

COCOTRAVEL

## BEST OF BASQUE

*When you get an invitation to explore the gastronomic delights of the Basque Country you do not decline. Recently, our Editor-in-Chief Laura Bartlett spent 5 days exploring all that the Basque country has to offer. ~*

Words by Laura Bartlett

I constantly battle between wanting to be a size 8 (which by the way, I never have been) and wanting to eat that cake/burger/pasta/everything, so when I found out that I would be exploring the Basque Country whilst sampling all of the dishes in every town, I knew that my inner obese devil would win on this one.

At the start of this trip, I had no idea what Pintxos was. By the end, I had had enough to last me a lifetime. FYI : It's a small snack, typically eaten in bars, traditional in northern Spain and especially popular in the Basque country.

### First stop : Bilbao

We started as we meant to go on, with shedloads of food courtesy of La Ribera Restaurant. Housed underneath La Ribera market, they buy all of their food from there and freshly prepare it every day.



Next up it was an hour-long boat ride with Bilboats, the perfect way to let our excessive lunch settle whilst taking in the sites from the river.

Following the boat ride, we had some time to explore the internationally recognised Guggenheim Museum. When it opened in 1997, the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—a spectacular structure made of titanium, glass, and limestone—was celebrated, as the most important building of its time and it was clear why.





That evening we checked into Hotel Carlton, which was built between 1919 (the year in which Smith Ibarra designed it) and 1926. It is a late example of the French Second Empire style, in keeping with the tradition of the grandiose hotels of the time. The building is impressively beautiful and their breakfast offering is incomparable.



### Departure : Next stop Álava

We started the day with a visit to the Salt Valley, a breath-taking destination, regardless of the torrential rain that was drowning us. A visit here will educate you on one of the most singular architectural, landscape, archaeological, geological and historical sites in the world. We got to see how salt was made and we tasted many of the different salts that are produced in the area. Don't leave here without buying their garlic salt.



### Departure : On to Vitoria-Gasteiz

It was time for more food; this was a gastronomic tour, after all. We had the pleasure of seeing our food prepared by the chef and owner, Senén González, at Sagartoki restaurant and bar. Famous for their tortilla, this is a cool place that will have you hooked for hours.





We visited the Old Cathedral, currently undergoing a refurbishment so we had to don protective headgear (I wasn't impressed) as we had a tour around the jaw-dropping building. The sights from the top are glorious and like nothing you'll have witnessed before.



We slept at NH Hotel Canciller Ayala Vitoria, a simple hotel where the English language-learning staff will challenge you to brush up on your Spanish.



### Departure : Rioja Alavesa

We started the day with a visit to the avant-garde Baigorri Winery. The views here will take your breath away and hidden beneath the surface is the most modern, functioning winery I have ever seen.



Enough of the wine and food, it was time to have some oil (because clearly, we hadn't consumed enough calories by this point). We spent the afternoon with the guys at Palacio Samaniego, who were passionate, enthusiastic and incredibly fun. They matched the different oils with wine and pintxos, helping us to truly explore the taste of the oils; a must-do experience to add to your itinerary if you are in town.



We walked off a few calories as we explored the medieval village of Laguardia followed by a visit to the next winery on our list, El Fabulista. The tour guide was extremely entertaining and fervent and we sipped through some interesting wines in the spooky cellar.

Dinner was at Las Duelas Restaurant, housed in the Hotel La Hospedería de los Parajes, and offers traditional cuisine while you are viewing a fifteenth century cellar below your feet. You must explore the basement, spa and hidden tunnels underneath the main restaurant. This was definitely one of my most memorable evenings in the Basque country.



#### **Departure : Tolosa**

Located on the bank of the river Oria, Tolosa is a town with a great historical importance that admires its past, but it is also adapted to the present times. For centuries it benefited from numerous privileges. From that glorious past Tolosa inherited a valuable historical old quarter marked by buildings and monuments of different styles. We visited their popular market, witnessed traditional dancers and had the most chocolatey hot chocolate on the planet.

