Europe's First Family

THE BASQUES

Martial pride in a 16th-century victory over French invaders brings out a festive army of Basques in the Spanish town of Irún. Memories run deep among a people who have defended their culture and corner of Europe since prehistoric times.
Jewel of Spain's Basque coast, San Sebastián's harbor looks out over the Bay of Biscay. Basques sailed with Columbus and helped colonize the New World, but their cultural center of gravity lies in their homeland in Spain and France. There traditions have endured in laws, music, dance, crafts, sports, cuisine, and, above all, language: Basque, which predates the Latin-based Romance languages, resembles no other tongue in Europe.
F
ROM ROAD'S END at Arantzazu Monastery it's only a two-hour walk through fragrant forests of beech and pine to the high, stony pastures of Urbia. Yet the well-worn track leading to this high mountain valley crosses a dozen millennia.

In fields shielded from the chill north winds by the mile-high walls of the jagged Aitzkorri Range, Basque shepherds still summer their flocks, surrendering to a seasonal rhythm unbroken since Neolithic times.

In early June men shoulder their packs and leave lowland farmsteads in the charge of their wives to push flocks steeply upward, dogs barking at their heels. For more than four months, until gray October skies threaten snow, they graze the hardy blackface Latxa sheep through long summer days across rocky slopes. Evenings, they corral the ewes behind their stone huts for milking.

From a cloudy ridge above the valley I clambered down the final stretch just ahead of a gathering September rain. Nothing moved except the clouds and a sprinkle of white, grazing specks in the distance.

The weather caught me as I reached the small stand of trees that guarded the txabola, the shepherd's hut, of Ixidro Legorburu (pages 82-3). He and his son Gorka stepped out to quiet the dogs. Although I carried introductions from mutual friends, the tanned and weathered pair eyed me warily while we stood for awkward minutes in the drizzle.

Basques can be a cautious lot. "Atzerri, otserrri," runs a local adage: "The alien's land is a land of wolves." But once met, they are indefatigable hosts. Soon we were sipping small glasses of red wine at Ixidro's hearth.

Surely what has bred this caution into the three million Basques—whose wedge-shaped homeland straddles the French-Spanish border along the western Pyrenees—is their long and turbulent history. Through the centuries, waves of Romans, Visigoths, Arabs, French, and Spanish overran them. But the Basques endured, often taking their traditions to the hills and forests for safekeeping. The same Pyrenees that separate Spain from the rest of Europe united the Basques.

In 1980 the three Spanish provinces of Vizcaya, Álava, and Guipúzcoa were officially joined as the Basque Autonomous Community. This is the Basque heartland, a 2,800-square-mile swath of green slopes and chestnut forests interrupted only by hillside villages and a handful of vibrant cities.

But the Basque country spills beyond these official borders. Basques call their nation Euskal Herria, or "land of the Basque language." And it is their ancient mother tongue that truly unites them. It was spoken here 5,000 years ago, before the Indo-Europeans arrived and spread out across the continent. And it is spoken today in cities and among the shepherds in the hills.

Ixidro and I converse in Spanish—slowly. It is, for both of us, a second language. "¿Más vino?" Ixidro fills our glasses even before his question is out, then pokes the fire with his hazelwood staff, setting the coals aglow. They light the weather-beaten face of a man in his mid-50s. His forehead and deep-set eyes are sheltered by a traditional wide black beret. With a worn pocketknife he slices cheese onto the plate between us.

"Pasture was good this year," he says. "We put up just over 400 cheeses." During the summer he and his son hand-press curds into three-pound wheels; in the rear of their hut, Gorka loads the last few into gunnysacks for the trip downhill.

A couple of chairs and a rough table furnish the spartan room. Strings of red peppers and spare sheep bells decorate one wall. On the opposite wall hang a painting of the Virgin Mary and a pinup calendar from a garage.

