

Maribel's Guide to the Basque Country™ Bilbao-Bilbo

Bilbao

Bilbao, or Bilbo in Basque, the locals call it "Botxo", is widely considered Spain's "city of the future". It's definitely a very prosperous city on the move, invigorated, sophisticated, underrated, and no longer the grey, grimy, polluted, ugly industrial eyesore it once was, although the grey, gritty suburbs don't give a good initial impression. Once you arrive on the Gran Vía López de Haro, Bilbao's partially pedestrianized main boulevard, you'll see that Bilbao is quite cosmopolitan, very well to do and the place to be. Notice the gorgeous rotunda at the Plaza Moyúa, the elegant shops on Rodríguez Arias and Maximo Aguirre. Sit on a park bench in the beautiful little square, the Plaza and look around. You'll think you're on Manhattan's tony Upper East Side.

And don't be afraid of visiting the city because of what you may have read about terrorism. Yes, the political tensions with ETA sadly go on unabated in the Basque Country but tourists have never been targeted and are basically unaffected by it, although you might find yourself at some point in the midst of a massive anti-ETA street demonstration. We've spent considerable time traveling recently for business and pleasure in the Bilbao area and have always had a wonderful time. The "Bilbaobanos" are friendly, helpful, warm, outgoing-just great folks. I feel very comfortable there.

Sightseeing:

Your first stop in this increasingly popular city should be Frank Gehry's titanium masterpiece, the **Museo Guggenheim**. Gehry's building is a fascinating, awe-inspiring work of art, although I admit to having been quite underwhelmed by the permanent collection, which is clearly a work in progress. Actually, very little of the permanent collection is usually on display, but there are always special exhibits, so check on-line at www.guggenheim-bilbao.es. Be sure to rent an audio guide.

After touring its special exhibits don't forget to stop in at the upstairs bar to try the designer tapas by a disciple of renowned chef Martin Berasategui. Try to arrive at 11 am when they bring out all the fresh tapas, or try a gourmet lunch in its restaurant. Before you leave, make sure to cross the bridge, the Puente de la Salve, to see the museum from the other side of the river, the Deusto area. It's even more spectacular from that vantage point. Behind the museum is their newest acquisition, a sculpture of a spider called "Mama", a complement to Jeff Koons' famous "Puppy" which sits in front, at the main entrance. Don't be startled if you see and hear a little "explosion" in the river. It's part of the museum experience; a group of gas jets timed to erupt on queue. Open Tuesday to Sunday from 10 am to 9 pm. In July and August the museum opens daily at 9 am. www.guggenheim-bilbao.es

After visiting the Guggenheim, you may want to walk to the unheralded, but very nice **Museo de Bellas Artes** with its fine collection of Spanish Baroque. They recently added a brand new modernist wing. You will also find paintings by El Greco, Goya, Van Dyck, Gauguin and even Mary Cassat. It has some fine temporary shows. I saw a major Rodin exhibit there once. The Museo has just opened a new restaurant and bar/cafeteria. The restaurant **Arbola-Gana** is on the top floor, the room, decorated in minimalist style, looks out onto the Parque de Doña Casilda de Iritza next door. For summer dining there is also an outdoors terrace. You can purchase a joint ticket for the Guggenheim and the Museum of Fine Arts, Bono Artean, for 10 Euros, but remember the Museo is free on Wednesdays. Open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 am to 8 pm, and Sundays from 10 am to 2 pm. Closed Mondays. www.museobilbao.com

Take a ride on the ultramodern **subway** with stations designed by Norman Foster. You can take the train all the way to the beaches of Plentzia. Also try a short hop on Bilbao's new and colorful tram, the Euskotran, which runs from Atxuri station, about 0,60 Euros a ticket.

Take a short walk across the Nervión River on the Arenal Bridge, past the neo-classical **Arriaga Theater**, a copy of the Opera Garnier in Paris, into the atmospheric Old Quarter, the **Casco Viejo**. Wandering around the Casco Viejo, it's hard to imagine that up until the turn of the century this maze of ancient stone palacios contained all the enterprise of this ambitious city. Founded in 1300, Bilbao accreted out of just seven parallel streets, the **Siete Calles**, which run down to the riverfront and still serve as the neighborhood's heart. Indeed, this city's antique half remains wonderfully alive. Bilbaínos work, shop, and live in these austere edifices, which are crammed with bars, cafés, restaurants, bakeries, tobacconists, hole-in-the-wall groceries, furniture shops, and boutiques.

