

The **Guggenheim** Museum's 10th anniversary this autumn has put **Bilbao** back into the cultural spotlight, introducing a new generation to this indisputable city of **art** and **architecture**.

IT'S just a short flight from Málaga to the north of Spain, making it the perfect long weekend destination. A weekend that combines art, design, innovative cuisine and a bohemian nightlife.

The Tate Modern in south London; the Museo Picasso in Málaga; the Baltic Centre in Gateshead – all are examples of how cities have embraced art galleries and museums as catalysts or icons for urban renewal. Yet arguably, few have become as iconic as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The undulating waves of titanium that envelop the gallery are recognisable across the world. Frank O. Gehry's architectural masterpiece has become acknowledged as the genuine catalyst for the transformation of this post-industrial city into a magnet for international culture vultures. Bilbao is a city redefined.

Now is the perfect time to experience Bilbao. Ten years ago, when the Guggenheim first opened its doors, there was still plenty to be done in a city that wanted to be on the world-class destination list. Now it has achieved its goals, with a balance of great architecture, a world-class arts scene, luxury hotels, diverse shopping and exceptional cuisine.

The Guggenheim Bilbao is synonymous in many people's minds with a new era in architecture and is a major draw for tourists. It alone is certainly worth the trip. In fact so successful has Frank O. Gehry's architectural design been that many argue it overshadows the art pieces and installations it houses. If, like me, you find

some contemporary art just a little too esoteric, then it is well worth going to the Guggenheim simply to explore the building and its gallery spaces – the structure is filled with interesting and irregular spaces that you can enjoy in different ways from the floor level, balconies or elevated walkways.

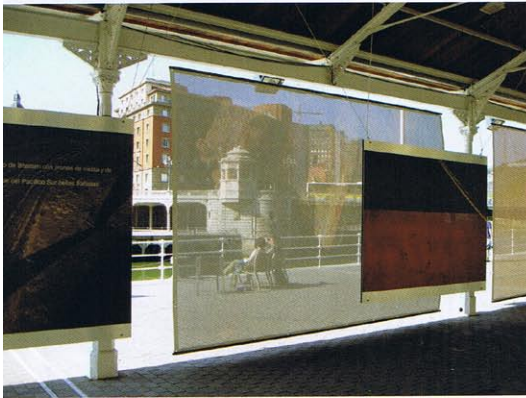
Included is a free audio guide that helps decipher some of the more bizarre pieces on show! In my opinion art shouldn't need an interpreter and a great example of this is in the permanent collection. The mammoth steel sculpture/installation 'The Matter of Time' by Richard Serra is both powerful and inspiring. You can't help but be engaged by it. If you enjoy truly contemporary art, then Bilbao has attracted plenty of experimental artists. New spaces like the Sala Rekalde gallery have a changing collection of installations and art that really push the boundaries.

The Adandoibarra district, in the centre of Bilbao, was once full of industrial units, cranes and a large container port served by the river Nervión that flows through the city out into the Bay of Biscay and the Cantabrian Sea.

Now, the galleries, fancy bars, sculpture gardens and parks define this part of the city – a place developed on a human scale in which it is a joy to walk and explore. Famous architects have built footbridges across the river, from the Pedro Arrupe Footbridge (with its steel clad design) to Santiago Calatrava's Zubizuri Bridge (with a sweeping parabolic deck suspended by a graceful arch) that reclaims the river for the city and its inhabitants in favour of cars or industry.



WORDS & IMAGES BY ANDREW FORBES



It is no longer the clogged artery of an aging industrial place but instead a new focus for visitors and locals. The planners have cleverly integrated the best of Bilbao's past too. The city's legacy of fine 18th and 19th Century period buildings including the Town Hall, the extravagant, neo-baroque Arriaga Theatre and the elegant Doña Casilda Park now all sit comfortably in the new Bilbao.