78

National Geographic, November 1995
Banned during decades of repression under Generalissimo Francisco Franco, the Basque flag is paraded legally in memory of a member of the separatist group ETA. An ETA campaign of terrorism has diminished since limited autonomy was granted in 1980.

Basque Homeland

One nation in two countries, Euskal Herria, as three million Basques call their region, is recognized within Spain as the provinces of Navarra, Vizcaya, Guipúzcoa, and Álava. The last three share a parliament, courts, and police. Basques also predominate in three French provinces.
I mention several portents I have noticed: solar panels on isolated huts for a radio or TV; a radiotelephone at a mountaineer's retreat; a road working its way up from the village of Zaldúando. Herders are beginning to move livestock by truck, rather than by foot.

Isidro nods. "We've been grazing this land since time began," he says. "But you are right; our world is changing.

"Twenty-five years ago there were 53 shepherds summering up here; today we are only ten," he says. "Our sons are turning down the shepherd's life for factory jobs.

"Gorka, here, has set his heart on the life of a truck driver," he adds with a sigh.

While Isidro's world changes, much of the Basque country seems to stay the same. From a hilltop in the heart of Guipúzcoa Province the panorama sweeps from the white limestone summits of the Indamendi Mountains, across misty green hills, and then drops 800 feet to the red-roofed harbor town of Getaria and the deep blue Bay of Biscay.

I had come to Guipúzcoa to spend a few weeks at a small country inn run by Josefina Peña and her family. Encouraged by a government program, hundreds of farmers have opened their doors to paying guests. It was hard to believe that this rustic hideaway lay only an hour or so by expressway from the major Basque city of Bilbao.

"I was born and raised here on this farm," Josefina said over breakfast. Her roosters had roused us early that morning. "After working several years for restaurants in town, my husband and I decided to start our own place."

The whole family pitches in. Josefina's teenage daughter, Alazne, was clearing away the dishes. Her son, José Agustín, was out collecting the eggs. Her brother came in from the morning milking with pitchers of fresh cream, followed by her mother with an apron full of

Inside players of business and finance deal a friendly hand of el mus, a popular Basque card game, at the Sociedad Bilbaina. Founded in 1839, the all-male club numbers among its members the elite of Bilbao, the industrial, banking, and shipping center of northern Spain. A few blocks away in the city's Old Quarter a very different generation's tastes are given shape by innovative hairdresser Begoña Alegría.

National Geographic, November 1995
chestnuts. Josefina’s husband, Agustín, was out getting groceries and wine. Only 81-year-old Pedro, her father, is exempt. On two canes he tottered past the window on his determined morning walk into the hills.

Josefina was clearly in charge. Only during the daily nine o’clock radio Mass, when she sat down by herself for coffee and toast, did she ever stop working.

“Basque society may be largely a man’s world,” she said, smiling, “but a Basque house is the woman’s domain—here we reign supreme.”

In neighbor Ernesto Txueka’s vineyards I spent a morning filling plastic boxes with white grapes. A tractor would haul them up the hill to his presses. Ernesto’s vines grow just above the sea, where waves crashing on the rocky coast salt the air. These slopes produce the fruity young wine so prized by the Basques themselves: txakolina.

“Txakolina is usually white. We blend in just 15 percent red hondarribi beltsa to give it character,” Ernesto explained. “It makes the perfect complement to seafood—salted anchovies or slices of fresh Getaria bonito.”

He showed me the modern presses and stainless steel vats of his bodega, built beneath his house.

“Most txakolina is made in small, family cellars,” Ernesto said. “People always considered it an informal wine, something for drinking at home, but in recent years the better vintages have become popular in restaurants.”

I told Ernesto I had tried to find some of his wine—for gifts to friends back home—in several Getaria shops, but failed.

“Last year’s production was sold out long ago,” he said. But from his own cellar he brought up a few bottles and slipped them into my knapsack. “This year I’ve almost doubled production, to about 120,000 bottles. But it, too, is already spoken for.”

Many of those 120,000 bottles were no doubt headed for the restaurants of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the Basques’ cosmopolitan capital.