One of the prettiest spots in the Casco Viejo, a dramatic change from its crooked, narrow streets, is the **Plaza Nueva**, a great square enclosed by grand 19th century apartment buildings and an arcade crowded with cafés, bars, and shops. It's a great place to rest your feet after a day of exploring and to sample some pintxos. Pay a morning visit to the **Mercado de la Ribera** next to the river while in the Casco Viejo. It's a 3-story feast for the senses. Downstairs on the 1st floor are the fishmongers. The meats and cheeses are on the 2nd floor, while upstairs you'll find fruits and veggies. It's the largest covered market in Europe.

Also, if you won't get to the city of Bayonne in the Pays Basque, the French Basque Country, then visit the cultural and ethnological Basque museum, the **Euskal Museoa** on Calle Cruz, 4 (www.euskal-museoa.org). Closed Mondays, but free on Thursdays. There's also a small bullfighting museum in the bullring, Plaza de Toros Vista Alegre, on Martín Agüero, 1. Open

Monday to Friday from 10:30 am to 1 pm and from 4 to 8 pm. Entrance is 1,20 Euros. You check on-line for the bullfighting schedule. www.torosbilbao.com

A 1-Day tour of the city:

Bilbao is quite compact, so it's possible to take a walking tour of the city. We start ours at the Guggenheim at 10 am, when the doors open. Pick up a map at the tourist office out front, stay right, strolling down Alameda Mazarredo to the very pretty Doña Casilda de Iturriazar Park, where you'll see the Museo de Bellas Artes, then down Máximo Aguirre to the flower-filled Plaza Moyúa rotunda. Turn left past the Plaza Moyúa and head down the semi-pedestrian, beautiful Gran Vía López de Haro, an excellent place to shop. There are more stores on Rodríguez Arias and Máximo Aguirre. Cross the Nervión River on the Arenal Bridge past the fin de siècle Arriaga Theater and into the Old Quarter with its warren of lively streets, south of the cathedral, the "7 calles". End your long walk with a rest on the Plaza Nueva before visiting the Mercado at the very end of the Old Quarter next to the river. You can return to the Ensanche, the new quarter, either via the nifty subway, or the new Euskotran tram, which will take you back to the Guggenheim. Between the new city and the old quarter is the Café Iruña where you might enjoy an informal and quick lunch. Try to be there around 1 pm, before it becomes packed. It's a great value.

Tapas (Pintxos) Hopping:

In the new city, the Ensanche:

After trying out the bars of the Plaza Nueva on your first night, take a stroll down Licenciado Poza Street, behind the Gran Vía, to the corner of Maestro García Rivero, between 7 and 8 pm, for a second night's tapas adventure. On this small pedestrian street, an area called "pozas"; you'll see several bars filled to the rafters with people, some spilling out into the street, enjoying Bilbao's gourmet tapas. Make sure you stop by **Serrantes** at Licenciado Poza, 16, for "rabas", fried squid rings, an exquisite seafood dish.

Saving the best for last:

After everything else is done, head to the pedestrian Calle Diputación for 2 unique treats, the **Viña del Ensanche** at Diputación, 10, for great "jamán Jabugo", the silkiest ham in the world better than prosciutto. This is a chic local hangout where everyone drinks "cariñena" red wine to go with the ham, foie and cheeses. They have a gourmet shop just around the corner. From here you move to **El Globo**, across from "La Viña", which is open all day for great tapas and good wines. Here you can experience treats like scrambled eggs with mushrooms and roasted red peppers in earthenware dishes that make for a great 4-star meal. It's filled with locals, popular with business folks in the morning hours. It also features a wine of the month. Great gazpacho! **El Globo** often wins the yearly tapas competitions with its very original creations. This is very much a local yuppie watering hole, but just can't be beat. Another recommendation on the same street is **Lekeitio** whose specialty is a 3-tiered tortilla, a rather large omelet.

