego, at the more modern Bodegas Baigorri, famed for its oak-aged Crianza, that figure is closer to 500,000.



Sampling the wine at Bodegas Carlos San Pedro Perez de Viñaspre

Despite the winery's endless vineyards and vast 600-litre barrels, which some lucky sod later has the job of climbing into to clean, quantity never supersedes quality, with every single grape examined - and in the case of premium wines, even scanned - one by one before making the grade.

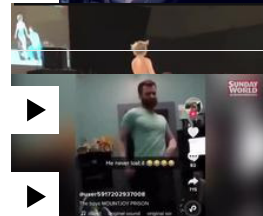
Made from local white grapes, sparkling Txakoli (pronounced 'chackoli') flows freely in Basque Country, but it's the ciderhouse ritual of 'txotx' (pronounced



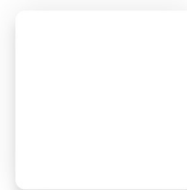
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Sadly, due to Covid, we didn't get to try the madcap centuries-old practice of grabbing our glasses and dashing to a cask erupting with freshly-fermented cider after someone bellows 'txotx!', and yanks the stopper out, during a lunchtime feast that simply didn't stop coming at Alorrenea cider house while bound for San Sebastian.

Not to worry, as we had earlier experienced the magic in the making at the unexpectedly fun Sagardoetxea Basque Cider Museum in Astigarraga, where you can also tour a maze of different apple trees and give apple juice processing a bash.



Traditional apple juice making

Our final night is spent dandering along Donostia's picture-postcard coastline, and drinking up the long-forgotten buzz of a city alive with smiling tourists, buskers and street artists.

It's a wrench to leave the gorgeous Lasala Plaza Hotel, let alone San Sebastian, as we know it in English, behind.

Admiring beautiful La Concha beach from a height one last time, wind whipping through my hair, who needs a hat anyway.

TRAVEL FACTFILE

BASQUE COUNTRY, SPAIN

See tourism.euskadi.eus

- Aer Lingus flies direct from Dublin to Bilbao in two hours and 15 minutes from as little as €42 one-way. See aerlingus.com.
- With views of La Concha Beach, Lasala Plaza Hotel is the ideal luxury base for exploring San Sebastian. See lasalaplazahotel.com.
- Entry to Sagardoetxea Basque Cider Museum is €5. See sagardoarenlurraldea.eus.

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