



Gastronomic Basque Country

Food, art and architecture in the Basque lands

7–14 September 2026 (MM 157)

8 days

Lecturer: Gijs van Hensbergen

Long, lazy lunches including two in restaurants with three Michelin stars.

Excellent wines of La Rioja-Alavesa.

Architecture by Gehry, Calatrava, Moneo, and varied landscapes of coast, plain and mountain.

Led by Gijs van Hensbergen, art historian and author of books on Spanish art and food.

Based in Bilbao and San Sebastián.

Straddling the Pyrenees and divided between France and Spain, the Basque Country has wonderful and varied scenery, a magnificent range of art and architecture and a culinary tradition which ranks with the best in the world. It is a land of abundance in many things, though there is one striking exception: tourists are in short supply.

The landscape reaches from the Atlantic coast, indented with natural harbours and the fishing communities from which the wealth of the region has derived since ancient times, to the hills and mountains majestically clothed with broadleaf forests. Both the highlands and the fertile rolling lowlands provide the raw ingredients which supplement the seafood and inspire gastronomic greatness.

The best of Basque cooking mixes a strong sense of tradition with startling innovation. From the all-male dining clubs, where friends cook for each other, to the indoor markets spilling over with smoked idiazabal cheeses and gleaming fresh fish, from the rustic cider clubs to the chic new bars vying for the 'tapas of the year' prize, Basques remain obsessed with the quality and provenance of their food.

Juan-Mari Arzak is the most famous restaurateur in Spain. As godfather to New Basque Cuisine, he has inspired an entire generation of chefs including Martín Berasategui, Pedro Subijana and Hilario Arbelaitz. Together they share no fewer than thirteen Michelin stars. Today Juan Mari cooks alongside his daughter, Elena, voted best Female Chef in the World in 2012, and their restaurant consistently ranks among the world's best.

From Bilbao we drive out to the Rioja-Alavesa, the northern rim of the most prestigious wine-making area in Spain, before



San Sebastian, wood engraving c. 1860.

moving on to San Sebastián, arguably the most gastronomic city in the world, with a swathe of flamboyant turn-of-the-century buildings.

Between visits to restaurants, wineries and specialist food shops, we linger in medieval villages, Gothic churches and Baroque interiors. Here there is some fine contemporary architecture by Gehry, Calatrava and Moneo, while nestling in the upland valleys and clamped to hillsides is a doughty vernacular of remarkable distinctiveness and beauty.

Itinerary

Day 1: Bilbao. Fly at c. 9.30am (Vueling) from London Gatwick to Bilbao, Calatrava's spectacular airport. First of three nights in Bilbao.

Day 2: Bilbao. A morning walk in Bilbao takes in the medieval quarter, before lunch at the riverside Art Deco market. The afternoon is spent studying Gehry's extraordinary titanium-clad Guggenheim Museum.

Day 3: Laguardia, Marqués de Riscal. Laguardia is the most picturesque of Rioja villages, perched on a hillock within a circuit of fortified walls. See the ramparts and the outstanding 14th-century portal of Santa María de los Reyes. Morning tasting at Bodega El Fabulista, where 32,000 litres of wine are produced annually by treading the grapes. The bodegas of Marqués de Riscal are among the

most venerable in the region. The visit includes lunch followed by a tasting in the cellars of their Gehry-designed hotel.

Day 4: Bilbao, San Sebastián. Visit the Fine Arts Museum in Bilbao, before driving to the outskirts of San Sebastián for lunch at one of the most famous restaurants in Spain, Arzak. Despite its three Michelin stars and status as one of the best restaurants in the world, it remains very much a family business. First of four nights in San Sebastián.

Day 5: Getaria. The traditional fishing village of Getaria is perched on a rocky promontory in the Bay of Biscay. Here we taste the local specialities of txakoli wine and anchovies. Lunch is at Michelin-starred Elkano (subject to confirmation), where the local catch is grilled to perfection over a wood fire.

Day 6: San Sebastián. This is the gastronomic capital of Spain, sweeping elegantly around one of the finest beaches on the northern coast. Behind the ancient fisherman's quarter is the compact grid of the old town with a wonderfully harmonious arcaded square at the centre and traffic-free streets lined with bars. Lunch is in a private dining club, a rare privilege. Some free time to see the elaborate historicist architecture of the 19th-century extension and Moneo's arts centre.

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Day 7: San Sebastián, Lasarte-Oria. Morning visit to the Chillida Leku open-air sculpture museum in San Sebastián. Continue to lunch at Martín Berasategui's three Michelin-star restaurant in Lasarte-Oria.

Day 8. Drive to Bilbao for an afternoon flight to London Gatwick, arriving at c. 2.30pm.

Lecturer

Gijs van Hensbergen. Art historian and author specialising in Spain and the USA. His books include *Gaudí*, *In the Kitchens of Castile*, *Guernica* and most recently, *La Sagrada Familia*, and he has published in the *Burlington Magazine* and *Wall Street Journal*. He read languages at Utrecht University and Art History at the Courtauld, and undertook postgraduate studies in American art of the 1960s. He has worked in England, the USA and Spain as exhibitions organiser, TV researcher and critic and is a Fellow of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the LSE.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, six lunches (including three at Michelin-starred restaurants, costing over £1,000) and three dinners with wine, water and coffee; all wine and food tastings; all admissions; all tips for waiters and drivers; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. The Artist Grand Hotel, Bilbao (hoteltheartist.com): 5-star hotel opposite the Guggenheim; contemporary in style. **Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra, San Sebastián** (hlondres.com): traditional Belle Epoque-style 4-star hotel, overlooking La Concha bay. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? Evening meals tend to begin at 9.00pm and some late nights are inevitable. There is a fair amount of walking on this tour, some of it uphill or on roughly paved streets. A good level of fitness is essential. Although most of the distances travelled are not vast, there are some long journeys, especially on day 3. Average distance by coach per day: 42 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.