#### **Departure : Astigarraga**

Astigarraga is located in the north-eastern area of the historical territory of Gipuzkoa, five kilometres from San Sebastián.

The town comprises two distinct areas. Down in the area around the river Urumea, the main town centre is located on the lands that were once controlled by the lords of Murguia. Up the town, in the current neighbourhood of Santiago, the buildings are spread over the Santiagomendi mountainside, on the summit where there is a chapel dedicated to St. James the Apostle. But most of all, this area is famous for its cider, as we would soon find out.

This afternoon was the most fun and relaxed as we had many a laughs in the traditional cider house where you help yourself to cider directly from the barrels. We swigged our cider over a feast of bread and steak so good it deserves to be written home about.

#### **Departure : San Sebastián**

One of the most romantic cities in the world, famed for its beauty and fine food.

The moment you arrive in San Sebastián, La Concha beach invites you for a dip or a pleasant stroll along the shore, even in winter. The elegance of the bay, framed by the massif of Igeldo and the island of Santa Clara, is known the world over. The city is also a world capital for food, particularly its pintxos, for which every bar in its Old Town is a treasure trove.

We had the perfect end to the afternoon with a stroll along La Concha Bay, a stop off to appreciate the views from Igeldo Mountain and a laugh-a-minute-girly night in with Tenedor Tours, cooking traditional pintxos in their apartment before re-treating to Astoria 7 Hotel with full stomachs.

#### **Departure : Getaria**

Getaria is a walled medieval town settled on a hillside. The silhouette of Mount San Antón, better known as “the Mouse of Getaria”, draws special attention, jutting out into the sea. Located in the Urola Kosta region, in the historical territory of Gipuzkoa, the town is famous as it is the birthplace of a sailor and a couturier: Juan Sebastián Elcano and Cristóbal Balenciaga. It’s famous for its delectable seafood!

Cue the least sexy part of the trip, as we had to wear net hats and gut fish with Maisor, a family business famed for their Preserves of the Cantabrian Sea; be prepared for the tastiest anchovies on the planet.

#### **Departure to Muxica**

Just as I was starting to grow tired of wineries, we went to the most amazing one I have ever visited. Cue jaw dropping views upon views with top notch wines to match at Bodega Borroja.







### Departure to Loiu

Lunch was at Aspaldiko, where history meets culture and peacocks roam freely in the garden.

The Basque Country - You arrive with excitement and leave with a sadness knowing that no other culinary experience will ever compare.



### Sleep:

Bilbao - Carlton Hotel  
[www.hotelcarlton.es](http://www.hotelcarlton.es)

NH Hotel  
[www.nh-hoteles.es](http://www.nh-hoteles.es)

Astoria 7 Hotel  
[www.astoria7hotel.com](http://www.astoria7hotel.com)

### Food and Drink:

La Ribera Restaurant  
[www.lariberabilbao.com](http://www.lariberabilbao.com)

Oil Tasting  
[www.palaciosamaniego.com](http://www.palaciosamaniego.com)

Fancy Michelin star?  
[www.restaurantemarquesderiscal.com](http://www.restaurantemarquesderiscal.com)

Sagartoki  
[www.sagartoki.com](http://www.sagartoki.com)

Bodegas Baigorri Winery  
[www.bodegasbaigorri.com](http://www.bodegasbaigorri.com)

Gurutzeta Cider House  
[www.gurutzeta.com](http://www.gurutzeta.com)

Tenedor Tours  
[www.tenedortours.com](http://www.tenedortours.com)

Bodega Berroja  
[www.bodegaberroja.com](http://www.bodegaberroja.com)

Aspaldiko  
[www.aspaldiko.com/es/ar/1/inicio.html](http://www.aspaldiko.com/es/ar/1/inicio.html)

### Transport:

Bilboats  
[www.bilboats.com](http://www.bilboats.com)

### Visit:

Guggenheim Museum  
[www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/)

