

Village to village in Spain's Basque region

By Kate Siber
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ZARAGOZA, Spain — The moment we drove off the highway and onto a tiny two-lane road winding into the Basque region, a thick fog descended. Instantly the landscape turned eerie, and the old stone farmhouses and fences took on an atmospheric, medieval glow.

Here in northeastern Spain, highways slim to roads and lanes eventually narrow into car-width capillaries threading the hills. J.T. Leaird, my old college friend and stalwart travel buddy, and I were lost. We were searching for our night's accommodation, Etxebeltzea, a "casa rural," or rural house. We had no idea how to pronounce the name and only a slightly better idea how to find it.

Getting lost, however, seemed like a large part of the fun. As we looped through the hillsides, we passed perfect stone churches, tidy stone-and-whitewall houses topped with red roofs, and gardens bursting with green leafy vegetables, roses, and bougainvillea. Each village seemed more photogenic than the last. Finally, in a tightly packed hamlet barely

bigger than a soccer field, we found Etxebeltzea: a stately four-story stone house with a grand vaulted entrance and an iron-gated courtyard dotted with lipstick-red geraniums.

Some say that the old soul of Spain lies not so much in its flashy leading ladies, such as Barcelona and Madrid, but in the narrow lanes, tiny towns, and centuries-old palaces and farmhouses of its countryside. Long ago, J.T. and I shed the inclination to check off a tiring list of city sights on our trips. Instead, we prefer to choose a few of the less obvious corners of a place, follow roads on a whim, and sink into the details of daily life. Traveling between the bucolic corners of the Basque Country suited us perfectly.

Few hotels exist in these remote nooks of the country. Here, there are casas rurales. More than 10 years ago, the government established a program encouraging residents to open hospitality businesses in an effort to promote sustainable rural living. The program was wildly popular and the result is an ever-burgeoning network that stretches



KATE SIBER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Children pass the centuries-old Roman Catholic church in Etxalar, in the Navarra region. In Zaragoza's central market square is a statue of Caesar Augustus, who founded the city in 24 BC. Its first name was Caesar Augusta.

throughout Spain.

Casas rurales vary from simple country homes to historic buildings that owners have refurbished to accommodate guests. They are often run by families, have a homey feel, and cost relatively little. We paid no more than 60 euros, about \$81, for a room, and often we booked within days of arrival.

Starting in Zaragoza, we drove northeast into the foothills of the Pyrenees, cruised west along the northern coast, and finally veered south into the deeply forested inland. Each night, we stayed at out-of-the-way casas rurales, each a window into the heartbeat of Basque life.

"Hola!" beamed Marisol, the manager of Etxebeltzea, as she unlocked the ponderous wooden door and let us in from the cobblestone courtyard. The place felt ancient: The hip-width floorboards groaned as we walked across them and the detritus of centuries lined the walls: a



SOURCE: ESRI Teletlas GLOBE STAFF

crooked bookshelf stacked with aged volumes; scones emitting a dim, romantic glow; and plush red curtains. Marisol swung open our door with great effort: Thick and wooden, with iron hinges and thumb-size keyholes, it looked as if it had been crafted by giants.

"The palace was built in the 1300s," said Marisol in Spanish and she showed us our recently refurbished room. "And it's been in the same family, handed down."

The Basque Country is filled with historical footnotes such as this, and staying in casas rurales often offers an unexpected look into the past. The Basques have lived here since long before Roman times. Over the centuries, they defended their turf from Romans, Vikings, Visigoths, and others with a fierce territoriality that safeguarded not only their land but also their culture and language. The Basque tongue, whose origins are unknown, survives today, and it is the primary language of many residents. The Basques' enduring pride has perhaps been best known for fueling the violent separatist group ETA, founded in the 1960s. Though the group's graffiti mars some of the region's stone walls and streets, it seems at odds with the countryside's overwhelming peacefulness.

We chose casas rurales that were located in sleepy villages and often simply finding them proved adventurous. Our meanderings and wrong turns took us through beautiful corners of the region and offered glimpses of a pastoral life steeped in tradition and cultural pride.

