

# BA SQUE

*in the*

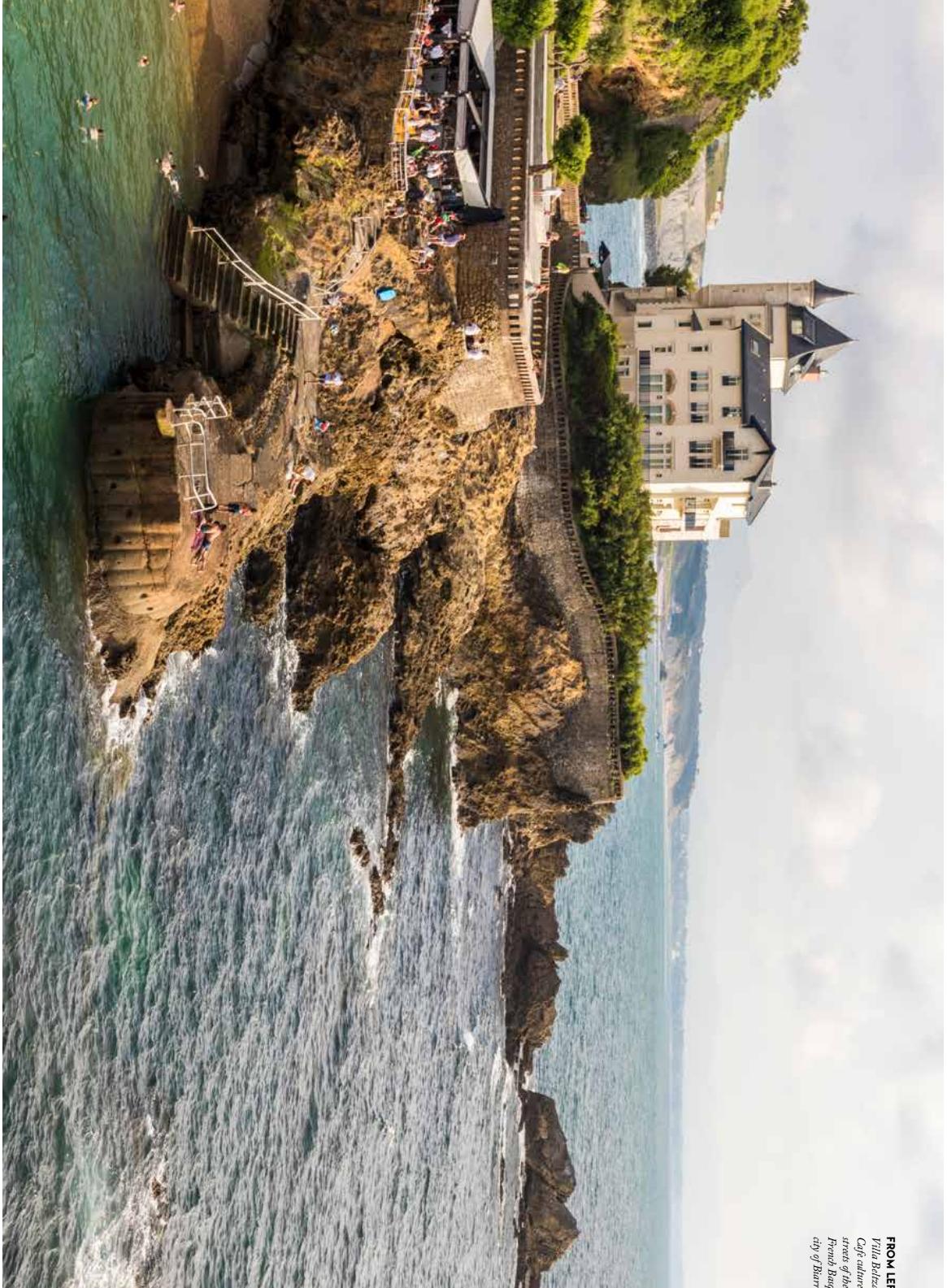
*Words SUSAN GOUGH HENLY*

## GLORY

FIND FINE DINING, EXQUISITE CRAFTS AND TO-DIE-FOR CHOCOLATE DELICACIES WRAPPED IN A DEEP PRIDE AND THE UNIQUE CULTURE OF THE FRENCH BASQUE COUNTRY.



