



Basque Country of Spain with Madrid and San Sebastian Trip Notes **October 13-30, 2015**

The Country Walkers hiking trip to Spain's Basque Country (northernmost Spain at the French Border) turned out to be another winner for both of us. Tom did his usual of being a tourist during the day in his rental car while I hiked with the group of six, then joining us at our hotel in the evening. Our Basque native guide (Josu) was super and fun and made sure we were in excellent accommodations and fed extremely well (this part of Spain is noted for its cuisine and wine (Rioja). In addition to their famous small savory snacks called tapas, our evening meals were typically choices in three courses with plenty of really good wine in very nice restaurants. And, as usual, Tom had pre-arranged upgraded hotel rooms, even staying in the presidential suite at a five star in Bilbao and the royal suite in the famous Maria Christina in the seaside resort of San Sebastian. Pictures to follow eventually at Tom's web site - www.tomskoi.com. .

Highlights:

- Basque food is famous for being excellent and they have a large number of Michelin Stars, even in the Bilbao food market stalls. We really didn't find it and yet found their 'tapas' to be a treat.
- The region is rather foreign – the architecture, language, type of food, and mountainous terrain parallel and so close to miles of seashore.
- Country Walkers is remiss to not have two guides when they have such differences in hiker's abilities.
- Madrid is worthy of another trip but it's no Paris -- in part because of the mixture if not mish-mash of architecture.
- Bilbao is the center of their weird architecture, with Roja Wine Region being a close following.
- San Sebastian is absolutely a gorgeous chic town, easy to get around in, and seemingly something for everyone.
- A return trip to the Southern Region – Andalusia's Granada, Coronado and Seville is planned for May.

My Celtic Origins?

One of my interests in going to the Basque Region had to do with the Basque allegedly coming from the Celtic tribes. Since I've always had an affinity for Celtic music and even thought I may have had another life in one of the Celtic regions, I expected the same goose-bumps that I did while in the Conamara region of Ireland. It didn't happen except with one couple we met in La Guardia: he was forever Spanish Basque and she was French Basque and very French.

Overview from Barbara the 84 year old hiker!

Hi All, What a wonderful trek. Granted it was my first, so I have no comparison to make, but food, sights, challenges, accommodations, and companions added up to a lovely adventure.



Each of you now, at least for a while, occupies a special place in my heart.

Donna, you remind me of those energetic little Russian dolls, not the nesting ones, rather the ones that refuse to lie down, that pop up whenever and wherever. What journeys you've taken; what tales you have to tell! And you're so blessed to have Rudy as your partner - Rudy, the fixer.

Rudy, I truly appreciated your thoughtfulness; it goes beyond band aid application - sometimes just a glance in the middle of a conversation. I can see how it is that you are the caregiver in the family - and the organizer and problem solver. I do hope Donna's purse makes it safely home.

Kate, thank you for hanging back on occasion to keep me company. I hope I can remember the suggestions you made on how to make walking and breathing easier. I'm certainly going to try using a fanny pack instead of that backpack I was struggling with. I intend to keep on walking although I may think twice about using Country Walkers; it was a lot harder than I expected. I hope you and Scott have a lovely post-trip tour of the area

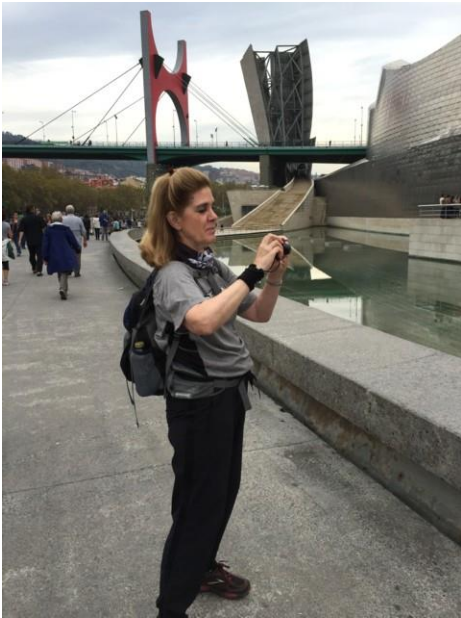
Well, Rod, how was Bilboa without the rest of us? I suspect that you have no trouble navigating on your own, in town or in the country. Thanks for sharing the photos of the flowers beside the trail on our first hike. We may disagree on issues around extraction of limited energy resources, I know there has to be a better way. The problem, of course, is finding the will to make the hard choices and getting people to agree. Keep on fishing!

Diana, not the Princess (dear girl that she was), you are the Goddess, the huntress of Greek and Roman mythology. What a treat! You make getting older look like the true accomplishment it ought to be. Needless to say, your stint as my Sherpa on the last real hike was not just a help, but also a revelation, each step does not need to be made with pain and effort. I wish I could remember half the tales you related about marathon running and border crossing and hiking and living life to the fullest and ... Tom, dear soul, is so lucky to have you for a partner. I'm very sorry that you lost your friend who was to join you on this trek. See if you can find some way if only privately...

*Well, the plane has landed, the last bit of the journey is over. Thank you all for a wonderful experience. Pictures are yet to come. Keep on...
Barb*

Photos compliments of hikers Donna and Rudy





Obviously having fun, this outside Bilbao's Guggenheim museum, and then on the trail carrying two backpacks: one on front and one on the back balances one out?

Adjoining towns were visited such as Toledo. We also did a Madrid Full-Day Tour - <http://www.getyourguide.com/madrid-l46/toledo-madrid-sightseeing-tour-t40805/#booking-assistant>

Toledo, Spain -

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toledo,_Spain

Toledo has the most famous El Greco painting -

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Greco

Added links of interest:

Vizcaya Bridge -

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vizcaya_Bridge

Bilbao Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry -

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=hhJ62_IJKWw

Tom's comment: astonishing, weird, outlandish, crazy, waste of titanium, tourist draw, you name it. Inside or out, I couldn't get it. Diana's comment: I get it. Couldn't get enough of it. It brought lots of tourists. I loved the building. I tried to understand the inside art and guess I needed my art experts, Beverly and Nola.

Roja area, staying at the town of La Guardia, gave Tom a visit to the wild "Marques de Riscal" – the Frank Gehry vineyard and hotel. We'd heard about it from NJ friends.



http://www.marquesderiscal.com/seccion_menueng.php?a=43&tipo=N&id=30

https://barrelsecrets.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/p_rioja-wine-regio_1539574c.jpg

<https://barrelsecrets.wordpress.com/tag/frank-gehry/>

Food – Despite being in a Michelin star restaurant and not finding quite the quality we expected for the famous Basque cuisine, we sure ate well. You'll see a focus by Country Walkers to feed us well,

and add that to Tom's focus on food, huge buffet breakfasts, and I don't know why this didn't cost me extra pounds.

Bilbao hotel breakfast buffet – per Tom. Other than the Bellagio in Las Vegas, these four or five islands of food in the ex-Sheraton, now Bilboa Melia hotel, is about the most selection we've ever seen.



Hondarriba Hotel Obispo, a bishop's palace converted and our first stop of the hiking tour:



Daily trip notes:

Day 1 - Tom and I are on our way to Spain.

The plan is to have three days in Madrid, two days in Bilbao, and then I start a seven day hike through the Basque region of northern Spain. After the hike which includes staying a couple more days in Bilbao we go onto San Sebastian before returning via a small plane into Madrid for a couple more days.

That all may sound rather envious to you but don't be because I'm sitting in the United airport lounge when I'm supposed to be jetting across the Atlantic. We boarded and aircraft, were served a drink and our menus to choose from, then they came on with an announcement saying they had a maintenance issue that was too difficult to fix quick enough and we would have to deplane. Now we are waiting for a hopeful substitute aircraft.

As much as I have like United, I must tell you that this is like a recorded message. "We have maintenance issues." They are in deep-dookie with too many maintenance issues and I have experienced far too many of them.

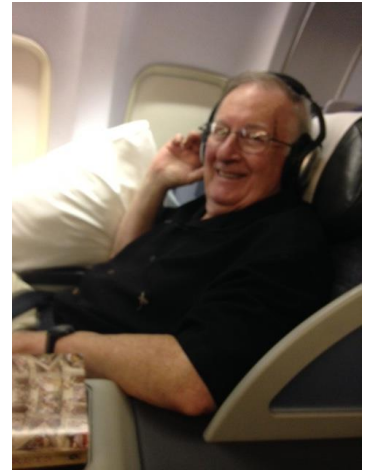
In the old days, and I mean the really old days because we were attached to TWA, there was such a thing as flight crews on call and aircraft sitting waiting to be back-ups. Flights went without being totally full and now they are overbooked.

Yet I know that I will not get too much sympathy because as you can guess Tom is sitting here with a scotch in his hands and we have enough food available for a full dinner in front of us. We were however looking forward to the Asian style short ribs of beef along with wasabi grits and Asian stir-fry and not airline lounge food.

Reality check. Standing in line to reboard and someone had collapsed so we had medics and policemen - reminding me that a flight delay really is no big deal.

Here is Tom in his lie flat seat with big entertainment screen. Drink on the way.

Upon landing only about an hour and a half late there was a little glitch in that two drivers and two cars came to pick us up. That took a little bit explaining but it was clearly the doing of the limousine company. All was much better by the time we landed at our lovely Relais and Château Hotel.



Guess who had a nap and guess who took a long walk. Long lost but pleasantly so.

I am trying to book a half-day tour to Toledo and a half of day overview of Madrid.

Here is where the hotel wowed us with the offer of cava and little dainty dessert treats while sitting on their sunshine Terrace that you can see just beyond the dining room. We like our room and the service.

A walk along the boulevard and tapas in an old time cafe found this triple size full bodied bronze pretty much in the middle of the street. Fortunately I've not seen tubby Spanish women.



The bronze (lady?) in Christopher Columbus Circle was within sound of the first piano. Apparently pianos are stationed around town as the next one we saw/heard was at the archeological museum.

Re booking tours, the hotel wasn't much help until I found my own. Now I've got half day in Toledo and half in Madrid for tomorrow. Picture of Toledo is obviously off the web.



Wikipedia.



On that, and remembering we are off six hours and lost a night's sleep -- good night.

Wish you were here. Smile.

Day 3 - it's Thursday but I had to stop and think about it first. If it's Tuesday it must be Belgium? Today was much of a fly-over type of day; that means getting on a bus and seeing highlights. Not necessarily my choice yet I'm sure that Tom has no comfort in walking all day.

Bus tours: they have you arrive too early then make you wait. Then the bus is as likely to consolidate you onto another bus. Then folks are late and I steam. We had all of that today so when you see our pictures you can be less jealous.