A striking Norman Foster designed Metro opened 12 years ago, starting the city's architectural and social transformation. Soon after came the Guggenheim Museum, from the New York based Solomon R Guggenheim Institute. It swiftly became the emblem of the revived city. Others followed, with Spain's internationally acclaimed architect, Santiago Calatrava, creating the city's stunning airport. Designed to look like a white dove, its sweeping wings embrace the building's structure. Soon Cesar Pelli is to have an iconic skyscraper erected in the city – further testament that Bilbao is continuing a pace on its road to reinvention.

Thanks to the city's popularity amongst international visitors in general and the art scene set in particular, you're not short of choice for designer accommodation either. A plethora of chic, boutique four and five-star hostellers hug the banks of the river or sit snugly in the Bilbao's narrow streets. The Gran Hotel Domine is almost over-designed, whilst the coloured glass façade of the Hesperia Hotel has quickly made it a local landmark. What's more, to go with the designer hotels there are also plenty of designer stores too, so if you tire of the art you can relax with some classic retail therapy amongst the many independent, high quality shops.

Bilbao is not just simply about urban aesthetics, the visual arts or business. It's about people and having fun. There is only so much art and architecture one can take when enjoying a weekend away – a proper break has to be about enjoying the other pleasures in life, and for me that means going out, having a few drinks, meeting people and, of course, eating! Take a moment to enjoy some tasty pintxos with local wine, beer or cider. In the Basque Country, snacks accompanying a drink have been taken to a new culinary height in the form of pintxos; elegant, tasty morsels piled up on toast or bread, held in place by a toothpick, or 'pintxos'. The barman will work out your bill by counting the number cocktail sticks left on your plate.

The cliché is that northerners lack the warmth and passion of Andalusians, and at first people here may appear more reserved, yet once engaged, they are genuine and enthusiastic. I experienced

many examples of their warmth and generosity throughout the weekend, from an elderly man offering us a free tram ticket so we could catch the next service, to a lady in the street offering detailed and enthusiastic ideas of what to do.

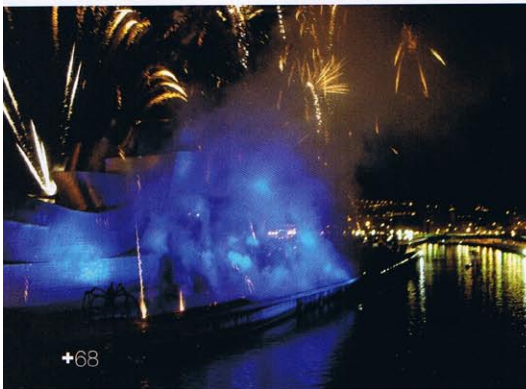
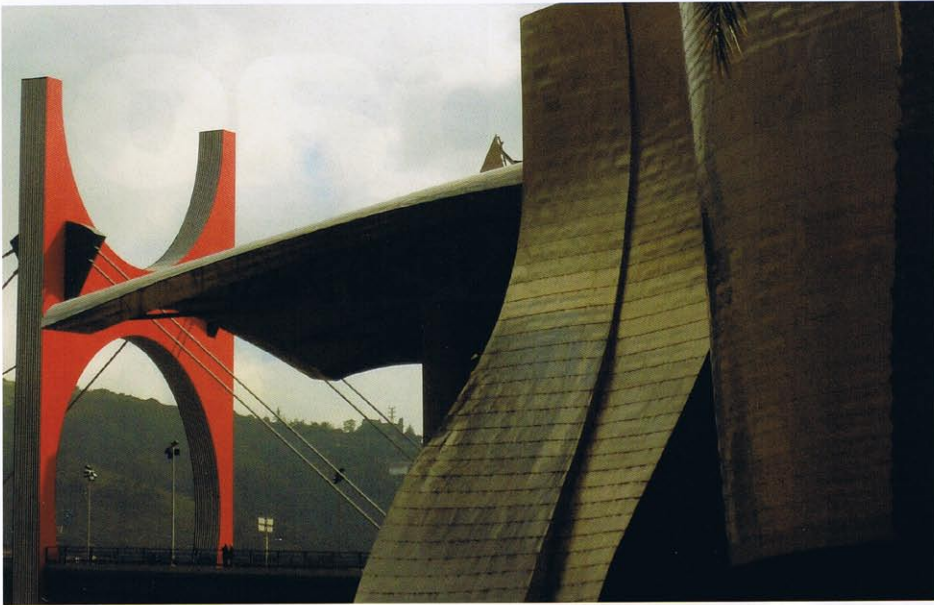
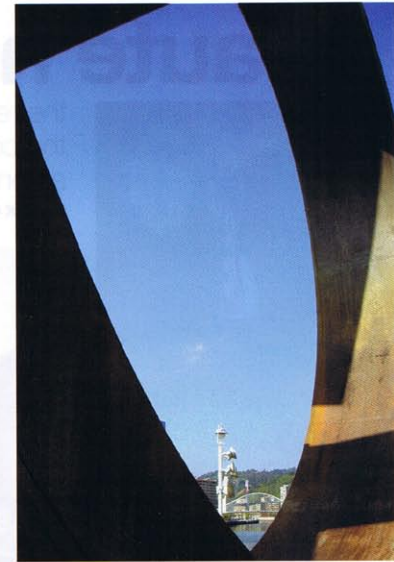
As with most regions of Spain, the Basque County has a proud winemaking heritage, and in addition there is a great selection of ciders to try, which are extravagantly poured by holding the bottle at a great height. It's a little like watching a Moroccan serve mint tea. These cloudy ciders are pretty potent, so take it easy! In addition to the ubiquitous Rioja, the locals also enjoy Txakoli, a local white wine.

