

Spain: A Walking Tour of Basque Country

Walking Vacation Only

Experience French and Spanish cultures together as you journey through the region where their homelands meet. You'll amble along an ancient pilgrimage trail with sweeping bay views and meander past stunning cliffs, scenic coves and quaint villages. You'll also walk in the footsteps of Louis XIV in St. Jean-de-Luz and discover a royal retreat in San Sebastián with its beachfront promenade. And feel like royalty yourself as you stay at a restored palace and savor gourmet dining, including dinner at a private gastronomic society and an exclusive cooking demonstration.



Cultural Highlights

- Join a private gastronomic club, or txoko, for a cultural and flavorful meal
- Live like royalty in a setting beautiful enough to earn the honor of hosting Louis XIV and Maria Theresa's wedding in St. Jean de Luz

- Experience the vibrant nightlife in a Basque wine bar
- Stroll the same seaside paths in San Sebastian as Spanish aristocracy once wandered in the summers
- Learn about one of the largest museums and architectural phenomenon, the Guggenheim Museum, during a guided tour
- Satisfy your cravings in an area with more Michel-star rated restaurants than Paris
- Rest your mind and body in a restored 17th-century palace, or auegia
- Participate in a cooking demonstration of traditional Basque cuisine
- Follow trails on the Way of St. James, an 800-km stretch of path used by pilgrims

What to Expect

This tour features a combination of easy terrain and paved roads mixed with moderate hills. We walk primarily in the open countryside and small cities and on a variety of surfaces, including uneven footpaths over grass and soil, and cobbled streets. We plan longer, optional walks for those who wish to spend more time on their own exploring the small towns and surrounding areas. We also provide short and easy options for those who prefer to spend more time relaxing in Basque Country. Our VBT on-tour support vehicle is available at specific meeting points for those who need assistance. This tour is ideal for both enthusiastic beginners and experienced walkers. Several of the walks require a transfer from our hotel to the start of the walk. Our Trip Leaders often use this time in the van for our morning route review, so we can enjoy a more leisurely morning at breakfast.

Tour Duration: 7 Days

Average Daily Mileage: 2 - 5

Group size: 20 max

Climate Information

Average High/Low Temperature (°F)

May 68°/50°, Jun 73°/55°, Jul 77°/59°, Aug 78°/59°, Sep 76°/56°, Oct 69°/51°

Average Rainfall (in.)

May 3.0, Jun 2.0, Jul 1.0, Aug 2.0, Sep 2.0, Oct 3.0

DAY 1: VBT Walking Vacation begins / Bilbao

VBT-Walking-Vacation-only guests: After breakfast on your own, meet your VBT Trip Leaders at the NH Collection Villa de Bilbao at 9:00 a.m. (Address: Gran Via 87, Bilbao, Spain; telephone: +34 94 441 6000).

To reach the hotel, you can take a taxi from Bilbao airport (approximately 25 euros). If your arrival in Bilbao is scheduled for later than 9 a.m., or if you are delayed, please contact the Bilbao hotel to advise them of any travel delays or changes so the hotel staff can pass the message on to your VBT Trip Leaders.

Following introductions and a welcome briefing you will walk to the world-renowned Guggenheim Museum, designed by acclaimed architect Frank Gehry. You will enjoy a 90-minute informative tour given by one of the museum guides regarding the building's architecture and the current works on display. At the end of the tour, you will walk with your leaders to Bilbao's old town where you will have an opportunity to have lunch on your own.

Later this afternoon, join your Trip Leaders on a walk and discover how this city has reinvented itself, with its host of modern sites designed by world-renowned architects. The metro is a combination of architectural craft and engineering prowess by Britain's famed architect Sir Norman Foster, and you will readily see his dramatic, curved-glass metro entrances, which are locally known as fosteritos, or "little Fosters." Other masterpieces include Philippe Stark's La Alhandiga, which is an old wine warehouse converted into a multicultural center; and Iberdrola Tower, the tallest tower in the Basque country, designed by Cesar Pelli.