First I should return to our arrival in Madrid. I got Tom's better pictures of the hotel so here they are.



Thursday we started with a 1/2 hour overview of Madrid. Walking thru highlights of Old Town into plaza Mayer and to the famous and now ritzy food market made me want to return. But every Friday food tour I found was booked full. Guess we shall eat alone. But together. Here's the oldest continually running restaurant in the world. Someone asked (seriously) if it had been renovated. I kid you not.



I just couldn't bring myself to want entry into the big famous bullfight arena but it was as popular stop as football/soccer stadiums in Brazil. At least no one kissed the ground here. Lovely red brick building with lots of classy statuary.

The Palace probably deserves another trip to Madrid and a day tour inside.



There's more but we went onto Toledo and were gone from 8am until 8:30pm and now it's 10:30pm and jet lag is setting in so I'll follow up with the rest of Madrid, our lovely lunch in front of the palace high on the hill and of course our very long day in amazing hill top town of Toledo.

Tom said he was ready to call Uber as it was about to the max of his energy. I didn't test him. Nite.

Day 3 - continued into Toledo

It was a good thing that we did our Madrid tour first because Toledo might have worn us out and then Toledo wouldn't have happened. Tom had joked while climbing hills that he wanted to call Uber car service which was double funny since Toledo is a car free cobblestones hilltop village. Further and by surprise, it not only didn't totally wear him out but he said for the first time he had an evening of regular heartbeat. Did the heavy (for him) shock his heart better than the failed cardio-version procedure?

Toledo is about 70 Kilometers south of Madrid and famous for not only being a hilltop village with ramparts but also for being the rare village that comfortably housed a diverse group of Muslims, Jewish folks, and Christians.

Someone wisely thought of building a series of escalators off to the side of the village where they are unobtrusive but allow visitors to get up to the top. There used to be a series of escalators in Hong Kong noted to be the longest in the world. I suspect that these test that statistic.

There's really no way to give you a real feeling of what it is like to walk in a little town like this but I've tried to give you a few photo shots with the first one being of the cathedral. Very narrow streets, cobblestones, overhead bridges, and all very clean though the feeling of being ancient.

I wish there were an explanation of why this hilltop town had such a different feel from those in Croatia.



The second photo is the front door of the cathedral but it is only used by the Archbishop who lives across the street or a pope or a big time visiting dignitaries. I'm not too hot on the idea that religious doors aren't open to anyone.

Inside the synagogue was a very moving experience not only to know that it is the oldest synagogue in Europe but we are able to be in it. We entered through the front door. I have shared some of the interior columns.

I can't explain but Toledo's significance has to do with all religions happily living together and yet there was a very clear quarter for each separate religion's housing. Is it that they are more

comfortable living together? Why segregated? As soon as we walked into the Jewish quarter I remembered the streets of Jerusalem and the similarities.

A huge complex hanging over the river was the biggest wow factor. It had an interior cloister that I have pictured. It was built as a mausoleum. Tom will soon give us a few more pictures of the interior.

Madrid has been a pleasant surprise in that it seems much cleaner and neater than we expected. It is a vibrant busy city and contains many open areas and lush parks. High on the hill is this major palace with its own parklands. Near to our hotel is another famous park named Retiro and it was originally a park for a palace. We are headed there and the adjoining Prado Museum and Ritz hotel for our day four.

I mentioned that we were at the palace on the hill early in the day and that is where we had a lovely lunch they seen the palace. This palace bears an inside visit as it is said that Napoleon felt it was better living quarters than he himself occupied. He gave it to his brother Joseph when he had Joseph crowned king.

Despite our pleasant feeling about Madrid, we are clear that Madrid is no Paris.

Day 4 - it's Friday and we are still in Madrid.

We tried to book a food tour and every single one we found were sold out.

So.... The buffet at our hotel was practically worthy of being a food tour and we probably ate enough and stayed long enough to get our full value from the €30 per person price. It was a lazy morning luxuriating to use Tom's term.

I don't like hop on/ hop off bus tours and this was no exception but it's about the best way to see a lot of you don't care to walk miles. It would have been a bargain at 20 euros but at 10 euro senior rate it was a steal. I feel mildly guilty and do not agree with giving everyone senior rates but when available I indulge. I am always disappointed when they don't ask for proof of age. The weather was perfect and the town has a lot to see.

There are churches everywhere. Presumably catholic.

On our corner, that being the closest bus stop and traffic corner, are giant gaudy elegant buildings this one being a government building said to be so impregnable that were some unauthorized entry to occur, the entire building would flood.

Nearby is the hard rock cafe where our guided bus tour dropped us for a toilet stop and a free soda. Crass. Do I really come to the foreign city to see Hard Rock Cafe and Burger King this? I may as well.

Madrid has a lot of gorgeous old elegant buildings and yet it is somewhat mixed whereas cities like Paris have kept a continuity. Incidentally, the American Embassy now looks like a fortress with the addition of metal fences and guards. I have seen that in various cities. Sad. Embarrassing.

We got off to go by the famous Prado Museum, said to be the largest in the world, and then into the old royal palace gardens called Retiro. We have agreed that I will wait for a tourist day in the Prado Museum until I return in May on my way to Granada and Seville.

I was tempted to get off the bus in old town. Were I to return for a lengthy trip, I might choose old town or the edge - and pre book a food tour too. When we return after the Basque hike, we are staying in the Retiro gardens area in the old Palacio Hotel.

My file is near full, my thoughts are near nil, so I'll continue the day later.



Day 4 - continued

I told you that Madrid is very green and full of public spaces and parks. Look at this design museum with a live "park" green wall.

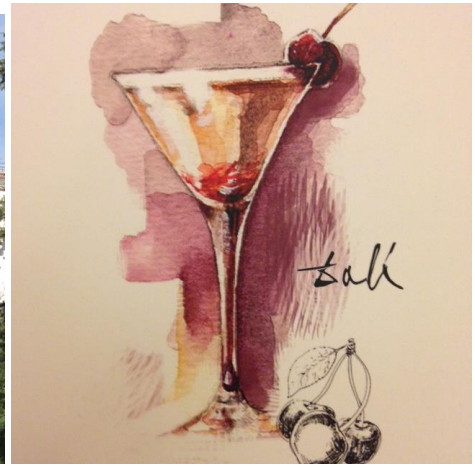
We finished our hop on and hop off bus loop at the Prado Museum and walked to the Retiro Park. It's huge and full of statuary, lakes, a crystal palace, a rose garden and couples lazing around the lawns with some of them clearly having no private place to go. One lake used to have naval battles to entertain the king.

We were about half done with the park when we decided to entertain ourselves at the Ritz hotel and indulge in an Aperol spritz. Breakfast was a similar cost; yet our drinks included enough calories to match.

The picture of the white building in the trees is the Ritz. It is next door to the Prado museum and behind is the park.

I'll later tell you about the Salvatore Dali famous drink of the Ritz hotel.





Day 4 - second continuation -- still in Madrid and it's still Friday.

I should have added how the huge high security government building sports a giant poster boasting "refugees welcome" which warms my heart. Turns out the building with the high security is across the street and it's the bank of Spain.

Taking in refugees? It embarrasses me as an American that we have politicians so unwelcoming. We really have some mean spirited people.

Still in the Ritz but later to the Pitz. You see the picture of the drink? The story goes that Salvatore Dali frequented the Ritz Bar and was making a play for a woman at the bar. But in his enthusiasm he somehow cut his finger, polluting his drink and making it pink, which he wasn't willing to admit, so he reached over and grabbed a cherry from her hat and plopped it into his drink. Thus a new drink was created. Did he get the lady? The story doesn't tell but you'll see he created art work of it.

Here is the palace at night. High on the hill. We saw the city once again in a much different light, traversing many of the main streets by bus tour.

Dinner? It was late. We were pooped. We saw a unique place full of locals and good looking food. Too funny: The day went from Ritz to Pits. The Ritz to Pitz as Tom called our late night food stop called VIPS. It really was good food but our entire dinner and drinks wasn't much more money than a drink at the Ritz. We enjoyed both stops and laughed lots at being adaptable, flexible, and liking a couple levels of life.

I turned the lights out at 1:30am and died quickly knowing we were off to Bilbao on Saturday but would return to Madrid for two nights after my hike and our three nights in San Sebastián.

Many of the buildings have statuary or toppers on them. I like this one especially. Is it an angel?

The main street called Grand Villa did not look like it had a lot of angels on it to me. I can't remember he seen so many people jammed together since Disney World. There were streets much more crowded than this picture.

And on that, we have ended this sojourn in Madrid and look forward to another one in a couple of weeks. Nite.



Day 5 - Saturday Madrid to Bilbao

We arranged an easy morning and then a car to pick us up to the airport for our one hour flight to Bilbao.

It's amusing to me how you have to get to the airport taking close to an hour, you must get there an hour and a half early, hope security isn't too tough, airplanes are commonly late, and then when you get to your destination the airport is a long way out of town. When I come through next May (on my way to Granada and Seville) I am going to use the train. The train station is downtown, you only have to show up 10 minutes ahead, there's Wi-Fi on board, and when you land at your destination, you're already downtown. So why am I flying?? Duh.

At the Madrid airport we were fortunate to find a VIP lounge for a few drinks and food. Landing in Bilbao was much easier than expected as the airport is very modern and lovely and convenient. Frankfurt could take a few lessons.

As usual, Tom being a real car fanatic as are many boys, he had to "interview" the rental car lot. We rarely drive off with what we reserved and this was no exception but I must say it is a lovely Mercedes though not a high end one. Black of course.

May I suggest that if you are coming to Europe with a GPS navigation system, as we have the new Garmin nüvi, that you make sure your software is up-to-date. Roads change, traffic circles are removed, and hotels are even built thereafter. Fortunately Tom is never thrown off by European driving, nor the changes, nor that U-turns, nor the frustrations, etc. Remember he had lived in Europe in the 60s, and we lived in Europe for five years in the 70s, and we return quite often and have rental cars.

We were in no hurry anyway and the hotel was well worth waiting for. We went under the river via a tunnel and toll to the side with the Guggenheim and got to see it close up before returning by a bridge and finally coming upon our lovely new hotel right on the river.

I will hope Tom downloads some of his pictures so we can show you our suite with a big glassed in balcony over the river and a Calatrava type pedestrian bridge. And on the other side of the suite in the dining area, there is a full corner of glass overlooking more river, gardens, and in the distance the Gehry inspired Guggenheim. The Guggy is much larger than I expected. There is beauty within that monstrosity.

