



The label "land of contrasts" suits Bizkaia perfectly. Pure images such as that of San Juan Gaztelugatxe or the local nature reserves alternate with areas strongly influenced by the hand of man. Both industrial and natural, Bizkaia is an all-round province that never fails to surprise.

Bizkaia

«**B**uruan orlegi, bihotzean sua...”. “Green in the head, fire in the heart”. These are the words of a love song written to this province by singer-songwriter Benito Lertxundi, entitled “Bizkaia maite”. The fresh green of places like the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve or the Nature Reserves of Urkiola and Gorbeia. The red flames of the blast furnaces, of the industrialisation responsible for converting the left bank of the Nervión estuary into the area with the highest population density in the Basque Country.

But there should really be a third colour, the blue of the Bay of Biscay, seen from the beaches and fishing harbours of Bizkaia, or from magical places like the hermitage of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe. Bizkaia is an all-round province with a capital city impressive in itself, Bilbao, now stronger than ever thanks to the *Guggenheim effect*, and Gernika-Lumo, a place of symbolic meaning for all Basques.

Bizkaia suits the label “land of contrasts”. It hardly seems possible that, in one single province, and simply by changing valleys, we can go from industrial areas to nature reserves; from proud, stately boroughs to towns marked by rapid development.

No matter what the landscape, Bizkaia never loses its expressive pride. One excellent example of this is the hanging bridge which has been spanning the Nervión estuary since 1893, linking the residential Getxo to the industrial Portugalete. But we mustn't forget the spectacular silhouette and 1,296 metres imbibed in legend of Mount Anboto. And the colours of the painted trees in the Bosque de Oma, or the metallic dazzle of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

Bizkaia is the most densely populated of the three Basque provinces. This said, the demographic agglomeration is located in Greater Bilbao, whereas the rest of the territory has both highly populated areas and others with an age-old rural flavour.

The province of Bizkaia is extremely rugged. Mountains tumble down into the sea, forming a steep coastline only softened by the odd beach and the mouths of rivers which, though short, nevertheless contain a great deal of water. An oceanic

climate, damp and mild, makes for a densely wooded landscape with an important variety of autochthonous trees, such as oak or beech, which are now losing ground to the more profitable imported pine or eucalyptus trees.

THANKS TO IRON

Bizkaian soil is extremely fertile and as such ideal for the agriculture and cattle-raising largely found in the more rural valleys. It likewise conceals a hidden treasure, iron ore, the reason for and symbol of the province's intensive industrial development. This development, based on mining and on the iron and steel industry, planted its roots in Bilbao, on the left bank of the Nervión and in the bigger towns.

Fishing, although of generally less importance, has marked and continues to mark the everyday life of a number of coastal villages.

Populated since prehistory – the Magdaleniense man left almost fifty drawings of animals in the Santimamiñe caves at Kortezubi – Bizkaia was only very partially Romanised. The earliest written reference to the territory is to be found in a 9th century document, when the province was an entity comprising several *merindades* or territorial divisions which floated back and forth between the kingdoms of Asturias and Navarre.

The area soon became a manor, with the Lord of Bizkaia at its head. In 1379 it became part of the Castilian crown which, by means of charters permitting the foundation of boroughs, boosted the appearance of several towns, including: Plentzia, Bilbao, Portugalete and Lekeitio.

Although related to Castile, the Basque Country maintained its own legal system as set down in its charters and implemented by its general assemblies, or *Juntas Generales*. For centuries, the Castilian kings, though granted the title of Lords of Bizkaia, had to swear allegiance to the *Fuero viejo* (Ancient Chapter) at a rigidly established ritual according to which ceremonies were established in five different places. The “oath-taking route” began in Bilbao and continued in Larrabetzu, Aretxabalegane, Gernika-Lumo and Bermeo.



Iron ore deposits and the early promotion of exportation were behind the iron industry's historical driving effect on development in Bizkaia.



