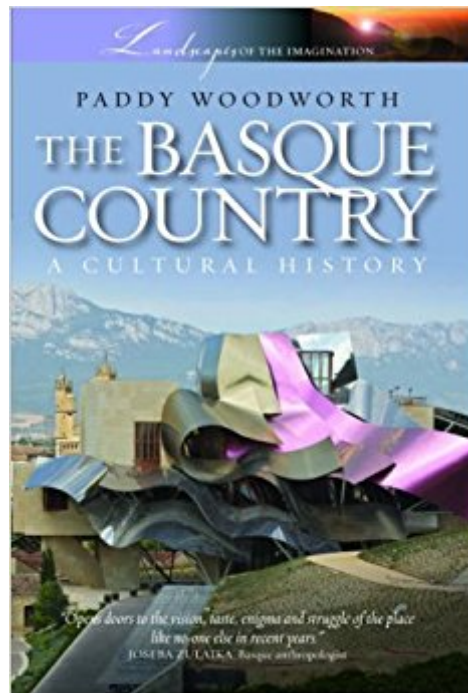




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The Basque Country: A Cultural History



Synopsis

The Basque Country is a land of fascinating paradoxes and enigmas. Home to one of Europe's oldest peoples and most mysterious languages, with a living folklore rich in archaic rituals and dances, it also boasts a dynamic modern energy, with the reinvention of Bilbao creating a model for the twenty-first-century city. In *The Basque Country*, Paddy Woodworth takes us on a sweeping tour of this enchanting land. We discover a small territory which abounds in big contrasts, ranging from moist green valleys to semi-desert badlands, from snowy sierras to sandy beaches, from harsh industrial landscapes to bucolic beech woods. The book reveals how this often idyllic scenery forms the backdrop for a land of ancient and modern culture, where Basque poets still compose spontaneous stanzas in public contests and where strange age-old sports--rock lifting, goose decapitation--are still held at fiestas. Likewise, the region has made important contributions to modern culture, through novelists like Bernardo Atxaga, sculptors like Eduardo Chillida, painters like Zuloaga, and cineastes like Julio Medem. And of course Bilbao's flagship museum, the Guggenheim, designed by Frank O. Gehry, may be the best work of architecture of the last century. Here then is a marvelous guide to the culture and landscape of one of the most intriguing places on Earth.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Signal Books Ltd (2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1904955312

ISBN-13: 978-1904955313

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #2,858,977 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #48 in Books > Travel > Europe > Spain > Basque #1915 in Books > Travel > Europe > Spain > General #3605 in Books > Travel > Europe > France > General

Customer Reviews

"The Basque Country is full of gems.... Woodworth has a good eye for architecture and topography.... This is a splendid portrait of a bewitching land."--Financial Times
"An enthralling homage...deserves to rank as [the] companion of Julio Medem's film, *The Basque Ball*."--The

Sunday Tribune"A terrific modern introduction to the Basque Country...succeeds in showing us the complexities of the Basque struggle for identity."--Irish Times"He weaves a rich tapestry from his catalogue of stories and journeys but is not slow to criticise, often with acerbic wit...knows his subject intimately...a roller-coaster ride around the region...expands our idea of identity in a world of sameness...more than a travel book. Through this valuable record of a culture surviving, often thriving, we share a richness and depth often missing from modern life. Woodworth guides us down that road with style and intensity, until you want to savour the uniqueness of the Basque country first-hand."--Sunday Business Post"A spectacular achievement by any standards. Definitive in scope and lyrical in style...fit to set alongside any of the finest travel writing of recent decades."--The Hot Press"A marvellous book...subtle and ironic...he has] an exasperated love for this region...do buy this book if you are going to the Basque Country, or if you have no intention of ever going but enjoy armchair exploration."--The Dubliner

Paddy Woodworth has written about the Basque Country for thirty years, and is the author of *Dirty War*, *Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy*, described by Paul Preston as "one of the best books ever published on post-Franco Spain."