Glass and windows are delightful but I could do without glass bathroom doors even if they are frosted. I laugh at thinking how getting older i.e. senior brings less and less privacy but I didn't need a hotel to add to it.

I will add a picture of the hallway walk-through the bathroom/dressing room from living room to bedroom. Logical and nice floor plan. I give up waiting for room pictures and yet might send later.

We managed to walk past and beyond three of the bridges and into old town. But not until we went shopping for my trekking poles. (I can't carry them on board so I purchase upon arrival and then donate to the guide after my hiking week.)

We were told that old town had an area for tapas but little did we expect a whole town square/place with everywhere small bars and tapa cafés. It was seventh heaven and we ate to hearts content with six different dishes, and had a drink each, all for €16. Total! I admit that it was very much like a trick-or-treat experience however because there was little English available and we had to resort to pointing and trusting. A little old man sitting at the bar told Tom one tapa that he should have which was so good that Tom went back for a second. It was a chunk of marinated tuna with some salsas and on top was a pepper, a pimento and topped off with a green olive.

Do you see that wall of the restaurant in the picture? It is all pieces of wooden wine cases. There wasn't much seating area as people would pick up their bits of food and either eat standing, or at the bar, or outside despite a bit of sprinkling rain. The square was full of families and children on skateboards and or playing soccer. Nice family event.

Big surprise and fun: Bilbao has a night marathon and it is running right past our balcony. There are literally no walkers as the cut off for a marathon is five hours. I remember when I was doing European marathons that many of them required this five hour cut off. They said if you took longer you should be doing the half marathon. I'm glad that is not the case for many of our US marathons.

Incidentally if you don't know, they call any race a marathon. It need not be a 42 km and in this case it looks like they are about done two hours later for the two smaller events which I believe was a 10K and half marathon. The marathon must've ended elsewhere. We heard the music well after midnight.



Day 6 - Sunday in Bilbao

This is a much easier city to get around. To feel comfortable in. Maybe that is because we are on the river and can see the major sites from our room. There are a number of pedestrian bridges to cross the river and that is oftentimes the method for directions as "cross the second bridge".

We lounged over a big expansive and expensive breakfast buffet for Sunday morning (going into afternoon) then had eaten so much that one of us needed a nap. It is good that I start my hike tomorrow to work off a little bit of excess energy.

Hotel description from their website: Combining avant-garde design with a superb location across from the Guggenheim, the newly-built Hesperia Bilbao hotel has been designed for luxury and is situated just 200 meters from the main shopping area. You'll find plenty to do just outside our doors.

The description didn't include giving us a ringside seat to the marathon nor that there would be all those screaming spectators late in the evening. I noted even at the very end there just are not any walkers in Europe. Only runners. The purple shirt phenomenon (leukemia foundation with lots of strollers vs runners) is alive and well only in the U.S. and apparently limited in Europe.

Off to the Guggy. We tried. We listened to the audio guide. We still don't get it. But the building is crazy and magnificent all in one. Extravagant. I read it was some of the largest use of titanium in the world and it sure brought a lot of tourists and money to Bilbao. The pictures of sculpture outside Guggy are huge. Really huge.

We watched still another event and this one for walkers instead. It appeared to go UP the mountain, loop around, then descend finally into the Guggenheim river park. Did we do it? Ha ha. Here is a picture of Tom with a little unlikely snack prior to tourist bus tour. Sushi.

Our late afternoon bus tour was another fly over type tour.

I have confirmed that they interesting foot bridge near to us is by Calatrava. We are living in a hotel between these 2 foot bridges pictured.

Maybe more later. Tomorrow starts my hike and the hike returns for two days in Bilbao area at the end. I'm glad and also that it will be in another area of the river so we shall see new territory. That I like -- exploring, new, challenges.





Day 7 - Tuesday.

Where did day 6 go? I wonder too. We started really early and ended really late. Hiked along the Camino de Santiago for about 7 miles but I must say that not one of the thru hikers looked like pilgrims. I wasn't: I stitched grapes all along the pathways. We would have seen the coast as we walked were it not for the heavy fog and light rain. Sometimes heavy rain.

We were able to see many vineyards and learn how lucrative the business as evidenced by the estates and new houses is. Some built ecologically with planted rooftops and practically list within nature.

Rain - part of the day was only very light mist. Part of it poured. I said I'd rather have rain than heat but I didn't count on the mud. Slippery, messy and required extra laundry.

Learned much about superiority of the Basque. That's probably a story in itself. So many wars. So much dissection. They watch the Catalans strive for independence closely. I suspect they will try too.

Hotel is a 16th century Bishops palace. Parts look old. Parts renovated. I'll add some pictures.



Day 7 - Tuesday and another far too early a start and I felt brain dead for the first couple hours despite my coffee in the room then a couple more cups at breakfast.

Driving up 2200' to start a 10-11 mile rolling hills walk. We learned and believe that this area is the second most humid and rainy place in Basque area. Green!

Cider production is big industry. Cider parties are too. We had a party demo before dinner. That's another story. Charcoal used to be big industry but that too is another story for a time we get in before midnight and have to pack out early.

OMG another lunch after 2pm. Thank heaven for the chocolate and figs snack stop mid-morning coupled with my own granola bar.

Guides can be so different from one trip to another. In Croatia our lovely full bodied guide fed us huge multi course lunches then so much dinner we thought we were done after the many appetizers. Remember how a bunch of us left early and just as the main courses were coming out. It was very late for our full bellies. This guide looks like an ultra-runner and feeds us simply. Lunch on Monday was barely enough. Dinner was multiple courses but very light. Here's my monkfish. I've never seen it in this form and it was like picking crab.



Tuesday hike was to be 10-11 miles and it was less for some and a lot for two of us lost soles. Not souls. We probably about caused a stroke for the pour tour guide and we got a couple hours hard trekking in before we were found.

I swear I can't do much more on six hours of sleep. We must mutiny!

Day 8 - Wednesday

Sleep! We need time to sleep. A couple of us suffer. Those who only need ten minutes to get into bed and ten minutes to get ready are doing find. Me? I take a lot of time to calm down and then even more to wake up. Time to get adjusted to a new room.

Last night's dinner was great fun with lots of laughing and I thought good food but Tom isn't rating it all that highly. Might he have expected more from a Basque region with lots of Michelin stars?

I'll add some pictures of our dinner. He looks pretty happy to me.

Wednesday had us move out of our 15th century castle. Remember it was a bishop's house. Shame on him. In that era they were known to be keeping lovers and building many estates.

Today? Driving about 1 1/4 hours inland towards Pamplona (I think) for a natural preserve park and a tough hike had me rethinking my options when 1/2 of our group opted out - being so sore and tired from the day before and concerned about it being even more difficult. And they hadn't even had the strong two hour extra hike that two of us had. But I went and despite lots of huffing and puffing and even more shivering cold to the bone I'm glad I went. Some of the terrain reminded me of Switzerland.

It was almost rock scrambling for the first sections up to the natural tunnel and on the Camino de Santiago. It was steep, then Rocky, then muddy, sometimes a forest of birch trees, and even loads of sheep and wild ponies.

Ended at the most unusual Basque inspired monastery / Franciscan church. Nice story I will endeavor to tell in due course.

Then it was still another 1 1/2 hour ride to La Guardia, a hilltop town in Roja wine region full of architectural wonders though preserving the



old town.

Oops. Ran out of room and out of time. To be continued.

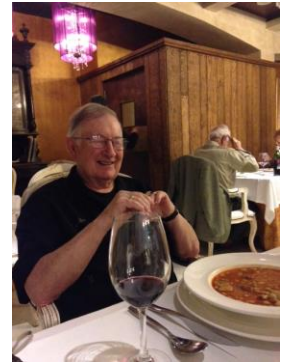
PS re Tasio - reminder to see the movie about the charcoal makers of old time. We saw the birch trees partially cut, the fire pits, and heard the 400-500 year stories.



YES! We take pictures of food. These tours are as much about food as hiking, and Basque is as much about food as anywhere. Some of us even take pictures of food routinely, as much to show Tom what I'd had for dinner since I'd immediately forget.

Day 9 - Thursday in La Guardia

You'd think we wouldn't be hungry after all of last night's drink and dine extravaganza but breakfast buffet got everyone's attention. Country Walkers becomes Country Eaters becomes Country Waddlers.



Actually, we continue with the thought that the food has not been the magnificent famous Basque cuisine like we expected. It is good but it is not top of the line. Yet. To finish some of yesterday's hike and terrain, we came across a monastery church probably run by the Franciscans which I need to look up more about because it was very inspiring. It was modern yet it was built into nature and walking inside was one of those ohhhh and ahhhh moments.

The crypt was covered with messages within modern art by a few of their famous artists. Most commemorated heroes of their war with Franco and pictured the tortures of the time.

La Guardia is a hilltop town well preserved and we entered one of the gates and almost directly into their center courtyard where our hotel was located. Tom was already at the hotel in what was said to be their best suite. He answered the suite door with a "you won't believe it" and I wish I had a picture. Perhaps he will send them later but the best I can call it is "early warehouse style."

Despite being short of time to clean up before dinner I went down the few flights of stairs to the reception and announced I just could not stay there. They couldn't understand why I didn't need a Jacuzzi mid room. We moved. The room we are in is probably not worth picture taking but it has a big open walk-in shower that is like part of the living room and a major bear rug all topped off with two chandeliers that belonged in the last room. There

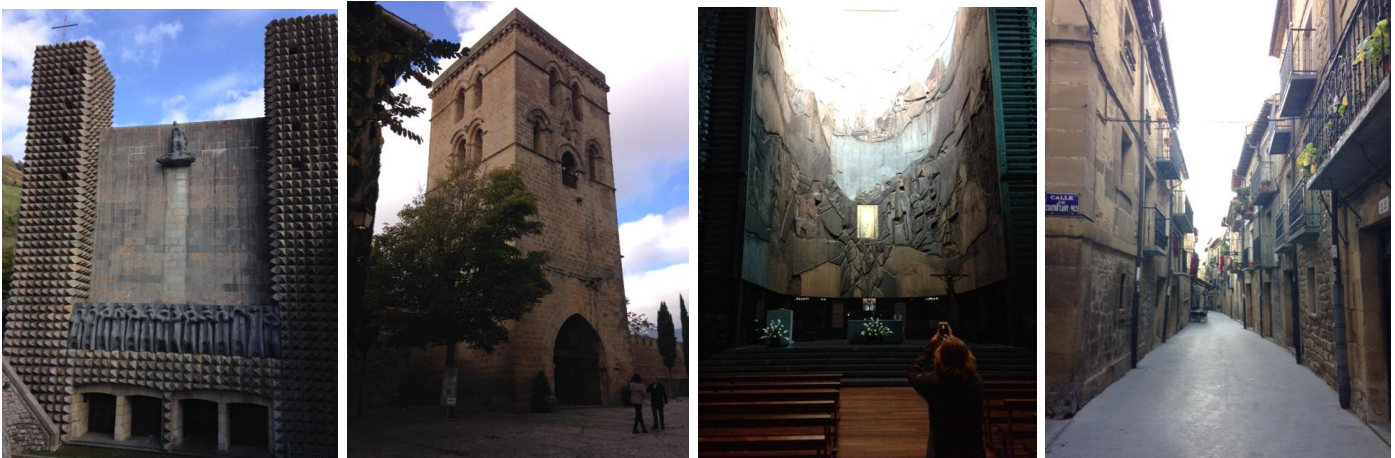


was a lot of hee haw going on about the first room. I was certainly going to sleep well no matter where I was.