The beautiful Laga Beach, with Cape Ogoño at the back, tells us that the Urdaibai biosphere reserve is near.

VIA THE COAST

Bermeo stands at the centre of one of Bizkaia's greatest attractions: its coast. From Ondarroa, on the border with Gipuzkoa, to Punta Covarón next to Cantabria, the steep cliffs of the Bizkaian coast alternate with long beaches and splendid fluvial valleys.

The first fishing village to the east is **ONDARROA**, the houses of which rise haphazardly above the harbour, base of the most important deep-sea fishing fleet on the Basque coast. Slightly inland from here is **MARKINA-XEMEIN**, a land of *cesta-punta* pelota players. The hermitage of San Miguel de Arretxinaga offers an unforgettable image: three enormous rocks forming an extremely beautiful interior altar. Well worth the visit is the nearby village of Bolibar and the Cenarruza-Ziortza collegiate church.

Back on the coast, is the parish church of Santa María de la Asunción in **LEKEITIO** with its Flemish altarpiece. A one-time rival with Donostia-San Sebastián for the position of summer venue for the Royals, this town has two beaches facing out towards San Nicolás Island, to which you can walk at low tide.

The area between Lekeitio and Bermeo accommodates a number of picturesque fishing villages, such as **EA**, with its narrow streets and bridges, and **ELANTXOBE**, with houses that almost hang off the mountain before tumbling down the steep streets towards the small harbour.

Further along the coast is the Mundaka estuary, an area with several natural, leisure and historical attractions. The natural aspect takes the shape of the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve, a qualification granted to the area by the UNESCO in 1984. Its marshlands and holm oak trees provide shelter to species of birds not normally found on the peninsula. The long local beaches, such as those of Laida and Laga, offer all sorts of fun activities.

History is present even before reaching Gernika-Lumo, thanks to the interesting prehistoric paintings of the Santimamiñe caves in **KORTEZUBI**, where we will discover yet another of Urdaibai's important attractions, the unusual Oma forest, where Agustín Ibarrola has colourfully painted hundreds of pine trees.

At the entrance to the estuary stands **GERNIKA-LUMO**, a highly symbolic Basque town, and home of the Gernika Oak Tree, under which the Bizkaian *Juntas Generales* would meet, an event which lasted until the charters were abolished in 1876. Today's *Juntas Generales* still meet at the local *Casa de Juntas*. Gernika is also unfortunately well known as a result of the 1937 bombing which virtually razed the town to the ground, an event which Picasso was later to portray in his famous painting.

Today, in addition to being the principal town of the area with a lively market, Gernika-Lumo speaks out in favour of peace through the open-air sculptures of its Parque de los Pueblos de Europa.



Despite being the most populated of the Basque provinces, Bizkaia still has a number of natural environments with a very definite rural flavour.

Returning to the coast from the west will bring us to **MUNDAKA**, a fishing port long visited by tourists. Its wild seas attract surfers from all over the world. This said fishing activity concentrates in the Puerto Nuevo, while the Puerto Viejo is now a peaceful area in which to visit the Gothic Ercilla tower, home of the Museo del Pescador. The old quarter of **BERMEO** smells of delicious grilled fish. Not to be missed under any circumstances.

Returning along the coast road, we'll soon come to the spectacular Gaztelugatxe rock, surrounded by the sea but connected to dry land by a bridge. You can get to the top by the steps carved out of the rock leading up to the small hermitage housing the image of Saint John the Baptist. This splendid panorama is rounded off by Aketxe Islet.

BAKIO, a traditional holiday resort offering a long beach, is the starting point for a stretch of more or less wild coast until arriving at the basically tourist and residential town of **PLENTZIA**, which shares its shell-shaped bay and practical beach with the neighbouring town of **GORLIZ**.

