

Best of The Basque Country

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Bilbao, drive to Urdaibai
- Day 2** Txingudi, San Sebastian and Zumaia Geopark
- Day 3** Urdaibai Biosphere, Gernika, Urkiola NP and Salburua
- Day 4** Valderejo NP, Salinas Añana, Salto del Nervión
- Day 5** Izki NP, Urbasa NP, Aralar NP
- Day 6** Birding & winery visit in Laguardia, Rioja Alavesa
- Day 7** Mendixur, fly London

Focus

Birds, orchids, gastronomy & Basque historical sites

Grading

Optional day walks only. Grade A/B

Dates and Prices

Please see website (ESP48) 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.



Osprey (Lee Morgan)



Black Redstart



San Juan Gaztelegatxe



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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 two-centred, 7 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, there are five UNESCO world heritage sites all of which makes the Basque Country one of the jewels of Iberia.

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 two centres in Urdaibai (2 nights) and Alava near Vitoria, known as Gasteiz in Basque, (4 nights), 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



European Bee-eater

picturesque town of San Sebastián, the 2016 European Capital of Culture, 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.



Vineyard in Carravalseca

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 Urdaibai

Today we take a morning flight from London to Bilbao and head straight into the city, where we will have a moment to appreciate the contemporary and striking architecture of, including a quick look at the outside of the Guggenheim.



Peregrine Falcon

We then 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, Shag, Blue Rock Thrush, Firecrest, Melodious Warbler or a Peregrine Falcon zooming past. 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 near Urdaibai.

Day 2

Txingudi, San Sebastian and Zumaia Geopark

Our first full day will be long but quite spectacular. First we will head to the Bay of Txingudi, the infamous salt marshes of the Gipuzkoa Province due to the number and variety of species that are found here. There are rafts of geese, ducks and other wildfowl, waders, herons, egrets, warblers, gulls, and of course many birds of prey. It is a good location for Osprey, as well as rare migratory birds as it is a mandatory stopover for birds that avoid flying over the Pyrenees.

After what should prove to be a fruitful morning, we will continue to San Sebastian. Otherwise known as *Donostia* in the Basque language, the city 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.

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. Lunch is not included today so you are free to make your own choice! Our guide will happily offer the opportunity to accompany him at his favourite eatery for those that want to.



La Concha Beach, Donostia San Sebastian

On the journey back to our hotel we will visit another spectacular UNESCO heritage site – the Zumaia Geopark. 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, Wryneck, Grasshopper Warbler, Tree Pipit and Zitting Cisticola.

Day 3 Urdaibai Biosphere, Gernika, Urkiola NP and Salburua

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 and Reed Warbler, Marsh Harrier, Spoonbill, Kingfisher and Whinchat. We will also visit the Urdaibai Bird Centre, where we will learn about the importance of Urdaibai during the migration of birds from the Western Palearctic, and with luck, we might see here species such as Merlin and Common Snipe.

We will then head to the historical town of Gernika for lunch, sampling the delicious traditional pintxos or Basque tapas, and then see 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 a full-scale replica of this very painting, which is located near the Casa de Juntas, the historic assembly house.

As we continue southwards the terrain abruptly changes as we enter the mountains that separate the



Alpine Chough

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 Griffon and Egyptian Vulture and Alpine Chough, whilst in the forests we will look for Crested Tit, Short toed Treecreeper, Bullfinch, Citril Finch and Marsh Tit.

We then continue to the town of Vitoria, where located on the outskirts is Salburua Wetlands, arguably one of the best and most reliable places for bird-watching in the whole of the Basque Country. Here where we may observe Little Bittern, White Stork, Night Heron, Great Reed Warbler, Great-crested Grebe, Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Red-crested Pochard, Garganey, Curlew, Shovelers and many waders species. The woodlands here are also good for Iberian and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

We then make the short journey to our hotel for the next 4 nights.

Day 4 Valderejo National Park, Salinas de Añana, & Salto del Nervion

This morning we will visit Valderejo Natural Park, a broad wooded valley with a river gorge running through it, surrounded by impressive limestone outcrops, and is well known for its diversity of wildlife. If it is a fine day, we are likely to see raptors taking advantage of the thermals, such as Griffon, Egyptian and Cinereous Vulture, Booted, Short-toed Snake and Golden Eagle, as well as Common and Honey

Buzzard. The forests are home to woodland species such as Red Crossbill, Common and Black Redstart, Serin, Firecrest, Nuthatch, Blackcap, Coal and Marsh Tit.

