



Basque traditions, from drying peppers on the street to the game of pelota, have been preserved for generations

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

In southwest France, **Chris Fitch** finds himself seduced by a unique Basque cultural identity that preserves its heritage with a stubborn yet admirable passion

The ball makes a terrific 'thwack' as it smacks against the wall, then ricochets at great speed back in the opposite direction. A chorus of shouts rings out from the assembled crowd as a sweating, lanky young man charges forward to meet the ball mid-flight, and strikes it powerfully back against the wall. This time it takes a wicked deflection, and suddenly the rebound is heading straight towards me. Instinctively I flinch, but before I can react, another player has leapt forward, bat extended. Making firm contact with the ball, he sends it flying back towards the wall again, and the match continues.

Anyone who has had the pleasure of being in the crowd for a traditional Basque pelota match will know it is a thrilling experience. Even removing the risk of being struck following a momentary lapse in concentration - which remarkably never seems to happen, despite the match taking place on a court squeezed between the main road and an outdoor café seating area - the energy on show makes for a breathless spectacle. Consisting of a pair of two-person teams engaged in what is best described as open-air squash, the ball, free from the confines of a sealed court, is capable of flying off and down the street at any moment. Matches are very much

the focus of the local community, and people gather around to watch the action in this small French Basque bastide village.

Watching the ball mesmerisingly ping around at over 125mph, from wall-to-bat-to-wall-to-bat, it strikes me that - more than what this game actually is or how it is played - I'm drawn to what it stands for, a key ingredient in the unique identity of the Basque region. This small corner of Europe, a curious region spread across the French and Spanish border on the fringes of the Pyrenees, has fascinating cultural properties which enable the inhabitants to stand apart from their respective compatriots.

SPORTING HERITAGE

The French Basque region enjoys a fascinating niche in world culture, with an identity thriving not only at home, but abroad as well. The region, officially named *Pays Basque*, encompasses three provinces, Labourd, Lower Navarre and Soule, within the southwestern *département* of *Pyrénées Atlantiques* - 'the Atlantic Pyrenees'. The communities of Upper Navarre and the Basque Autonomous Community in neighbouring Spain complete *Euskal Herria*, as the wider Basque region is locally known.



A building displaying the traditional Basque colour scheme in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in Low Navarre



The Rhune mountain provides a backdrop for the 16th century St Vincent bell tower in Saint-Jean-de-Luz

Pelota itself is played across the region, arguably the number one sport on both sides of the border. It's a variation of the historical sport *jeu de paume*, which fell out of favour across most of France in the 16th century. With most of the country increasingly enamoured by a strange new sport called 'tennis', led by its popularity within the English and French royal courts, the Basques instead became obsessed by an alternative game using a ball with a string-covered exterior, derived from the word *pelote*, which refers to the winding of said string.

Despite incremental changes - such as the introduction of a rubber ball following the material's discovery in the Americas - people in the Basque region continued to play their own unique sport by themselves for centuries, resulting in what we now know as pelota. It's a symbolic illustration of the Basques' determination throughout history to distinguish themselves from their neighbours.

There are around 12 major versions of pelota, best distinguished by the variation of racquets on display: from the ping-pong-esque *pala* the players I watched were using, to the distinctive curved wicker *chistera*, or - for those with especially tough palms - even bare-handed. The sport has since been exported around the world, especially to Latin America and the Caribbean, where it often goes by alternative names such as *cesta punta* or *jai alai*. But the Basque region is its spiritual home, and every year the town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, in Labourd, plays host to the *Cesta Punta* International Games, an intense tournament to decide the very best players in the world.

Thanks to centuries of emigration, pelota is just the tip of

Pelota is symbolic of the Basques' historic determination to distinguish themselves from their neighbours

the iceberg when it comes to Basque cultures going global. Large Basque diasporas can be found in the United States and Latin America, including Argentina, Uruguay, and Mexico, and even across into the Asia-Pacific region, particularly the Philippines and Australia. These communities have all the trademark cultural habits normally found within such tight-knit ex-pat heartlands, based not only around the playing of pelota and other traditional sports, but also in music, food, and dance. Many people have even adopted *Aberri Eguna* - the unofficial Basque day of 'national' celebration.