In downtown Vitoria, my friend Juan Trincado and I walked along the narrow, concentric lanes of the city’s medieval core. The streets there still bear the names of the tradesmen they once housed: cutters, shoemakers, painters, and blacksmiths.

Juan had arranged a rare invitation to dinner at one of the city’s foremost gourmet

“I want to be a shepherd too!” says five-year-old Andoni Legorburu, wearing father Ixido’s cap. His aspirations may change as jobs in towns and cities thin the ranks of young people tied to the land.

For now the seasonal rhythms of herding sheep remain. In spring Ixido and oldest son Gorka walk 300 sheep from their valley farm to high pastures and a small stone cottage. Father and son milk the ewes and make cheese. When autumn skies darken, they move the herd down the slopes for winter.

societies, or txokos. “Altogether here in the Basque country there are more than 1,500 of these txokos,” he told me.

On Calle Herrería, or Street of the Blacksmiths, we entered the Lagundi club. Its cozy dining room, opening on a vast kitchen, was already filled with members and their wives. Once all-male preserves, txokos now invite women to dine as well.

“Only the kitchen is off-limits to the ladies,” said club president Julio Ulrich. He had just emerged from the wine cellar with an armload of an ’86 Rioja bottled under the club’s own Lagundi (meaning “friends”) label.

“Good food and drink is the ideal centerpiece for an evening of fellowship,” Ulrich said as we sat down to salted anchovies on lettuce and tender Urbia lamb chops in a pâté sauce.
"I want to be a shepherd too!" says five-year-old Andoni Legorburu, wearing father Ixidro's cap. His aspirations may change as jobs in towns and cities thin the ranks of young people tied to the land.

For now the seasonal rhythms of herding sheep remain. In spring Ixidro and oldest son Gorka walk 300 sheep from their valley farm to high pastures and a small stone cottage. Father and son milk the ewes and make cheese. When autumn skies darken, they move the herd down the slopes for winter.

societies, or txokos. "Altogether here in the Basque country there are more than 1,500 of these txokos," he told me.

On Calle Herrería, or Street of the Blacksmiths, we entered the Lagundi club. Its cozy dining room, opening on a vast kitchen, was already filled with members and their wives. Once all-male preserves, txokos now invite women to dine as well.

"Only the kitchen is off-limits to the ladies," said club president Julio Ulrich. He had just emerged from the wine cellar with an armload of an '86 Rioja bottled under the club's own Lagundi (meaning "friends") label.

"Good food and drink is the ideal centerpiece for an evening of fellowship," Ulrich said as we sat down to salted anchovies on lettuce and tender Urbia lamb chops in a pâté sauce.

After dinner, champagne and cigars stoked the fires of a Basque sea chantey:

*By myself I dream, Aloine I come and go Like the waves of the sea....*

**ASQUES** have looked to the sea for centuries. Their whaling camps stood on Labrador's stony shores long before the English arrived at James-town. Basque captains sailed the Atlantic with Columbus and carved the Pacific track of the famed Manila galleons.

In Getaria, in the small plaza in front of the town hall, the marble figure of Captain Juan Sebastián de Elcano cradles a compass in one hand and steadies a stone tiller with the other.

"Elcano was a junior officer with Magellan on the first circumnavigation," Getaria's mayor, Mariano Camio Uranga, told me in his office. "Magellan himself perished in battle in the Philippines. Ultimately four of the expedition's five ships were lost.

"Steering by way of the Strait of Malacca and around Africa, Captain Elcano brought 17 survivors back to Spain in 1522 on the only remaining vessel, the *Victoria*—the first ship to circle the earth."

From the town hall I followed the polished stones of Getaria's main street down to the harbor. The fleet was in, packed bow to stern, some 40 high-prowed tuna boats and a score of smaller coastal vessels, bobbing impatiently at their moorings.

