

Best of The Basque Country – Birds & Pintxos!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Bilbao, San Juan and Mundaka
Day 2	Birdwatching in Urdaibai Biosphere
Day 3	Gernika/Urkiola/Salburua
Day 4	Izki, Salinas Añana, Salto del Nervión
Day 5	Birding & winery visit in Laguardia, Rioja Alavesa
Day 6	Arantzazu and transfer to hotel
Day 7/8	Zumaia Geopark & San Sebastian
Day 9	Depart Bilbao Fly to London

Focus

Birds, orchids, gastronomy & Basque historical sites

Grading

Optional day walks only. Grade A/B

Dates and Prices

Please see website for further details

Highlights

- Experience Casa Primicia's 'Days of Wine and Birds' in the vineyards and lagoons of Laguardia
- Nesting Osprey, Hen Harrier, Eurasian Spoonbill, White Stork & other wetland birds
- World-renowned gastronomy in San Sebastian
- Alpine Chough & Egyptian Vulture.



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Introduction

Situated on the elbow-crook of the Bay of Biscay, and in an area barely larger than Northern Ireland, the autonomous region of the Spanish Basque Country offers the visitor a spectacular and diverse range of habitats, a bounty of wildlife, and unique cuisine and culture.

This three-centred, 9-day tour brings together culture and gentle birding: here is a place that differentiates itself markedly from neighbouring France and the rest of northern Spain, with its rugged coastline and coastal paths, craggy mountains and lush, verdant valleys with their complementary wildlife, and a proud history incorporating a long fight for independence and autonomy, an ancient autochthonous language, and long established historical pilgrimage routes. In addition, here are five UNESCO world heritage sites. The Basque Country is indeed one of the jewels of Iberia.



Vineyard in Carravalseca



European Bee-eater

Otherwise known as 'Euskadi' (The land of the Basque Speakers), a diverse array of habitats paves the way for a pleasing variety of birdlife. Spread across three centres in Bizkaia (2 nights), Alava (3 nights) and Gipuzkoa (3 nights) and with an average transfer time of about one hour between each, this tour offers an opportunity to look for woodpeckers in sheltered Pyrenean Oak forests, colourful European Bee-eaters feeding along ravines, and a variety of raptors circling the mountains. Eurasian Spoonbill, White Stork, Black-

winged Stilt, Hen Harrier, Garganey, Black Kite and Osprey can be found in the great expanse of wetlands in Urdaibai and Salburua. Higher up, raptors such as Honey Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle and Booted Eagle soar around the peaks and cliffs of the majestic Sierra de Cantabria where the occasional Blue Rock Thrush can be seen amongst the boulders, whilst the streams and alpine meadows of Goierri provide a home for Cirl Bunting, Dippers, Iberian Chiffchaff, Black Redstart and Sardinian Warbler.

Not only does Euskadi's landscape provide a good opportunity for birders and wide range of diverse flora for botanists but Basque cuisine also boasts a reputation of excellence. With more Michelin stars per capita than anywhere else in the world, together with the Basque belief that good food can be perceived as a reflection of good character, you are sure to feel welcomed and indulged in the picturesque towns of San Sebastián - the 2016 European Capital of Culture, and the quirky riverside landscapes of Bilbao where we will sample traditional pintxos (Basque country tapas) and txakoli (local slightly sparkling dry white wine).

From the roaring swells of the Atlantic that batter the jagged coastline of the UNESCO Flysch Trail and the quintessentially Basque landmark of Gaztelugatxe (the castle on the crag), to the melodic cow bells that roll across the alpine hills of the Goierri Highlands; from the sociable sounds, sights and delicacies of Donostia to the vineyards and crumbling medieval villages of Rioja Alavesa - this is a place that commands exploration.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximize best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Bilbao, San Juan Gaztelugatxe and Mundaka

Today we fly from London to Bilbao and arrive just in time for lunch. Kicking off the tour with a light meal of traditional Basque 'pinxtos' we will have a moment to appreciate the contemporary and striking architecture of Bilbao, the capital city of the Basque Country, including a quick look at the Guggenheim.