I was expecting something a little more balance for a general reader. Instead the book is an odd cluster of items that interest the writer, without a clear integration of his themes.

As a lover of world languages I embrace all things Basque, and would love to immerse myself in a Basque language course as I did with Finnish, Romansch and Breton. I studied each of those three languages in locations where they are still spoken as everyday languages (although I admit finding Finnish courses in Finland was rather easy to arrange). If I ever study Basque it would have to be in Basque Country, or Euskal Herria. I would be in language heaven, yet after reading *The Basque Country: A Cultural History* by Paddy Woodworth, I would have a tough time deciding where to study: in the Basque Country of Spain or France? Woodworth makes attractive cases for both regions. Basque is a language isolate, and is the oldest language of Europe. How did the Basques settle and where did their language originate? I had to chuckle at the opening lines of chapter two: "The origins of the Basques, and of their language, Euskera, are at once enticingly mysterious and politically contested. This has been a complex combination, and at times a lethal one. A vacuum of hard evidence has sucked in a deal of lunacy." Woodworth didn't deal with any of the lunacy, but debunked claims of the language to Neolithic or Stone Age origins. Book chapters dealt

with the frontÃ n and pelota, gastronomy, music, fiestas, Basque politics and the ETA, and "The Basques on the Other Side of the Mountains" = the French Basques. Basque literature was one of my favourites among the fifteen chapters. Bernardo Atxaga, undoubtedly the most famous Basque author of international renown was cited throughout the book and more so of course in this chapter. I read Atxaga's Obabakoak before I started to write book reviews and I recall seeing a beat-up Basque edition at Schoenhof's during my last visit. Woodworth wrote about many more Basque authors whose names I have recorded for future interloan requests or Abebooks purchases. While a joy to read for those who love Basque culture, I found that my notes were dominated by references to check on-line for photos. Woodworth unfortunately only included a few black and white photos with the text, and dark ones at that. I don't have a cell phone to Google for photos as I read, so I had to wait till I got on-line to find out what some buildings and places looked like, such as the parish church of San Salvador in Geraria, which is described as: "...so much in the building, from the floor to the obscure complex of arches that makes up the roof, is tilted, uneven, askew. But the curious architectonics of the church are due to something much more deliberate, and much more radical, than awkward location and idiosyncratic workmanship. Move right around the building and you will often find elegant curves, but rarely be offered a straight line." The Basque Country wasn't the first book I had read about the Basques but it was, thankfully, the least sensational. The most striking observation I found wasn't about the Basque past, but rather the present. Woodworth, in exploring the shops that dot the French Biscay coast, lamented the kitschy nature of merchandise. Both the Spanish and French sides realize that Basqueness is marketable and a selling point for tourists who like a "Basque experience" in B&B's and at restaurants, yet in France the stores go overboard with tacky souvenirs. Granted, the French side of Basque Country encompasses the Biarritz beach resorts, yet the shopping experience must nonetheless be a disappointment. I wonder if Woodworth had the same impression that I had when I first visited Amsterdam: every fridge magnet in every souvenir store depicted either a marijuana spliff or a lady of the evening. It was an effort to find a magnet not associated with sex or drugs. When compared to the kitschy French side, Woodworth noted in Spain: "...you can scour the streets of the old part of Bilbao and only find a single shop selling Basque souvenirs. Even in that one shop, they take third place, after suitcases and belts in the window display." There were a couple grammatical errors in the text, most of them caused by missing words. However I did encounter the nonword empherality on p. 133, when Woodworth likely meant ephemerality. Woodworth included three pages of further reading resources, and I have already copied the titles by Basque authors.

This is a very interesting and well-written book. It has a lot of historical information that is helpful in understanding the Basque people. A significant part of the book is organized by region, and at that point it reads more like a travel guide. I preferred the thematic parts of the book. I was disappointed that basic questions I had about Basque culture were not answered.

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