Sailors crowded the waterfront, reworking nets and rope and grumbling over coffee at the noisy Itxas Etxe bar. A fishermen's strike
A shepherd's cottage is built of stone from the mountains that sheltered the Basques while historic tides of conquerors swirled around them. Blood-typing and other genetic studies show the Basques to be a people distinct from any other in Europe, rooted in the region of the Pyrenees and Cantabrian Mountains before Indo-European tribes arrived. As a saying goes, "Before God was God and boulders were boulders, the Basques were already Basques."
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and roast rabbit sustain farmhands in the Spanish Basque region, which is known for its simple country cuisine. Across the border, French kindred dip their manex sheep, a Basque breed. Virtually all Basques speak Spanish or French; a quarter also speak the mother tongue, in eight major dialects. “Different accents, but we can understand them, like British and Americans,” says a Spanish Basque.

was dragging into its second week, and they had nothing to do but prepare for the next, unscheduled, sail.

Down the street from the bar, José Mari Irigoien, president of Getaria’s 400-member fishermen’s fraternity, was holding endless meetings with local wholesalers, Bilbao environmentalists, Basque trade commissioners, and federal economists from Madrid.

“Our market, Spain, eats more fish per capita than any other country in Europe,” Irigoien told me. “But the French, with their three-mile-long nets and lower paid foreign crews, are undercutting us. Fishing techniques—especially net size and depth—are strictly controlled here. Of course, local distributors and canneries look to buy the cheaper foreign catch.”

I boarded the Izaskungo Ama, a hundred-foot fishing boat painted the colors of the Basque flag—red, white, and green. Most of her 18 crewmen were busy polishing, painting, greasing winches, and stowing nets. Others rigged stout fishing poles.

“As soon as the strike breaks, we’ll sail out 50 or 60 miles looking for bonito,” said the captain, Jesús Mari Uranga. He was on deck scooping out handfuls of cod eggs to feed swarms of baitsfish in their tanks. “We haul in 20-pounders—some get as big as 80 pounds—on hook and line.

“Later we will head to Madeira or the African coast to fish with our nets for three or four weeks,” he said.

“We are worried. Not only do those big French nets threaten our fleet—250 trawlers altogether along the Basque coast—but the greedy long-liners, cleaning out everything, could spell death to the entire industry,” he said. “Five years ago Basque boats landed 28,000 tons of bonito; last year the catch was half that.

“Some of us steamed out 600 miles last summer to join a Greenpeace protest against the
French long-liners. French Navy gunboats showed up. They fired on my boat with rubber bullets,” he said, his eyes red with anger.

“If these foreign boats are going to destroy our way of life, to take away the livelihood of my family and crew, well, then I’m ready to go to war!”

I was near the French border when the strike ended. Boats from Hondarrribia brought in the first catch in weeks. By dawn the men had loaded the fresh bonito, glistening gray fish more than three feet long, into tagged hampers. From there the fishwives took over.

Not barefoot women in shawls selling seafood along the docks from baskets on their heads: They survive only on postcards. Today’s “fishwives” are women like Julia Martínez, whose blue apron and rubber boots could not conceal her business suit. On a cellular phone she talked prices with distant Zaragoza and Madrid. She was brokering her cousin’s catch; her husband was still at sea.

“They offer only 264 pesetas [$2.00 U. S.] a kilogram,” Julia sniffed, cupping her hand over the phone. “After the long strike the market is hungry for fish. I will hold out for 300.”

She soon got her price. A dozen humming refrigerator trucks waited along the quay. By Spain’s late lunchtime, Julia’s fish would be gracing tables 300 miles inland.

Today more than half of Spain’s 2.5 million Basques live in industrial towns and cities. And though Basques make up only about 5 percent of the population, they produce 10 percent of the country’s exports.

In the factory city of Bilbao, Avenida Txabarri passes by the Altos Hornos de Vizcaya plant, the giant government steelworks. In a stream of sparks, white-hot metal flows from the seething furnaces to the casting sheds, filling the air with sulfur and soot.

