

# BasqueCountry

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## Independence days

The locals' fierce sense of community and desire to keep their culture alive make the province of Navarre one of the most traditional in the country

I'm standing on a mountainside in the Pyrenees at an ancient weather-worn stone that marks the Spanish/French border, catching my breath after half an hour of hard tramping into the mountains. The sky is blue, the air perfectly clear. Somewhere to the north-west is the dark Atlantic sea. The thick grassland stretches above me, turning eventually into snow-capped peaks.

Seeing the border stone reminds me of a conversation I had a couple of days earlier with a middle-aged Basque man called Koikili who described himself as an "unemployed smuggler". For years he smuggled anything from car parts to cows back and forth across the border until trade barriers within the EU were withdrawn in 1992. "It was," he laughed, "a good living until the EU came along." His grandfather, father and uncle were also in the trade - during the war, the smugglers' routes were vital in getting allied airmen out of France.

Koikili is typical of the people who live in this mountainous region: traditionally farmers, they have a proud, independent - even rebellious - streak. Although the French Basques have been essentially normalised over

the decades by a centralist government that has grown adept at dealing with dissidents, those in Spain - particularly here in the northern part of Navarre province - maintain a fierce sense of cultural independence. Under Franco's long rule, Basque culture and language were effectively outlawed, but now Basques are proud of their heritage.

Georgina Howard, my host for this trip, is a British woman who runs a small company, Pyrenean Experience, specialising in Spanish classes and walking holidays designed to immerse you in the local Basque culture, from music and food to drinks and festivals.

I'm staying at Lesko Borda, a luxurious converted 18th-century farmhouse in Ameztia, a hamlet high above the mountain village of Ituren. It's an hour's drive from the airport at Biarritz (in France) and close to Howard's house, where we met each day. First she took me to a restaurant, Donamaria'ko Benta (+34 948 450708, [donamariako.com](http://donamariako.com)), in the village of Donamaria, to meet a local friend, Mixel Gereka, who, over a traditional meal of peppers stuffed with veal paté, local pork and lamb cutlets, explained that Basque identity is in many ways really about the language, Euskera.

There are currently about 700,000 Euskera speakers in the world, with more than half a million of them here in Spain. In theory Euskera now enjoys official status, but Basque people are still looked down on in parts of Spain, according to Mixel.

The separatist terrorist group Eta is a factor. "If I defend Basque culture," he says, "I am seen by many Spaniards



After ewe... dressing up for the annual march of the Joaldunak

as sympathising with Eta." In fact, he says, few Basques actually support Eta these days: although they feel unfairly treated by the central government, they would rather find political solutions to the question of whether the Basque region should enjoy complete autonomy rather than the devolved status it currently has.

There is little organised tourism in these mountains, and this means that visitors who make the effort can really experience local life. Georgina is happy to translate for anyone who doesn't speak Spanish. One day we took a walk along the top of a lush green valley to

visit Ignathio, a farmer who grew up in a traditional Basque farmhouse where he still lives with his family. Farm animals are kept on the ground floor to keep the first floor warm, and Ignathio took us down to see the cows in their dimly lit shed.

From Ignathio we learned about the Basque obsession with "rural sports": pushing carts, lifting stones and chopping wood - people in this part of the world pride themselves on their connection with the land. Another of Howard's neighbours, Maika Aristegi, 36, is women's wood-chopping champion for the area, and she gave

us a demonstration of this ancient skill at her home.

I had the next day to myself to explore San Sebastián's medieval streets and sweeping beaches, and sample the *pinxtos* and *sidra* (local cider). Then it was back into the hills to the most full-on cultural experience of my week: the spring march of the Joaldunak. This Basque pagan festival is unique to the neighbouring villages of Ituren and Zubieta, and has been held every February since Roman times. Wearing sheepskins and pointed hats, and with gigantic bells tied to their backs, the men tramp around the village to usher in spring. It's followed by a party for the whole village.

The culture here is fascinating, but what makes the trip spectacular is the incredible mountain scenery. Beyond that border post we entered a rocky conservation park called Las Peñas de Itxusi which is also a vulture breeding ground. As we crossed streams and stared down into sheer gullies, clouds of vultures wheeled overhead. In this strangely isolated and secretive place, I almost felt I could be a 19th-century shepherd, a second-world-war British pilot or a 20th-century smuggler. And I'm glad that - for possibly the wrong reasons - this part of the world isn't quite ready to open up yet.

### Maxton Walker

• The next Walking & Basque Pagan Traditions tour is on 12-19 September, and costs from £850 all-inclusive with Pyrenean Experience (0121 711 3428, [pyreneanexperience.com](http://pyreneanexperience.com)). Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies from Stansted to Biarritz from £30 return.