Running the length of **BARRIKA** and **SOPELANA** are the busiest beaches in Bizkaia. From here we can visit the Castillo de Butrón in **GATIKA**, an impressive building reminiscent of fairytale constructions.

Well known for its intensive cultural activities, not to mention its beaches, **GETXO** is the coastal door to the left bank of the Nervión estuary. Algorta and Las Arenas, both part of the same town, are residential areas with an excellent quality of life. Algorta is home of the elegant Neguri neighbourhood, once residence of Bilbao's upper middle classes, and to the Puerto Viejo, with its small houses and steep streets.

Crossing over to the other side of the Nervión is the best way to experience a typically Bizkaian contrast. Instead of the residential and tourist aspect of the right-hand bank, the left bank is completely industrial, with extensive and functional urbanisations.

Curious visitors will enjoy having a look at the examples of industrial heritage -particularly of our mining past in the natural area of La Arboleda-at the old parts of **BARAKALDO**, **SESTAO**, **PORTUGALETE** and the fishing port of **SANTURTZI**.

It would be a crime to pass through the latter of these two towns without having a plate of grilled sardines. The cherry on the cake of the left-hand bank is **ZIERBENA** with its excellent seafood. The nearby La Arena beach marks the end of the Bizkaian coast as it runs into Cantabria. It's easy from this left-hand bank to reach the mining area of the Triano mountains. A funicular railway leaves from **TRÁPAGA-TRAPAGARAN** for the neighbourhoods of La Reineta and La Arboleda, where striking views will take us back in time.





Bizkaia's hanging bridge linking Getxo and Portugalete is one of the province's most impressive features.

THE INLAND VALLEYS

Bizkaia also offers inland attractions in the shape of medieval boroughs and nature reserves. The Duranguesado valley, on the corridor running between Gipuzkoa and Bilbao, still offers the most rural and peaceful of Bizkaian atmospheres. The old part of **DURANGO** has been standing since medieval times and is home of the eye-catching, colourful, Renaissance Town Hall and the Baroque Kurutzia cross.

ELORRIO is another of the outstanding boroughs in this area. Now qualified as a historical monument, this village is remarkable for its accumulation of solidly built, emblazoned houses set out in elegant rows.

Country buffs will feel completely at home in the Arratia and Orduña valleys to the south of Bizkaia. Arratia, named after the homonymous river born on the hillside of the Gorbeia massif, is flecked with farmhouses. Making our way over Barazar Pass takes us to **OTXANDIO**, where we will find one of the most interesting specimens of typically Bizkaian Baroque architecture in the shape of Santa Marina church.

ORDUÑA is the only place in Bizkaia to boast the title of "city". Surrounded by land belonging to the province of Alava, it acquired a great deal of importance in the 8th century when a new road leading from Bizkaia to the meseta was opened through the Orduña crags.

THE ENCARTACIONES

The Encartaciones occupy the westernmost and perhaps least known area of Bizkaia. Some ten municipalities and a number of isolated farm-houses give shape to the region, a succession of valleys with enormous personality, rich in forests and fertile lowlands.

One of the few places in this area to have become industrialised is **BALMASEDA**, well known for its popular representation during Easter Week. Its main square houses the church of San Severino and the Town Hall, with a large arcade known as La Mezquita for the number of columns holding it up.

Next to Balmaseda, other towns such as **ZALLA**, **GÜEÑES** or **TRUCIOS-TURTZIOZ** likewise have a variety of interesting monuments. Similarly numerous are the tower-houses left over from the factionist *Guerra de Banderizas*. Some of these buildings, such as the Torre de Oxirando in Gordexola or the Torre Loizaga in Galdames are well worth a visit. Another interesting spot is the *Casa de Juntas de Avellaneda* in **SOPUERTA**, now the Museo de las Encartaciones.

This region simply abounds in unusual geological formations, including the famous Ventalaperra and Pozalagua caves. Stalactites defying the laws of gravity can be visited in the latter of the two.