Bilbao is Spain’s chief port. Here a century of shipbuilding fed the country’s industrial revolution. But aging plants, a worldwide shipping glut, and competition from a flood of European Union goods are taking a toll. Though average wages are higher than in Madrid, unemployment last year climbed to 27 percent and it continues to rise.

Still, while many industrial plants are closing, some succeed. I followed Bilbao’s new expressway to Astilleros Zamacona, a busy private shipyard in Santurtzi. There, soaring black-and-yellow derricks clanged heavy steel plates onto giant platforms. Computer-controlled cutting torches traced wide arcs of fire, tailoring the curved hull sections of a new supertug.

“In the past we launched tankers and freighters—up to 300 feet long,” said Pedro Garaygordobil García, Zamacona’s young marketing director, as we walked around the noisy yard. “Demand these days is for smaller, high-tech support vessels.”

Pedro showed me through a 160-foot-long freezer trawler and a pair of powerful tugboats, one for the Bilbao Harbor Authority, the other for the Red Sea port of Al Hudaydah in Yemen.

“These tugs are state-of-the-art, each fitted with twin 2,000-horsepower azimuthal stern drives—the rudders and propellers pivot as
black-and-yellow derricks clanged heavy steel plates onto giant platforms. Computer-controlled cutting torches traced wide arcs of fire, tailoring the curved hull sections of a new supertug.

"In the past we launched tankers and freighters—up to 300 feet long," said Pedro Garaygordobil García, Zamacona's young marketing director, as we walked around the noisy yard. "Demand these days is for smaller, high-tech support vessels."

Pedro showed me through a 160-foot-long freezer trawler and a pair of powerful tugboats, one for the Bilbao Harbor Authority, the other for the Red Sea port of Al Hudaydah in Yemen.

"These tugs are state-of-the-art, each fitted with twin 2,000-horsepower azimuthal stern drives—the rudders and propellers pivot as
units—for maximum maneuverability jockeying big ships in and out of crowded harbors.

“We’re one of only two Bilbao shipyards still working at capacity,” Pedro said.

Northeast of the city, in Zamudio, some 1,300 scientists and engineers ply their trades in the cluster of glass laboratories that make up the Basque Technological Park.

“Already 38 innovative young companies have set up business here,” said the park’s technical director, José Manuel Molinuevo Isasi. “They are pioneers in biotechnology, telecommunications, metallurgy, advanced software, robotics. Most are small, with 5 to 20 employees.

“With the decline of heavy industry, Basque manufacturers need to look to new futures,” he said. “Here, we provide high-tech support facilities, floor space, and help with financing for promising new ventures—a kind of nest for fledgling companies.”

In a laboratory at the ultramodern Robotiker plant, I watched remote-control lenses peer into red-hot castings where human eyes dare not look.

The automated assembly line at Indelec, a Basque-Swedish joint venture, was a row of glass-walled compartments. Inside, robot soldering irons hissed around tiny circuit boards of radiotelephones destined for Spain’s cross-country microwave system. Inspectors in white lab coats checked the frequency ranges and completed the final assembly.

ALTHOUGH SCIENCE and technology are changing the look of the land and the nature of work, a long history of struggle for regional autonomy remains the cornerstone of Basque identity.

In San Sebastián (Donostia to the Basques), I climbed the marble stairs of the provincial government building, the Palacio de la Diputación, and squeezed in behind delegates seated at their walnut desks for the annual state-of-the-union address. Below a large canvas of Spain’s king, Juan Carlos, two soldiers, dressed in the brocaded regalia of 14th-century Basque guardsmen, flanked the speaker, Parliamentary President Jon Esnal Alegria.

“We have won back our destiny,” he said. “Now it is time to end the violence that has so long stained our lives.”

After the speech Esnal walked me around the historic neoclassic building and recounted highlights from the Basques’ tumultuous past.

“Since the Dark Ages we Basques have governed ourselves with village councils and ancient charters called fueros,” he said. “These fueros guaranteed local autonomy, provided us a constitution, and regulated daily life, often in great detail—the obligation to provide fire for a neighbor’s kitchen, for instance, even specifying the rites for mourning the dead.”

