

SPAIN SPECIAL

A festival of witches and rituals in the Basque Pyrenees

In the mountain village of Ituren each January, residents have a unique way of banishing winter



The Joaldunak bell-wearers
ALAMY

Georgina Howard | Sunday January 16 2022, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

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At the heart of the tiny village of Ituren in the Spanish Pyrenees stands the “Ding Dong” school, the Pulunpa Eskola, as it’s called in Euskara (Basque). The name chosen in a competition by the children of the village is not an obvious choice in this shadowy northern fringe of Navarra. Straddling the Spanish-French border, these mysterious mountains have not only offered refuge to smugglers, witches, penniless pilgrims and espadrilled Allied airmen, but also to the Basque culture — preserving its language, traditions and pagan beliefs.

But for the villagers of Ituren, their identity is also unequivocally linked to bells — bells that chase away the cold, dark and disease of the winter months, and herald the light, warmth and fertility of spring.

The Ituren carnival of the Joaldunak (bell wearers), on the last Monday of January, has its roots in pagan celebrations politely hijacked by the Church. During the 20 years I have lived in Ituren I have come to realise that the constant tussle between pagan and Christian rites is part and parcel of Basque mountain life. As are the bells.



Ituren, Spain
ALAMY

During my first summer here, newly arrived from Birmingham, I would awake to the chiming sheep bells that echo skittishly as the flocks graze the green valley slopes. It was not until one frozen, windy morning the following January, on a visit to my neighbour's farm, that I started to fathom the true depths of the Ituren carnival, and exactly who these Joaldunak might be.

On entering the yard I found horse-hair whips lying on a bench next to a maelstrom of pink and blue ribbons attached to conical hats. To ward off the witches a large silver thistle was fastened to the lintel above the door. I found the grandmother sitting beneath a crucifix in the kitchen, warming her back against the wood-burning stove. "*Ya llegan los carnavales!*" she grinned. Carnival time is on its way!

The next morning I headed down the mountain towards the centre of Ituren. Even before I arrived in the village I could hear the bells. The valleys, like giant conch shells, echoed with their sound: a deep, primeval mantra that ricocheted between the mountain slopes.

Entering the village I picked my way between broken plastic beakers, clods of manure and a dubious entrail or two. On the bridge demons in miniskirts and chains — with grotesque masks and bloodshot eyes — writhed and screamed. Children with fluorescent wigs flung grey ash into the crowds while a pasty-thighed youth in a G-string and fishnet tights lunged at me with a chainsaw — the blades, mercifully, removed. Centre-stage in the square, two severed car bodies, fitted with antlers, butted each other like stag beetles, their engines screaming while acrid black fumes filled the air.



The chaos was gripping and terrifying. Wiping the muck and gore from my clothes I stood my ground, thrilled. Then, as a second cowpat landed in my recently shampooed hair, I abandoned my philosophical musings. A glass of wine in the village bar became an increasingly attractive idea. But then the Joaldunak appeared from the woods.

The eerie whine of a ram's horn heralded their arrival, then the troupe appeared out of the mists. In two parallel lines, some 40 to 50 men marched along the river path, whips in hand and pointed hats like miniature maypoles strapped to their heads. Sodden sheepskins hugged muscular shoulders while coarse ropes held copper bells strapped to the embroidered skirts around their waists, their deep dirge ringing out at every lunge of their hips.

Accompanying the Joaldunak was a shepherd holding the chains of a huge carnival "bear" with ram-horn ears, which — swiping at the crowd — sent children and parents screaming into each other's arms. As the Joaldunak marched on, the sea of monsters stepped aside to let them pass. The arrivals were the good guys, dispersing the dark and disease of winter, and ushering in the light and fertility of spring with the rhythmic flick of their lace-petticoated hips.





A villager in Ituren
ALAMY

Now, after two decades in Ituren, I do not wear clean clothes to the carnival. Spotting my teenage daughter among the thrashing demons in the square, I note the auburn highlights in her black Basque hair, the physical evidence that my genes have mixed with theirs. But perhaps I have become part of them in other ways too. This atavistic pounding of the bells seems to pull at some timeless thread within me, concertinaing past into present; human into beast; Brummie into Basque.

Ituren's carnival is from January 31 to February 1. Georgina Howard runs a guesthouse in the hills above Ituren that offers holidays focused on walking, natural history, language immersion or creative writing. Seven nights' full board from £1,000pp (pyreneanexperience.com). Fly to Bilbao

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