

## Back to the Basques

September 2016

I have had a long love affair with the Basque region of Spain. I first went there in 1951, when my parents wearied of the weather on English seaside holidays and vowed to return to a country they both knew well. My mother went to college in the Basque town of Durango as long ago as 1917, and she and my father visited Spain half a dozen times before and after they got married in 1929.



In 1951, after crossing France in a Ford Prefect whose top speed was 55mph, we ventured along the Atlantic coast as far as the fishing village of Lequetio, staying in the Hotel Betia on the harbour front. In 1952, when currency restrictions limited overseas travellers to £25 each (and £15 for children) we lodged in a fisherman's hostel tucked away in the streets behind the harbour. We visited neighbouring villages such as Ondarroa too (*photo left*). Spain then was desperately poor and still racked by the civil war. I remember my

mother talking in whispers with a Spanish friend about what the friend had seen – and declining to tell me what she had learned. After my father died in 1953, I went back to the Basque region with my mother in 1954, once again staying near the harbour. So some of my earliest and most numinous memories of Spain have a long and well-engrained provenance.

So it was that Leni and I decided, more than 60 years on, it was time to see again what the Basque country held for us. We originally considered staying in San Sebastian, not least because of its reputation as a foodie haven. But accommodation was not cheap, and we found an apartment in a converted Basque farmhouse in the village of Lesaka some 25 kms inland. We travelled to Spain once again with Brittany Ferries, enjoying the 24-hour voyage and the sense that the holiday had started once we boarded the ship at Portsmouth.



Once in Spain, we headed first for Pamplona, where my mother had stayed in 1954 with friends she had made in Lequetio. In 1961, Leni came with us there too, joining us on a beach holiday in Benicasim – long before it became the venue for a music festival. This time Leni and I headed for the Café Iruña in the Plaza del Castillo – Hemingway's café when he was writing *The Sun Also Rises*, with its splendid ornate interior (*see photo*). As always, we loved the street life, the pinxtos bars, the chatter and the laughter, and the balmy night air.

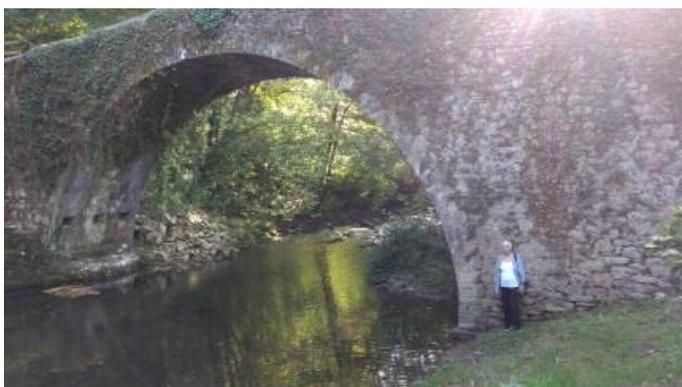


Then it was on to our village, with the farmhouse at the far, high end of a bumpy track (*photo left*). The view from our apartment was across a lush green valley, rising to green ridges beyond. The village clustered around bars and cafes and some impressively monumental civic buildings, with a river coursing through the centre.

Over the next seven days we savoured a rich range of delights. We drove up to the pass across the Pyrenees that marked the border with France, where I followed the border ridge eastward with views plunging alternately on either side. We swam at the French town of Hendaye, coasting in with the Atlantic rollers. We drove to the seaside village of Getaria, birthplace of Sebastian del Cano, the navigator who took charge of Magellan's expedition after he was killed in the Philippines in 1521, and completed the first circumnavigation of the planet in his leader's name. I had been there in 1952, and Leni and I posed in front of the same statue where I was photographed with my parents 63 years before.



We enjoyed it all: the scenery, the mountains, the climate, the friendliness. But the biggest revelation was the food. Despite dipping into gastronomy in San Sebastian, nothing quite prepared us for the sheer excellence – and extraordinary value – of Basque country cooking. In the village of Etxalar, after my ridge walk, we had a sensational three-course lunch, with wine, for just 11 Euros each at the Herriko Ostatua. A few days later we returned to find that it was offering porcini mushrooms – cèpes to the French and us – collected that morning and cooked in a variety of guises. (*See photo left.*) We opted for sautéed and with rice, unable to believe our luck – and this time the meal cost around 20 Euros each.



We went twice, too, to the Altxunea Erretegia, a husband and wife restaurant beside a stone bridge over a babbling river at Ituren (*photo below*). The house speciality was lamb cooked on an open grill in the dining room, and the finest meal of our trip, which we had ordered without inhibition, cost less than 70 Euros. We drank superb Navarra red wines too, rich, fruity and deep, and

almost unknown in Britain. There too we drank the special wine of the coastal region, mostly grown around Getaria, with the denomination Getariako Txakolina – a lightly sparkling white that is poured from a height to give it “bounce”.

For our last night we stayed, as before, in Santander, savouring our last taste of street life in the pinxtos bars. We saw an incipient construction on the quayside that we now know to be the Centro Botin, an art gallery that is Santander's riposte to the Guggenheim in Bilbao. It was designed by

Renzo Piano and photographs we have seen since its opening make it a worthy rival to the Frank Gehry art palace 50 miles to the east. We do not need an excuse to return to Navarra and the Basques – but now we have an additional incentive to go back.

Brittany ferries: <http://www.brittany-ferries.co.uk/>

Restaurant Ituren: <http://altxuneaerretegia.com/>

Herriko Ostatua: <http://www.etxalarherriko.eus/>