*La Grande Plage draws the crowds in Biarritz, watched over by a 19th-century lighthouse.*



**FROM LEFT:** The stately Villa Belzunce, Biarritz; *Café culture on the streets of the glamorous French Basque Country city of Biarritz.*



When people ask me where my favourite place in the world is, the French Basque Country wins hands down every time. Let me tell you why. Where else in the world can you go surfing in the morning, lunch on just-caught tuna, then spend the afternoon hiking verdant hillsides before feasting on the likes of rare-breed pork, nutty sheep's cheese and hand-crafted chocolate in any number of 300-year-old country inns?

And it's not just about a beautiful landscape and great food, either; its culture is as fascinating as it is a little mystifying. The Euskadi language bears no resemblance to any other European tongue and, while you may not understand the lyrics, the haunting melodies of Basque choirs will send chills down your spine. The Basque lauburu cross, often carved on tombstones, is also mysterious but from what I gather it signifies spirit, life, consciousness and form, and is a powerful symbol of Basque unity. Then there's the almost ballistic *bullejana* of pelote, a gripping spectator sport that kids learn to play on every village fronton court. There are exquisite artisan products, too, like *Hermès*-quality leather goods, Basque linens, even meticulously crafted walking sticks, to take home.

Say the word 'Basque' and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and gracious San Sebastian with its galaxy of Michelin-starred marvels like Azkarraga, Akelarre and Mugaritz come to mind. While these are indeed drool-worthy, they are all in Spanish Basque Country. The home of the Basque people straddles the border between Spain and France in the Western Pyrenees. There are four Basque provinces in Spain and three in France. The Spanish Basque country is much more developed and industrialised (the Guggenheim anchors a post-industrial Bilbao). It was also, until recently, much more stridently political due, in part, to the region's persecution by the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco. »



## Immaculate white-washed red-and-green-shuttered houses line up in Sare, Ainhoa, and La Bastide-Clairence, all listed among the most beautiful villages of France'

flinty white from the Irauleguy Basque wine region. Also check out Elements, L. Fooding guide's best restaurant of 2018, where hipster chef Anthony Oyofolé creates flavour-packed dishes with no sugar, no gluten and no milk products. Head inland now to meander around those fulsome green hills dotted with black-faced sheep, contented cows, sturdy Pyrenean Potok ponies and floppy-eared Basque black pigs. Immaculate white-washed red-and-green-shuttered houses line up in Sare, Ainhoa and La Bastide-Clairence, all listed among 'the most beautiful villages of France'. But there are dozens of equally charming spots, including Espelette, Aucin, Saint-Pé-de-Nivelle, Saint-Étienne-de-Baigorry and Cambio-Les-Bains, where Edmond Rostand, author of *Gymnase de Bergerac*, used his profits to build a superb house and gardens not far from the thermal spa that first drew him here.

I can't wait to lace up my walking shoes to explore lovely trails that ring the villages or head into the Iraty Forest, the largest beech forest in Europe. Diehard hikers might like to join the pilgrims at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, (the foot of the pass) the last stop in France on the Route de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle.