Peregrine Falcon

In the afternoon we drive north-west along the coast towards Mundaka. We head to the enchanting chapel of San Juan Gaztelugatxe clinging to the rocks, only accessible by foot on a windswept islet in the Bay of Biscay. Depending on the weather, we may see Yellow-legged Gull, Blue Rock thrush and Shag. Owing its name to John the Baptist, who is believed to have taken three giant steps from the port of Bermeo to reach it, San Juan Gaztelugatxe is an iconic emblem of the Basque Country. Traditions such as tolling the chapel bell three

times and placing the soles of your feet onto the Saint's lucky footprint on the last of the 241 steps that link the land to the crashing sea, in conjunction with magnificent views of the coast and coastal wildlife, makes this 10th century hermitage a magical place.

The coastline between Bilbao and San Sebastian is scattered with picturesque fishing ports, towering cliffs and idyllic beaches. For the best views, we will drive along the winding roads before retiring to our quiet and traditional hotel.

Day 2

Urdaibai, Elantxobe & Berroja Winery

Urdaibai UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is an area covering 220km with 45,000 inhabitants, mainly concentrated in Gernika and Bermeo. The region is characterized by a great salt marsh created by a hydrographic basin and a coastline of cliffs and capes. Further inland, magnificent Cantabrian Holm Oak forests and vivid strawberry trees trickle down mountainsides and feed into the meadowlands of the 'Pais Vasco' which we will visit later in the tour.



Urdaibai UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Estuary

Urdaibai is home to 615 species of plants and 318 species of vertebrates including over 200 birds. The area is of major historical significance with the town of Gernika almost completely destroyed during the civil war. The surrounding countryside is inhabited by farmers raising livestock on the lush hills and growing crops in the rich soil since the late Neolithic period. The Urdaibai estuary has played a major

role in progressing means of transit and communication, forming part of such routes as the Wine and Fish Route, St. James' Way pilgrimage and the Oath Route.

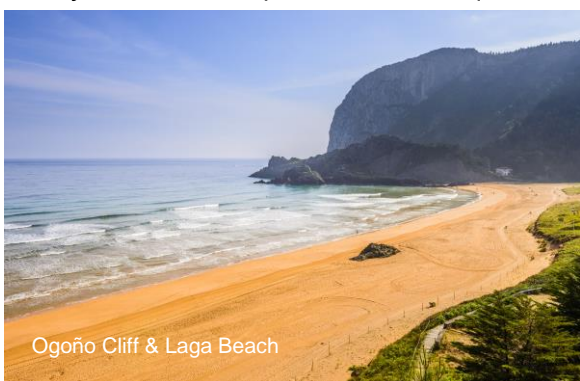
On to San Cristobal bird hide this morning, which can be good for photography. Species we may see in and around these wetlands include Sardinian Warbler, Marsh Harrier, Melodious Warbler, Reed Warbler and Zitting Cisticola. Afterwards we will enjoy the scenery overlooking the beautiful Laga beach and the Ogoño cliffs, taking lunch in a restaurant on a terrace with unbeatable views of the Urdaibai estuary.

After an active day, we will visit the family-run Berroja Winery for txakoli and wine tasting whilst admiring the views of the natural environment that surrounds it, including four of the five emblematic mountains of the Historical Territory of Bizkaia (Biscay). The evening brings with it an indulgent dinner, at an excellent restaurant in Mundaka with delicious food. The steak, Bay of Biscay Sea Bass and the famous delicacy Kokotxa (Hake) being particularly recommended!

Day 3

Urdaibai, Gernika & Urkiola Natural Park

Today we delve deeper into the Basque country to experience what this region has to offer. We may



Ogoño Cliff & Laga Beach

meet at the Urdaibai Bird Centre with Dr. Aitor Galarza who is responsible for the reintroduction of Osprey in the reserve and directly connected with Rutland Water Nature Reserve Osprey projects. Highlights here include nesting Osprey, Black-winged Stilt, Cattle Egret, Eurasian Spoonbill, Knot, Black Stork, Marsh Harrier and Red-backed Shrike.

This birding visit is followed by a cultural trip to the historical town of Gernika to visit the symbolic Basque Oak Tree. From the Middle Ages, it was a prevalent tradition throughout Europe for politicians to gather under trees, to discuss and make important decisions and create new laws. The Gernika Oak represents Basque national pride and is located in the birthplace of 'Basque culture' as the meeting point for communities dating as far back as the 14th century. This is the third oak to be planted in front of the Biscayan Assembly which survived the infamous 1937 bombing of the city during the Spanish Civil War, an event that inspired one of Picasso's greatest and most harrowing masterpieces – 'Gernika'. We will take a moment to view and contemplate this very painting.

