



Walkers enjoy a picnic under an oak tree after negotiating the Col de Nive in the western Pyrénées

PYRENEAN DISCOVERIES

On a walking tour, **Paul Lamarra** enters the fascinating worlds of the Pays Basque and its Béarn neighbour

On the steep, rough road out of the Basque village of Sare, I waited by the wooden signpost while the others emerged from the minibus to don their walking shoes and adjust their rucksacks. The signpost, pointing at a path going uphill into the flaming yellow gorse, did not give a destination but identified it as the *Sentier des Douaniers* – the customs officers' path, or in other words: "Smugglers this way".

James Tamlyn, our walk leader, Francophile and eccentric Englishman, looked dressed for the occasion with his blue Basque beret and African hunting waistcoat. Before we set out, he did his best to conjure up images of packs of men and horses moving cautiously through the foothills of the Pyrénées risking their lives to smuggle everything from tobacco and wheat to gold and silver between France and Spain. In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and throughout World War II their contraband was human and the risks were higher as they escorted Jews, downed airmen and enemies of General Franco to relative safety. For the Basques, whose traditional land straddles the Pyrénées, no border existed and it was their duty to subvert it.

Yet on this cool spring morning it was impossible

to capture any sense of the smugglers' clandestine dead-of-night activities, for the sky was cloudless and the air had a haze-free limpidity. Consequently, my group of six was conspicuous, but there was no chatter as we moved uphill in single file with subconscious stealth through the head-height gorse on our way to Bera in Spain. When we heaved ourselves out of the gorse and on to steeper, grassy slopes for the final climb to the Col de Nive, three feral horses known as *pottoka* were waiting for us.

These distinctive horses were the smugglers' preferred beast of burden and their survival has become a *cause célèbre* for the Basques. Short and sturdy but at the same time gentle and circumspect, they display, I am told, very similar traits to the Basques themselves.

By this point we had been together nearly a week and grown used to James's immersive approach to walking in the Basque Pyrénées and it had probably crossed several minds that we could indeed be smuggling something.

It had all started at the Auberge du Bois by the roadside near Navarrenx, about 80 kilometres to the east of Sare in the historical Béarn region. We had signed up for a walking week complemented with fine wine and Basque and Béarnais gastronomy, ➤➤

and were staying at the Domaine de Bétouzet, an extremely comfortable and spacious 18th-century *manoir*, hired for our exclusive use. However, that evening, James and his wife Diana bundled us into the minibus for a night with the locals in what James described as a hunters' café. "Pace yourself," he warned in his pre-prandial team talk, "there is a lot of food and you don't need to eat it all – they will pour it on."

Placed at a long table beneath a stuffed boar and a hunter's perplexed gaze, we sat huddled, elbow to elbow, and were immersed in everyday life and the five-course *menu du jour*. Working alone, the elderly but sprightly Bernadette served vegetable soup in steel basins, charcuterie, chicken and chips, slices of the local Ossau-Iraty sheep's cheese and an ice-cream Cornetto served straight from the freezer. The spread was washed down with wine from bottles sealed with plastic caps that were opened with the flick of a fingernail. In the absence of formality, the group bonded and it was just the start of James and Diana's unique way of doing things.

{ Beneath a stuffed boar and a hunter's perplexed gaze, we sat elbow to elbow

We had met the locals, but we had not yet encountered the locality. As it was a Basque walking tour, I had assumed we were already in the Pays Basque. However, on the first morning at breakfast in Bétouzet's cosy kitchen, Florence Verspieren, the owner of the *manoir*, was quick to put me right.

"This is the Pays Béarn, not the Pays Basque, and we are French – this is the land of Henri IV and Porthos, one of the three musketeers," said Florence. It was a forgivable faux pas, for when we embarked on our first walk, it became clear that the distinction was far from a simple one.

Our starting point was the village of Castetbon on the high ground behind the *manoir*, from where we could properly appreciate our situation. Before Henri IV became king of France in 1589 he was Henri III of Navarre and in the 16th century all that we now surveyed was his domain – an ever-changing kingdom that included much of the lands inhabited by the Basques. Soule, one of the three ancient counties abutting the border, considered itself independent of everyone else. Nowadays it is all simply part of the *département* of Pyrénées-Atlantiques.