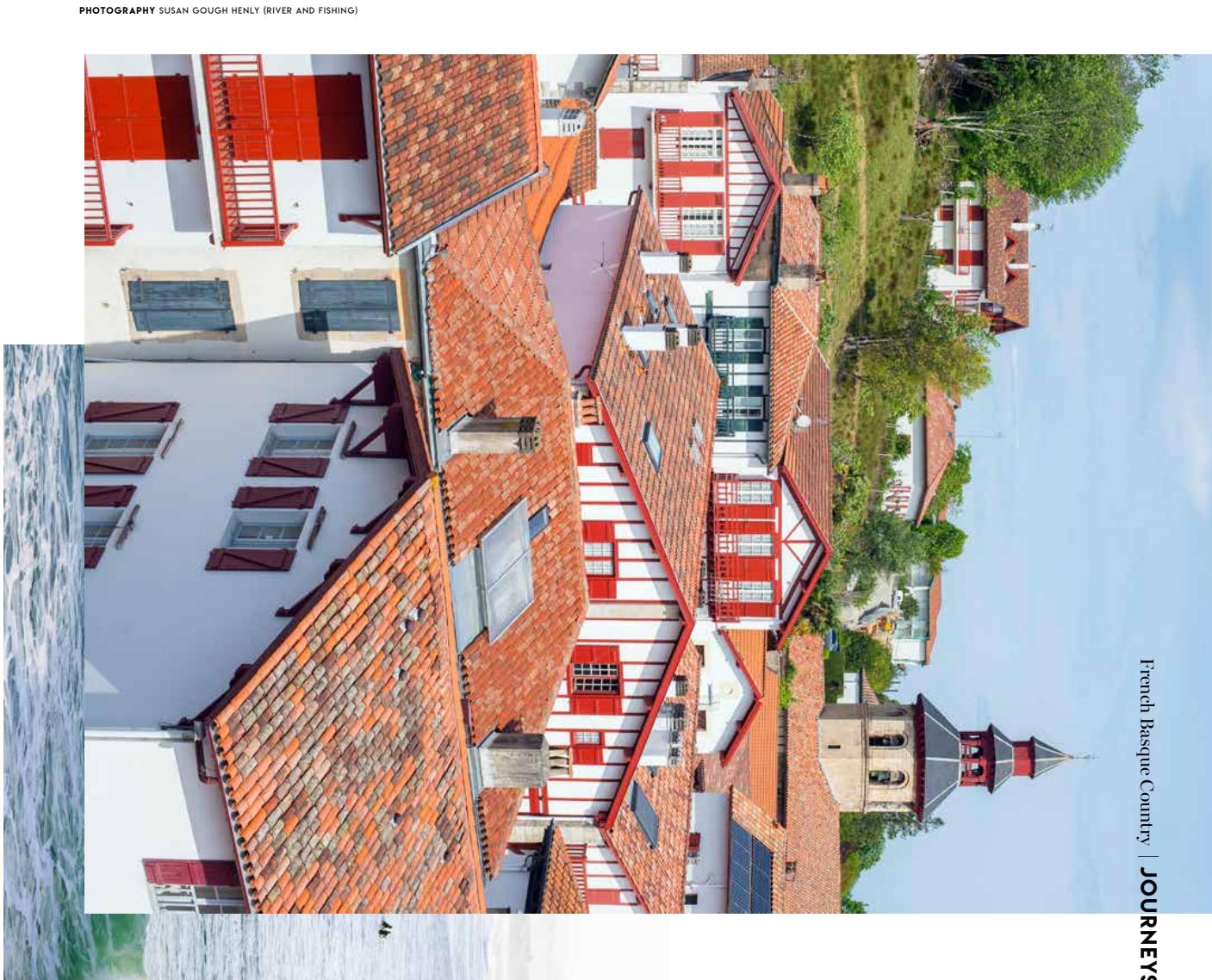
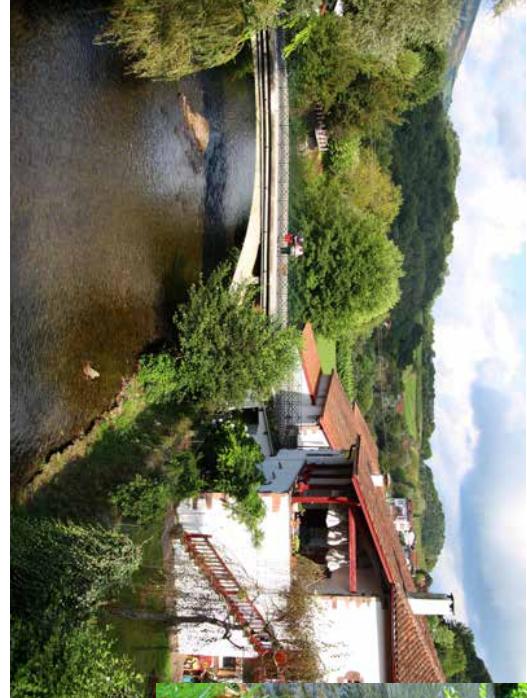
Both farming and hospitality remain family affairs everywhere in the Basque country. At Hôtel Iburrua in Ainhoa, Michelin-starred chef Xanet Izal follows in the footsteps of his grandfather to create sublime dishes with local lamb, foie gras and turn, enhanced with honey, cèpe mushrooms and herbs delivered to his door by farmers and foragers.

FROM LEFT: *Lazky* river flowing on the outskirts of Saint-Étienne-de-Baigorry; A sous chef nets a trout for supper at Hôtel Arroz; opposite: Traditional red-timbered houses at Ciboure.

Fifth-generation hoteliers Pascal and Christine Arcé run the atmospheric Hôtel Arroz alongside the River Nive in the shadow of Ispéguy Pass in Saint-Étienne-de-Baigorry. The house's specialty is trout, which are scooped from the river the moment on order.

Even newcomers like Michelin-starred chef Cédric Béchade keep things in the family. With his wife Marion, he transformed an ancient inn into the contemporary L'Auberge Basque with striking views to La Rhune mountain. His resume may include stints with Alain Ducasse and Jean-François Piège in Paris, but Cédric fell in love with the Basque country for the lifestyle, for the quality of the local products and, he says, because the farming culture is so fierce and proud. He works closely with farmers who are resuscitating almost-extinct races of local ducks and cows, which he transforms into inventive dishes that reference Basque traditions.

