

BASQUE

in the

GLORY

Words SUSAN GOUGH HENLY

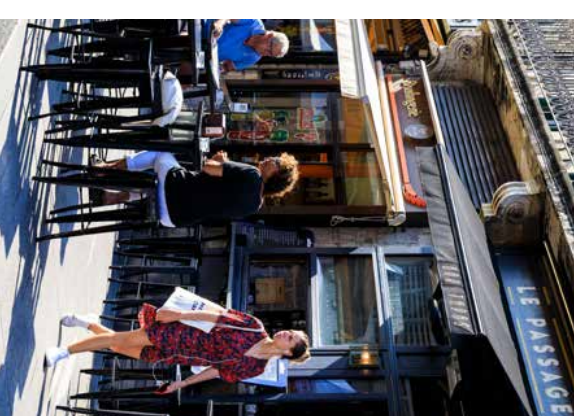
*La Grande Plage loves
the crowds in Biarritz,
switched over by a 19th-
century lighthouse.*

FIND FINE DINING, EXQUISITE CRAFTS AND TO-DIE-FOR CHOCOLATE DELICACIES WRAPPED IN A DEEP PRIDE AND THE UNIQUE CULTURE OF THE FRENCH BASQUE COUNTRY.





FROM LEFT: The sandy Villa Bihua, Biarritz. Café culture on the streets of the glamorous French Basque Country city of Biarritz.



When people ask me where my favourite place in the world is, the French Basque Country wins hands down every time. Let me tell you why. Where else in the world can you go sunning in the morning, lunch on just-caught tuna, then spend the afternoon hiking verdant hillsides before feasting on the likes of rare-breed pork, nutty sheep's cheese and hand-crafted chocolate in any number of 300-year-old country inns?

And it's not just about a beautiful landscape and great food; either, its culture is as fascinating as it is a little mystifying. The Euskadi language bears no resemblance to any other European tongue and while you may not understand the lyrics, the haunting melodies of Basque choirs will send chills down your spine. The Basque labdan cross, often carved on tombstones, is also mysterious but from what I gather it signifies unity, life, consciousness and form, and is a powerful symbol of Basque spirit. Then there's the almost balletic Basque ballgame of pelota, a gripping spectator sport that kids learn to play on every village fronton court. There are exquisite artisanal products, too, like Hermès-quality leather goods, Basque linens, even meteorologically crafted walking sticks, to take home. Say the word 'Basque' and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and gracious San Sebastián with its galaxy of Michelin-starred marvels like Azark, Alcegaire and Mugaritz come to mind. While these are indeed drool-worthy, they are all in Spanish Basque Country. The home of the Basque people straddles the border between Spain and France in the Western Pyrenees. There are four Basque provinces in Spain and three in France. The Spanish Basque country is much more developed and industrialised (the Guggenheim anchors a post-industrial Bilbao). It was also, until recently, much more stridently political due, in part, to the region's persecution by the fascist regime of General Franco. »



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The centre of medieval Bayonne; Cédric Béchade, chef of *L'halguy*; Biarritz; A typically pretty house in the village of Ainhoa; The vibrant colours of the Pyrenees. **OPPOSITE:** Fishing boats bring in their catches at Port des Pêcheurs, Biarritz.



While Spain has a reputation for discouraging regional identities, France is renowned for the distinctiveness of its provinces.



PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN GOUGH HENLY (CHEF CÉDRIC BÉCHADE)

The French Basques share the same language, culture and traditions yet have retained a more bucolic, agrarian lifestyle in the deep green valleys and foothills of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques. Add some class; seaside resorts alongside traditional fishing communities on the Bay of Biscay and you have a gem hiding in plain sight. This bling-free coastal getaway is not undiscovered however; it's popular with the French as well as an motley crew of surfer dudes from all parts of the map, but you get the feeling that both camps like to keep it under wraps lest the area get overrun like – *quelli borron* – Nice and Saint-Tropez.

While Spain has a reputation for discouraging regional identities, France is renowned for the distinctiveness of its provinces. Think Brittany, Burgundy and Provence. In terms of cultural hegemony however, the French Basque takes the gâteau – the Gâteau Basque at that, which is filled with black cherries for which the region is famous. Let's start in Biarritz. Napoleon III transformed this fishing and whaling village when he built a summer palace for his Princess Eugénie (now the Hôtel du Palais). Just like that, the health benefits of sea bathing became fashionable among European nobility who descended on Biarritz for the season in the late 1800s. Screenwriter Peter Viertel had almost as much impact in 1957 when he came to film *The Sun Also Rises*. Impressed by the waves, he sent for his sunboard from California and single-handedly introduced surfing to Europe.