'Even if it's only a Basque grandfather,' explains Yoni Arrieguy, my guide around the French Basque region, 'people will feel Basque. People hold onto their identity.' Indeed, long after the original French/Spanish nationalities of the migrants have become footnotes in history, their ancestors instead are referred to as, for example, American-Basques, Australian-Basques or Argentinean-Basques.

Is this loyalty a remnant of the centuries-old Basque fight for recognition against their encroaching neighbours, particularly the Spanish? Quite possibly. Basque culture was



ABOVE: the top of La Rhune mountain in Atlantic Pyrenees; **RIGHT:** old school trains still win out over high-speed rail

forced to withdraw into close-knit family circles during the Franco dictatorship of 1939 to 1974, staying alive in the form of folk tales. Understandably this built pent-up energy, which, upon release, has helped the culture flourish in recent decades.

Recent cross-border measures to officially recognise Basque culture – such as the Basque language's inclusion in the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – have also helped. The Basque Autonomous Community in Spain has become the most proactive in maintaining bonds with diasporas, regularly sending famous Basque musicians around the world to entertain its far-flung brethren with *txistus* pipes, *xirula* flutes and other signature Basque instruments.

MOTHER TONGUE

'We can be both part of France and have our own ideas,' insists Yoni, as we tuck into a distinctly Basque-flavoured lunch – line-caught Atlantic hake with locally-grown leeks – at a surfer café by the beach in Guéthary the next day. Where once Basque independence was a prospect many fought in pursuit of, the common desire among French Basques now appears to simply be increased autonomy for the region, as opposed to simply being one part of the more generic-sounding *Pyrénées Atlantiques*.

Of course, it isn't just an affection for an entertainingly fast-paced racquet sport which unites people in this part of the world. The Basque region has its own flag – the red, green and white of the *ikurrina* – visible not just on kitsch souvenirs, but also proudly displayed on signposts and stuck in car windows. Additionally, there is shared importance attached to

Basque culture has operated on the world stage for hundreds of years, producing individuals who took on the world

traditional lifestyles, in everything from the unique pole-and-line methods used by local tuna fishermen, to the protected network of hiking paths, whose distinctive red-and-white markings can lead ambitious travellers all the way into the Pyrenees, to the hyper-local festivals which regularly fill the towns along this coast with dancers celebrating the feast days of various important saints.

I ask Yoni what he believes the key characteristics behind the Basque identity are. 'Language, culture and history,' he replies confidently. He has summarised it well. These three elements appear to have played equally key roles in establishing the contemporary Basque identity.

Take the language, for example, known as *Euskera*. Yoni grew up in the region his whole life, but not as a native speaker. *Euskera* was outlawed as a means of communication during the Franco years, meaning his parents, like everyone else, didn't speak it in public, reducing the spread of the dialect through the population. An estimated 25 to 30 per cent of the current population does speak *Euskera* in some form today, however, with as many as 40 per cent of school

children in the region now reported to be able to speak it – rising to an astonishing 90 per cent on the Spanish side of the border – the evidence is there to suggest that it is experiencing something of a resurgence.

Yoni explains how *Euskera* contains linguistic elements unlike anything in neighbouring France, Spain, or even elsewhere in Western Europe. Indeed, even though my scratchy knowledge of French can understand occasional Francophone sentences, thanks to their shared Latin roots, Basque largely sounds so alien to my ears as to be incomprehensible. Instead, it finds striking similarities with dialects from much further afield, with various studies finding common linguistic traits with Arabic, Slavic, and even Japanese languages. How exactly *Euskera* evolved is still very much up for debate. Nevertheless, it neatly underlines how Basque culture has operated on the world stage for hundreds of years, producing individuals – such as 16th century explorers Juan Sebastián del Cano and Andrés de Urdaneta, respectively the first and second circumnavigators of the Earth – who left to take on the world.

