

Basque Country & Navarran Pyrenees

HIGHLIGHTS

- o Playing King of the Castle at the summit of Mt Autza on the **Frontier Views** walk (p147)
- o Poking your nose through **Atxular's Eye** (p133) and picnicking in gorgeous alpine meadows
- o Peering into the nests of massive griffon vultures and paying your respects at a pagan shrine on the **Vultures & Vertigo** walk (p149)
- o Clinging precariously to the summit of Anboto, the scariest mountain in the Basque Country, on the **Urkiola: Anboto Ridge** walk (p137)

Area: 22,670 sq km

Average summer high: 28°C

Population: 3.04 million

The Basque mountains link Cordillera Cantábrica and the Pyrenees in a series of dramatic east–west *sierras* reaching a maximum altitude of 1551m. Parting the area's plentiful waters into those destined to wind up in the Atlantic and those bound for the Mediterranean (via the Río Ebro), these feisty, magnetic limestone ranges shelter endless walking opportunities. Inevitably, legends, curious cultural practices, or enticing history enhance the outstanding trails.

Euskadi is a small region (7261 sq km) composed of three provinces – Bizkaia (Vizcaya), Gipuzkoa (Guipúzcoa) and Araba (Álava) – poor in agriculture but abundant in raw materials, such as wood, iron and water. Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa border the Atlantic while inland Álava is distinctly Mediterranean. Navarra, a separate autonomous community or region in the Spanish system, shares historical ties with Euskadi. The name Euskal Herria refers to the historical Basque Country where Euskara, the mysterious Basque language, was and is still spoken. The remaining three of Euskal Herria's seven provinces are in France. Euskara bears no relationship to known languages, leading linguists to believe it's a Stone Age survivor. Megalithic burial chambers (dolmens and menhirs) are frequently concentrated on mountain passes and high pastures oriented towards the sun.

Coast-dwelling Basques have long enjoyed prosperity through commerce, fishing and emigration. Noncoastal Basques lived in urban areas or are dispersed across the rugged countryside in largely self-sufficient farmsteads called *baserria* in Euskara and *caseríos* in Spanish (see the boxed text Basque & Navarran Farmsteads, p135). Shepherding, as practised for thousands of years, is in decline. Stone huts on the high summer pastures are still constants, but shepherds now usually leave their flocks in the mountains and make periodic visits rather than live with them.



ENVIRONMENT

Geologically speaking, the Basque mountains are young when compared with the Cordillera Cantábrica or the Pyrenees. They are composed of limestone and sandstone formed from accumulated ocean-floor sediments, and have been shaped by karstification. This term is used to describe how limestone – calcium carbonate – reacts over time to the eroding properties of water and air. Karstification is the most important erosive process at work producing the dramatic, jagged peaks, rifts, caves and ravines found throughout the region. The area's only granite range, Aiako Harria (Peñas de Aia), is near San Sebastián.

Exploitation of the iron-rich hills is an ancient practice: foundries have produced high-quality iron since the 9th century. By the 14th century many ironworks lined river banks, using water to power their hammers and bellows, and severely damaging the rivers' ecosystems in the process. Beech and oak woods also suffered. To produce 100kg of iron, smiths needed nine sacks of hardwood (oak and beech)

charcoal produced by carefully burning huge quantities of wood. Limestone was also painstakingly reduced to lime (to fertile fields) in enormous ovens built in the woods. Nineteenth-century industrialisation dramatically depleted the ancient forests, leaving many hillsides barren. Monterey pine was planted to reforest and is used in paper mills and furniture, providing supplementary income for farmers. Red spruce, Japanese larch (a deciduous conifer) and Lawson cypress are also commonly planted for commercial harvest. Native mixed forests of ash, hawthorn, birch, hazel and maple are more limited in extent. Grand, extensive beech forests still thrive, fortunately.

Apart from deer, foxes and several other small mammals, birds are the primary wildlife you'll encounter. Atlantic-facing oak groves shelter woodpeckers, coal tits, woodcocks and the tawny owl all thrive. Above 600m, hanging out with the beech, look for black woodpeckers, thrushes and the nuthatch. Griffon and Egyptian vultures and red-billed choughs reign in the limestone heights.

