

As the plane breaks through the clouds on its descent into Bilbao, I am given my first view of Spain's Basque Country: Below are sharp, looming mountains covered with green trees—instead of rocks—and often clear-cut with terraces on one side. Despite the wild appearance, many of the mountains have clean-looking trails running smoothly up the side; some have windmills evenly spaced across the ridgeline.

Made up of three Spanish provinces, Álava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa, the Basque Autonomous Community, or País Vasco in Spanish, has a population of over two million and since 1978 has been recognized by the Spanish government as its own nationality. Many of the people in these provinces speak Basque, an entirely unique language that possesses no basis in Latin or any modern language. The Basque people's origins are as mysterious as their language, and some anthropologists claim that the Basques are the closest direct link to ancient humans. Through thousands of years and hundreds of wars, dozens of crusades, inquisitions and revolutions, the Basque people's passionately independent culture still remains today. Their unofficial capital, Vitoria-Gasteiz, has served as a focal point for their cultural autonomy, and more recently, triathlon autonomy.

Since holding its first long-course event in 2007, Vitoria-Gasteiz has become a triathlon hot spot. In 2012, the tree-lined streets hosted the ITU Long Distance World Championships, an event won by Chris McCormack and Caroline Steffen. The next year, the Vitoria Triathlon became part of the Challenge Family of events. Known for its international prestige and massive marketing budget, it looked as if the Challenge Family was set to bring Challenge Vitoria into the ranks of other perennial European Challenge Family events like Challenge Roth. However, like the Basque people themselves, the race organization decided to remain independent—splitting with Challenge and boldly forging ahead on their own the next year.

The gamble paid off, and in 2014 participant numbers actually grew. This year, the race boasted over 2,000 participants between the full (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2-mile run) and half distances. In a triathlon climate where successful races are being bought up by larger entities like Ironman, Challenge and Life Time Fitness, the Vitoria Triathlon has staked its claim as one of the largest independent events in Europe. The race organizers' strong feelings of independence are no doubt a reflection of the Basque mind-set.

Less than half an hour outside of downtown Vitoria-Gasteiz, the race holds its swim in the gorgeous green Ullibarri-Gamboa Reservoir that has athletes sighting off an ancient cathedral on a tiny peninsula across the water. At the exit, swimmers are greeted by a throng of fans, a few of them waving the Basque flag. The bike takes participants through the rolling, open Basque countryside, past fields of giant sunflowers and past tiny towns with squares and cathedrals older than America itself. At times, the roads narrow down to the width of a bike path. On the bike course, spectators can sit right up against the road at any number of small village tabernas, have a glass of rioja and a pintxo (pronounced "peen-cho," a sort of Basque tapas) and watch the racers ride by. My favorite spot is Taberna Yaiza in Mendivil.

While the swim and the bike are all about the quaint, picturesque Basque countryside, the run experience is all about the passionate Basque people. As racers enter the town of Vitoria-Gasteiz to hand off their bikes and slip on their running shoes, a funnel of cheering fans greets them. The run course winds its way through thin alleys between the tall, ancient

buildings of Old Town Vitoria-Gasteiz. It passes through the Parque La Florida, where a band plays on the giant bandstand. And it takes athletes underneath the green canopy of trees that helped Vitoria-Gasteiz earn the distinction of European Green Capital in 2012. Finally, the run course makes its way through the crowded city squares where, with each lap, athletes are met with a torrent of spectators.

In this year's full-distance women's pro race, Canadian Brooke Brown took the lead roughly 50 miles into the bike and never looked back. As last year's winner, Brown was able to overcome a relatively poor swim and muscle tightness on the bike in front of Vitoria-Gasteiz's electric crowd. "I really love the community," says Brown. "There's such a cool energy." Only moments after winning, Brown added that the atmosphere is, "like a Spanish Kona in a colonial city." Brown won by over 20 minutes, finishing in 9:33:19.

Brown was followed by Germany's Kathrin Walther, an athlete whose last full-distance podium was at the 2014 ICAN Gandia-Valencia (an event she won), while Vitoria-Gasteiz resident Ruth Brito rounded off the podium. Brito, who considers herself a housewife and not a professional athlete, is married to famed triathlete Eneko Llanos, who was born in Vitoria-Gasteiz.

The men's race unfolded with much more drama. After a mediocre swim, Spain's Diego Paredes rode his way to the front of the race, where he joined countryman, longtime friend and 2014 champion Alejandro Santamaría. The two have trained together in the past and figured some teamwork could give them an advantage. "We decided we would ride together on the bike and leave it to the final kilometers of the run," said Paredes through a translator. "I accelerated a little bit on at the end of the third loop [mile 18], and I could tell he was struggling."