In the old quarter, the Casco Viejo:

My favorite haunt in the old quarter is **Victor Montes**, one of the oldest and liveliest of the square's restaurants and bars, which have a wonderfully jaunty Belle Epoque décor that are all black and white and gold. Start off with some rabas, fried squid rings, and a txikito of Rioja. The txikito is a sturdy short glass with a thick stem and a small hollow that holds only a few sips of wine. After the last sip it's Basque custom to move on to the next bar. The Bilbaínos believe in "little and often" and in each bar order only a short "txikito" or "zurito" and one pintxo that they knock back in a minute or two before quickly relocating to another bar. The plaza has so many that you may never get beyond the square before the evening's over. Another favorite is the next-door **Café Bilbao**, which always wins prizes in the annual "pintxos" competition. On Sundays you can see three generations of a family making their way through the neighborhood bars drinking Rioja in sips and feasting on pintxos.

In the "Siete Calles" section, be sure to take your map along, those seven parallel, narrow, pedestrian streets running south of the cathedral. On Santa María 10, look for **Bar Gatz**, another bar that regularly wins awards for their creative pintxos. It's next to the hostel **Iturrienea Ostatua**. On the same street you can check out **Irrintxi** if you like sushi. Two other contenders in the "Siete Calles" area include **Xukela** and **Rfo-Oja**, both on Calle del Perro.

Gourmet Dining:

Zortziko, at Alameda Manzarredo, 17, near the Guggenheim, is arguably the most famous and priciest in Bilbao but offers special tasting meals; the inexpensive "menu del trabajo", or the "menu de degustación" and the "menu de celebración". Very formal in the old European style with heavy, grand French Empire décor of lime green walls, crystal chandeliers, alabaster fireplace, gilt mirrors, gorgeous floral arrangements, waiters, all who speak English, in white jackets, formal and flawless service, even the beer is served elegantly, but you can go casually dressed. Frank Gehry's favorite hangout when in Bilbao. Locals come to dine in shirt-sleeves. I ordered chef Danciel García's 5-course "menu de degustación", priced at 55 Euros, but it wasn't my best meal in Bilbao. Huge selection of coffees, teas, Armagnac, brandy, cognac, and eau de vie. Closed on Sundays and Monday nights from August 23 to September 15. Reserve at www.zortziko.es

Goizeko Kabi, Particular de Estraunza, 4: nouvelle Basque in a cozy, rustic setting, offering potato ravioli stuffed with cod, hake cheeks. The kokotxas are legendary. Desserts like runny white chocolate cake and rice pudding with Grand Marnier ice cream. Closed on Sundays and the first two weeks of August. www.bilbaoweb.com/goizekokabi

Gorrotxa, Alameda Urquijo, 30, is located in an odd, dark, shopping gallery lined with bars and pubs, but don't judge a book by its cover. It offers elegant, luxury décor, recently praised by NY Times, F & W. Try the cod, bacalao al pil-pil, and the slightly tart, bubbly local white wine called txakoli.

Club Náutico, the dining room of the **Hotel López de Haro**, is also an elegant gourmet experience.

Asador Guetaria, on Colón Larreategui, is a great place for seafood. A Bilbao institution.

Arbola-Gana is in an airy, top-floor room in the new wing of the Museo de Bellas Artes, with a "minimalist" décor overlooking the pretty Doña Casilda de Irrurizar Park, with outdoor terrace for summer dining. The cooking of young Aitor Elizegui is supposedly avant-garde, but we have yet to try it. He offers creations such as monkfish in a creamy sauce of shallots, cacao butter and vanilla.

CASUAL DINING

For the best lunch, at the lowest price in the most atmospheric setting you can find, head to the lovely, flower filled Jardines de Albia Park. Across the street you'll find a Bilbao legend, founded in 1903, **Cafe Iruña**, at Calle de Colón Larreategui, 13, is directly across my favorite square. The Cafe Iruña offers extravagant Moorish décor, coffered ceiling, slow-moving Arabic wooden fans and lamps, mosaic tiles and murals. This restaurant is extremely popular and has great tapas all day at the bar. Just point to what looks good. Also try the "pintxo moruno", a type of shish kebab. The dining room fills quickly around 1 pm most days as the locals drop in to enjoy the great value. A three course "menu del día" only costs 11,50 Euros, in 2002. You'll see people standing outside talking on their cell phones, reading off to their friends and family what's on the menu for the day. It's a kind of a Parisian brasserie with a heavy touch of the Alhambra. This makes the perfect lunch stop. If you happen to be there on the 6th of July at noon you can join in on their **San Fermín** celebration, complete with "chupinazo". Be sure to dress in your best red and white.