As each of the Basque provinces came to recognize the suzerainty of Castile—beginning with Guipúzcoa in the 13th century—they insisted that the Spanish rulers accept the Basque fueros that guaranteed freedom from Spanish taxes, exemption from military service, and rights to free trade.

“Only in 1876 after a series of upheavals in Spain—the so-called Carlist Wars—were the thousand-year-old fueros abolished by the Spanish overlords,” Esnal told me.

Basque fortunes hit bottom under Generalissimo Francisco Franco. To break Basque spirit during the Spanish Civil War, the dictator enlisted Hitler’s new Luftwaffe to experiment on the historic town of Gernika (known to many by its Spanish name, Guernica, from Picasso’s famous painting). On a busy Monday in 1937, squadrons of Heinkel-111 bombers and Messerschmitt-109s demolished the town center, then dived in again to machine-gun the fleeing population. Some 1,500 Gernikans died.

After crushing the Basques’ resistance, Franco began purging them of their heritage, closing Basque schools and newspapers, prohibiting public use of the Basque language, jailing intellectuals.

Altogether, the war sent an estimated 50,000 Basques to their death and 100,000 to prison. Another 200,000 went into exile. New Basque resistance movements formed underground and began to multiply.

The extremist ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) launched bolder and bolder terrorist attacks against government officials and police. In December 1973 the group assassinated Franco’s chosen successor, Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco, in Madrid. A bomb blew his car 60 feet into the air.

Not until 1980, five years after Franco’s death, would anger begin to cool and Spain allow the formation of the Basque Autonomous Community. Nearly every Basque now agrees on one thing: The future should be
Summer's height brings a crowd to the French town of Biarritz, hailed as "queen of resorts and resort of kings," a watering hole for the powerful and famous since Napoleon III built a palace here in 1854. The royal residence is now the exclusive Hôtel du Palais. A vista from the hotel's terrace sweeps across beaches enjoyed by Europeans of all incomes.

decided by negotiations, not violence. In 1994 one of ETA's founders, Julen Madariaga, publicly called for an end to terrorism. 
"Always lamentable, these acts have now become politically counterproductive," he said in a Basque television interview.

Yet to be resolved is the fate of 560 Basque political prisoners still held in Spain. Some 2,000 more accused terrorists live in exile, mostly in France. I met some of the prisoners' anxious relatives through Senideak, a family-support group that has its headquarters in Bilbao.

"They arrested our son, Markel, ten years ago. He has never even been charged, but he is still in prison, in Algeciras, 500 miles away," said Nikola Madariaga, a Bilbao architect—and a brother of the ETA organizer.

Holding back tears, Nikola's wife, Teresa, showed me a letter from their son. "Be brave until I return," it read. "This is a small price I pay for freedom in our land."

"The war is over," Nikola said. "The soldiers should be freed."

Today the long-prohibited Basque flag flies from every balcony. The red and yellow colors of Spain have all but disappeared. In San Sebastián I passed only one small flag, at the local office of the Guardia Civil, Spain's national police force. It was guarded by a young rifleman in full combat gear. From under his steel helmet, he eyed the street nervously, as if covering a retreat.

The Basques' spirit of nationality is reflected in their many competitive sports. Jai alai, played today across the world, is a Basque invention. Each town has its frontón, or ball court, many sharing a wall with the village church. In the 1600s the Basques took the game of handball, which itself dates from well before ancient Rome, and added bullet-like velocity and hook-shaped baskets, the first of which were
Thundering hoofs and scampering feet race through the streets of Pamplona in the daily "running of the bulls" during the weeklong Festival of San Fermin. Early each morning half a dozen bulls gallop to the stadium, where they will fight and die that day. Daredevils run before them, carrying rolled newspapers to swat the bulls in a perilous sport that last July cost one young American his life.
In a rare moment of quiet, a cabezudo, or big head, takes a break from the frenzy of San Fermín. Papier-mâché masked figures loom over crowded streets, tapping rowdy celebrators with their staffs. The festival commemorates a third-century bishop born in Pamplona and now considered to be the patron saint of bullfighters.