Dark clouds had reduced the mountains to a faint outline, but we had a clear view of the lush, green meadows, the grazing cows, the oaks just coming into leaf and the seemingly slow-

moving River Gave d'Oloron. It was a plump landscape of soft, rolling hillocks and it was evidently very fertile. Henri IV was the gourmet king and it made sense that it was this landscape that fed his passion.

As we walked along the peaceful lanes that linked the farms, James explained that the best way to establish where we were in the area's complicated political geography was to look at the architecture. In the Béarn the buildings were stout and grey with steep, tiled roofs. The churches were usually Romanesque and the barns had a martial look. In the Pays Basque we could expect colour and a vaguely alpine appearance.

For the next few days we would orientate ourselves with the Pyrénées and every pause on the first walk was carefully chosen for its view of the mountains. It was only a 12-kilometre stretch, but during one break, James dived behind a hedgerow and pulled back a tarpaulin to reveal elevenses.

Standing knee-deep in wet grass looking to the mountains we sipped on fresh lemonade and Pineau des Charentes fortified wine, and nibbled on home-made Florentine biscuits while James recited *The Windhover* by the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Later, having sloshed through a wet meadow in a downpour, James reached down into a stream flowing under the road and produced a chilled bottle of champagne to be drunk as an aperitif – possibly the only time I have quaffed bubbly with my hood up.

As it was only a short excursion, we were walking up the tree-lined avenue to Domaine de Bétouzet in time for lunch. Awaiting us inside were a log fire and a midday meal of *petite terrine de lapin* (wrapped in bacon, it was made to resemble a rabbit, with celery for ears and a fluffy tail), goose rillettes and four strong cheeses.



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: On the path leading from Sare to Ainhoa; Lunch near Lohitzun in the historical county of Soule; Breakfast at the Domaine de Bétouzet;

FAR RIGHT: The *manoir*'s exterior; **BOTTOM ROW:** A rabbit terrine with celery 'tail'; Feral *pottoka* horses; A view towards the sacred mountain of La Rhune; Walking beside the River Gave d'Oloron



A short afternoon walk took us along the Gave d'Oloron to the medieval hill town of Sauveterre-de-Béarn and a bridge from which they used to throw suspected witches. We then reconvened around the fireplace in the *manoir's* lounge to sample local Gascon wines and a not-too-distant Sauternes under the guidance of Minette Constant, a Scottish master of wine who lives in the area.

With each day and each walk, we ventured further from the plain and deeper into the rolling green hills which James either described at the "Pyreneankles" or as "bosom hills". The latter description was one that conveyed both their shape and the motherly sense of comfort to be found walking among them.

Walking in the tight and steep-sided valleys there was no longer a wider world and it occurred to me that it was perhaps that sense of separation that made the Basques such an independent and idiosyncratic race.

On day two we undertook a walk from Domezain to Lohitzun in the Soule and for nine kilometres we followed rising and dipping lanes greasy with mud and overnight rain. The place names indicated that something had changed.

According to James the *Souletins* were 'Basque-lite' but their churches and houses were unmistakably Basque. Farmhouses and townhouses had white walls and any exposed woodwork was often painted in either green or red to evoke the Basque national flag. Usually, though, the shutters were a deep red as a nod to the long tradition of painting them in bulls' blood to keep insects at bay.

The churches, like the one at Domezain, had three-tiered galleries in heavy dark wood extending from the floor to the roofline on three walls; the men sat there while the women occupied the nave. When the bell rang I could feel the pews

vibrate. Apparently it was a signal for the men to sing, for it was only their voices that could drown out the sounds of the dead.

For the second half of the week our base was the *Plus Beau Village* of Sare, which is surrounded by hills on all sides and by Spain on three sides. The staunchly Basque *commune* is arranged around its church and a pelota court where the high-speed Basque game resembling squash is played.

En route to Sare from the Pays Béarn there were three opportunities to sample the best in Basque produce. At a trout farm in Banca in the remote Vallée des Aldudes, we tasted its famous smoked trout, which is in such high demand that even the likes of three-Michelin-star chef Alain Ducasse must ➡➡



Drive the cheese trail

SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT PACE

A good way to explore the green valleys of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques is to drive the *Route du Fromage* that starts in Urrugne on the Atlantic coast and heads east to end on the Col d'Aubisque (1,709 metres). The 200km route is devoted entirely to Ossau-Iraty, the pale sheep's milk cheese, and there are almost 100 opportunities for tasting and buying. The insiders' tip is to buy directly from the shepherds who mature the cheese in their summer huts in the high pastures.