Asador Oteixa, Licenciado Poza, 27, has another very well priced "menu del día" at lunch. Is very informal.

El Viejo Zortzi, Licenciado Poza, 54k is a little bistro and a less expensive way to sample the Garcia family's **Zortziko**. Gourmet food in a more informal setting.

BREAKFAST OR COFFEE BREAK:

Abando y Barra, Iparraguirre is near the Guggenheim. Tiny and sophisticated for an excellent coffee break, or several different continental breakfasts, on your way from the Guggenheim to the Museo de Bellas Artes. Lovely canapés. They serve a delicious Basque brand coffee. As you leave, check out beautiful cheese, fruit and vegetables at **Gamazo**, across the street.

Arábicas, Rodríguez Arias, 4, on the corner of Máximo Aguirre, next to Gucci. If you're staying at the Aránzazu, they have your breakfast here, or if you're shopping on this street, stop by for great coffee and unbelievably delicious omelets.

LODGING:

Expensive

Gran Domine is a new design hotel opened in 2002, a creation of Javier Mariscal and Philippe Starcke, plus other hot designers who contributed the shower stools, sinks and scarlet sofas. Kind of whimsical, pop artist on the inside; the centerpiece is an atrium lobby with a 7 story wire mesh cage of stones, 26 meters high, called the Cypress Fossil, a touch of Andy Warhol. There are two restaurants, the informal café with Bauhaus red and white chairs and the gourmet Beltz the Black. Run by the Hesperia chain. The piece de resistance is the rooftop terrace, for a guest only, which overlooks the Guggenheim. Breakfast is served on the rooftop terrace. Rooms have wool-cashmere spreads, pillow menu, Internet TV. Recently featured in the British Condé Nast Traveler's "The Hot List: 50 of the Coolest New Hotels in the World". www.granhoteldominebilbao.com.

Read the Departures magazine review at www.departures.com/bb/bb_1102_bilbao.html

Hotel Miró is another designer hotel down the street from the Guggenheim and one block south of Gran Domine, created by Barcelona's fashion designer, Antonio Miró. The rooms are done in minimalist style in beige, green and black and have mohair blankets on the beds, excellent bedside lighting and black marble baths, but no door between bedroom and bath, only a fabric curtain. The desk staff is fantastic and offers superb service. 44 rooms. www.morohotelbilbao.com

Moderately expensive:

López de Haro was Bilbao's leading 5-star boutique hotel (before the opening of the hip, trendy Miró and Grand Domine) with a perfect location. Kind of a posh British private club décor. Very quiet. Its dining room, the Club Nautico is one of Bilbao's finest restaurants. Downstairs bar/lounge for light meals. Perfect service from concierge staff. Low rates through Expedia. Large, marble baths with lots of toiletries, power showers, and thick towels. Furniture showing its age, though.

Carlton, The classic "wedding cake", Belle Epoque building at the flower filled rotunda, the Plaza Moyúa, the prettiest park of Bilbao. This 5 star hotel's recent guests include Pavarotti and Pierce Brosnan, while filming scenes of "To Die Another Day". But popular with groups, as well.

Upper budget to moderate:

High Tech Petit Palace Arana is a brand new entry in the Casco Viejo belonging to the budget-hip High Tech Petit Palace chain. Lots of bells and whistles for a little money. Computers in most rooms along with halogen lighting, bare wood floors, exposed wood beams and showers with hydro-massage with a seat. Next to the classical **Arriaga Theater** and the river. www.hthoteles.com

Abba Parque is in a terrific location on Rodríguez Arias, behind the Gran Vía, with its upscale shopping, tapas bars, nearby restaurants and a pleasant 15 to 20 minute stroll to the Guggenheim. This is an old-time classic completely remodeled and given a very fresh look in 2003. There is also a handy parking garage.

