



French Basque Country

POP 272,100

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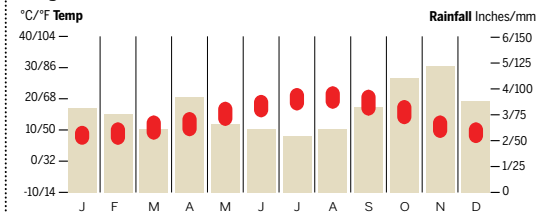
Why Go?

Jammed between the brilliant blue Bay of Biscay and the craggy foothills of the Pyrenees, the Pays Basque (Basque Country) feels one step removed from the rest of France – hardly surprising, since it's been an independent nation for much of its history and has more in common with the nearby Basque regions of Spain. Proud, independent and fiery, the people of the Basque Country are fiercely protective of their history and culture, whether it's their passion for *pelota* or their fondness for their spicy chilli pepper, *le piment d'Espelette*. It's a fascinating place.

The region's biggest town is the glitzy beach resort of Biarritz, famous for its sweeping beaches and thriving surf scene. Nearby Bayonne is considered the true capital of the Basque Country, and hosts a major Basque festival every July. Along the coast you'll find surf towns and fishing ports, while lots of sleepy hilltop villages nestle among the hills towards the Spanish border.

When to Go

Bayonne



May Chocolate time in Bayonne. Empty beaches and spring flowers of the mountains are all yours.

Aug Beaches are packed, and the Fêtes de Bayonne is in full swing.

Sep-Oct Autumnal colours are glorious in the hills, and the surf is as good as it gets.

Bayonne

POP 46,200



Stretching along the banks of the Rivers Adour and Nive, the waterside city of Bayonne is one of the prettiest in southwest France, and the capital of the French Basque Country. It's been a strategic stronghold since medieval times, and the old ramparts are still visible around the outskirts of the old town, but it's Bayonne's pretty half-timbered buildings, riverside restaurants and shady cobbled streets that make it worthy of exploration.

Sights

The Rivers Adour and Nive split central Bayonne into three: St-Esprit, the area north of the Adour; Grand Bayonne, the oldest and most attractive part of the city, on the western bank of the Nive; and the rather grungy but very Basque quarter of Petit Bayonne to the east. To the west, Bayonne meets the suburban sprawl of Anglet (famed for its beaches) and the glamorous seaside resort of Biarritz; collectively they're often known as BAB.

Musée Basque et de l'Histoire de Bayonne


MUSEUM

( 05 59 59 08 98; www.musee-basque.com; 37 quai des Corsaires; adult/child €6.50/free;  10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, closed Mon rest of year) If you're still getting to grips with the complex culture and history of the Basque region, this excellent ethnographic museum makes a great place to start. It's crammed with artefacts, from traditional costumes, artwork and archaeological ephemera to a reconstruction of a typical Basque *etxe* (home). Labelling is in French, Spanish and Basque only – but English information sheets are available.

In July and August free 'nocturnal' visits are possible on Thursday evenings at 8.30pm.

Cathédrale Ste-Marie

CATHEDRAL

(place Louis Pasteur;  10-11.45am & 3-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 3.30-6.15pm Sun, cloister 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm) The twin towers of Bayonne's Gothic cathedral soar above the city. Construction began in the 13th century, and was com-

pleted in 1451; the mismatched materials in some ways resemble Lego blocks. Above the north aisle are three lovely stained-glass windows; the oldest, in the Chapelle St-Jérôme, dates from 1531. The entrance to the stately 13th-century **cloister** is on place Louis Pasteur.

Ramparts


CITYWALL

Once the defensive barrier that kept the city safe from attack, Bayonne's 17th-century fortifications are now covered in grass and enveloped in pretty parks. You can walk the stretches of the ramparts that rise above bd Rempart Lachepaillet and rue Tour de Sault.

Festivals & Events


Fêtes de Bayonne

CULTURAL

(www.fetes.bayonne.fr;  early Aug) A five-day extravaganza of food, drink, dance and fireworks. See p644 for more information.

Foire au Jambon


FOOD

(Ham Fair;  Mar/Apr) During Easter week, the town hosts a Ham Fair, honouring *jambon de Bayonne*, the acclaimed local ham. You may think this is just a recently thought up touristy gimmick to sell ham, but no – this fair has taken place annually since 1462!

Sleeping



Auberge de Jeunesse

HOSTEL €

(HI;  05 59 58 70 00; www.fuaj.org; 19 rte des Vignes; dm €22-26;  mid-Apr-Sep, reception 9am-noon & 6-10pm;  ) The nearest hostel is actually in Anglet, but it's not for wallflowers – with droves of surfers and backpackers passing through, it's a real party place, complete with its own Scottish pub and surf-film screenings. Rooms are mostly seven-bed dorms, and in summer it doesn't accept families. Catch bus 4 from outside Bayonne's town hall, then walk the last 500m.

Hôtel des Arceaux

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €

( 05 59 59 15 53; www.hotel-arceaux.com; 26 rue Port Neuf; d €69-89; ) On the pretty street of Port-Neuf, this simple hotel offers colourful, no-frills rooms, some of which share a bathroom, some of which are suited to families; they're all different, so ask to see a few. It's a jumble of old furniture, faded prints and chaise longues; there's even a vintage rocking horse in the lounge. Head to the 1st floor for reception.

Péniche Djébellé

HOUSEBOAT €€

( 05 59 25 77 18; www.djebelle.com; face au 17 Quai de Lesseps; d incl breakfast €150;  closed

FAST FACTS

Area 3039 sq km

Local industry Tourism, agriculture

Signature drinks Cider, Izarra