Dinner had gone on till near midnight and there was about six hours available to sleep again. Some of these tour guides give us a lot of free time and some don't.

Did I say that yesterday's hike was only half of us who was willing to do it? Today only one person decided to stay back. But they all voted for the easy option which even that took us all day and allowed at the end for an optional additional hike for three of us. Primarily we went from one little village to another with vineyards in between. The optional was another hilltop town that was quite well preserved and quaint. Some walked and some took the van. Pictures follow.

A tour of wine cellars and wine tasting was offered as well as an introduction to our hilltop town. I declined and Tom provided my dinner from the local grocery store. So with that it's goodnight.



Day 10 - Friday - from La Guardia to Bilbao or about 1 1/2 hour drive.

How is the weather? Like home, it is very changeable. Like the world, it is not following set patterns. For hiking, it has been fine. For my packing choices, it has been a challenge necessitating lots of weird combinations.

The predictions while I was packing was fairly warm and pretty much touching high 60s most days. Thus I packed shorts but to be safe I had one pair of convertible pants. I've needed pants every day with temperatures starting in the mid-forties, windy, and a couple days rain. Many days started with being totally fogged in reminding me of Belgium or where I grew up in the valley between San Francisco and Sacramento.

My two long sleeve shirts are getting a work out along with under layers and dinner clothes. Most all of yesterday I wore two shirts, my wind breaker with hood, two BUFFS, gloves, plus my dinner hooded rain coat over all. Sun glasses have rarely been needed except to hold my hair back.

Is it any wonder why I have NO pictures of myself? The messy look plus my embarrassment for, and hesitation to, indulge in this narcissistic hobby of picturing oneself everywhere. Selfie Twits with Selfie Sticks have been in abundance.

The vineyards of Rojas Region are in full autumn colors. Harvest is finished and we smell wine processing often. We saw some processing during yesterday's hike. Enough grapes remain on the vines for big feasts and yes my body is fortunately used to so much fruit. And yes they are less sweet

and full of big seeds yet still I like them. Truthfully, when hiking all day I could look favorably upon road hill. Smile.

My body is holding up so far and I remain continually grateful. I do all I can while I can and get smiles when I refuse elevators or help with luggage. There will probably be time for that later but I rather hope a bus runs over me before I'm helpless. As has been said, if someone has to change my diapers, it shouldn't be my fault. But what do we know! We can only do our best and keep moving.

I eat well, often, and a lot. Oatmeal or muscili, a full container of yogurt, prunes, a plate of fruit, plain eggs, plus a sandwich for mid-morning snacks starts my day. Of course at least three coffee con leche. I cut the fat and sugar (though I do eat plenty of the fruit sugar.). I'm convinced this heavy and hopefully healthy eating helps.

We have a fellow hiker in her 80s who gives us mixed emotions. Primarily we love seeing her want to do it but we spend time standing around waiting for her. One day the guide was firm that she could NOT. But two much younger hikers gave up that day too. Country Walkers gets a bad rap for only having one guide with groups less than 7-8 people. (My domestic group would NEVER go with one guide.) The next day another one gave up the day in lieu of a massage and doing laundry. I can attest to the fact that doing laundry late night and having it still wet to pack is the pits. So I've worn plenty of dirty clothes. I left a wet shirt for Tom to pack when he leaves later today.

Tom is going to Frank Gehry's vineyard, hotel, and Guggenheim type building today. I'm envious. It's near to the Calatrava building.

I've added a picture of our crew. A bubbly pathologist, a retired NASA chemist with great humor, a sweet ex-teacher, a president of a west coast fish processor association who is likely our best hiker and who got lost with me, and a Wyoming ranch owner with a boat to live on in a San Diego marina who indulges and liked modern art. Our leader is Josu, a good looking pure Basque of about my daughter's age. He is extremely well traveled, mayor of a town adjoining Bilbao, very bright and full of historical stories and more willing to share them than one can hope for. He is tireless. He also never wears a coat but only his t-shirt.



I'm adding a picture of Josu, two of our hikers, and a local mushroom collector with his bag of "gold". These mushroom collectors were a common site. I got lots of mushroom pictures. Also here is my Selfie. I don't even know when it got taken. Like pocket dialing, I had a lot of ground pictures.

PS We had such a disparate level of hikers; the most divergent group I've encountered to date. Every single one is sweet and nice folks but this is really a Strollers Tour. Well, plus an Eaters Tour.



Day 11 - in Bilbao

I should go backwards to arrival in Bilbao later on day 10. I get spoiled by Tom showing up early and having previously negotiated an upgraded room, he can sometimes negotiate even further. He outdid himself this time. Here is his story:

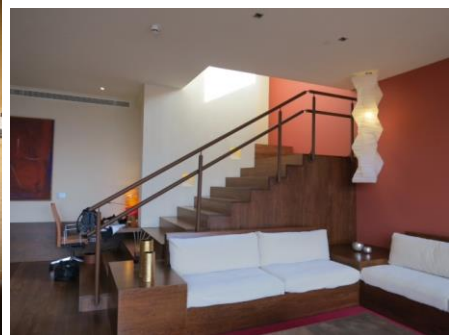
Hi all, you know we've stayed in some pretty special places over the years. Well, this may be the capper of them all. We had booked a junior suite but I asked the nice man at the reception if he'd make sure I had the best one available. He said, well there is one better. So I asked and yes, it was the Presidential Suite! Well, TMALS short, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse and we are getting lost in about a 1300 square foot place on the top floor with terraces and fantastic city views like out this living room window. A super place and of course we are very appreciative. Twelve foot ceilings, very tasteful and modern. Diana goes hiking again tomorrow and I think I'll just stay in and shift from room to room and luxuriate (one of my favorite things). However, I may just be dreaming all this. See ya, Tom

Going up to the terrace and more art work. They are very proud of their artwork and flaunt a catalog of it. Much of it is in this suite.

Then there is the view, parks, pagola, etc. The bathroom is larger than any of our other rooms. Maybe all our rooms put together. The upstairs opens to a huge terrace with views in three directions. Electric sun blinds plus electric darkening shades are in all rooms. A big Jacuzzi tub. (Oops. I can't understand why the format changes rather dramatically so I'll stop this missive and start again later with a clean pad.).

There is a Hanging bridge in this Basque region to investigate. Only one left in the world so UNESCO protected.

Time changes tonight. Changes one week earlier than the U.S.





Day 12 - Sunday from Bilbao to San Sebastián.

I lost day 11. It was hard to leave that huge lovely presidential suite in Bilbao. It is allegedly the largest suite in the city and I'd guess it is the largest view.

Yet Day 12 came with still another dramatic room but more on that after Tom 'processes his film.'

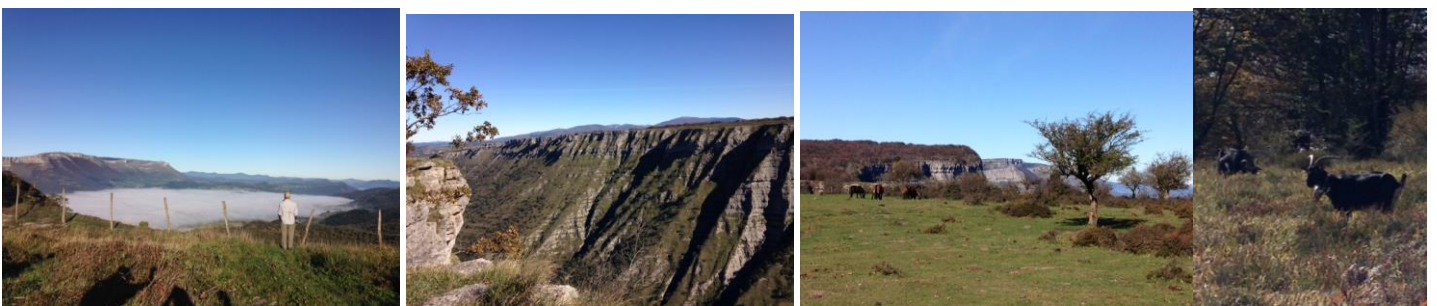
The weather has brought us some of everything. In Friday's bird preserve we had vultures, fog and their Grand Canyon. The picture isn't a lake but rather fog laying in the valley. Wild ponies, cows, goats and sheep made this hike competition to Isle of Skye's poo hike.

We mostly walked the canyon edge after a thought UP and at the end a big DOWN. A couple got a van ride down. I carried one gal's backpack up and around and that kept me from looking at my feet and poo all day as I wore her pack on my front. New muscles were found.

I'd skipped telling about Friday dinner and it was our favorite. Here is my tuna cheeks salad. Tom's veal in heavy red sauce suited him best out of all week.



More later. Gotta go eat again.



Day 12 cont'd

Out of Rioja wine country Tom visited Frank Gehry's vineyard and hotel. It isn't far from the Calatrava architectural monument to another winery. One looks like the Bilbao Guggenheim and the other like a pixelated chapel. You can almost take an architectural tour along the Route of Wines and it'll probably soon be offered if it isn't already.

In Bilbao there are plenty of their own architectural masterpieces. These are by an Antonio Gaudi type student and or someone else looking to make a mark.

Our final hike was pretty wimpy but full of coastal scenes plus learning about some industries that made the Basque wealthy. Here was kelp farming. Nearby was iron smelting and at the time the longest cable car in the world carrying product to the sea and ships. Now hordes walk an old rails to trails.



They walk. They mushroom collect. They like to show their findings. Something like how I like to show you what I find on travels?



Day 12 - cont'd still again



Finishing up the Eating Extravaganza we had our Basque type tapa lunch on the old town plaza and then wandered on our own for the late afternoon (or some took naps to ready for the next meal) until dinner at a Michelin starred restaurant. The tapas for lunch were my favorite and I think I managed to eat six of them. They call them txistu for "toothpick" which many but not all have. I call them tapas. Most of the world would call them tapas.