Today, the imposing Art Deco casino shares prime real estate behind the Grande Plage with Belle Époque villas and modern condos while barefoot surfers rub shoulders with impeccably dressed French matrons who come for thalassotherapy spa treatments. The mélange only adds to the charm.

I love to stroll along the seaside promenade, framed with wispy tamarisk trees and gigantic hydrangeas, and admire the ocean as it swirls around craggy rocks and across the golden beaches. Olona, beside the Art Deco Aquarium, is a great spot for sunset drinks before feasting on sparkling fresh seafood at Chez Albert in the tucked-away Port des Pêcheurs. Or, for a ship-up dinner, head to IOQR at Hôtel Regina.

Half an hour's drive south, red-shuttered beach framing the calm waters of a crescent-shaped bay. As attractive as it is, this little beach town is also a busy fishing port for anchovies, sardines, line-caught red tuna and hake, which are for sale at the covered market. No Belle Époque mansions here, but there is the Church of Saint-John the Baptist with its gilt altar and carved wooden balconies, where in 1660 a youthful Sun King, Louis XIV, married Maria Theresa, the Spanish Infanta, to seal peace between France and Spain.

These days, just down the road from the church at Malson Adam you can still buy the same chocolates and macarons that tempted Maria Theresa. There are loads of boutiques for Basque linens and espadrilles along pedestrian Rue Gambetta, but I like to head down a side street to Manufaktur where artisan Sandrine Bordenave handcrafts bags and accessories using leather from the same Basque tannery used by Hermès and Louis Vuitton. And for a seafood lunch, I go to Basque stalwart Amantzeak on the banks of the Nivelle River in neighbouring Ciboure. There's a whole coastline to discover on the walking trail linking Biarritz with San Sebastian and plenty of good food along the way. I love La Plancha, smack bang behind Ibarritz beach, for gailte-infused whole seabass washed down with a >>





FROM LEFT: Lazy river fishing on the outskirts of Saint-Etienne-de-Baïgorry; a man delves into a trout for supper at Hotel Arce.
OPPOSITE: Traditional red-timbered houses at Ciboure.

Immaculate white-washed red-and-green-shuttered houses line up in Sare, Ainhoa, and La Bastide-Clarence, all listed among 'the most beautiful villages of France'.

fluffy white from the Irouleguy Basque wine region. Also check out Elements, Le Flooding guide's best restaurant of 2018, where hipster chef Anthony Ojofollet creates flavour-packed dishes with no sugar, no gluten and no milk products.

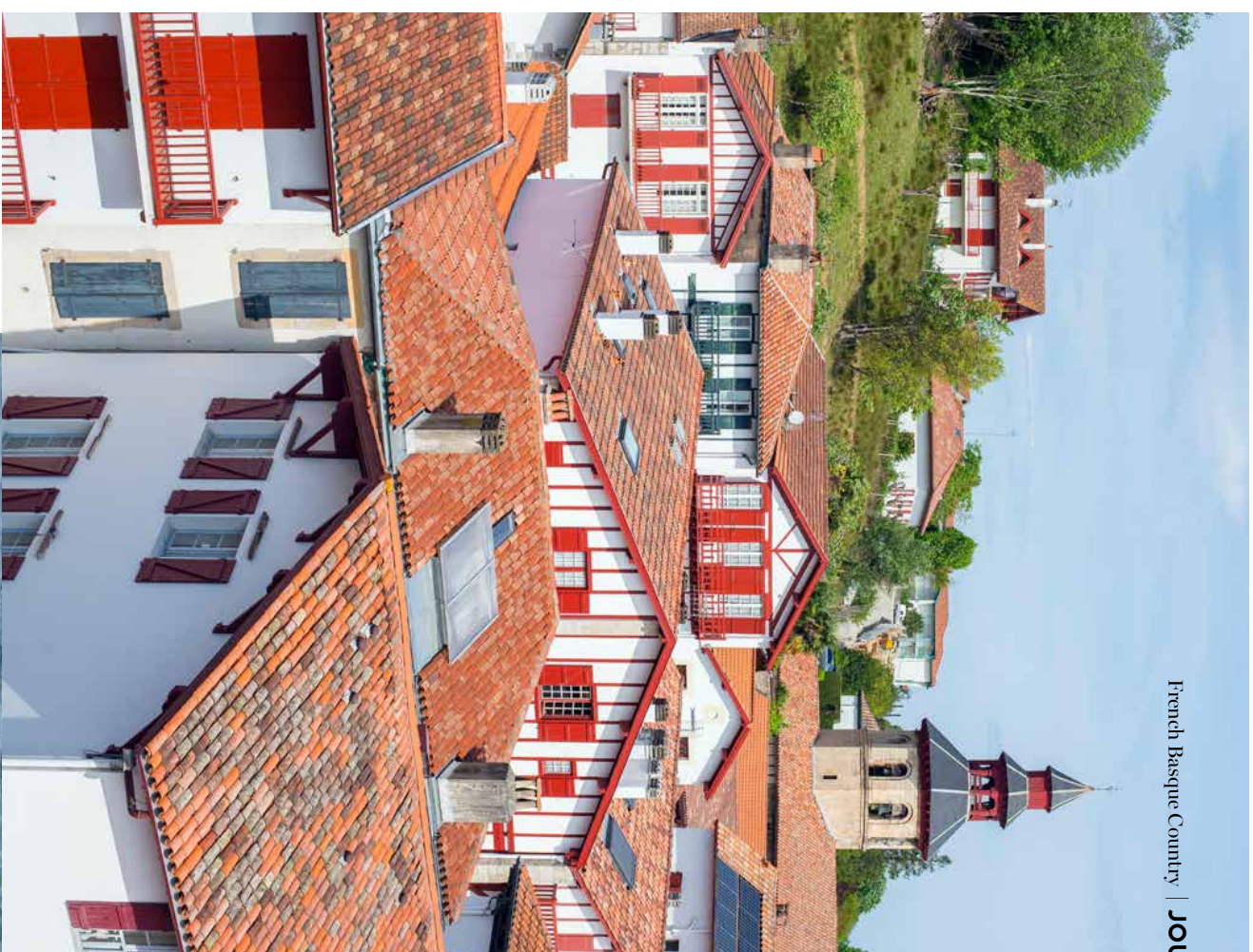
Head inland now to meander around those fusiform green hills dotted with black-faced sheep, contented cows, sturdy Pyrenean Portok ponies and floppy-eared Basque black pigs. Immaculate white-washed red-and-green-shuttered houses line up in Sare, Ainhoa and La Bastide-Clarence, all listed among the most beautiful villages of France. But there are dozens of equally charming spots, including Espelette, Ascain, Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle, Saint-Etienne-de-Baïgorry and Cambo-les-Bains, where Edmond Rostand, author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, used his profits to build a superb house and gardens not far from the thermal spa that first drew him here.