One example is Elizondo, a small town of stone-and-whitewall buildings arranged in neat lines along a river, which we passed in search of Etxebeltzea. Along the cobbled streets we found a florist, butcher, bakery, clothing shop, and furniture store selling simple wares. Happening upon a bar, we drank "patxaran," a local anise-flavored liqueur made from sloe berries, and watched as men gathered to play pilota with paddles and rubber balls in the adjacent gym.

Drives through the Basque Country are uniquely suited to the curious: Roads and trails carved by centuries of human footprints spread like tentacles into the hills. We couldn't resist following one. The signposted trail led along the edges of post-card-perfect farms, where cows lay in verdant pastures, moss crawled up the old walls, and barbed-wire fences surrendered to the wildflowers.

We were in search of "monumentos megalíticos," large prehistoric rocks that the map at the beginning of the trail had promised. Instead we took a wrong turn and discovered another treat: a 25-foot waterfall hidden in the forest. It was as if we had stumbled upon some forest nymph's sanctum. In a place that



MATIAS COSTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES/FILE/2008

If you go . . .

How to get there

For a trip through the Basque Country, the city of Zaragoza makes a good starting point. From Barcelona, it takes about 90 minutes by high-speed train (rates vary; www.renfe.com) to get to Zaragoza. At www.easycar.com, you can arrange a rental in advance; and there are several companies with outlets in the railway station.

Where to stay

Asetur (011-34-902-197-972, www.ecoturismorural.com) is the countrywide organization that oversees casas rurales. There are also regional organizations. **Nekatur** (011-34-902-13-00-31; www.nekatur.net) is the association of rural houses in the Basque region of northeast Spain.

The author stayed at three casas rurales:

- Etxebeltzea**
Erratzu, in the foothills of the Pyrenees
011-34-948-453-157
etxebeltzea-baztan.com
A 700-year-old familial palace, \$81.
- Arboliz**
Ibarrangelu
011-34-946-276-283
arboliz.com
On a hillside overlooking the Bay of Biscay, \$78.
- Casa Rural Arregi**
Near Oñati
011-34-943-783-657
casaruralarregi.es
In the countryside about 10 minutes from the architecturally rich university town of Oñati, \$53-\$57.

has been inhabited for millennia, steeped in legend, and often ensconced in fog, it's easy to indulge the imagination.

The Basque Country is also remarkable for its diversity. A few hours after leaving the spooky foothills of the Pyrenees, we discovered the sun-bleached northern coast, where the roads wound along beaches, through dense pine forests, and topped

out at lookouts over the twinkling Bay of Biscay. Every so often a town popped up, each with its own tiny harbor and multicolored boats. As the sun drooped in the sky, teenagers walked home with surfboards in tow, old women tottered under the weight of their grocery bags, and fishermen trolled in with the day's catch.

Arboliz, our lodge, was located high up on a hillside in the barely-there town of Ibarrangelu. Run by a family, it is decidedly casual, with a pingpong table in the front yard and lawn chairs set up to take in views of the sailboat-studded sea.

In these parts, dinner isn't easy to come by. In the nearest hamlet of Elantxobe, a 10-minute drive from Arboliz, we discovered a single restaurant hidden in a jumble of stone-faced waterfront homes. The waiter arrived with a verbal menu even we, with our rudimentary Spanish, could understand: big fish or little fish? We split a bottle of table wine, watched the last few fishermen motor into the harbor for the day, and dined on a just-caught fish that was perfectly prepared: split and lightly pan-fried with butter, salt, and lemon.

Our last stop led us south and inland into the forests of Euskadi and to the historic hilltown of Oñati, home of one of the oldest university districts on the Iberian Peninsula. Arregi, our casa rural, was first built more than 400 years ago. Farmers and their wives, hermits, and even a bishop set down roots here over the centuries. Now, it's a simple guesthouse with a garden and cows whose bells jingle as they plod through the meadows. We arrived in time to watch the sun rest on the horizon and the mountains turn hues of navy and violet.

Early the next morning we drove to the city center. Sitting in a nameless cafe, we watched regulars order pastries and espressos and students hurry to class across a stone plaza. It was as if we were in unspoken agreement to simply sit and linger for a while, chat idly, and in the cool promise of morning, consider the untold possibilities of the day ahead.

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