The Basque have bar after bar of these snack foods. They often eat standing up and pay around 2 euros each.

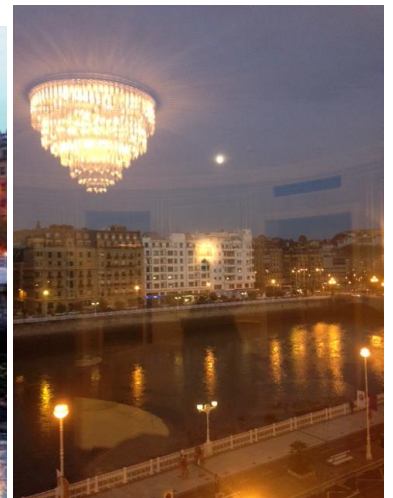
On the walk after lunch I found a big festival around the markets and here they were teaching about condoms. Dressed in white doctor coats were dozens of workers/teachers. Some posters

were a bit graphic. By the number of baby strollers, they haven't been too successful.



Speaking of Basque-speak: it is Euskara, believed to be the only surviving pre Indo-European language in Europe. It's unrelated to any other language and is exceptionally difficult to learn with its 11 grammatical cases and complicated conjugation. During Franco's regime it was repressed and schools went underground. They are a proud people with famous historical figures and firsts in many smart and profitable things. They are also seemingly at war or quarreling in much of their history.

Today we said goodbye to Bilbao and our lovely modern hotel and suite on the edge of parks and river and drove a couple hours to chic San Sebastián on the water too, and checked into the historical early 1900s 5-star hotel in old town called Maria Cristina - in their Royal Suite. We were assisted by Loudean's employee kindness with an add-on of my frequent stay points. We have an upper floor looking out on river and sea/bay made possible by the big round corner of the building you'll see in the night picture.



We had dinner on the bay our first night while staying in nearby Hondarribia. The guide gave us a walking tour then until we thought our little tootsies would wear off. It was cold then. Its 70 now.

I know some feel that they aren't in their room sufficiently long enough to stay in any more than a hostel. I understand. Some historical luxury is my ideal place and we especially enjoy feeling a part of it. We've stayed in extremes and most had upsides.

Tom took some interior pictures which I'll wait to send in due course.

San Sebastián is noted as Spain's most chic resort, with its long curving promenade and beach where everyone goes to see and be seen. The famous bay is closed off by green hills and cliffs; it hosts summer arts, film and jazz festivals that you've likely seen as background to famous artists and has a vibrant and clean old town. (At the end I'll add a bunch of links about San Sebastian as sent by the hotel concierge.)

I'll end with a good-night picture. With my iPhone through our living room window I got an "inside-out" shot of a full moon over the river, a bank of buildings, the promenade, along with inside reflections of our chandelier.

Day 13 - Monday early in San Sebastián

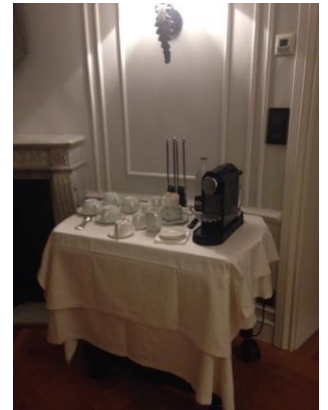
Here is Tom's note upon arrival in this chic resort aka fairyland. And just as artificial as fairies is how I decadently feel. It can't last!

From Tom: *Well, the Burton luck continues. Hiking is over, we're still in Spain's Basque region, and we're staying in this resort town on the coast (the ocean is just a few steps away along this river). We had a reservation for a premium room in this famous old hotel (Marie Cristina - just Google to have a look and some pictures to follow) but were able for just a few points and bucks more, to upgrade to the Royal Suite! Round living room maybe 30 feet in diameter. Lovely views out of the three LR windows. Beautiful bedroom, great bath, all the comforts of home. Tough life, but someone has to...*

Then I asked for a coffee pot and got a tea table of cups, supplies, a Nespresso maker and about a dozen pods.

Out the window is the river, the sea, palaces, mountains, a garden and grand place across the way from the opera house.

My guide had given us a walking tour the first evening and that was about a week ago. We gave ourselves a walking tour last night and ended up with a little bit of heaven for Tom in that he found a restaurant that gave him a huge chunk of Fois Gras. We ate outside in Old Town. You saw in yesterday's report that we had a full moon. That just added to this sense of fairyland. See how happy Tom looks?



We are currently on our way to the French side of the Basque region and ultimately to Biarritz by way of the mountain town of Sara.

Most of you have been introduced to my friend Ellen from Santa Monica. I see that you lucked out when she copied everyone on her most interesting dissertation on artists. Here are some of her comments on San Sebastian that I know you will equally enjoy.

Hi Diana, *on my International dining expedition trip from Barcelona to Santiago de Compostela we spent 2 days in San Sebastián and you described it accurately as Spain's most chic resort. And you may have guessed - eating is San Sebastián's favorite sport. The tapa bars are wonderful. And the social life in San Sebastián is organized around cooking clubs for men. They actually compete with each other to see which club can provide the most extraordinary dinner for their rivals. Our group*

were booked into one of these cooking clubs, and the members actually created a lunch for our group. And each participant was presented with a book of recipes created by the members. It might have been our name that got us in: "International dining expedition."

Walking through the commercial part of San Sebastian reminded me of window shopping in Paris. Very high fashion. San Sebastian is a very special place, indeed. The creator of this trip took me with him when he went exploring some high end hotels looking to see if it warranted another high end tour for the next year; that didn't happen for his company, but it sounds like you are on it. Enjoy! All the best, Ellen

And to that, Diana says, Ellen said at all.



Day 14 - Tuesday in San Sebastián and about Biarritz France trip on Monday

If San Sebastián is the chic and famous Basque seaside town, what is Biarritz? Rick Steves calls it a glitzy resort town steeped in the Belle Époque and where the French Basque put on the Ritz. It was just a whaling harbor until almost overnight it became a high-class aristocrat magnet dubbed the beach of king.

Perched high on a cliff and over-looking lots of surfers, with many grand hotels and casinos and a few jagged Capri-type rocks out in the water make it a striking beach resort.

We took our cheapie little Mercedes about an hour and a half along the coast and didn't intend to spend as much time as we did. We never made it to the village hilltop town of Sara. We did do some

auto route and had forgotten how pricey and clumsy it can be without their EZ Pass. Dig up 5.84 Euros with no pre notice? A card can be used IF you have a chip.

I am enchanted by the narrow little streets of old town's look and feel. In this case surrounding old town are huge old elegant hotels and fortunately Tom didn't mind doing a lot of driving through the one-way narrow confusing streets. He would not have walked that far - so good that he was willing and able to drive it. I wouldn't have. He did remark how grateful he was for the automatic transmission versus trying to use a clutch on those teeny narrow hilly streets.



Day 14 - Tuesday continued and from Bilbao into Madrid

Read on. Anyone jealous of our rooms will commiserate with us in our late day experience.

But first - some Basque comments:

They call tapas some weird word like Pintxos. But all of the words of Basques are weird.

Sitting in a restaurant you can always tell the Basque not just by their weird language but they are louder. In the Michelin restaurant you could tell the French diners because they were much calmer and softer. Then there were us louder than we should have been. I first said "obnoxious" to which Tom I thought that was a little stronger than need be. Maybe I was just embarrassed. I like dining in French atmospheres because they know how to speak softly.

(Ahhh, Paris here I come. In December but I'd be willing to go right now.).

We were on our way to old town San Sebastián for dinner when we looked in at the hotel lovely bar and read that they had tapas with the headline "why go to a noisy tapa bar " so we dined in. (And a drunk next to us nixed the idea of quiet.)

Dining-in included Foies Gras for Tom and a selection of tapas for me.

Then, not to miss anything in Sebastian, we jumped on a tour bus and got an overview of San Sebastián. I would doubt that I would come back again so gotta do it now. That is not because we didn't like it but it is well out-of-the-way.



Here is the famous San Sebastian seawall. The design is also noted to be their logo.



Ok - in Madrid with a bit of a cloud

As you probably know, some things have a price to pay. And while I can't complain I will confess to the fact that we are paying a bit of the price Tuesday night. Presidential Suite. Royal Suite. No-suite.

We got an Air Europa flight from Bilbao into Madrid and on the way I had a troublesome email from our Palacio-Retiro hotel in Madrid telling me what probably meant they overbooked and were moving me to a lesser place near to the Madrid airport and the Congress Hall. While I am very grateful for my employee deal, I never realize the rooms were "space available". Smile. In truth, over bookings happen and they are not easy for either side. I'd hate to be the employee telling a Gold member that their deluxe hotel wasn't available and they'd have to go far out of town to a way lessor hotel.

We, or mostly Tom, panicked about having a simple little plain hotel and we called to our earlier hotel in Madrid and found that all of Madrid was overbooked. Can you imagine but the Relais & Château Hotel actually was willing and looking to call around and find somewhere for us but it was late and I was tired so we are at a very Plain Jane but nicely appointed airport hotel. Nothing in the area.

I don't think Tom is going to be taking pictures of this room. In fact, he just announced that the restaurant menu does not include Foies Gras.

And so it goes. Life is still good.

Ps. Big surprise. The menu in the no-suite plain Jane hotel DID have Foies Gras. On a hamburger.

Day 16 - Thursday in Madrid.

It turned out fine. We had our basic hotel near the airport when our "palace" apparently overbooked. We had a big breakfast followed by a taxi ride into town where the hotel offered us their full suite as compensation for our inconvenience.

Here is Tom's email to Marie who asked if he really ate a hamburger topped with Foies Gras:

No, I didn't. But, we had a nice meal - We had been transferred from the Marriott we'd been scheduled in (they had overbooked) and we were fine in another place. Diana had one of the best filet mignons I had tasted in some time (about three inches thick and maybe four inches in diameter) and I had lasagna. We shared with each other and had a nice Spanish Rioja red. Then this morning after breakfast we took a taxi to the Marriott in the center of Madrid where we'd originally booked and they treated us to a wonderful suite - pictures to follow so we're luxuriating there now after spending a few hours in the famous Prado Museum. We leave early in the morning to catch our flight home. It's been a great trip and there will eventually be a photo-show.



That's Diana's quiche and a Croque Monsieur for me at the museum for lunch.



The End? I suppose so, though the next day's trip didn't go exactly right. United again had maintenance issues and our flight left about three hours late. We had a nice airline lounge and didn't mind a lot.