During a 50-minute drive into Euskadi the terrain abruptly changes as we enter the mountains that separate the Mediterranean and Cantabrian river basins. Dense beech forests come into focus as we reach Urkiola Natural Park.

Enormous limestone rocks and cliffs, loved by rock climbers, provide the backdrop for some sections of our walk and if we turn our gaze to the rocky ground and peaks we will likely observe Griffons, Egyptians Vultures and Alpine Choughs, whilst in the forests we will



Middle-spotted Woodpecker

look for Crested tits, Short toed Treecreeper, Bullfinch and Marsh Tit.

If time permits in the evening we'll visit the Salburua Wetlands where we may observe Little Bitterns, Garganey, White Stork, Night Heron, Great-crested Grebe, Black Kite, Red-crested Pochard, Curlew, Shovelers and other waders. We will arrive at the Hotel Palacio Elorriaga in Vitoria-Gasteiz, our base for the next three nights.

Day 4

Izki Natural Park, Salinas de Añana, & Salto del Nervion

There are six species of woodpecker in Izki Natural Park, including the Middle-spotted, Greater, Lesser-Spotted and Black Woodpecker. Although we're too late in the year for the best woodpecker conditions (which can be found in February and March, when the trees are still bereft of leaves, and the birds are setting up territories), we will be listening for the tell-tale sounds of these charismatic birds as we traverse the extensive woodlands of the Basque region of Alava.



Roe Deer, Izki Natural Park

The largest tract of Pyrenean Oak forest in Spain offers a chance to see the odd mammal such as Wild Boar or Roe Deer, although any sighting will be considered a bonus.

Later we'll visit Salinas de Añana, an antiquated salt making terrace system, and we will end our day at Salto del Nervion, the highest waterfall in Spain. If conditions are good, we will look for Peregrine Falcon, Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Alpine Swift and Alpine Chough. Once back at our hotel it will be time to enjoy another delicious Basque meal, perhaps washed down by some of the excellent local wines!

Day 5

La Guardia, La Rioja Alavesa

This day is dedicated to wine and birds as we explore the region of Rioja Alavesa nestled in the foothills of the Cantabrian mountains for an exclusive "Birds & Wine" experience at the Carravalseca vineyards - one of the oldest wineries in the world. Situated in the medieval village of La Guardia this is an area where time stands still – there is no access for cars through the small, historical village due to a curious discovery in the 1970's; an intricate network of underground tunnels and caves with pink hued walls directly beneath the village. On closer inspection, these were found to be extremely well preserved 15th century wine cellars, ergo, 'the silent witnesses to other periods'.

We will enjoy some gentle birding around the three endorheic (no external drainage) lakes in amongst the vineyards of Carravalseca. Here we look for Purple Heron, larks, Western Orphean Warbler, Bearded Tit, Great Reed Warbler, and Night Heron, Golden Oriole and the colorful acrobatics of European Bee-eaters. There will also be a tour inside the subterranean Casa



Riojan Wine, La Rioja Alavesa

Primicia wine cellars.

We return to our hotel in the evening well fed, and ready to venture into the Basque Highlands on our 6th day.

Day 6 Aizkorri Natural Park & Oñati (transfer to Gizpukoa Highlands)



Wryneck

The Aizkorri Natural Park in Gizpukoa, also known as the Basque Highlands, is the second largest park in the country, extending over 160,000 hectares of the Cantabrian-Mediterranean watershed. The range of habitats here makes for a rewarding variety of biodiversity and the extensive sheep grazing pastures, such as Urbia, is home to the Gomiztegi Shepherds School where, if it's open, we may learn how to make cheese with traditional methods. Aizkorri offers remarkable karstic phenomena of limestone

mountains and caves and rich cultural landscapes in the form of many prehistoric and paleontological sites accommodating paintings of lions and bears. Swifts, Crag and House Martins will be wheeling around us at the Arantzazu Sanctuary viewpoint.

We end our day at our final accommodation for dinner, our base for the final three nights of the tour.

Day 7 Zumaia Geoparkea & Lastur town

Today we return to the Basque coast to visit yet another spectacular UNESCO heritage site – the Zumaia Geopark. En route, we'll visit the historical little town of Lastur, with its famous Plaza de Toros and watermill.



