

Travels with Anzie: The Basque Country

February 12, 2014

We stopped in Biarritz, France on our way to San Sebastian, Spain. Both towns lie on the Bay of Biscay, on the Atlantic. We had a memorable 3 course lunch at **Café Goulue**. In need of exercise we strolled down to the waterfront. There we watched, spellbound, as thirty-foot waves pounded the shoreline. Those waves looked like they were going to cause some damage.

We traveled west to **San Sebastian**, or Donostia in the Basque language. Our underground parking was located less than 100 yards from a crescent-shaped beach. La Concha. When we exited the elevator, we were confronted with more of this violent wave action. We carried our luggage through Old Town, looking for our hotel. As we walked downhill we noticed that building doorways were shored up at least three feet high with boards to protect them from possible water incursion. We noticed that streets close to the ocean were blocked off. It became a spectator sport that evening to get as close as one could to the shoreline, and watch the waves breach the retaining walls. We heard that the wave action was more serious two nights before. Buildings were flooded, and a woman was swept out to sea. The search was still on for her.

The next morning we were awakened by the sound of machinery on the street below our hotel room. A truck was sucking sand out of a manhole. The sand was obviously deposited there by the waves that had reached the streets. Fortunately the waves became calmer for the rest of our stay, even though business owners kept the protective boards in place. Customers didn't seem to mind having to climb over the boards to enter and exit the shops.

We became seriously lost on the way to our hotel. This was the first of many experiences we had with the helpfulness and friendliness of San Sebastian. Two men could tell that we were obviously lost. They used their Smartphone to locate our hotel, **Ab Domini**. They were attempting to explain directions when another man, about my age, stopped to say he would guide me. And he did. Along the way we made conversation with my halting Spanish. It turned what could have been a worrisome experience into a very positive one. The moral of this story? Don't hesitate to reach out to foreign visitors who either ask for or appear to need help.

What's strange about the Basque country? First on the list would be the language, *Euskera*, allegedly the oldest language in Europe. It's a difficult language to learn. Do the Basques play Scrabble? If so, I wonder how many X's come with a set, and how many points an X is worth - because they certainly use a lot of them, along with many other consonants. Often the "X" is preceded by a "T". The Basque word for tapas is

pintxos (pronounced *pinchos*). How about: "Txartelik onartzen al duzue?" "Do you take credit cards?"

In San Sebastian most of the signage is in both Basque and Spanish. However, outside the big cities it's all in Basque. You'd swear you were in an Eastern European country.

Then there's the topography. As soon as you leave the coast you're into steep, green, grassy mountains. The white houses resemble Swiss chalets with red tile roofs. The pastures are dotted with cows, horses and long-haired sheep. We learned that Basque wool is described as "rough": In other words, not recommended for fine woolens – but their milk makes great cheese. You drive through many tunnels, some almost a kilometer in length.

We simply cannot find enough words to describe how impressed we were with the Basque country. On every turn our expectations were exceeded. Of course, the weather helped a lot. After freezing in Southern France, we were ecstatic to run into sunny climes in the 70's.

We spent our first full day exploring this gorgeous country. We began with **Guernica/Gernika**. Picasso made it famous with his master work of the same name. It memorialized the infamous day in 1937 when Hitler, with the approval of the Spanish dictator, Franco, used the town to try out his new technique, saturation bombing. It was market day and the town was destroyed along with up to 2000 men, women and children out of a total population of 5000. Franco chose Guernica because it was the center of the traditional Basque government and one of the centers of resistance in the Spanish civil war. Presently it is completely rebuilt as a typical modern Spanish town.

However, the Basques have long memories. For centuries they have fought for independence. Even today one sees evidence of the infamous ETA separatist group in graffiti; although the vast majority want peace. Perhaps the Basques could succeed as a separate country. They certainly seem prosperous. Every town appears to include a thriving industrial park. Few of the company names are familiar international conglomerates; most are of Basque origin. Mondragon, for instance, is a major manufacturer of solar cells. Iberdrola, of Bilbao, owns New York State Electric & Gas. Whereas, the rest of Spain is suffering from a prolonged economic drought and high unemployment. **News flash:** Saw on the news last night that the ETA is turning in its weapons to the federal police.

The **Museum of Peace** is worth a visit. Using multi-media it explains in graphic fashion the horrific event, and the international effort that contributed towards reparation.

We spent the rest of the day traveling the coast, exploring charming towns like **Lekeitio, Ondarroa and Deba**. Lekeitio is the site of the wild goose festival wherein contestants

try to hang on to the greased neck of a dead goose suspended from a bridge above the harbor. The road to Ondarroa winds among pine trees that arch cathedral-like over the road, towering granite cliffs and green pastures that slope to the edge of the sea. Deba was a fashionable resort in the 1900's. A row of fine old villas lines the wide beach, which is known for good surfing. In each coastal town we saw crews working to repair damage from the recent wave action.

It took us a minute to pass through the lovely town of **Ea**, not far from Deba and Orio..

The next day we traveled to **Bilboa** to visit the **Guggenheim Museum**. The Guggenheim, designed by the American architect, Frank Gehry, was opened in 1997. A series of shining curves, it is meant to resemble either a flower or a ship, depending on whom you talk to. By sheer luck I got lost on the way to the museum. I couldn't find the entrance. As a result I walked all the way around the structure, and was able to view it from every perspective, except for that of a bird's eye. Next to the architecture the art displayed inside barely holds a candle.

The city of Bilbao was certainly totally committed to this project. It must have uprooted and revised the entire center of town along the riverfront. New bridges and roads were built. The project takes up a huge area. No expense was spared. The exterior structure is covered with titanium – a precious metal compared to stainless steel. The interior is just as magnificent. Gehry tried very hard to integrate the museum into the city. To enter you walk down a very long flight of steps to the main lobby, which lies below street level. The main atrium is cathedral-like with arches going this way and that. Suspended from this high ceiling are long cylinders that resemble nylon stockings, the bottoms of which have deposits of sand. This gives them an organic appearance, like an old woman's mammaries.

One exhibit stands way above the rest, in our estimation. Richard Serra, an American, filled a room the size of a football field with massive steel plates that are welded together to form ovals, toroids (a donut shape, like an o-ring), and snakes. These are interactive. Spectators can walk around, into and through them. It can sometimes be dizzying: the plates will lean away from you and then suddenly toward you. Young students were running through them, and it was permitted. It struck me as a massive project within a massive project.

In front of the entrance you come across a giant scotty dog sculpture called "Puppy", by the artist Jeff Koons. The dog is covered with flowering plants. It was supposed to be a temporary exhibit; however, the city so loved it that they bought it, and it is now a permanent fixture. Whoever designed the irrigation system certainly is a genius.

I should also mention the three-story tall spider, which stands along the river walk outside the museum. I was afraid to walk beneath it.

No, we didn't do any part of the famous pilgrimage road to San Juan de Campostelo. Nor did we tour the westernmost part of this beautiful country. On our way to southern Spain we did pass by Pamplona. It brought back memories – as much as I could remember, that is – of running before the bulls, and getting caught by one, back in my youth. But that's another story.

At any rate, there's much to see in this wonderful country. We just feel blessed that we lived long enough to experience it.

Hasta la proxima,

Chuck & Anne

<http://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/video/tv-show/basque-country>

<https://picasaweb.google.com/chuckanzie/BasqueCountry> (you may have to open this in a new browser)

http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/a_nav/guernica_nav/main_guerfrm.html

<http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en/the-building/>