San Sebastian:

SAN SEBASTIAN IS A COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES, LET US BE YOUR GUIDE

Dear Mrs. Burton,

Welcome in advance to the Hotel Maria Cristina, a Luxury Collection Hotel in San Sebastian. It is our great pleasure to host you in our property for what I believe will be a very special stay.

We would like to inform you beforehand of the various activities you could enjoy here in San Sebastian.

First of all we would recommend visiting the old town "la parte vieja", which is a 5 minute walk from the Hotel, and discovering some historical monuments such as Santa Maria and San Vicente churches, la Plaza de la Constitución, located in the heart of the old town. We cannot forget the Pintxo experience, a fun and delicious local traditional not to be missed in the Old Town. Trying the excellent and unique pintxos bar is a must.

These are some excellent options: Zeruko, where you should try the impressive "Rosa de Bogavante", Gandarias renowned for its excellent beef tenderloin, and Ganbara, an old time classic. Furthermore, you can feel like a local using our PINTXO PASSPORT. A unique self-guided pintxo tour of San Sebastian's Parte Vieja, created exclusively for our guests in collaboration with San Sebastian Food. We have selected from the best of the best to create a fantastic tasting menu perfect for a night in town. Please, check it at:

http://www.hotel-mariacristina.com/en/pintxo_passport

There are also a lot of walking itineraries that you could do, such as visiting the Urgull Mountain, walking along the Paseo De La Concha or even taking the old funicular that will take you to Igueldo peak, which offers spectacular views over the bay of San Sebastian.

As far as museums are concerned, there is an interesting variety: the San Telmo in the city, Balenciaga in Getaria, and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao which is an hour driving from San Sebastian.

An interesting area to visit as well is La Rioja (1:45 by car), where you could taste some of the most famous and exquisite wines in the world. We recommend you visit the Marques de Riscal Estate: Wine Cellars, vineyards, hotel & Spa, which is one of the oldest and most quality oriented in this area. During the same trip, it could be very interesting to visit Dinastía Vivanco Wine Museum and make a tour of its winery located in the village of Briones.

One of the Basque Country's main specialities is the culinary culture so we also suggest you try some of the following restaurants:

-Arzak (Three Michelin Stars Nouvelle cuisine) www.arzak.com<<http://www.arzak.com/>>

-Akelarre (Three Michelin Stars Nouvelle cuisine) www.akelarre.net<<http://www.akelarre.net/>>

-Martín Berasategui (Three Michelin Stars Nouvelle cuisine)

www.martinberasategui.com<<http://www.martinberasategui.com/>>

-Zuberoa (One Michelin Stars Nouvelle cuisine) www.zuberoa.com/en<<http://www.zuberoa.com/en/>>

-Kokotxa (One Michelin Star Nouvelle cuisine)

<http://www.restaurantekokotxa.com/home.php?lang=en>

-Mirador de Ulía (One Michelin Star Nouvelle cuisine)

www.miradordeulia.com<<http://www.miradordeulia.com/>>

-Elkano de Getaria (One Michelin Star Nouvelle cuisine) http://www.restauranteelkano.com/en_restaurante.htm
-Alameda de Hondarribia (One Michelin Star Nouvelle cuisine) www.restalameda.com<<http://www.restalameda.com/>>
-Rekondo (Traditional Basque cuisine, a culinary classic for locals and has one of the most elaborated wine list of Spain) www.rekondo.com<<http://www.rekondo.com/>>
-Juanito Kojua (Traditional Basque cuisine, made famous for its fish specialties) <http://www.juanitokojua.com/en/index.php>
-Saltxipi (Traditional Basque cuisine, seafood specialized) <http://www.saltxipi.com/> -The several Basque cider houses located in the villages of Hernani and Astigarraga (10 min drive from the hotel)

Visiting neighbouring towns could be another worthy activity to do, so we suggest you visit Fuenterrabia, Zarautz and Getaria which are within a 20 minutes' drive. San Sebastian is also very close to the French Basque Country: Biarritz, Saint Jean de Luz, Hendaye and Bayonne are a great choice for a nice walk and some shopping.

Last but not least, we warmly invite you to visit the San Sebastian Food Cooking School, a beautiful facility located in the hotel. Designed specifically for cooking enthusiasts, they offer a range of hands on classes, wine tastings and experiences. To find out more please visit: <http://www.sansebastianfood.com/>

No visit to San Sebastian is complete without visiting our gourmet shop located at the entrance of the hotel. The shop is stocked with some of this regions most exciting and popular culinary ingredients, Rioja wines, Basque linens and uniquely designed cookware.

We hope these activities will be of interest to you, and in the event you need further assistance do not hesitate to contact me or our reception desk.

Finally, I would like to communicate to you that you have the opportunity to send your suitcases through our "Luggage Forward" service by visiting the following webpage www.luggageforward.com<<http://www.luggageforward.com/>>

We hope you will find this information useful and you will enjoy your stay in the Hotel Maria Cristina San Sebastian.

Itinerary

Tue Oct 13

8:35pm Depart Newark EWR via UA# 62

Wed Oct 14

10:05am Arrive in Madrid MAD

Car Blacklane ordered

Hotel Relais & Chateaux Orfila – 3 nights in Jr Suite
C Orfila N6, E-28010, Madrid Tele: 34-917-027770
<https://www.relaischateaux.com/us/spain/orfila-madrid>
<http://www.hotelorfila.com/> E-mail: orfila@relaischateaux.com

In the heart of Madrid, just five minutes from the Museo del Prado, where Hieronymus Bosch's masterpiece, The Garden of Earthly Delights, hangs among the paintings of Vélasquez, Titian and Rubens, another garden of delights awaits. The Hotel Orfila, a small palace built in 1886, has the feel of an art gallery, with its period furniture, feature marble and superb trompe l'oeil effects in the green garden courtyard. In the 1920s, the hotel was made famous by the plays staged within its walls. Today, its flowered patio invites you to dine under the stars and its tea room is imbued with English chic. This is an ideal place from which to explore Madrid at its own rhythm.

Sat Oct 17

2:45pm Depart Madrid MAD via Air Europa #7153

3:45pm Arrive Bilbao BIO

Rental Car Thrifty through Airport Rental Cars - Conf#26573930260

Hotel Hotel Hesperia Bilbao – 2 nights in Junior Suite
Campo Volantin, 28, 48005 Bilbao Tel/Fax 011 34 94 405 11 00
Email hotel@hesperia-bilbao.com www.hesperia.com
Mini-Bar and free WiFi

Modern 4-star property is situated on the riverbank and a short walk from the Guggenheim Museum. Country Walkers recommendation and also is the meeting location.

From website: With its multi-colored windows, the Hesperia Bilbao hotel makes a striking contribution to Bilbao's riverfront. It enjoys a prime position right opposite the Guggenheim Museum and 5 minutes' walk from the shopping and business districts. Plus the airport is just 15 minutes away by car. •striking modern building with multi-colored windows •views of the Guggenheim Museum and Nervión River •5-minute walk to the shopping and business districts - Our 151 rooms are bright and modern, with plasma-screen TVs and free Wi-Fi in each. Book a Superior Room or a Junior Suite to bag a colored window and river views. •light, modern rooms •free Wi-Fi •Superior Rooms and Junior Suites come with colored windows and river views

Mon Oct 19

Overview by www.countrywalkers.com: Stretching across the French and Spanish border, the Basque Country is ideally explored on foot—from coastal routes with sandy beaches, and in some places dramatic cliffs, to the hillsides and lush valleys of its interior. Equal to the landscapes is the fascinating—and even mysterious—Basque culture. With its unique language and long history, predating the Romans and retaining its strong traditions into the 21st century, this is a land of both shepherds and sailors, linked inextricably to the sea, and imbued in rural ways. The journey begins in the valley bordering the ancient kingdom of Castille, where medieval walled towns make the region's intriguing history come alive. Next, the open landscape of the Rioja wine country, the southern edge

of the Basque Country, offers invigorating walks through rows of vineyards climbing to high ridges and castle ruins at strategic viewpoints. And later, you taste its fruits in a private wine tasting. Ancient and modern blend as you trace the routes of medieval pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago, a walking route over 1,000 years old. Quaint Hondarribia is a perfect starting point, with its lively town square and medieval past, while Bilbao, the cultural heart of the Basque Country is a proper ending to your journey through this special region. At the end of the day, you relax in diverse locales, each with its own special charm. Basque cuisine also provides the best of land and sea...the freshest fish perfectly seasoned and complemented with a hint of local red pepper, and accompanied by a crisp Basque txakoli white wine.

Mon Oct 19 - Day 1

9:00am Meeting guide in Bilbao at Hotel Hesperia Bilbao.

Zumaia to Zarautz (including sections of the Camino de Santiago); 6-8 miles, easy to moderate, 1000-ft. elevation gain and loss

A scenic 1½-hour drive brings you to the Basque Country's northern coast along the Bay of Biscay. Reaching the seaside town of Zumaia, located in Gipuzkoa Province, where the Urola and Narrondo Rivers convene, you set off for the day's walk. Departing from the village beach, a steep but short ascent takes you up and over the hills on a dirt road, affording spectacular views of the Bay of Biscay. This undulating trail with wide-open views was first used by the pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela over 1,000 years ago. You cross vineyards of txakoli and lush farmland, dotted with horses and sheep before you continue on a combination of mule tracks and cobblestone roads before winding past lookouts of old Basque whalers. Your guides explain how this ancient practice played a major role in the region's development. You enjoy lunch after arriving at the town of Zarautz, an ancient whaling settlement turned beautiful seaside resort.

Next, a short transfer brings you to your final destination of Hondarribia, a charming border town on the shores of the Bidasoa River. Tonight's welcome dinner is in San Sebastián where you enjoy a txakoli tasting in a restaurant with fantastic views of the bay of La Concha and the Peine de los Vientos (Comb of the Winds), the spectacular iron sculpture by Basque artist Eduardo Chillida, before returning to your home for the next two nights.

Hotel Hotel Obispo, Hondarribia – 1st of 2 nights
Hondarribia, Spain Tele: 011 34 943 645 400 recepcion@hotelobispo.com
www.Hotelobispo.com - WiFi and hair dryers – confirmed upgrade for Tom

A charming family-owned restored 15th-century bishop's palace with modern amenities located on a quiet square in the old town with a courtyard, bar, and views of the port.