Budget:

Iturriena Ostatua, in the Casco Viejo, with its lace-curtained French windows and wrought-iron balconies dripping with geraniums, is as picturesque as can be, and the prices are equally as charming with double rooms for about \$50 a night. Tel: 011-34-94-416-1500 Fax 011-34-94-415-8929

INTERNET ACCESS:

Cyber café at Máximo Aguirre, 10, and Licenciado Pozas, across from Abba Parque Hotel

SHOPPING:

Clothing: Designer boutiques are located along the Gran Vía and Rodríguez Arias. Look for **Zara** for designer styles at discount prices. The boutique of the **Galician** designer, **Adolfo Domínguez**, the Spanish Armani, **Cortefiel** and **Massimo Dutti** for smart casual ware, can be found here. The huge **El Corte Inglés** department store, the main department store in Spain, is also located on the lower end of the Gran Vía.

Books: For a fine selection of Spanish books visit one of the 2 branches of the **Casa del Libro**. One is on Alameda de Urquijo, 9, and a larger branch is located near the El Corte Inglés department store.

Basque handicrafts: (Jean Vier linens/gourmet products/music/books on Basque culture)

The Basque cultural store **Basandere** is located close to the Guggenheim at Iparraguirre, 4. You can also try the **Bertako** store in the Casco Viejo on Calle de los Fueros, next to the entrance to the Plaza Nueva.

Music: If you enjoy Celtic music you might enjoy the music of **Kepa Junkera**, who plays the diatonic accordion. The sound is part folk and part rock. Members of the **Chieftains** have collaborated on some of his recordings. Look for "Bilbao: 00:00h", "Maren", which was up for a Latin Grammy in 2003, and his latest release, a live performance recorded at Arriaga Theater, "K1, K2". Great stuff.

FESTIVALS:

HERRI KILORAK, definitely not for wimps, is Bilbao's annual rural sports games that make Australian Rules football look tame by comparison. Typical events include tree-trunk chopping, hay-bale tossing, iron bar tossing, grass cutting, tugs of war, ox-cart lifting and relay races with heavy sacks of corn. There is also something called aritopeka, which is a bit like cockfighting, but featuring sheep. However, for displays of unadulterated brute strength, there is nothing to beat the stone lifters, or harrijasotzaile. Dressed in leather padding, contestants repeatedly lift a series of granite and lead filled stones weighing up to 315 kilograms in a timed contest. Refinements include dragging them, or twirling them round their heads. The sport is believed to have originated with the huge weights traditionally lifted by farmers laboring on their land.

SEMANA GRANDE, or ASTE NAGUSIA: This event takes place during the second week in August. It's Bilbao's yearly week-long, 24 hour party, which includes special concerts, parades with traditional folkdances accompanied by the "txistu" (a 3-holed flute), the Herri Kilorak (above) and bullfights each afternoon featuring Spain's leading matadors.

EXCURSIONS FROM BILBAO:

To the beach: On that rare sunny day you take the metro out to the **Neguri** stop, then walk down among the enormous, extravagant turn-of-the-century mansions of the industrial elite of **Getxo** to the Paseo, which takes you down to the Puerto Deportivo. Here you will find movie theaters, tapas bars and one great restaurant, **Cubita Kaia**, and the beach. You can either dine at Cubita Kaia, or at one of the more casual restaurants, or return to the metro and head up to neighboring **Algorta**. The **Bar La Graniola**, with a British pub atmosphere, is a great place for lunch.

A pretty inland drive: If you have a car, take a morning drive to the scenic **Duresangado valley**, or better yet, spend an incredibly tranquil night in this beautiful, out of the way spot with a visit to the picturesque town of **Elorrio**, with its noble homes, beautiful gardens, stone crucifixes and an unusual cemetery at the hermitage of San Adrian de Argineta above the town, with 9th-10th century sarcophagi. Once there, take a short detour to the tiny hamlet of **Axpe-Atxondo**. This is a wonderful find if you like being in the country. The village is secluded in a misty, green valley with the Amboto peak hovering above and consists of a stone church with a unique Basque porch, the requisite frontón and one great restaurant.

