



*The most highly populated of the Basque metropolis, economic capital of the Country, cultural benchmark due to the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao and the Euskalduna Conference Centre and Concert Hall... Reborn Bilbao has what it takes to go out and get what it wants.*

# BILBAO

«**T**he city with the highest number of inhabitants in the Basque Country had it all: active trade, lively streets and plenty to do and see. But something was missing, there was nothing definite to attract outsiders. However, that something has arrived over recent decades in the shape of new infrastructures – the impeccable Metro – the restoration of several buildings and, above all, the birth of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The titanium and glass colossus designed by Frank O. Gehry has brought an unmistakable image to this attractive, plural, cosmopolitan and welcoming borough; big but friendly. As Pio Baroja once wrote, “Bilbao is becoming increasingly dense and interesting”.

Bilbao is enormous. Its rambling metropolitan area is not only a place of residence for most of the inhabitants of Bizkaia, but for almost half of the entire Basque population.

The capital of Bizkaia, the toponym of which would seem to come from *Bi albo* in Basque, meaning “two sides”, in reference to the two banks of the Nervión Estuary on which it stands, was founded in the Middle Ages. The Lord of Bizkaia, Don Diego López de Haro, awarded the title of borough in 1300 to what had until then been little more than a small village of blacksmiths, seamen and farmers. Agriculture has disappeared with time, but iron and the sea have continued to define Bilbao down through the years. The iron of the nearby mines, already extracted and used as

far back as Roman times, led to the creation of a great number of foundries, predecessors of the heavy iron and steel industry which was to bring industrial revolution to the area.

The fact that the estuary was largely navigable meant that its port, safer than those on the coast, handled the Castilian merchandise heading for Europe. Queen Juana granted the right to create a Trade Consulate as far back as 1511. Early foreign trade relations began with Brussels and Nantes. This trade relationship later grew with Great Britain, from which coal was imported and to which steel was exported. In fact, in comparison with the increasing influence of France on Donostia-San Sebastián, Bilbao has always considered itself as being the Basque capital with the most *British style*.

Although the first blast furnaces were already being assembled in the mid-19th century, Bilbao didn't actually take off until having recovered from the last siege of the Carlist Wars in 1874. From then on it joined the parish churches of Abando and Begoña, experienced expansion and saw the construction of significant buildings such as the Teatro Arriaga, the Stock Exchange or the Alhóndiga. Seen from the socio-economic angle, the industrial development of the left bank of the estuary ran parallel to the triumph of the local upper classes and their backing of the iron and steel and seafaring businesses, banking and trading,



thus converting Bilbao into the economic capital of the Basque Country, a fact which is still true today.

The industrial decline had a strong effect on the area. But it also had positive effects, since Bilbao learned to increase the diversity of its activities and has succeeded in bringing an end to the image of an ugly, grey and polluted city from which it had suffered for decades.

### INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTS

This change of image was made possible thanks to the development of ambitious projects related to infrastructure and equipment, carried out by top-line international architects. New Bilbao is the work of names like Norman Foster (the underground), Santiago Calatrava (*Zubizuri* or *Puente de las Universidades*) and, of course, Frank O. Gehry (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao).

The Guggenheim has meant an incredible boom, both for the locals themselves and for the visitors who are captivated by this surprising titanium, granite and glass structure opening out like some kind of futurist vessel onto the estuary, that reflects the changing lights of the city. In addition to its striking “outer coat”, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao offers 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> of exhibition space and a continuous programme of important itinerant exhibitions in the attempt to

increase the popularity, without abandoning rigour, of contemporary art tendencies.

Not far from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, is the Euskalduna Convention and Music Centre. Located on the site of what used to be the Euskalduna shipyards, this building contains an auditorium for 2,200 spectators and installations for the holding of conventions. The Euskalduna has been rewarded within the 2003 Apex Awards as ‘The Best Conference Centre of the World’. Regeneration of the old industrial and port area of the estuary will be finished on completion of the Abandoibarra project.

Although the renovation of Bilbao is obvious from the bigger projects, there are also a number of other, more modest spaces to be found, for example, when going to a concert or to have a drink. On the La Merced quay, at the other side of “Siete calles” area, an old convent has been made into Bilbo Rock, a centre with practise areas and a concert hall for younger music. Next to the Albia gardens, the Café Antzokia combines drinks, cultural activities in Basque and performances in a reconverted cinema.

### ON THE RIGHT-HAND BANK OF THE ESTUARY

Despite these more modern options, Bilbao’s heart still beats in the Old Part, which boast far more than just the “Siete calles” area for which it is known. The Old



*Bilbao's Town Hall is one of the emblematic buildings that lean over the estuary.*

Part, which had to be renovated after the terrible floods of 1983, is one of the main leisure and shopping centres of Bilbao. Its pedestrian streets are lined with classic shops interspersed with state-of-the-art establishments and any amount of bars and restaurants in which to taste the best of Basque cuisine.

Santiago Cathedral, a late 14th century Gothic construction, presides over the old part of town, which has spilled over into the Plaza Nueva, the setting of ludic and festive events, such as the Sunday market or Santo Tomás Fair.

Running beside the estuary is the Arenal, a long promenade on which many of the local activities are carried out. Beside here is the symbolic Teatro Arriaga, dedicated to local composer Juan Crisóstomo de Arriaga and rebuilt after the floods. The right bank of the estuary running through Bilbao offers several interesting spots, such as the Casa Consistorial or Town Hall and Deusto University, which is administered by the Society of Jesus.

#### **LA GRAN VÍA**

Ever since the late 19th century, the Puente del Arenal has linked the Casco Viejo or Old Part of town to a typical, likewise 19th century suburb, consisting of long, regular streets lined with elegant buildings. The central artery of the suburb is the Gran Vía Don Diego López de Haro, which

the locals simply call the “Gran Vía”. This is a long avenue running from the Plaza Circular – where glazed banks stand round the statue of Don Diego López de Haro – to that of the Sagrado Corazón. Taking a stroll along the Gran Vía means discovering the big department stores and banks interspersed with splendid buildings like the Diputación Foral de Bizkaia (Regional County Council of Bizkaia), the Hacienda Estatal (State Tax Office), the Gobierno Civil (Police Headquarters) or the Carlton Hotel, the last three of which are actually in the Plaza Moyúa.

Beside the Gran Vía are the Albia gardens, a wooded square on one side of which is the bar Iruña, a famous place in this capital where literary and political discussion over a cup of coffee is an ongoing habit. The last stretch of the Gran Vía will likewise take us to Doña Casilda de Iturrizar Park. Gardens, walkways, pergolas and a large pond all contribute to making this the centre's biggest green space, with an excellent art gallery greatly benefited by the “Guggenheim effect” at one end the Museo de Bellas Artes.

In order to appreciate Bilbao from a different angle, we recommend that you take the funicular railway up to the top of Mount Artxanda or the lift which, from the Calle Esperanza in the Casco Viejo, makes it possible to observe the city from a height and will bring you out near the basilica of Nuestra Señora de Begoña.