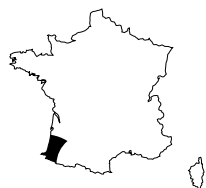


French Basque Country



Gently sloping from the western foothills of the Pyrenees into the deep sapphire-blue Bay of Biscay, the Basque Country (Euskal Herria in the Basque language; Le Pays Basque in French) straddles modern-day France and Spain. Yet this feisty, independent land remains profoundly different from either of the nation states that have adopted it.

The French side (or as it's diplomatically referred to here, the 'northern side'; 'Iparralde' in Basque) accounts for roughly 20% of the Basque country, and is famed for its glitzy beach resort, Biarritz. Bronzed surfers zoom around Biarritz's hilly coastline on mopeds, and oiled sun-seekers pack its beaches like glistening sardines.

Together with sprawling Anglet and Bayonne, 8km to the east, Biarritz forms an urban area often called BAB, with a population around 110,000. Biarritz, however, is the least Basque of the trio. Easily the most Basque is the French Basque Country's cultural and economic capital, Bayonne, whose authentically preserved old town is bisected by bridges arcing over its confluence of rivers. Traditional Basque music, sports and festivals are an integral part of Bayonne's local culture, and its good transport links make it an ideal base for discovering the region.

To the southwest of this conurbation is St-Jean de Luz, a delightful seaside township and working fishing port.

Up in the French Basque Country's lush hills, little one-street villages and green valleys traversed by hiking trails are easily explored from the walled town of St-Jean Pied de Port, an age-old pit stop for pilgrims heading over the border to Santiago de Compostela.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover just what makes the local chocolate so scrumptious during a behind-the-scenes factory tour in **Bayonne** (p691)
- Chug up the scenic mountainside railway, **Le Petit Train de la Rhune** (p704)
- Watch world-class surfers from fashionable café terraces or ride the waves yourself in and around **Biarritz** (p694)
- Taste traditional Basque dishes incorporating freshly caught seafood at **St-Jean de Luz** (p702)
- Browse local produce and handmade products at the farmers market in the age-old pilgrims' outpost, **St-Jean Pied de Port** (p704)



■ POPULATION: 600,000

■ AREA: 13,400 SQ KM



History

Recent DNA testing shows that the Basque people have inhabited the region for at least 30,000 years – the only people in Europe to have remained in their region for so long. This was made possible by the fact that the area was still inhabitable during the last ice age. Roman sources mention a tribe called the Vascones living in the area and it's attested that the Basques took over what is now southwestern France in the 6th century. The Romans never managed to conquer the area, however, as the Basques were able to shelter in the mountains and continue to live off fishing in the ocean. Converting to Christianity in the 10th century, they are still known for their strong Catholicism.

After resisting invasions, the Basques on both sides of the Pyrenees emerged from the turbulent Middle Ages with a significant local autonomy, which they retained in France until the Revolution. The French Basque Country, then part of the duchy of Aquitaine, was under Plantagenet rule from the mid-12th century until the mid-15th century.

Basque nationalism flourished before and during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Until the death of the Spanish dictator Franco, in 1975, many Basque nationalists and anti-Franco guerrillas from the other side of the Pyrenees sheltered in France. More recently, Spanish Euskadi ta Azkatasuna (ETA) terrorists have sought sanctuary in France. Failed negotiations mean trouble occasionally still flares up (such as the attack on Madrid airport in 2007 that killed two people), but it's a

small, extremist minority that doesn't reflect the peaceful nationalism that predominates in the region.

Getting There & Away

All roads and train lines lead to Bayonne, which is easily accessible from the rest of France.

Rail travel to Spain involves switching trains at the frontier since the Spanish track gauge is narrower. Take an SNCF train to Hendaye, where you can pick up the EuskoTren, familiarly known as 'El Topo' (The Mole), a shuttle train that runs regularly via Irún to San Sebastián.

Bus travel between Bayonne and Bilbao, Spain, via Biarritz, St-Jean de Luz and San Sebastián twice daily – see p693.

The airport (p693) serving Bayonne and Biarritz has domestic flights as well as services to the UK, Ireland and other European destinations.

BAYONNE

pop 44,200

Bayonne (Baiona in Basque) is defined by the so-name 'river junction' of the River Adour and the smaller River Nive, as well as by its compactness. Until 1907, it was forbidden to build outside the town's fortifications, resulting in the narrow, curved streets of Petit Bayonne, with riverside buildings clad in red and green shutters and shoals of waterside restaurants. Although you can cross the architecturally preserved town centre on foot in about 15 minutes, you can easily spend hours discovering its hidden laneways and staircases, and remnants of its medieval past.

In addition to its chocolates, Bayonne is famous for its prime cured ham, and for the *baïonnette* (bayonet), developed here in 1640 on rue des Faures ('Blacksmiths' Street').

History

Bayonne prospered from the 13th to 15th centuries under the protection of the Plantagenet kings who ruled Aquitaine. The town's subsequent 18th-century commercial prosperity was fuelled by Basque privateers, who landed cargoes much more valuable and sweeter scented than the tonnes of cod caught off the coast of Newfoundland by the substantial Basque fishing fleet. This already-lively town now buzzes even more with the recent opening of the city's new university.