There are two ancient stone farmhouses on the side of the hill overlooking the village. The **Mendi Goikoa**, another great Michelin starred restaurant, and the **Mendi Bekoa**, a lovely bed and breakfast. The names mean "upper and lower mountains" in Basque. This makes a perfect overnight stay. Tel: 94-682-0833; Fax: 94-682-1136). Mendi Goikoa's slogan is "where the silence is heard", while the Mendi Bekoa's slogan is "where the silence sleeps". It is said that Mari, a witch who watches over the Basques, lives atop the mountain's peak. When clouds hide the peak, Mari is at home. The restaurant is celebrated as much for its cooking as for its bucolic setting, and has attracted many notables. The King and Queen of Spain, Nobel Prize winners, and various Prime Ministers have all eaten in the dining room, which once served as a stable. People often drive up from Bilbao for lunch on Sundays. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

The rooms in the Mendi Bekoa are antique filled. The best room is number 4 with a long terrace overlooking the valley and beamed, open cathedral ceiling. No TV or mini-bar, but there is a phone. Stall shower. In the winter choose room 7 with a Jacuzzi shower, because room number 4 gets rather cold when the wind comes howling through, but a more peaceful spot you couldn't find anywhere. There's also a glassed in porch where a cold buffet breakfast of chorizo, fruits, breads, and cereals is served. It has a cozy bar. This is a perfect place to unwind after the madness of San Fermín, but in order to stay here over a weekend from March to October, you need to reserve far in advance, since it schedules many weddings where the wedding party takes all 11 rooms. Closed all of January.

The **Extiberre**, in the center of the hamlet, next to the church and the fronton, is quite the gourmet find. There is no indication that it's a restaurant from the outside, just the name written above the door of this pretty stone building. There's a simple bar downstairs where the locals hang out sipping cider and watching soccer on TV. The formal dining room is upstairs. You must reserve, particularly on weekends. Fabulous food. Was written up in Condé Nast Traveler magazine. Try the clams (almejas), wild mushrooms, their special filet mignon with cheese sauce (solomillo con salsa de queso Idiazábal) and the Idiazábal cheese ice cream desert. Fabulous! The hostess suggested that we try the local txakoli made in Elorrio, the **Mendraka**, and it was delicious. If both restaurants are full, you can drive down to the neighboring village of **Arazola-Atxondo** to the **Makatzeta Erreteguia** to sample their grilled meats and fabulous ice cream "copa" for dessert.

This valley doesn't have as much industrial blight surrounding it as other areas in the Bilbao-San Sebastian area.

A day-long coastal driving tour: Your first stop is in the historic city of **Gernika-Lumo**, the symbol of Basque nationhood and the site of the infamous saturation bombing by Hitler's Condor legion, "a dry run" to practice the Luftwaffe's theories of terror bombing in preparation for the saturation bombing prevalent during WWII. This historic tragedy occurred on market day, April 26, 1937. Picasso's painting, displayed in the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, immortalizes this massacre. Visit the "tree of Gernika", the symbol of Basque democracy, which survived the bombing. It can be found, still growing, next to the old Basque parliament building, **Casa de Juntas**. There is also a new, award-winning, Basque Peace Museum at the Plaza de los Fueros, 1, open from 9 am to 5 pm daily. Gernika remains a heavily industrialized town, considered a punishment by Franco after the civil war. Not much remains of its former glory, but it's worth a visit, regardless.

You can read an interesting article about Gernika and the Spanish Civil War at:
<http://travel.guardian.co.uk/countries/story/0,7451,709580,00.html>

While visiting Gernika, reserve a table for a great lunch at **Zallo Berri**, Juan Kaltzada, 79, just beyond the Red Cross building on the road leading out of town. Our friend, and famous Basque chef Joseba Jiménez de Jiménez, who owns The Harvest Vine in Seattle, first recommended this great restaurant to us. The new chef, Iñigo Ordorica, is making gastronomic waves with his new creations. www.zallobarri.com

For a treat in a beautifully decorated, atmospheric Basque farmhouse, head a few Kms up the road to **Forúa**, the well-to-do suburb of Gernika, to the restaurant **Baserri Maitea**. Follow the signs up the hill through an upscale housing development. The road may seem more like a farm road, but a great meal awaits you at its end. We had one of our most memorable lunches here. Very creative food beautifully presented and a gem of a find.