I can't wait to lace up my walking shoes to explore lovely trails that ring the villages or head into the Lary Forest, the largest beech forest in Europe. Diehard hikers might like to join the pilgrims at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port (the foot of the pass), the last stop in France on the Route de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle. Both farming and hospitality remain family affairs everywhere in the Basque country. At Hotel Ihurra in Ainhoa, Michelin-starred chef Xavier Izabal follows in the footsteps of his grandmother to create sublime dishes with local lamb, foie gras and tuna, enhanced with honey, cipe mushrooms and herbs delivered to his door by farmers and foragers.

Fifth-generation hoteliers Pascal and Christine Arce ran the atmospheric Hotel Arce alongside the River Nive in the shadow of Isepeyru Pass in Saint-Etienne-de-Baïgorry. The house specialty is trout, which are scooped from the river the moment you order.

Even newcomers like Michelin-starred chef Cédric Béchade keep things in the family. With his wife Martine, he transformed an ancient inn into the contemporary L'Alberge Basque with striking views to La Rhune mountain. His resume may include stints with Alain Ducasse and Jean-François Pêche in Paris, but Cédric fell in love with the Basque country for the lifestyle, for the quality of the local products and, he says, because the farming culture is so fierce and proud. He works closely with farmers who are resuscitating almost-extinct races of local ducks and cows, which he transforms into inventive dishes that reference Basque traditions.

There are plenty of ways to connect with local producers here in some of the most beautiful farmland in France. In the Pays des Aldudes, just near the Spanish border south of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Pierre Oizich has almost single-handedly restored the race of black Basque pigs which he now raises free range so they have access to chestnut, oak and beech forests. You can do a 1.3-kilometre walk to see how the pigs live, as well as admiring their million-dollar views. I snook up on cured ham, sausages, pâté, foie gras, sheep's cheese and more at the shop and restaurant, where I make another delicious discovery: aromatic Izarra Basque liqueur made from Pyrenean herbs. >>



