

BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

THE BASQUE REGION, SPAIN



The Basque country straddles the border between southwest France and northeast Spain, but except for their passports the Basques are neither French nor Spanish -- they are Basque. They speak the oldest European language still spoken, so old that no one can tell where it came from. We don't even know where the Basques came from. Scientific tests indicate that the Basques have a different bloodline than their neighbors in Spain and France. They also have a distinct and interesting culture and they do all they can to keep their traditions alive.

The Basques have lived on the Iberian Peninsula for thousands of years, but the two most important historic influences on Spain -- a three-hundred year colonization by the ancient Romans, and a seven-hundred year occupation by the Moors -- were hardly noticed by the Basques.

The Basques lived in small isolated villages and governed with a democracy in which the residents of a house voted as a unit rather than as individuals. That sense of family group has been central to their history. There are four Basque provinces in Spain and three just across the border in France. These days the two most interesting cities for a tourist are San Sebastian and Bilbao.

Since medieval times Bilbao has been an important trading port. At first the city shipped wool from the sheep farms of northern Spain. During the 1800s iron mining became important, and the city evolved into an industrial center for steel mills, shipbuilding and chemical production. It was a commercial city and clearly not a destination for tourists.

But that has completely changed. Today Bilbao is Spain's fourth largest city and a major tourist attraction. For many travelers, the standard European



tour, usually limited to London, Paris and Rome, now includes Bilbao. The change was the result of imaginative urban planning and the belief that a single building could be the catalyst for the rebirth of an entire community.

Because of its size, the Guggenheim Museum in New York can only present five percent of its collection at any one time. Yet the traditional model for a museum calls for it to constantly make new acquisitions, which just leads to more art in the storerooms.

During the late 1980s, the board of directors of the Guggenheim Museum decided to continue its acquisition activities, but at the same time look for new sites to present their collection. They already had one in Venice, and they opened two new ones in New York City, and one in Berlin. In 1991 they were negotiating with Salzburg Austria when

the Basque government began making their pitch. And the Basques had a couple of good points. Salzburg already had a major international music festival and



hundreds of thousands of tourists came there every year. A Guggenheim Museum in Salzburg would just add more whipped cream to their cake. A Guggenheim Museum here could rejuvenate an entire city.

The logic and the opportunity were too powerful for the Guggenheim to resist. The old shipyards became the site for the new museum, with its titanium shell undulating in the wind and changing color from blue, to red, to gold throughout the day and night. Jeff Koons' flower-covered "Puppy" welcomes visitors to the building, inviting them to loosen up for what's coming.

Our guide is Susana Garcia.

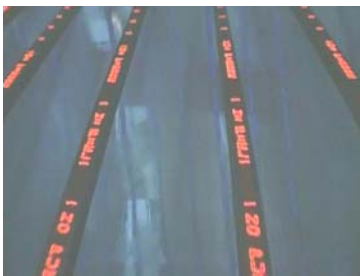
SUSANA GARCIA

In my tours I usually like starting with our Andy Warhol, because I think it is quite different. It is not the Andy Warhol we are used to. We display what he was doing in

the Fifties. He was a graphic designer, and he was designing shoes. In his sketches I can see the evolution he is going to have. Because I can see the glamour already, and he is going to be obsessed with glamour. I can see the bright colors. I can imagine his assistants helping him to paint, to color, because he had what he called his coloring parties. And, as he said, he wanted to be a sort of machine; he wanted to work in every medium -- cinema, photographs, painting, fashion, music, everything. He thought that everything could be art, and art could become common.



Jenny Holzer is an American artist, and she works with language. So what she's created is text written in Spanish and in English, depending on the moment you arrive. She's



playing with language because the message we get is a personal message; it's something intimate, but the media she's using is public. It's LEDs. The contrast of a personal message in a public media. And

something I like of her work is that we can go through it and discover something else.