The fiesta's raucous tone carries into the arena, where revelers soaked in wine show tipsy approval of a matador's performance. In 1926 Ernest Hemingway captured San Fermín's wild spirit in his novel The Sun Also Rises.

wicker panniers used for gathering apples.

At the new indoor court in Mauléon in the Basque region of France, I watched champions Etxaluz and Felix take on Kompa and Marmoyet. Their shoes blasted out piercing squeaks as they snared returns and spun the ball out of the wicker, sending it whistling back to the wall at 150 miles an hour.

Every Basque fishing village also has its own rowing team—13 powerful oarsmen and one on the rudder of the trainera—competing up and down the coast. The matches go back to the 12th century, when whalers, alerted by spotters on village watchtowers, raced out to hunt the giants that once breached along the coast. The fastest team got in the first harpoons.

In San Sebastián, at the annual rowing championship, tens of thousands lined the

Europe's First Family: The Basques
wicker panniers used for gathering apples.

At the new indoor court in Mauléon in the Basque region of France, I watched champions Etxaluz and Felix take on Kompa and Marmouyet. Their shoes blasted out piercing squeaks as they snared returns and spun the ball out of the wicker, sending it whistling back to the wall at 150 miles an hour.

Every Basque fishing village also has its own rowing team—13 powerful oarsmen and one on the rudder of the trainera—competing up and down the coast. The matches go back to the 12th century, when whalers, alerted by spotters on village watchtowers, raced out to hunt the giants that once breached along the coast. The fastest team got in the first harpoons.

In San Sebastián, at the annual rowing championship, tens of thousands lined the sands of La Concha beach and filled the ledges of Igueldo and Urgull, the mountains that frame the entrance to the city. Aboard the press boat I joined the colorful flotilla lining the buoyed racecourse.

At noon sharp they were off. The favorite, a purple-colored longboat from Pasai San Pedro, gained an early lead over the yellow hull from Orio. Flashing oars carried it past the islet of Santa Clara at 12 knots or better. But rounding the outer marker too closely in choppy three-foot seas, San Pedro’s crew scraped the steel buoy and holed the boat. It began taking on water. Down the return leg the crew sweated harder as the Orio boat narrowed the gap.

The spectator fleet fell in behind the racers—tourist launches, trawlers, and cabin cruisers swerved among kayaks, barges, rubber rafts, sailing yachts, even an old wooden shallop carrying a loud oompah band. Its music was drowned out by cheers, the clanging of fog bells, and blasts from ships’ horns.

It looked to be a photo finish. But, even with 60 gallons of water in the bilges, San Pedro won the day.

Throughout the year scores of festivals highlight sports with rural roots: sheepdog trials and ram fights; harrijasotsailak, or stone-lifting competitions; and aizkolariek, log-chopping contests.

At the fiesta of San Miguel in Aizarnazabal, a fife and drum led the fanfare as stone-lifting champion Goenatxo II strode onto the court, followed by four assistants lugging a 420-pound granite cube in a long-handed box. They helped wind the champion into his 30-foot-long cummerbund.

He was a giant of a man, wearing a padded vest, dark trousers with padded knees, and old-fashioned tennis shoes. While his assistants rubbed the stone with rosin, he taped his fingers and pulled on a pair of cutoff gloves. Now he was ready to challenge the record: nine lifts of 420 pounds in five minutes.

The whistle blows. Goenatxo grips the granite block and rolls it smoothly onto his thigh, then his chest, and finally his shoulders.

In unison the spectators begin the count: “Bat! One!” The stone slams down to the ground. After a few deep breaths he begins muscling the block to his shoulders again and again. The crowd counts off each lift: “Bi! Hiru! Lau! Bost! . . .”