La Ruta del Flysch, Zumaia Geoparkea

After lunch, there will be a boat ride if conditions allow. This magnificent area can be read like a geology book with its twisted, jagged cliffs conjuring up the awesome forces of nature that created such a dramatic coastline. Comprised of hard limestone, sandstone, and soft layers of clay and loam, this striking sequence of sedimentary rock makes up one of the most striking continuous stratas in the world.

At the park we visit the 'Flysch Trail' and the sloping bedrock of the Sakoneta area, the most extensive abrasion line in Europe, which reveals an especially bountiful variety of intertidal life at low tide.

A gentle walk in Sakoneta will likely reveal the intriguing geology in the area as well as birds such as Stonechat, Wheatear, Grasshopper Warbler, Tree Pipit and Zitting Cisticola.

Day 8

Donostia San Sebastian

We will visit the Bay of Txingudi this morning, the most iconic salt marshes of the Gipuzkoa Province. We will then travel to San Sebastian. Otherwise known as *Donostia* in the Basque language, is located on the eastern coastline of the Bay of Biscay and is famous for the stunning, shell-shaped La Concha Beach (amongst many other landmarks). Often referred to as the most beautiful city beach in Europe you might want to take a refreshing dip along the spacious 1,350-meter-long bay of clear blue Atlantic waters or go for a long walk to the “*Pico de Loro*” (the parrot’s beak); a small passage of rocks which disappears during high tide and marks the end of La Concha Bay.



La Concha Beach, Donostia San Sebastian



Pintxos, Donostia San Sebastian

San Sebastian has more Michelin stars per capita than anywhere else in the world, and epitomizes the culinary extremes of Spain’s dining spectrum; from upmarket three Michelin star restaurants to the humbler ‘holes-in-the-wall’ you may simply wish to explore the gastronomic wonders of San Sebastian with a pintxos bar-crawl in the old town.

Day 9

Fly London

Today it will be time to leave and we will depart Bilbao in the morning and return to London.

Tour Grading

On this holiday we will be based at three comfortable hotels in order to see and experience as much of the diverse habitats and wildlife in the Basque Country. From these bases we will go on daily excursions, to explore the valleys, hills, fields, coastline and other habitats of the Spanish Basque Country. Much of our exploration will be on short walks of no more than 3-5 kilometres, utilizing the many paths and tracks that criss-cross the landscape. These walks will be of a leisurely nature, with plenty of stops to examine and study the many plants, insects and birds that we will encounter on our way. Inevitably, considering the contours of the land, one or two of these paths will be fairly steep, but at our pace they should present no problem for a reasonably competent walker.

Weather

Very variable at this time of year. It may be mild and sunny but be prepared for colder weather, especially along the Atlantic coast. The Basque Country is well known for having a lot of rain in the Autumn and Winter, however, May is the most suitable time of year to avoid this and equally, to avoid very hot temperatures. This variability makes fleeces and wind-breaking waterproofs a must – on the other hand, if warm and settled we may be in T-shirts.

Flights

Group flights will likely be from London Gatwick to Bilbao with British Airways. A morning departure will land us in time for lunch in Bilbao and on return a midday departure will allow us time for a relaxed breakfast before flying home.

Food and accommodation

All accommodation and three meals a day are included in the price of this holiday, except for excursion day in Zumaia and day 8 in San Sebastian. If you have any special requests (for example lobster) or perhaps would like a particular wine this might be at an additional cost. Wine is included at some establishments but not others – we cover the wine where it is included in the menu structure (or one non-alcoholic drink for those that do not drink alcohol), and we also cover water. Other drinks will be at your cost.

The two prestigious winery visits (which both include wine and txakoli tastings and lunch at Carravalseca) are included in the tour price as well as cheese making, the visit to the Urdaibai Bird Center and the watermill, in Lastur.

This three-centred tour starts in the region of Bizkaia (2 nights), our second accommodation is in Araba (3 nights) and the third in Gipuzkoa (3 nights). All hotels are comfortable with breakfast included and when dinner is not available we take the opportunity to dine out.

All three accommodations are varied and are all simple yet comfortable. Our first hotel prides itself on its eco-friendly design and ethics – Hotel Mundaka. Our second accommodation Hotel Palacio Elorriaga in Vitoria is a 16th century red-brick building with beautiful bare beams in all of the bedrooms. Our final accommodation is a comfortable hotel in Gipuzkoa.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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