A great way to explore the multicultural old town and the popular Plaza Nueva is to take in a number of bars throughout an evening – sampling different pintxos, wines or beers at each one. The drinks are served small – including very small glasses of beer –but it makes sense as before you know it, you've eaten platefuls of pintxos and drunk plenty of booze! It's a fun way to spend an evening and a good way to get talking to people.

There are also plenty of places to hear live music or to dance away the night. Many bars have an alternative or bohemian feel – even slightly grungy! So, if something a little more formal is your style then Bilbao boasts some fine restaurants and chefs. The designer hotels also have fine restaurants, including one of Spain's award-winning chefs, Ramón Berrioizabal. His temple to food, 'Bletz The Black', at the Gran Hotel Domine, manages to serve food that isn't upstaged by its dramatic, designer surroundings – and that is some achievement! Or try one of the posh bistros that are in and around the old town, like 'á table', serving French and International cuisine. If you make it into the commercial centre of the city and its prestigious Gran Via, you'll find 'Guria'. It is a popular choice for those that want classic Basque dishes.

One of the most enjoyable aspects about a weekend break in Bilbao is the ease of getting around. Forget the car or taxis; enjoy walking the streets and avenues. Or use the excellent tram that runs along the river or the elegant, minimalist metro system. There's plenty to enjoy, from the charming Casco Viejo (old town) to the parks and gardens that define the revitalised city centre. Catch glimpses of the award-winning buildings or the striking metal sculptures of local artist Eduardo Chillida that dominate public spaces – or travel out to the city's port on the coast.

I hope that at the end of your weekend, you'll be happy to salute the 'Goog' like I did. Here's to ten years of inspirational change.



+ **Details:**

WHERE TO EAT:
The Guggenheim Restaurant
www.restauranteguggenheim.com
á table - www.restauranteatable.com
Guria Restaurant
restauranteguria.com
Martin Berasategui Restaurant
martinberasategui.com

WHERE TO STAY:
Gran Hotel Domine
granhoteldominebilbao.com

HOTEL HESPERIA
hesperia.com/hotels/Hesperia-Bilbao/
Miró Hotel - mirohotelbilbao.com

ARTS: The Guggenheim Museum
guggenheim-bilbao.es/ingles/home.htm
Film Festival
zinebi.com/eng/programa/46.html
Museo de Bellas Artes
museobilbao.com
Sala Rekalde Arts Centre
salarekalde.bizkaia.net
Euskalduna Palace – Concert Hall
euskalduna.net

GETTING THERE:
Vueling – Summer Timetable only
vueling.com
Click Air - clickair.com
SpanAir - spanair.com
Iberia - iberia.com