This evening, get to know your fellow travelers and Trip Leaders during a welcome reception and dinner.

Hotel: NH Collection Villa de Bilbao

Meals: D

Daily Options: Morning: 1 mile (1.6 km) warm-up walk on flat, paved sidewalks. Afternoon: 2 miles (3.2 km) on paved sidewalks.

DAY 2: Walk the pilgrimage path "Way of St. James" / Hondarribia walking tour

After breakfast, your transfer (approximately 90 minutes) will take you to the start of today's historic walk along the "Way of St. James." The coastal route that you follow today is considered to be the oldest of the paths leading to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, where many believe St. James is buried. Our path dates back more than 1,000 years and is believed to be the first institutionalized route used by religious pilgrims. The natural beauty of today's walk—featuring vistas of the Bay of Biscay and small rugged coves—will become even more spectacular as you reach the summit of Mount Jaizkibel. You'll then shuttle five minutes to the Sanctuary of Guadalupe, where a 15th-century Black Madonna is kept. From here, you can shuttle to our next hotel or continue your walk through the quaint fishing town of

Hondarribia before ending at our hotel.

After free time for lunch on your own in Hondarribia, you will explore the town with a local guide, who will acquaint you with the history of your home for the next three nights. Hondarribia is a town with two identities: one belonging to the lower port town and the other to the 800-year-old medieval walled town above, with its balcony-lined cobblestone streets and magnificent vistas of the sea, the Bidasoa River and neighboring France.

This evening, you can choose from among Hondarribia's many gourmet restaurants for dinner on your own.

Hotel: Hotel Obispo

Meals: B

Daily Options: Morning: 5 miles (8 km) on a flat, dirt Way of St. James path along the Atlantic Coast.

Afternoon: 1 mile (1.6 km) walking tour on flat, paved and cobblestone streets.

DAY 3: French Basque country / Coastal walk to St. Jean-de-Luz

Today, you'll take a short walk from our hotel to the pier and then enjoy a five-minute ferry ride across the Bidasoa River to Hendaye, France. This seaside resort with its long stretch of beach will be your starting point for today's walk. Your narrow dirt path will meander past stunning cliffs, scenic coves and quaint villages before you arrive at St. Jean-de-Luz, one of the most attractive towns on the French Basque coast. You will have ample opportunities during the walk to shuttle to our destination if you would prefer more time exploring St. Jean-de-Luz.

There are many sites to visit in this idyllic town, such as the Maison Louis XIV, a temporary residence of the Sun King, who came here in 1660 for his marriage to Maria Theresa. You can also visit the nearby church where the pair was married, the largest Basque church in France. Or simply enjoy exploring the town's picturesque harbor and pedestrian-friendly streets. Enjoy lunch on your own in one of the many outdoor cafes. Later in the afternoon, you may take the 12-minute train journey back to Hendaye.

This evening, you will have the special privilege of being a guest at a members-only, private gastronomic society, or txoko, as it is known in Basque. Txoko members tend to be mostly men who have shared interests in cooking creative meals for their guests. When Basque culture was suppressed under the reign of Francisco Franco, txokos became safe havens where members could share their language and traditions as well as their love of cooking. Women used to be banned from the society; today, however,

they are welcome to dine with the men.

Hotel: Hotel Obispo

Meals: B, D

Daily Options: 2 to 7 miles (3.21–11.2 km) on rolling dirt paths along coastal cliffs and coves with van support for shorter options.

DAY 4: River Bidasoa Marshlands / Basque cooking demonstration

For today's walk, you can choose from among several options, depending upon your interests. After breakfast, walk to Hondarribia's marina and fishing port to see the many holiday boats and fishing trawlers. You may start a later morning walk from the hotel to the River Bidasoa marshlands, at times treading in the pilgrim's footsteps on the "Way of St. James." Later in the afternoon, you have the option to shuttle back into Hondarribia and explore the town's art galleries, restaurants for lunch, and stores.