Upon reaching the finish chute first and passing through the hundreds of fans, Paredes reflected the passion that the region is known for. "I went a little crazy," said an elated Paredes. "The music, the crowds. It was very emotional." Even after passing through the finish line, Paredes turned back around onto the carpet, showing almost no tiredness at all and led the already crazed crowd through a second chorus of AC/DC's "Highway to Hell."

Moments later, Alejandro Santamaría arrived at the finish. He was also incredibly emotional, but for different reasons.

As last year's winner, Santamaría had become somewhat of a local hero in the small city of Vitoria-Gasteiz: his face was plastered on buses, signposts, posters and billboards. At the finish line, Santamaría's appreciation for the wild Basque audience could not be contained as he addressed the crowd. "I have been suffering since the second kilometer of the running course, but I could not abandon," said the teary-eyed Spaniard, almost weeping with emotion. "I have suffered a lot, but I did not abandon this city."

In a nod to the event's decidedly homegrown status, an amateur, Xabier Amparan, who is a policeman from the nearby Basque town of Bermeo, claimed the third spot. "I have to enjoy this moment," said an elated Amparan, barely able to contain his emotions, but added, "I have to go back to work tomorrow night." For the moment, however, it was time for the policeman to cut loose and enjoy another of Vitoria-Gasteiz's passions, their world-renowned cuisine.

Named the Gastronomy Capital of Spain in 2014, Vitoria is known throughout the country as a hotbed for food. Also, like much of Europe, dinner in Spain's Basque Country usually begins late by American standards—some nights at 9 p.m., but most nights it's even later. On my first evening, I sampled the entire gamut of Basque cuisine at a restaurant called the Bost (meaning "five" in Basque for its street address on La Florida Kalea). Dinner

AUPA, AUPA, AUPA!

A JOURNEY TO THE VITORIA TRIATHLON IN SPAIN'S BASQUE COUNTRY FOR HARD RACING, INCREDIBLE EATS AND PERHAPS THE MOST PASSIONATE TRIATHLON FANS IN THE WORLD.

By Chris Foster

Ride past centuries old churches on one of the most challenging bike courses in Europe.



COURTESY VITORIA TRIATHLON

started at 10 p.m. with a few pintxos and wandered from the sea (with cala-mari) to the farm (with beef ribs), covering everywhere in between. When I left around 1 a.m., I was not the last to go.

On my final night, I explored the far end of the contemporary spectrum and ordered pintxos at Sagartoki, which had a much more modern take on Basque food. I ordered their huevo frito, an uncooked egg yolk wrapped in a thin potato pocket and flash-fried. I also ordered large chunks of smoked salmon with the skin removed and replaced with edible gold and wasabi paper. Everything at Sagartoki was amazing, including the delicious 1.50-euro glasses of local rioja.

Like any place where eating plays a huge role, drinking is not far behind. Just to the south of Vitoria-Gasteiz, but still in Basque Country, lies the famous Rioja wine region. Fantastic varieties are available everywhere, and even at the finest restaurants, often cost less than two euros per glass. Only slightly less shocking than the low price of incredible wines was the area's most popular cocktail of the moment: the gin and tonic. Most bars serve them in a glass that resembles a fishbowl with a stem instead of a highball, so there's no need for more than two per night—trust me.

Vitoria-Gasteiz is a town at the heart of one of the most fiercely pas-

sionate regions in Europe, and yet “passion” is a word rarely used to describe people's feelings toward triathlon. “Obsession” is usually more accurate. Sometimes it's in the attention to detail in a wind-tunnel-tested carbon rig. Sometimes it's in an athlete stacking hours and hours of training during the long buildup to their “A” race. Most of the time, passion only comes up when the discussion turns to cheating, doping, drugs, cutting courses or any of the other hot-button Internet-forum-fodder topics. But really that's just outrage.

Passion for sports is more often seen in soccer, football and sometimes cycling. Passion means running alongside racers. It means getting into fights over Your Team. It means painting yourself blue and probably getting drunk and waiting for hours in the sun.

In Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, passion can be seen and heard in the squares of the small town, in the cheers for the riders coming into T2 and across the finish line. It can be seen in their passion for Basque food, for the outdoors and for independence. It's the same passion that causes groups of friends to take over any number of bars along the run course for the Vitoria Triathlon. Here they wait for someone to run by: friends, family or anyone with a race number. Here they passionately cry, “Aupa, aupa, aupa!!” or “pick it up!” in Basque—and sip some vino and order more pintxos. 🍷