Tue Oct 20 - DAY 2

Artikutza to Arantza; 10 miles, moderate, 700-ft elevation gain and 1,700-ft elevation loss or Chapel of Agina, 5 miles, easy

Today you stroll in the mountains overlooking the sea, beginning at Eskas, the entrance to the Artikutza Reservoir. The walk follows the ridgeline and is dotted with holly, walnut, and beech trees, and offers impressive views of the surrounding mountains. The trail is well maintained and the ascent is gradual as you take your time and enjoy the stunning surrounding forest until the path opens to expansive views of the sea and the western peaks of the Pyrénées. From here, those choosing the shorter option continue downhill following a quiet dirt road to the Chapel of Agina, a place of worship since the Iron Age with astonishing views of the Peñas de Aia, the oldest peaks in the Basque Country. Those choosing the longer option continue uphill arriving at a mountain pass where you see

prehistoric stone circles. The narrow path continues as it crosses a beech tree forest before the final descent where you enjoy views of the pristine mountain village of Arantzazu, located in the valley below. After returning to your hotel, you have time to enjoy the rooftop terrace before walking to one of Hondarribia's most popular restaurants in the lively port area for a memorable dinner of Basque specialties.

Hotel Hotel Obispo, Hondarribia – 2nd of 2 nights

Wed Oct 21 - DAY 3

Aizkorri to Arantzazu; 8 miles, easy to moderate, 1,500-ft elevation gain, 580-ft elevation loss

A short transfer brings you to today's walk, where an initial and gradual climb brings you to the heart of the Sierra de Aizkorri. Here, an old Basque castle was built inside the rock. Abandoned years later, it was used as a hideout by bandits working their way through the countryside.

Next, a medieval road takes you across a beech forest into the alpine pasture lands of Urbia, where you stroll through a group of stone huts used by local shepherds. The final descent leads you to the deep gorges of Arantzazu where a breathtaking Franciscan monastery reigns over the cliffs. Considered a holy place, many local Basque girls are named Arantzazu.

This afternoon, a short drive delivers you to the southernmost part of the Basque Country: La Rioja, Spain's most renowned wine-producing region, and the medieval hilltop town of Laguardia. Considered the capital of the Rioja Alavesa, this fortified town is home to more than 300 cellars used for making and storing wine beneath its streets. You arrive at your home for the next two nights, a unique hotel designed to meld tradition with modern comfort, and located on a lively village square in the heart of the town. Before your delicious Slow Food dinner served in the hotel's fabulous restaurant, you enjoy a brief city tour as well as a visit and tasting at La Bodega del Fabulista wine cellar.

Hotel Hospedería de Los Parajes, Laguardia – 1st of 2 nights
Laguardia, Spain Tele: 011 34 945 621 130 Email: info@hospederiadelosparajes.com
www.Hospederiadelosparajes.com/en/ - WiFi and hair dryers

A newer property constructed in an ancient town, this hotel was built to captivate the senses. Offering both accommodations and a menu that combines modernity with tradition, the hotel hosts a private wine cellar along with a full spa, including Turkish bath, Scottish showers, a series of indoor pools of varying temperature, a Jacuzzi, and a sauna.

Thu Oct 22 - DAY 4

La Rioja: Santa Maria de la Piscina to San Ginés; 6 miles, easy to moderate, or Santa Maria de Toloño monastery; 8-9 miles, moderate, 1,090-ft. elevation gain and 2,080-ft. elevation loss

Following a delicious breakfast of fresh yogurt, fruit, meats and cheeses, and croissants, you set off to explore the northern portion of La Rioja wine country. An easy to moderate walk option begins at the Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria de la Piscina, set amidst poppy fields, and takes you through world-renowned vineyards. Alternatively, you may opt for a more challenging option up and over the Sierra de Toloño to the ruins of Santa Maria de Toloño, a 9th-century monastery with spectacular views of the wine country.

This route begins high in the Sierra at the 3,051-foot Rivas de Tereso pass and, after gently ascending a forested dirt road, continues along an open gravel trail bordered by high pastures and grazing cows. Reentering the forest, the walk continues uphill over steep switchbacks and mountain

trails before reaching the ruins of the massive rocky formation known as Santa Maria de Toloño. Rewarded with spectacular views over the lush farmland and vineyards of the Ebro River Valley, you depart the monastery and begin a steep descent toward the town of San Ginés.

All walkers reunite at a shaded picnic area on the outskirts of town, where your guides lay out another delicious lunch. Afterwards, you may opt to join your guides for an additional 1½-mile walk to town before returning to your hotel by midafternoon. You may then opt for a visit to the hotel's wine cellar, where you taste wines from the region before enjoying dinner on your own this evening. Whether your preference is to dine at a simple café or to enjoy a refined dinner at one of this classic Basque town's wonderful restaurants, your guide(s) will offer recommendations.

Hotel Hospedería de Los Parajes, Laguardia – 2nd of 2 nights

Fri Oct 23 - DAY 5

Nervión Canyon: Unza to Puerto de Orduña; 6-7 miles, easy to moderate, 500-ft. elevation gain

After breakfast, you depart for the village of Unza and the start of the day's walk in the high plains of the Sierra de Orduña. Ascending grassy slopes and high pastureland dotted with grazing cows, horses, and long-haired sheep, you arrive at the spectacular Nervión Canyon, with its 2,000-foot vertical drop. (While the drop-off can be vertiginous, those who suffer from vertigo will be able to stay at a safe distance from the edge).

Walking along the rim, you are treated to breathtaking views of the canyon's dramatic cliffs and the sweeping valley below. Soaring overhead are griffon vultures, the largest birds in Europe. Nervión Canyon boasts the highest concentration of this species, who favor the high pasturelands in search of prey. Don't forget your binoculars for an unforgettable flying show! A shady grove provides the perfect setting for a fresh picnic lunch prepared by your guides perhaps salad with goat cheese, chorizo, tuna, ham, melon, and peppers, finished off with chocolate and almonds for dessert. Following lunch, your walk continues along the canyon rim into the afternoon.

Later, a short drive brings you back to Bilbao, the cultural heart of the Basque Country. Dinner tonight gives you a chance to experience the vibrant atmosphere of Bilbao's Old Town as you walk from your hotel to a landmark restaurant that serves traditional Basque cuisine.

Hotel Mélia Bilbao, Bilbao – 1st of 2 nights – upgrade confirmed to Jr suite
Lehendakari Leizaola 29, Bilbao Spain 48001 Tel 011 34 902 14 44 40
www.melia.com/es/hoteles/espana/bilbao/melia-bilbao/
Wireless Internet, hair dryers, and laundry service available.

Designed by architect Ricardo Legorreta and inspired by the famous Basque sculptor, Eduardo Chillida, the Mélia Bilbao is situated alongside the Nervión River and Doña Casilda Park and is only minutes from the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts. In addition, every room offers supreme comfort, modern amenities, contemporary design, and a city view.

Located in the centre of the city, Meliá Bilbao is located opposite the Congress Palace and the Música Euskalduna, the Doña Casilda Park, Ría Nervión and is only 15 minutes from the International Airport of Bilbao.

Sat Oct 24 - DAY 6

Basque Iron Corniche, 4 miles, easy

Today's walk takes you to the most western edge of the Basque Country, an area known in the past for the wealth of its iron ore mines. Basque iron, which made Bilbao and the surrounding area famous throughout the world, was once transported on ships loaded below the impressive cliffs you walk along. Here you witness the remains of this industry, as you stroll through the mining town of Corbaron. Bilbao has since experienced a rebirth focused on art and architecture, leaving its mining history behind but not forgotten.

After a delicious lunch featuring pintxos (Basque tapas), you have a free afternoon to explore Bilbao, before meeting back up with your guide(s) who offers a brief tour pointing out the stunning contemporary architecture of this fascinating city before the evening culminates in a memorable farewell dinner at the Michelin-starred Zortziko.

Hotel Mélia Bilbao, Bilbao – 2nd of 2 nights

Sun Oct 25 - DAY 7

Departure from Bilbao

After breakfast, you bid farewell to your newfound friends before your guides assist your departure from Bilbao. Drive to San Sebastian about 60 miles and from 1 to 1 ¾ hour

Hotel Hotel Maria Cristina San Sebastian – 1st of 3 nights
Paseo Republica Argentina, 4, San Sebastian, 20004 Spain Tele 34 943 437600
Mini Bar and free Wi-Fi but NO coffee; parking 40 Euros a day

www.starwoodhotels.com/luxury/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=86&language=en_US

Hotel Maria Cristina is an integral destination for international explorers. Located in San Sebastian's historic city center and overlooking the Urumea River, it is surrounded by gardens and promenades just a short walk from white sandy beaches.

Each room exemplifies the hotel's enchanting synthesis of past and present thanks to their gracious atmosphere, with modern details. Natural light highlights this rare combination through large windows and French doors offering relaxing garden views in Deluxe Rooms and river views in Premium Deluxe Rooms.

A sparkling crystal drop chandelier adds to the gracious atmosphere, illuminating the room's state-of-the-art, yet artfully concealed amenities, including a 32-inch flat screen television with over 35 international channels as well as movies and music on demand. Guests can also utilize wireless High Speed Internet Access, which is available via the television for a fee or complimentary at the work desk, where a dual-line cordless phone resides. Individual climate control ensures an ideal environment, no matter the season.

In the middle of the room, an ornate quilted headboard frames Luxury Collection beds, either one king-size or two twins, which can be joined to form one super king-size bed. Wrapped in crisp cotton linens, they are topped with feather-filled duvets and a selection of plump pillows. Royal purple glass bedside lamps cast a soft glow that enhances the serene setting.

The marble and tile bathroom, with stainless steel accents, expands the bedroom's contemporary color scheme. Along with a deep soaking tub and separate glass-enclosed rainforest shower, it features a vanity and signature Luxury Collection bath amenities. Plush bathrobes and slippers remind guests of the royal treatment that the hotel's namesake, Regent Maria Cristina, enjoyed in this very palace.

•323-484 Square Feet / 30-45 Square Meters •Rainforest Shower

Area: Rising majestically above the vivacious historic city center of San Sebastian, Hotel Maria Cristina is supremely surrounded by promenades and gardens. This landmark building is situated between the white sand beaches and colorful buildings of La Concha and La Zurriola and in front of the Urumea River and Victoria Eugenia Theatre. Just opposite—on the other side of the river—is the Kursaal Congressional Palace. Three surrounding hills, Mount Urgull, the Castillo de la Mota, and the Mount Igeldo, delineate the city limits. As the capital of Gipuzkoa, San Sebastian is a city where visitors co-exist seamlessly with the approximately 180,000 locals who frequent the city's esteemed restaurants, world-class casino, and Zubieta Race Track. The vast selection of cultural activities includes year-round options San Telmo Museum, Balenciaga Museum and the Aquarium. Annual head-line events are the International Film Festival, Musical Fortnight, and Jazz Festival. The Fantasy and Horror Film Festival and Theatre Festival are exciting options for the adventurous. Gipuzkoa is also a recent discovery of the golf world. The winding Cantabric coast lined with small fishing villages, beaches, cliffs, and rocky coves presents a contrasting landscape perfect for the picturesque sport.