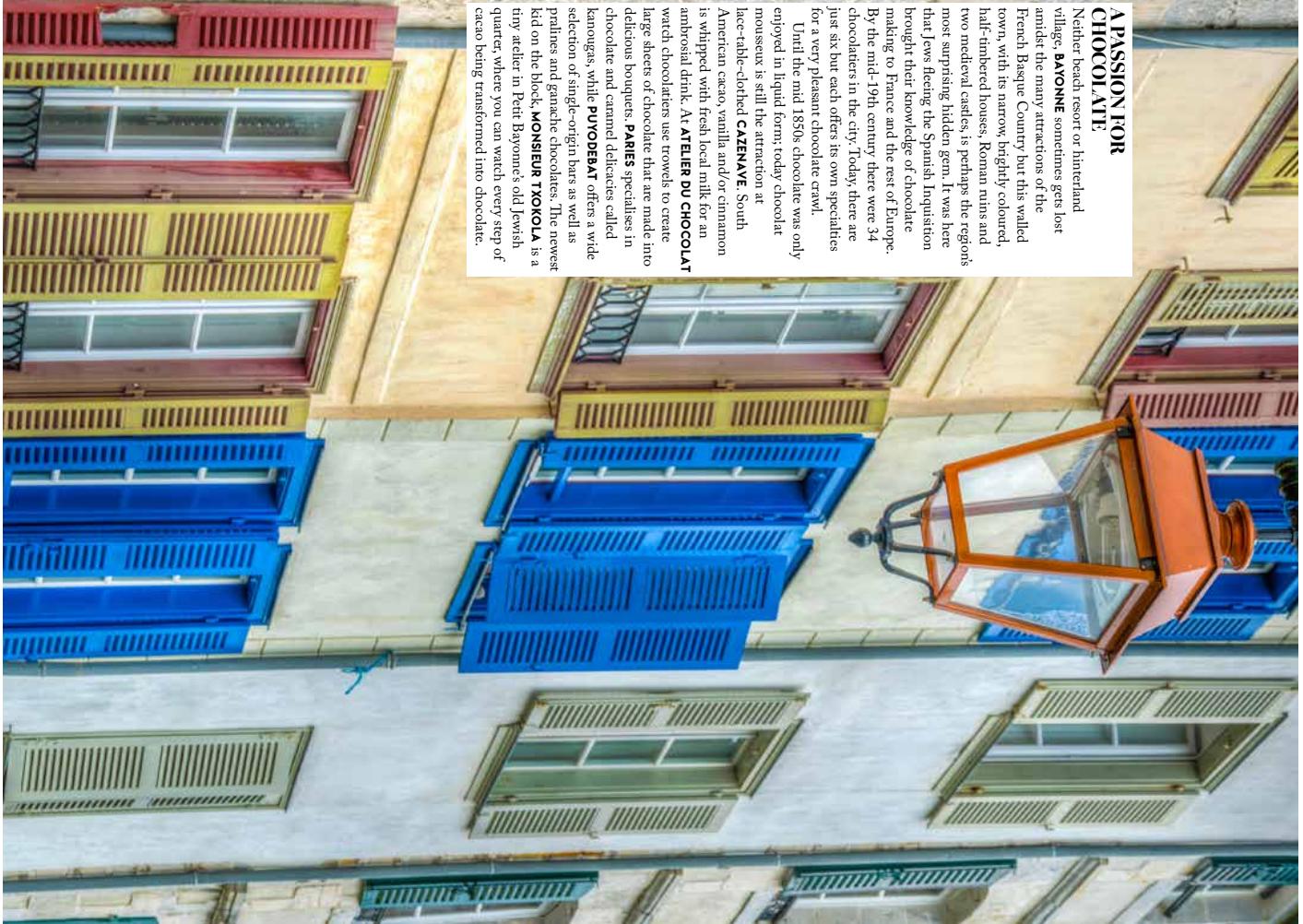
There are plenty of ways to connect with local producers here in some of the most beautiful farmland in France. In the Pays des Aldudes, just near the Spanish border south of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Pierre Oteiza has almost single-handedly restored the race of black Basque pigs, which he now raises free range so they have access to chestnut, oak and beech forests. You can do a 1.5-kilometre walk to see how the pigs live, as well as admiring their million-dollar views. I stocked up on cured ham, sausages, paté, foie gras, sheep's cheeses and more at the shop and restaurant, where I make another delicious discovery: aromatic Izarra Basque liqueur made from Pyrenean herbs. ▶▶



## A PASSION FOR CHOCOLATE

Neither beach resort or hinterland village, **BAYONNE** sometimes gets lost amidst the many attractions of the French Basque Country but this walled town, with its narrow, brightly coloured, half-timbered houses, Roman ruins and two medieval castles, is perhaps the region's most surprising hidden gem. It was here that Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition brought their knowledge of chocolate making to France and the rest of Europe. By the mid-19th century there were 34 chocolatiers in the city. Today, there are just six but each offers its own specialities for a very pleasant chocolate crawl.