Tonight, you'll learn how to replicate the flavors of Basque Country in our own hotel kitchen during an exclusive cooking demonstration, followed by a dinner in the hotel.

Hotel: Hotel Obispo

Meals: B, D

Daily Options: 2 to 6 miles (3.21–9.6 km) on flat, paved walking paths, as well as urban streets.

DAY 5: Transfer from Hondarribia to Tolosa / Basque Country hills and forests

After breakfast, you'll transfer 45 minutes to the town of Tolosa, located on the Oria River. After a brief tour of Tolosa, you'll have a short shuttle ride into the surrounding hills to the quaint village of Bidania. Today, your path will be a mostly steady incline through lovely forested hills and valleys. Stopping for lunch, you'll have the opportunity to feast on a Basque specialty: alubias de Tolosa, or Tolosa beans—purple-black legumes that turn red when cooked and are celebrated for their rich, buttery flavor. You'll also have a chance to sample the local sidra (hard apple cider). Following lunch, you have the option to continue walking through the lovely countryside to our accommodations—a hotel within a restored, 17th-century jauregia (palace)—or you can travel there by van.

This evening, meet the jauregia's owners and learn about the history of and future plans for this unique property. You will also have a Basque language class to prepare you for dinner on your own, or perhaps for a walk into town to sample the nightlife at the local pub.

Hotel: Iriarte Jauregia Hotel

Meals: B, L

Daily Options: 4.3 miles (6.9 km) on flat and gradually ascending dirt paths through forest and paved country roads. Afternoon: 4.3 miles (6.9 km) on paved country roads. Flat and gradually descending dirt paths through forests.

DAY 6: Walk through Basque villages / Farm visit / Farwell Dinner

Today's walk immerses you in Basque country life as you meander through a series of hamlets on lesser-traveled (but paved) roads, past peaceful pastures nestled in the valleys. You'll hear tinkling cowbells and see sheep grazing as you walk beneath the shade of apple trees. A charming stone farmhouse will be the setting for today's lunch. Our host is Pello Urdapilleta, whose family has raised Euskal txerria—a breed of pig found only in the Basque region—for generations. Pello will introduce us to the rural culinary delights of this region of Spain. After an included lunch, you have two options: You can shuttle back to our hotel, or you can return by foot retracing your morning path.

Tonight, enjoy your farewell dinner at the jauregia. You will be treated to a delicious dinner prepared by the palace's creative and renowned chef.

Hotel: Iriarte Jauregia Hotel

Meals: B, L, D

Daily Options: 1.4 miles (2.25 km) on rolling, paved country roads. Afternoon: 2 miles (3.2 km) on rolling, paved country roads.

DAY 7: Transfer to San Sebastián / Funicular to Monte Igueldo / VBT Walking Tour ends

This morning, you'll transfer to San Sebastián. Upon arrival to this beautiful seaside town we will enjoy an easy stroll along the town's two-mile-long beachfront promenade, which offers views of beautiful La Concha Bay. You will soon discover why Queen Isabella II and other wealthy aristocrats would spend their summer holidays in this scenic corner of Spain. To help get your bearings, you'll ride the funicular to the lookout atop Monte Igueldo, which will give us a great perspective on this scenic seaside resort. Continue with your exploration in the Casco Viejo (Old Town), which dates back to the 12th century. Here you'll enjoy lunch on your own in one of the many restaurants. You may want to sample local pintxos, the Basque form of tapas. Given the Basque passion for cuisine, these delectable small plate morsels are usually more substantive and complex than their Spanish tapas counterparts.

VBT-Walking-Vacation-only guests: Your luggage will be stored for your pick-up at the nearby Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra where your walking tour will end at 1pm. Please note: The hotel will help you book a taxi at your own expense to your next hotel, train station or airport.

Meals: B