She also shows a different color and a different language. It's in Basque -- the Basque language. Jenny Holzer had to come to Bilbao to prepare this piece, and when she came she discovered Basque language. She didn't know anything about this. So she thought, "Well, that's perfect -- as I had to come to Bilbao to discover this language, I want people to enter into my piece to discover my message in Basque."

It's also a nice symbol because here Basque is behind everything that we see up front. The Guggenheim jump-started the new Bilbao.

SAN SEBASTIAN

The other great coastal city in Spain's Basque country is San Sebastian, which is about fifty miles to the east of Bilbao. The coast road between the two cities is beautiful. And the area has its own unique history.

During the 1100s the Catholic Church had three Holy Cities: Rome, Jerusalem, and Santiago de Compostela on the northwest coast of Spain. If you visited any of these

cities the church would reduce the impact of your sins during your afterlife. It was called an indulgence. Getting to Jerusalem was dangerous and difficult. Getting to Rome was a lot easier but when you got there you weren't sure the church would give you an indulgence. Santiago de Compostela was your best bet, and thousands of people made the trip every year, aided by the first travel guide for the mass market. It was written by a monk, and published in 1130. It told you where the food was good or bad, where the neighborhoods were dangerous, and if there had been bathrooms it would have told you which ones were clean. It was the Mobil Guide of the moment.

The route passed through here -- the town of Getaria. And pilgrim or not, if you are traveling in the Basque country, Getaria is worth a stop. It's the hometown of Juan Sebastian Elcano, who was the navigator on Magellan's voyage around the world. Most popular literature describes Magellan as the first person to sail around the world, but he died in the Philippines and never finished the trip. It was Elcano who completed the voyage home and should be given credit for the trip. He got a nice statue but he needed a better agent.

Getaria is also the center for the production of a local wine called *txakoli*, which is made from grapes grown on the nearby hills. Young, sparkling and fruity, it is poured from a bottle held a few feet above the glass under the theory that the trip aerates the wine and increases its sparkle.



Getaria has a number of good restaurants that specialize in the outdoor grilling of fish that come up from the town's port. The grills are set up outside, near the entrance to the restaurants. My favorite

is Iribar. The chef's name is Pile and she is the third generation of her family to own the restaurant. It's a perfect place to take a break during your pilgrimage.

Following the Protestant Reformation the market for indulgences pretty much disappeared, along with the traffic of pilgrims through Getaria. But recently there has been a resurgence. During the Holy Year 1993 over a hundred thousand pilgrims walked the route along northern Spain, and new hotels and inns are being built to accommodate the new traffic.

To qualify as an authentic pilgrim you must walk a minimum of 62 miles, but you can also meet the requirements by biking for 124. Inline skaters have made

petitions, but as yet there is no official ruling. And if you're considering a skateboard, forget about it. You must start with a letter from your parish priest and a record book that gets stamped along the way.

When you arrive in San Sebastian, you are entering a city that has been around since the 11th Century, and was one of the major resting points on the pilgrim route. But not much went on here until the middle of 1800s, when Queen Maria Cristina chose the beachfront waters of San Sebastian as the spot for her daughter's saltwater cure. Bathing in the ocean was recommended for the princess's skin ailment.

Gabriella Ranelli is an American friend of mine who has lived here since 1989 and has a good sense of the town.

GABRIELLA RANELLI:

But she didn't just walk into the water like you and I would today; because in 1845 decent people didn't swim in the ocean. You only went in the water if you fell in. You were usually a fisherman.



So what they had to do was build a special round building set on rails -- it was called "The Pearl of the Cantabria" -- and the queen was in it, and a pair of oxen would pull it down into the water. She could very decorously lower herself into the water, swim around, nobody could see the Royal Body.