As a result of an astonishing 16 Michelin stars bestowed upon San Sebastian restaurants, culinary aficionados congregate here to sample distinctive Basque cuisine.

Our Concierge recommends the following as distinct local spots and activities:

- El Peine de los Vientos: An incomparable stop at the foot of Mount Igeldo.
- Walking Around: A simple stroll around San Sebastian, referred to as the pearl of the Cantabric Sea, is unforgettable.

- The Old Quarter: The perfect place for authentic shopping, this area is also home to the best bars, which serve the city's famous Pintxos, small portions of food particular to Basque Country.
- Surrounding Area: The nearby towns of Getaria, Pasajes San Juan, and Fuenterrabia are exceptional cultural excursions, as are the French towns San Juan De Luz, Biarritz, and Hendaya.

Wed Oct 28

Drive from San Sebastian to Bilbao about 60 miles from 1 to 1 ¾ hour

Turn in rental car

4:45pm Depart Bilbao BIO via Air Europa #7154

5:50pm Arrive Madrid MAD

Hotel AC Palacio Del Retiro, Autograph Collection of Marriott – 2 nights

Alfonso XII 14, Madrid 28014 Spain Tele: 34-91-5237460

<http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/madre-ac-palacio-del-retiro-autograph-collection/>

Palatial home built in the beginning of the 20th century converted into a discreet 50 room luxury hotel. Unique building protected by National Heritage status where you can enjoy the pleasure of resting in one of the historic buildings of the centre of the city, located in front of the famous Retiro Park and close to the Paseo de Recoletos. It occupies the centre of the magical Art Triangle, Prado Museum, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection and Reina Sofía National Art Museum. Ideally located in the centre of the cultural, financial and business area.

Fri Oct 30

11:15am Depart Madrid MAD via UA#965

3:25pm Arrive Newark EWR

Emergency contact while on hike:

Luisa Usai of Amaior Tele 011 34 944 214 275 office or 011 34 669 189 526 cell

Email luisa@castilloamaiur.com – also see lists in file

Participants:

Katherine Brooks – Alta WY with friend Scott on the last evening

Rudolph Landry and Donna Boden – Bowling Green KY

Barbara Case – Rochester NY

Rod Moore – Portland OR

Josu Artetxe – Bilbao – Guide

A native of Basque Country with a profound love of his land and culture. After spending several years traveling solo throughout Europe and South America where he sharpened his fluency in six different languages, Josu is now involved with organic farming and the local development of his native language: Euskera. He lives in the beautiful Valle de Ayala (where he is mayor) with his family in their historic stone farmhouse.

Gratuity recommendation: \$10-\$15 per person per guide per day.



Money-Saving Travel Tips for Madrid and Spain - The New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/travel/money-saving-travel-tips-for-madrid-and-spain.html?em_pos=small&emc=edit_tl_20150725&nl=travel&nlid=22982744&ref=headline&r=0

<http://www.puretravel.com/blog/2015/07/10/madrid-a-city-to-savour/>

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL- For more than 36 years, Country Walkers has been a leader in active travel, with responsible tourism an integral part of our core values. Our tours reflect our dedication to best travel practices—and to the preservation of indigenous cultures and the environment. Country Walkers has made a donation on behalf of every traveler to the CW Travelers Fund, which supports designated projects in the communities and habitats in which we travel. We invite you to learn more about our efforts and initiatives for giving back. Here's just one example that highlights our sustainable practices: The Basque language, known as Euskara, is the oldest surviving tongue of Western Europe and is still spoken by almost one-third of the population. Paradoxically, the Basques never had a country or state of their own, and presently are split between France and Spain, with some regions experiencing high levels of autonomy from the central governments. For more than a century, Basque nationalists have claimed all the Basque provinces into one single and fully independent state; support for this separatist group is declining, as their actions have impacted the entire Basque community and their image. Exploring this region with your local guides promotes an in-depth understanding of the Basque people and their land, as you learn about the history and distinctions that comprise this unique culture. Country Walkers makes a donation on behalf of every traveler to Aunia (aunia.org), an organization born in the area where you walk on days one and two of the tour, which is dedicated to the preservation of Basque traditions, farmers' history, and ethnography.

Tour Facts at a Glance

INCLUSIONS

- » Two expert, local guides (for groups of 8 or more), with you 24/7
- » All meals except for one dinner; local wine or beer included with dinners
- » All accommodations while on tour
- » Transportation from the meeting point to the departure point
- » Entrance fees and special events as noted in the itinerary
- » The unbeatable and cumulative experience of the Country Walkers staff

LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN - Prior to your adventure you will receive:

- » Guest Information and Acknowledgment Forms to complete and return at least 90 days prior to your tour
- » Luggage tags
- » List of travel companions and guide(s)
- » Your trip invoice

GRATUITIES - Gratuities for all hotels, meals, and services that are included in your tour price will be paid by Country Walkers. Should you wish to tip your Country Walkers guide(s), the standard in the industry ranges from \$10 to \$15 per person, per guide, per day (or \$20 to \$30 per couple, per guide, per day), and can be paid in USD or local currency.

DELAYS AND LATE ARRIVALS - If you are delayed while traveling, or for any reason miss the scheduled group meeting, please telephone the Hotel Hesperia Bilbao, our meeting point, and leave a message for your guide(s) as to your estimated time of arrival. Or, you may call our local partner in Bilbao: Amaiur, at 944 214 275 (office) or 669 189 526 (cell phone) (these numbers must be preceded by 011 34 if dialing from outside Spain). Since many of our tours begin on a weekend, and due to the time change, it is not advisable to leave this message at the Country Walkers office. A transfer by taxi to our first hotel in Orduña takes 45 minutes and costs 50-60 euros, or approximately \$65-\$80 USD (at your own expense).

MOST CONVENIENT AIRPORT - San Sebastián Airport (EAS), San Sebastián, Spain
aena.es

Please note that there are no direct flights from the San Sebastián Airport to the U.S. and most flights connect via Madrid or sometimes Barcelona. Should you need to return to Bilbao to catch a flight, a

taxi can be arranged by the hotel, takes approximately 1½ hours, and costs about 170 euros (approximately \$235 USD). Those who wish could also rent a car at the San Sebastián Airport and leave the car at the airport in Bilbao. Should you wish to spend additional time in San Sebastián, there is a city bus stop just outside the Hotel Obispo with buses leaving every 30 minutes. The trip takes about 40 minutes and costs approximately 5 euros (approximately \$7 USD). A taxi can also be arranged by the hotel's front-desk staff, takes about 20 minutes, and costs approximately 40 euros (approximately \$55 USD).

* * * * *

MADRID ideas from CWs add on trip:

Discover the essence of multifaceted Madrid, through guided walking, art, and bicycle tours. In this city of European grandeur and neighborly intimacy, an expert tour through the priceless art collections of the Prado Museum is complemented by a unique electric bicycle and walking tour of its grand monuments and beguiling old quarters and markets. Step out from a stylish centrally located hotel to explore this vibrant and welcoming city.

DAY 1 - Upon arrival in Madrid, you check into your stylish four-star retreat in the heart of the Spanish capital's central museum district, just steps from the "Golden Triangle" of exceptional repositories of art: the Prado Museum, the Reina Sofia Museum, and the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum.

Hotel: Hotel De Las Letras – 20th century hotel that was originally built as an aristocratic residence is on the historic register and blends old and contemporary design from its 2005 renovation. Spacious guest rooms feature oak floors, warm colors, and custom-designed linens and blankets.

DAY 2 - Private guided walking and museum tour. Today, after breakfast at your hotel, you set off with your expert guide to trace the history of Spain through Madrid's great art collections. One of Europe's major art centers, its best-known museums complement each other in the scope of their collections. The Prado Museum contains one of the best collections of European art from the 12th to 19th centuries—showcasing the Spanish masters Goya, El Greco, and Velázquez. The Reina Sofia, the national museum of 20th-century art, houses the works of Picasso, Miró, and Dalí among others. Carefully designed, the tour focuses on 10 great works of Spanish art, located in both the Prado and Reina Sofia museums. Through these pieces, the history of Spain is presented from 1492, the date of the "re-conquest" from the Moors, to the Catholic Monarchs, to the Spanish Civil War. This private tour is an excellent way to understand Spain's history as it has fluctuated between greatness and insularity, using artistic masterpieces as a unifying theme. With recommendations for lunch, the afternoon is yours to explore Madrid at your own pace, facilitated by an included Madrid visitor card that provides priority entrance to the city's main museums and monuments. Your appetite whetted, you may not be able to resist visiting the third side of the "Golden Triangle," the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, with its wide-ranging collection of European and American art. Or you may choose to stroll past the Puerta del Sol and on to the arcades of Madrid's expansive Plaza Mayor square and enjoy a drink at one of the outdoor café tables.

DAY 3 - Private guided tour of Madrid by electric bike and on foot; Lunch at San Miguel Market

Today you get the big picture of the Spanish capital on foot and by electric bicycle. A perfect way to take in the key neighborhoods and monuments of the city, an electric bike is easy to use in this fairly flat city, providing a little power boost if needed. Bicycle lanes flank some wide avenues or you take car-free streets or bike paths through the city parks. Start with the Belle Époque grandeur of the Gran Via. Then, step back in time to Madrid of the 18th-century Bourbon royal dynasty, when King Charles III of Spain implemented his vision of making the city a great European capital with important urban planning and the construction of grand buildings and monuments such as the Prado Museum, the Royal Botanic Garden, and the Puerta de Alcalá. The bicycle portion of this tour transitions to walking as you head on to explore the oldest part of the city, associated with the Hapsburg dynasty. The La Latina neighborhood is a fascinating and integral part of Madrid, with artisan workshops and boutiques sitting alongside bustling restaurants and tea rooms on narrow, cobbled lanes. The relaxed stroll ends at the enticing San Miguel Market, a treat for the senses with artisan foods and wines served in a lively market environment. As a reward for the morning's exertions, your guide leads you on a culinary journey, tasting some of the best products from around the country such as hams, cheeses, wines, and seafood. Concluding the tour and lunch in the later afternoon, your guide offers suggestions to continue your evening explorations and dinner options.

DAY 4 - Departure from Madrid - Enjoying breakfast at your hotel, you check out and depart Madrid at your leisure.