The route also takes in several high *cols*, the walled pilgrimage town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, the village of Espelette (famous for its peppers) and the Irouléguay wine area, regarded by some as one of the oldest in France (www.ossau-iraty.fr).





ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Walk leader James Tamlyn (in beret) and other group members deep in the Pyrenean countryside; The Église Saint-André in Sauveterre-de-Béarn

sometimes do without. In Irouléguy we imbibed the robust wines that have been made from grapes grown on its impossibly steep and iron-rich slopes since at least the 3rd century. Finally, in Aldudes, we visited Pierre Oteiza, a *traiteur* specialising in deeply flavoursome cured hams and *saucisson* made from the Basque pig.

James bought a big, fat leg of slow-dried ham that came complete with hoof and toenails. On our final day, having negotiated the smugglers' route over the Col de Nive and descended through the beech trees on a path lined with towering white asphodelus plants, we found the ham hanging from the oak tree under which we would picnic.

{ We savoured our pig ham under an oak tree, another important Basque symbol

Like all of James and Diana's picnic spots, it was carefully chosen. Even though we were now deep in the mountains, we looked south as always, this time over the mountaintops known as Los Tres Coronas because they apparently resemble the Three Wise Men riding on camels. At our back was La Rhune – a mountain considered sacred by the Basques and conquered every 30 minutes by a steam train decked out in the region's colours.

It was appropriate then that we savoured our pig ham under an oak tree, another important Basque symbol, and ate our Ossau-Iraty and Petit Basque cheeses with cherry jam, just as the locals do. It was as deep as any immersion could be and I can only hope that Diana's refreshing if very un-Basque gazpacho soup was the only thing we were smuggling. 



Francofile

Walk into a different world in the western Pyrénées

GETTING AROUND

Paul was a guest of The Walking Party and joined its Taste of the Basque Pyrénées walking holiday, €2,890pp for eight days, including all accommodation, food and drink. Biarritz Airport is the normal pick-up point (www.thewalkingparty.co.uk).

GETTING THERE

Paul travelled with Brittany Ferries between Portsmouth and Santander in Spain, which is a 2hr 45m drive from Biarritz. Single fares for a car and two passengers start from £229 (tel: 0871 244 1400, www.brittanyferries.co.uk). See page 31 for more travel information.

WHERE TO STAY

Domaine de Bétouzet
64390 Andrien

Tel: (Fr) 5 59 38 91 40
www.betouzet.com

This 18th-century *manoir* has six spacious bedrooms, a grand sitting room, dining room and farmhouse kitchen. Available only for exclusive hire.

Hôtel Arraya

Place du Village
64310 Sare

Tel: (Fr) 5 59 54 20 36
www.arraya.com
Family-run hotel with doubles from €85.

WHERE TO EAT

Auberge du Bois

Quartier du Bois
64190 Navarrenx
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 66 10 40
Traditional hunters' restaurant. Five-course menu with wine €11.

Auberge de la Fontaine

Place de l'Église
64390 Laàs
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 38 20 20
www.aubergedelafontaine.net
Dine on local, seasonal food with menus from €20.

Hôtel-Restaurant Erreguina

64430 Banca
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 37 40 37
www.auberge-pays-basque.fr
Remote restaurant in the Vallée des Aldudes serving the renowned Banca trout. Menus from €11.

WHERE TO VISIT

Pierre Oteiza Basque

Route Urepel
64300 Les Aldudes
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 37 56 11
<http://en.pierreoteiza.com>
Breeder of Basque pigs and supplier of hams and *saucisson*.

Truite de Banka

64330 Banca
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 37 45 97
www.truitedebanka.com
Producer of Banca trout and supplier to top French chefs.

TOURIST INFORMATION: Béarn des Gaves tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 59 38 00 33, www.tourisme-bearn-gaves.com; Béarn-Pays Basque tourist board, www.bearn-paysbasque.com