She was not swimming inside the little building, she would come out. There was a hole in it, she could swim out, she would swim around. You could see her Royal Head but, nobody would see the Royal Body. Then she would go back up into her little bathing house, the oxen would pull it up on the beach, she could bathe with fresh water, come out



dressed with all her dignity intact. And that's what people did in those days, even though they wore bathing costumes made of wool from their necks down to their ankles, as you can see in photographs of the time. But because the queen was here, everybody else -- all the court, and all the aristocracy from Spain wanted to come up here and spend their summers in the same place where the queen came.

This was a walled city and from the walls the French defended themselves against the English. Wellington and Napoleon were always fighting it out here because this was



a very strategic city. If you captured San Sebastian, you would generally have a gateway into the entire Iberian peninsula, and eventually Africa. Everybody wanted this place. They were

always fighting people off, and eventually in 1813 the English came in, the allied troops came in -- the French had the city under siege -- and burned the entire thing to the ground. So they had to start over and rebuild. A lot of what you see in San Sebastian today was rebuilt after the fire and after the walls came down in 1865. The town hall used to be the casino. It was built at the end of the 1800s, but then gambling was outlawed in 1923, so they turned it into the town hall eventually.

THE LOCAL CHEFS

The gastronomy of San Sebastian is based on the sea and the mountains. The local chefs are considered to be some of the best in Europe and seafood is one of their great strengths. Excellent fish soups. Sea Bream with Garlic Vinaigrette. Or whatever today's catch is, fresh from the ocean and simply grilled.

For hundreds of years, Basque fishermen followed whales across the Atlantic, eventually ending up off the coast of Newfoundland and discovering the huge schools of cod that lived on the grand banks. Many historians believe that the Basques knew a great deal about the new world long before Columbus showed up, but didn't tell anybody about it because they considered it a commercial advantage. And it makes perfectly good sense. If you found gold, why would you want to tell the competition where your mine is?



And cod turned out to be a gold mine for the Basques. Dried cod was a way of preserving valuable nutrients and became a popular food throughout Europe. The demand for cod increased when the Catholic church required meatless meals and the Basques were the major suppliers. Today, codfish is an essential ingredient in the local flavors of the Basques. But cod is not the only important fish in the Basque kitchen.

Walk through the market in the city of San Sebastian and you will see the other local favorites like langoustine,

which is a European species of lobster, monkfish, tuna, hake, sardines and anchovies. Because Basque country is as much about mountains as it is about the sea, lamb has always been an important part of the local cuisine.



The mountains behind San Sebastian are home to the shepherders, whose traditional dishes include roast lamb with garlic and lemon served with roasted potatoes and hearts of lettuce. But there are also some small ranches that supply great steaks.

The sheep also supply milk, which is used to make a number of traditional Basque cheeses. The cheeses take on the flavor of the mountain plants on which the sheep fed. In the United States, you can find a number of Basque cheeses. The Basques are also famous for their hams. The mountain forests, filled with acorns and chestnuts, became a natural habitat for the pigs, and ham is an essential part of the Basque diet. The local flavors of the Basque kitchen reflect the history of the region. Ancient Romans did a little trading with the Basque and introduced wheat, olive oil and wine making, which was rather important, since all three elements are essential to one of the great gastronomic traditions of the Basque, a tradition known as the pintxos bar.

GABRIELLA RANELLI:

A pintxos bar is where they have pintxos, little snacks. They're called tapas in the rest of Spain. There are different kids of pintxos bars. There are ones for breakfast, this is a little bit different from the one people go to in the evening, which are heartier. And normally if you come here all the time they'll hand you the newspaper first thing in the morning and they know whatever you like to eat. Everybody has their favorite pintxos usually. And they know their clients.



Txakoli is a local wine. It's a white wine but they pour from a great height so it gets a little effervescent, but it's not a sparkling wine. It's made with grapes which are grown on the steep hills next to the sea, so they don't get a lot of sun. They get a lot of rain. It's quite tart but it's an aperitif.

One item easy to recognize is just a little egg omelet on a little piece of bread. Very simple but it's absolutely ideal.