“Sei! Zaspi! Zortzi! Bedevatsi!” He matches
A candlelit crowd gathers in the plaza in front of City Hall on the last night of San Fermín and sings a mournful song: “Poor me, poor me! How sad am I. Now San Fermín has ended. Woe is me.” Festivalgoers will disperse to all corners of the world, but the Basques of Euskal Herria will remain to shape the future of Europe’s oldest ethnic group.

the record, and nearly a minute remains. The crowd is on its feet. Goenatxo’s biceps glisten with sweat. The crowd screams the count, “Hamari!” Veins bulge out on his neck and forehead. His cheeks puff out, and his eyes go white. “Hamaika!”

For the 11th time Goenatxo shoulders the stone—and a new record.

FiftY MILES NORTHEast on the coast of France, the elegant mansions and plush hotels of Biarritz buzz with the comings and goings of tourists from around the world.

Tourism officially began here in 1854 when the Spanish bride of Napoleon III, Empress Eugénie, persuaded him to build their summer palace overlooking the sea. Their guests included the cream of Paris society, Russian princes, and the crowned heads of Britain and Spain.

Through the years the resort town, with its 11 golf courses, casino, saltwater spa, and convention centers, has attracted the highborn and the famous—Clemenceau, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Churchill, Stravinsky, Hemingway, Chaplin, Bing Crosby, the J. Paul Gettys, and the Henry Fords.

As official greeters for Biarritz, the lords of Arcangues, a village five miles inland, have been hosting VIPs ever since the late 1700s, when Louis XVI granted them the French title of marquis. The present marquis, Guy d’Arcangues, can trace his line, unbroken, to 1150. At his château he showed me the mahogany-and-brass bed where Napoleon Bonaparte passed a night in 1807.

“Later the Duke of Wellington slept here when he made the château his headquarters for several weeks in 1814,” the marquis said, as we headed off to dinner, a candlelit sit-down affair for 60 black-tie guests, backgammon enthusiasts in town for a tournament.

After the foie gras, champignons sauvages, dos d’agneau farci, and chocolat à l’impératrice, we drank coffee in the White Salon amid 18th-century Gobelin tapestries. In the Red Room the marquis showed me a prized artifact, a gold-fringed Basque flag.

“Our Basque origins are sometimes overshadowed by our long allegiance to France,” he said. “But during the Spanish Civil War we smuggled in Basque refugees from Spain. This regimental flag was given to my father by Basque soldiers forced across the border by Franco’s armies.”

The marquis himself knows firsthand the fortunes of war.

“During World War II, Nazi officers took over the château. I was packed off to a labor camp in Silesia,” he said. “There, to earn cigarette money, I took up the barber’s trade.”

On the wall of his study, among letters and autographed pictures of General de Gaulle, Somerset Maugham, and Prince Rainier, hangs a photograph of the marquis giving a trim to one of his guests, Frank Sinatra.

In the Basque country old and new continue to overlap. On my last weekend in Spain I trekked along the valley of Oma, outside Gernika. Here modern artist Agustín Ibarrola has painted the trunks of hundreds of pines to create a startling outdoor gallery. Close by, in the Santimamiñe Cave, a prehistoric artist left a gallery all his own.

From the cave’s entrance caretaker David Bengoetxea led me down some 200 feet into a small, dim chamber, where our flashlights illuminated a finely sketched trio of bison, a prancing horse, a goat, and a bear.

“Archaeologists date the paintings to the end of the last glacial period, 15,000 years ago,” Bengoetxea said. “But experts differ on their meaning. Purely aesthetic? A celebration of a hunt? More likely, given the remoteness of this deep sanctuary, they were powerful religious symbols.”

Today’s Basques bow to other icons. They have been Christians since the fifth century and now also pay homage to the gods of change. Often I whizzed by the new temples of glass and steel on my trips along the Bilbao-San Sebastián expressway.

With their destiny once more in their own hands, the hardworking Basques have taken their place among competitive modern nations.