STRONG PERSONALITY

With the wind barrelling into my face and threatening to relieve me of my notebook, I fight my way up the last few steps to stand atop the famous Basque Corniche, a wild area of clifftop which runs for 8km between the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and the looming Pyrenees, starting in *Pays Basque*, France, and stretching far into Spain.

Spread out all around me – and brutally exposed to the elements – are vineyards, growing almost-haphazardly atop the cliff. Wild grass fills the gaps between the vines, providing the most minimal of blockades from the ferocious wind that is roaring in from the sea.

'The Basque coast has a strong personality. I want to make wine that represents the Basque identity.' So says local wine-maker Emmanuel Poirmeur, whose liquor is produced from the grapes of these wild vineyards. 'I wanted to create wine which fits well with our way of life here,' he continues. 'Its personality comes from the geographical location.' It's certainly a world away from the micro-managed methods of wine production deployed across most of the world.

Unsurprisingly, fresh fish is the food of choice among the Basque population to accompany this uniquely wild white wine, and here that means hake. While hardly making regular appearances on the menus of most French restaurants, it is a mainstay of local Basque cuisine, harking back to the ancient relationship between the sea and these Basque fishing communities. Yoni boasts to me of the 62 tuna fish currently in his freezer back home which he caught using skills taught to him by his father. It's a cultural chain going back many generations. With locally-grown tomatoes and courgettes also waiting for him, he can say with pride that his entire dinner was reared in the Basque country.



Strolling around the colourful town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, the central square is decorated with traditional rich red Espelette peppers drying in the sunshine. The buildings display typical Basque architecture, with wooden beams dyed a deep blood red, a colour so distinctive, it is known across France as *rouge basque* – Basque red. What was once an everyday practice of soaking the wood in cow's blood as a preservation technique has now become a vivid urban visualisation of contemporary Basque identity, which no self-respecting Basque home would be without. Yoni informs me that even new buildings in the region must fit this style, a compulsory preservation of regional identity. 'We can be modern, but we can also be traditional,' he says with a grin.

GRADUAL EVOLUTION

This delicate balance between tradition and modernity even became a major stumbling block behind plans to build a high-speed train connection between Madrid and France's famous TGV network. Known as 'Basque Y', the plans, which have been in the pipeline since the 1980s, would see trains charging at 220km/h through the region in order to link up with the rest of Europe. While the project may have the support of the European Union and the Basque government, the power of petitions and community activism has repeatedly forced developers back to the drawing board, as the determined Basque protestors try to shut off what would be the easier route around the Pyrenees.

Nevertheless, the project has slowly ground forwards, gaining initial funding in 2006. A statement in July 2015 by Ana Oregi, Minister of the Environment and Land Policy for the Basque government, revealed that the Basque Y project was at that point 80 per cent complete. The final stage involves the symbolic linking of the expansive Spanish high-speed train network with the towns of Irun and Hendaye

which straddle the French-Spanish border. While their staunch opposition may have delayed construction for many years, the Basque protestors have eventually been dragged into a world where such decisions have been taken out of their hands.

'We don't want to stay the same,' insists Yoni, as the exhausted pelota players shake hands upon the conclusion of their match, and the crowd disperses. 'We want to evolve. We want to show our culture can change and grow.' The Basque are hardly the first minority community to find themselves under pressure to protect their unique culture against an increasingly globalised world. Where it feels as though they have the upper hand, however, is how much experience they have in this situation.

Whatever peculiar mix of anthropological influences did create the modern iteration of Basque culture, it has been through centuries of evolution. It's a culture inherently prepared to maintain its individuality, whatever the world throws at it – even, perhaps, a 125mph rubber pelota ball. ■