Every bar has its own version of a Hilda, in English we would probably say Gilda. It's after the Rita Hayworth film. She had a lot of impact here. It's anchovies, little peppers and olives on a toothpick. Rita Hayworth was considered spicy. That scene where she takes off her gloves, you know, that revolutionized the entire country.

You won't see bagels, but you will definitely see the smoked salmon and the cream cheese.

At the pintxos bar you take whatever you want and at the end, you just tell them what we've had and they'll tell us how much it is. They're very good at math. So it's the honor system, and people are very honest. Nobody cheats on pintxos.



At night, the pintxos bars take on a different menu and a different character. Groups of friends come together, forming a loose assembly of like-minded pintxos-lovers. They know what they like to eat and they know where they like to eat it. They have a pre-planned route and they move along it. One team that I traveled with always starts at eight o'clock on Thursday nights at a specific bar. They



go there because they like the mushrooms. After about thirty minutes, they move on to the next place. If you miss the eight o'clock opening, you know where to catch up at eight thirty and that would be true for the third or fourth spots as the night continues.

GABRIELLA RANELLI:

You've got to pace yourself at night. That's why the wines are so small also. Big glasses with a little bit of wine. You might have to go to twenty bars, and so if you were drinking an enormous tankard full of wine, you wouldn't make it passed four. Another nice thing about this is it gives a lot of room on the top for air, which means you get a better flavor from the wine.

The streets of San Sebastian's old city are packed with pintxos groups moving from bar to bar. You can always tell the best pintxos bars because they've got the most people in them. You've got to elbow your way in here. It's a time-honored tradition.

I suggest trying baby eel. It looks like pasta, but doesn't

The Basque Region, Spain

taste like pasta. It comes down from the mountains. You have to eat them with a wooden fork. And stir them around, give them a good stir. The reason you use a wooden fork is also because if you used a metal fork, the eels would slip



right through it. They come from the Sargasso Sea. Nobody knows where. They travel here, they get here when they're about three years old.

They cost about \$500 a kilo. \$500 for two and a quarter pounds. It's the traditional

food that they eat on the day of San Sebastian, the 20th of January. It's delicious.

One of the things they have here in San Sebastian are goose barnacles. It's a specialty here that most people enjoy. They're big barnacles and you must have some wine them. Eating goose barnacles can be a little messy. Find a good spot like between the nail and the body and kind of pull it open. No, you have to get your finger in and twist it open. Then you just eat it—don't eat the nail. They're

cooked in sea water for one minute, like a snail. They're a great delicacy here, but not a first date kind of food.



Another traditional aspect of Basque gastronomy is the cider house. The Basques have been growing apples for thousands of years and making cider since medieval times. At some point, a farmer decided to sell his excess capacity and thought it would be a good idea to let everybody have a taste just after the fermentation. They brought along something to eat and before you knew it, the tradition of cider tasting was part of gastronomy in the Basque region. And cider houses developed all over the area.

The cider houses became centers of social life. During the cider tasting season, which runs from late January through March, the traditional cider houses open up and people stand around tasting cider. During the rest of the year, they're closed. But here in San Sebastian there's a restaurant called Sideria Donostiarra, which is open all year round



and has an atmosphere that is very much in keeping with the old farmhouse tasting rooms. One big space, long wooden tables without tablecloths, an open kitchen, grilled food, vats of cider along the walls and patrons filling their glasses with the traditional cider catching technique.

The process for making apple cider is basically the same process used for making wine, with apples sitting in for the grapes. There's a natural yeast on the crushed apples that turns the sugar in the apples into carbon dioxide gas and alcohol. The carbon dioxide gas makes the cider bubbly and the alcohol makes the cider.



There was a standing menu in the cider house. First, slices of cod omelet and a green salad. The main course is grilled steak. The dessert, slices of local cheese, strips of quince jelly, and walnuts. And of course as much cider as you want.

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