We will also be able to enjoy important plants in the more open areas such as Woodcock Orchid and Bee Orchid. This is also one of the few areas in the Basque Country where traces of European Wild Cat and Iberian Wolf can still be seen on occasion.



Bee Orchid

We then head to Salinas de Añana, an antiquated salt making terrace system, where salt has been extracted using traditional methods continuously since pre-Roman times, dating back to when salt was the local currency.

After lunch we will make our way up to the Orduña Pass and Salto del Nervion, the highest waterfall in Spain. This is another excellent area for raptors if conditions are good. Also observed here are several rock-dwelling species such as Iberian Chiffchaff, Cirl Bunting, Rock Bunting, Mistle Thrush, Tawny Pipit, and Black Woodpecker is also present.

Day 5 Izki Natural Park, Urbasa Natural Park & Aralar Natural Park

One of the largest tracts of Pyrenean Oak forest in Spain that makes up Izki Natural Park, offers a chance to see the odd mammal such as Wild Boar or Roe Deer, although any sighting will be considered a bonus. There are six species of woodpecker here, 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 these extensive woodlands.

We will make a quick stop at La Muela, a nearby rocky promontory where, with luck, we will be able to observe Blue Rock Thrush and Alpine Swift.

Urbasa Natural Park in the neighbouring province of Gipuzkoa, is a large expanse of dense Beech forest where we might see species such as Bullfinch, Pied Flycatcher, Iberian Chiffchaff, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Tree Pipit, Common Cuckoo and maybe even Turtle Dove.



Blue Rock Thrush

The final visit in our trio of Natural Parks today is Aralar, another jewel in the crown of the Basque's wilderness areas. It has a wide variety of habitat including karstic mountains, beech, oak and alder groves, and meadows, which host a broad spectrum of flora and fauna, as well as ancient burial mounds and dolmen. It is another hotspot for raptors, and here we will keep a keen eye out for Lammergeier soaring above the rocky mountains. We could also see red and Black Kite amongst others, and closer to the ground, Alpine Chough, Raven, Northern Wheater, Wryneck, Rock Bunting and Linnet.

Day 6

La Guardia, La Rioja Alavesa

Today we will head to the southernmost part of the Basque Country, bordering neighbouring Rioja, where the continental Mediterranean climate favours the development of fine red wines. People have lived in these ancient lands since time immemorial, as evidenced by the numerous examples of dolmens that we will see along the way.



After crossing the Sierra de Cantabria, we will begin birdwatching at La Paul Pond, taking a pleasant circular route, where the star birds are undoubtedly the Bearded Tit, Bee-eater, Golden Oriole, and Purple Heron, birds typical of Mediterranean environments, enriched by the presence of beautiful orchids and, of course, the song of the Common Nightingale. We will then visit the neighbouring Carravalseca lagoons, where we will look for Garganey, Night Heron and, above all, Western Orphean Warbler.

By this point we should have worked up an appetite and thirst, and will make our way to the medieval village of La Guardia and the Casa Primicia winery, where we will enjoy a delicious lunch in the vineyard, with excellent views of the mountains. After this exclusive meal, we will visit the underground cellars, where we will learn firsthand about the historical process of making this excellent wine.

We will make our way back to the hotel, making a birding stop en-route.

Day 7

Mendixur, fly London

We will make our way back to Bilbao airport, but should have time for a stop at the wetlands of Mendixur for some more birding. We will say our goodbyes and depart on a flight back to London.

Tour Grading

On this holiday we will be based at two 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. Some of the days will be quite long, and our explorations will be walks of 4-6 miles per day, 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 birds, insects and plants 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 or Vueling. A morning departure will land us in time for lunch in Bilbao and on return a lunchtime departure will allow us time for one last stop before flying home.

Food and accommodation

All meals are included in the price of this holiday, starting with dinner on day 1 and finishing with breakfast on day 7, except for lunch on day 2 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 prestigious winery visit which includes wine and txakoli tastings and lunch at Carravalseca, is included in the tour price.

The two accommodations we stay at are simple yet comfortable.



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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