Until the mid-1850s chocolate was only enjoyed in liquid form, today chocolate mouseux is still the attraction at lace-table-clad **CAZENAVE**. South American cacao, vanilla and/or cinnamon is whipped with fresh local milk for an ambrosial drink. At **ATELIER DU CHOCOLAT** watch chocolatiers use tweezers to create large sheets of chocolate that are made into delicious bouquets. **PARIÉS** specialises in chocolate and caramel delicacies called kanouras, while **PYRÉOBEAT** offers a wide selection of single-origin bars as well as pralines and gommeuse chocolates. The newest kid on the block, **MONSIEUR TOROLA** is a tiny atelier in Petit Bayonne's old Jewish quarter, where you can watch every step of cacao being transformed into chocolate.



PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN GOUGH HENLY (GREEN HILLS)

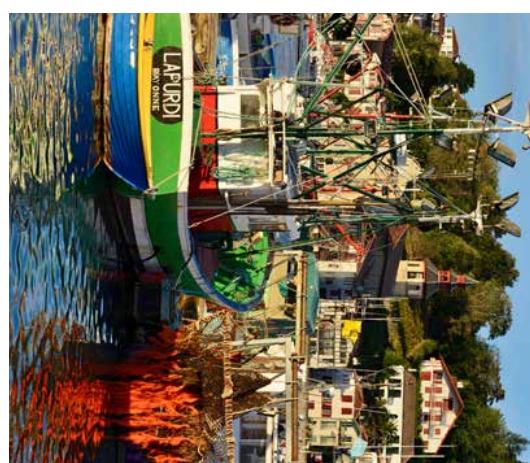
## The mildly spicy Basque peppers are tended as carefully as grape vines and dry in bright red strands in the village.

In Espelette, a duo of interpretation

centres offers insights into two other Basque

Appellation d'Origine (AOP) classified products: the piment (or red pepper of Espelette) and Ossau-Iraty sheep's cheese. The mildly spicy Basque peppers are tended as carefully as grape vines and dry in bright red strands in the village. They season lots of Basque dishes, even chocolate, while the nutty sheep's milk cheese tastes of flower-filled summer mountain pastures. The Route des Fromages shows all the farms you can visit to buy cheese.

All this touring is thirsty work so stop for a tasting at Akeleitz (Basque for black sheep) brewery, the oldest of the region's craft brew spouts. Next door is the weaving workshop and store of Lartigue 1910, one of the major Basque linen producers. It's fascinating to see how colourful thread is woven on traditional looms with the signature seven stripes representing the Basque provinces. Not far away in Larrrose,



CLOCKWISE FROM  
LEFT: Fishing boats  
moored in the village  
of Ciboure on the Bay  
of Biscay; Surfers enjoy  
breaks at Biarritz; The  
Basque Country's such  
a food-and-produce haven  
that it's like Ossau-Iraty  
sheep's cheese; **OPPOSITE:**  
Multi-colored bunting in  
chocolate-making Bayonne.

**DETAILS**  
**GETTING THERE**  
Fly with Air France or KLM to Paris before catching an internal flight to Biarritz.

**STAYING THERE**  
By the sea  
Mercurie Biarritz Centre Plaza; [accorhotels.com](http://accorhotels.com)  
La Réserve, Saint-Jean-de-Luz; [hotel-larreze.com](http://hotel-larreze.com)  
In the countryside  
L'Auberge Basque, Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle; [aubergebasque.com](http://aubergebasque.com)  
Hôtel Arçé, Saint-Étienne-de-Baigorry; [hotel-arce.com](http://hotel-arce.com)  
La maison Oppoca, Ainhoa; [oppoca.com](http://oppoca.com)  
Hôtel Araya, Sare; [araya.com/en](http://araya.com/en)

**TALKING THERE**  
Useful Basque phrases:  
Kaiizo – Hello  
Eskerrik asko – Thank you  
Egun on – Good morning  
Arrasotz – Good afternoon  
Agur – Goodbye