Salt Valley  
[www.vallesalado.com](http://www.vallesalado.com)

**A classic pintxo, perhaps the first with a name of its own. Green, salty, and a bit spicy, it's the taste of the Basque coast on a stick.**

***Serves four***

**Ingredients:**

4 olives  
12 guindilla peppers  
4 good salt-cured anchovies Maldon salt  
Extra-virgin olive oil  
4 long toothpicks

1. Pour yourself a splash of cool, crisp txakoli wine from the coastal wine country, sigh deeply, and remember your lovely time in San Sebastian.
2. Line up the peppers and cut off the stems. Put three peppers on each toothpick, followed by one end of the anchovy.
3. Deftly slide the three peppers and lone anchovy to the other end of the skewer, and wrap the anchovy around the peppers, bundling them all up.
4. Bring everything back to its rightful and pointy end, and poke the pick through the last remaining bit of anchovy.
5. Add the olive to the end, drizzle it generously with good olive oil, and crush a pinch of flaky sea salt over the top.
6. With one bold move, eat the gilda in a single bite, followed by a sip of txakoli.
7. Promise yourself that you'll return to San Sebastian next year.

**Pintura Basque Kitchen & Bar**

All was not lost however as we headed home with a heavy heart, longing for a mouthful of Basque cuisine once more, as we soon discovered that Pintura Kitchen & Bar, Leeds, have launched a new Basque Country inspired menu.

Pintxos lovers and gin connoisseurs, Pintura Kitchen & Bar is bringing a taste of the Spanish summer to Leeds with it's brand new seasonal menu.

The award-winning restaurant's latest menu celebrates the incredible flavours, ingredients and methods of the Basque Country and is inspired by head chef Greg Lewis' and head drinks creator Matt Coates' most recent research trips to the region.

Each dish uses the finest imported Spanish produce married with the best seasonal ingredients to give a British twist on traditional Basque recipes. There is also an emphasis on using inno-

vative cooking techniques married with artistic presentation.

New dishes to try include Mejillones Con Cerveza - British mussels, Mahou beer and garlic toast; Bacalao Pil Pil - cod fillet, pil pil sauce, parsley and garlic; and Ensalada de Coliflor - cauliflower, cannellini beans and Spanish goats cheese.

The menu's signature dish is the Pastel De Carne - beef cheek, summer truffle and whipped new potato - which is a Spanish take on the classic English dish, cottage pie. Inspired by the team's latest expedition to Bilbao, the dish is an incredible fusion of Yorkshire and the Basque Country - the very essence of Pintura's culture.

The new cocktail menu, which was created by Matt alongside head bartender, Lawrence Woodrow-Smith, has a distinct Basque twist.

Meat-lovers will adore their new Ibérico Martini, made with Cien gin, Ibérico ham-infused vermouth and olive bitters, served with a garnish of hand-carved Spanish ham;

or The Ultimate Snapper, infused with pancetta, black pudding, Spanish hams, smoked duck, chorizo and an array of herbs and spices.

Pintura has also perfected it's own unique take on Kalimotxo - the popular Spanish drink of cola and red wine in equal measures. Pintura's version is crafted using Ysabel

Regina, Lacuesta Dry Vermouth, Rioja & coke reduction and is served straight up with a lemon twist and a cherry.

Pintura's basement bar is the city's leading gin bar and the latest menu doesn't disappoint, featuring 100 varieties of the juniper spirit, including Pintura's very

own artisan blend, Cien, that is made using the finest Spanish and Yorkshire botanicals.

Open in time for the summer, Pintura's pop-up summer Gin Garden is also the ideal, stylish setting for guests to enjoy al fresco Spanish lunches and beautiful drinks.

Pintura Kitchen & Bar's Managing Director Lucy Cheetham says: "The Basque Country is Europe's foodie mecca and the Pintura team makes regular research trips to the region to explore it's food-crazed culture."

I guess there's no sign of our waistline decreasing following our gastronomic tour of the Basque Country.