Leaving Gernika, you can take the BI 2235 northwest towards Mundaka and Bermeo.

About **Mundaka**: I enjoyed the surfing town of Mundaka, and Atalaya, and the Hotel Puerto the first time we stayed there. We recommended it to everyone, but when we returned last July we found it surprisingly run-down. A militant pro-ETA faction had draped the entire town with pro-ETA banners. It made us feel a little uncomfortable, particularly on the heels of two ETA political assassinations in the Basque Country the week before, so we didn't want to linger. I can't personally suggest it any more, but we do suggest you continue on to the historic whaling port of **Bermeo**. Once there, take a walk around the village, checking out the well-kept cemetery overlooking the sea, before continuing along the coastal until you reach the little islet of **San Juan de Gaztelugatxa** and its hermitage. For a real cardiovascular workout, take the 231 steps down to the Romanesque chapel. The scenic drive stops here, as **Bakio** is quite unappealing.

Retracing your steps to Gernika, veer off and follow the BI 638 to the northeast towards Gauteguiz-Arteaga. From here you take the BI 3237 out to the cute little fishing village of **Elantxobe**, whose fishermen's homes cling precariously to an almost vertical cliff. There's only one road into and out of this cliff side village, with a bus turnout where the street ends in the village plaza. If you find yourself in need of a nice lunch, drive on towards the village of **Ea** and stop 3.5 Kms before Ea in **Natxitua** at the modest little **Hotel Ermintxo** overlooking the water. After lunch, head back towards Elantxobe, driving east via the coastal on the BI 3238 to the fishing village of **Lekeitio**, impressive, as it is unique and your last stop, a very Basque, and very pro-independence community. It's well worth a stroll around the port and the village plaza. Be sure to visit to the Church of Santa

María de la Asunción, an interesting example of Basque Gothic construction. It's impossible to find a place to park here during the summer. After Lekeitio you head back to Bilbao. It's a very scenic drive along what is the very best of the Vizcayan coast.

CHARMING RURAL FARMHOUSE LODGING OUTSIDE OF BILBAO:

Near Gernika, on the road heading out towards the coast, in the small hamlet of **Gauteguiz-Arteaga**, you'll find one of the very finest examples of the Basque Country's Agroturismos (B&B's - we've tried several). The **Casa Txohebenta** is a beautiful stone farmhouse complete with wood beamed ceilings, a charming sitting room with a corner fireplace for its guests, six small, but cozy, antique filled rooms, all with private baths. Your hosts offer homemade cakes, marmalade and cheese fondue for breakfast. Located only 4 Kms from the beautiful **Laida** and **Laga** beaches on the coast, and in the heart of the **Urdaibai Nature Reserve** with the famous painted forest of Oma, by artist **Ibarrola**, and the Santimamiñe (Paleolithic) caves. It's even listed in the 2003 Michelin red guide. It's also on every critic's list of Spain's best **casas rurales** and is a favorite of cookbook author Teresa Barrenechea, author of "The Basque Table". The house has been featured in Pays Basque magazine and in a German interior design coffee table book, which your hostess, Arantza will be happy to show you. One caveat. The house is located along the highway, which was built after the house was constructed. And because it's a log structure, made of old railway ties, sounds tend to reverberate. Ask for a dormer room. They're quieter. The owners, Arantza and Txope, make up for these minor flaws with their warmth and genuine kindness. This is a very popular destination for people traveling through the area. Phone/fax: 946 25 4923 or email: txohebenta@jet.es

There are dozens of these very inexpensive, 50 euros or less, small "caseríos" throughout the Basque country, which is still relatively unknown in the U.S. You can pick up a brochure at any Basque tourist office, or view them, in English, at www.nekatur.net (this site doesn't work very well with a Mac)

July and August are very busy in the Basque country as Europeans tend to plan their vacations far in advance, so you should plan on reserving a room as early as possible. If the Txohebenta is full, try the **Urresti**, which is right around the corner, down a short country lane, away from the traffic. It's run by a younger, friendly couple that also rent an apartment on the premises. Both casas rurales are featured in Alistair Sawday's "Special Places to Stay/Spain" guide.