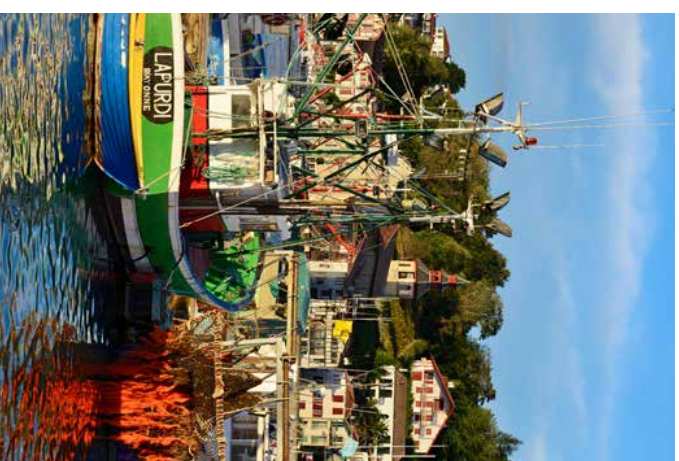
PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN GOUGH HENLY (RIVER AND FISHING)



PASSION FOR CHOCOLATE

Neither beach resort or hinterland village, **BAYONNE** sometimes gets lost amidst the many attractions of the French Basque Country but this walled town, with its narrow, brightly coloured, half-timbered houses, Roman ruins and two medieval castles, is perhaps the region's most surprising hidden gem. It was here that Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition brought their knowledge of chocolate making to France and the rest of Europe. By the mid-19th century there were 34 chocolatiers in the city. Today there are just six but each offers its own specialities for a very pleasant chocolate crawl.

Until the mid 1850s, chocolate was only enjoyed in liquid form; today chocolate moussoux is still the attraction at lace-table-clothed **CAZENAVE**. South American cacao, vanilla and/or cinnamon is whipped with fresh local milk for an ambrosial drink. At **ATELIER DU CHOCOLAT** watch chocolatiers use towels to create large sheets of chocolate that are made into delicious bouquets. **PARIES** specialises in chocolate and caramel delicacies called kamogas, while **PUNODBAT** offers a wide selection of single-origin bars as well as pralines and ganache chocolates. The newest kid on the block, **MONSIEUR TXOKOLA** is a tiny atelier in Petit Bayonne's old Jewish quarter, where you can watch every step of cacao being transformed into chocolate.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Fishing boats moored in the village of Cibiran on the bay of Biarritz. Surfers enjoy breaks at Biarritz. The Basque Country's tub fermented produces rucifal delicacies like Ossau-Iraty sheep cheese. **OPPOSITE:** Multicoloured houses in the seaside town of Bayonne.

The mildly spicy Basque peppers are tended as carefully as grape vines and dry in bright red strands in the village.

In Espelette, a duo of interpretation centres offers insights into two other Basque Appellation d'Origine (AOP) classified products: the piment or red pepper of Espelette, and Ossau-Iraty sheep's cheese. The mildly spicy Basque peppers are tended as carefully as grape vines and dry in bright red strands in the village. They season lots of Basque dishes, even chocolate, while the milky sheep's milk cheese tastes of flower-filled summer mountain pastures. The Route des Fromages shows all the farms you can visit to buy cheese.

All this touring is thirsty work, so stop for a tasting at Akerbeliz (Basque for black sheep) brewery, the oldest of the region's craft brew spots. Next door is the weaving workshop and store of Laritge 1910, one of the major Basque linen producers. It's fascinating to see how colourful thread is woven on traditional looms with the signature seven stripes representing the Basque provinces. Not far away in Larressou,

the fifth, sixth and seventh generations of the Bergan family still custom-craft mukhila, traditional Basque walking sticks with leather and silver handles and hidden sabres. Gifted to presidents, artists and sportsmen around the world, they are a symbol of honour and a walking companion through life.

There are so many ways to connect with Basque culture while exploring this gob-smackingly beautiful place, but for one of the most appealing is to savour a long lunch on the flower-filled terrace of the Maison Olibabida. Owned by the proud Basque Figeoaga family, this 16th-century family house, tucked into a verdant hillside, gives a visceral sense of how the home, or etxe, and delicious food is at the heart of everything Basque. Good food, a good home and a strong culture: it's the perfect Basque trinity. Add 36 kilometres of sublime beaches to the mix and, like I said, you have the ideal destination. **IT**

DETAILS

GETTING THERE
Fly with Air France or KLM to Paris before catching an internal flight to Biarritz.

STAYING THERE

By the sea
Mercure Biarritz Centre Plaza; accorhotels.com
La Réserve, Saint-Jean-de-Luz; hotel-larreserve.com/en

In the countryside

L'Auberge Basque, Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle; aubergebasque.com
Hotel Arcé, Saint-Étienne-de-Baigorry; hotel-arce.com
La maison Opoca, Amboit; opoca.com
Hotel Arnyra, Saint-arnyra.com/en

TALKING THERE

Useful Basque phrases:
Kaixo – Hello
Eskerrik asko – Thank you
Egun on – Good morning
Arratsalde on – Good afternoon
Ayur – Goodbye



PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN GOUGH HENLY (GREEN HILLS)

