

# Cultural background of Bilbao

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Bilbao is the capital of the Vizcaya province, in the Basque Country, Spain. I am not afraid to say that it is more Basque than Spanish. I was in confusion about this identity question, so I have asked multiple people, young and older, „Do you feel Basque or Spanish?”. None of them answered „Spanish”. They either said, very firmly that they are Basque (this was more in the older generation, in their 40s and 50s), or said both (usually young people).

When I first decided to spend my Erasmus semester in Bilbao, I didn't pay too much attention to this part of Spain being the Basque Country. I knew it exists, I knew it was here... but I didn't expect that the Basque people are this „Basque”. Let me explain. Everything here is first written in Basque. The street names, the signs, the bus stops, everything. When I open the door for somebody, 60% of the time they say thank you in Basque, which is “*Eskerrik asko*”, instead of “*Gracias*”.

As it can be seen by the buildings in the outskirts of Bilbao (which I unfortunately did not take pictures of because I didn't like them), Bilbao used to be an industrial city in the 1980s. It was known for steel economy and shipbuilding. I was told by one of my teachers that in some parts of Spain, people still think that Bilbao is not a pretty city, but little do they know. The city

was rebuilt, and it is now full of modern and eye,-catching buildings, it's this strange mix of the past and the present.

In the early 1990s, the city's government wanted to make Bilbao as attractive for tourism as other cities were around Spain, so the first step of doing that was building the Guggenheim Museum, which opened its gates in 1997. The Guggenheim is a modern art museum, and the only time I was there, I left feeling confused but somehow amazed at the same time. Little tip if you ever visit: take the audio that explains the art. You will need it.

The most culturally rich part of the city is the old town, also known as *Casco Viejo* or *Zazpikaleak*. There are the best bars and restaurants here, music every weekend and tons of people. You won't find any clubs here, but if you really want to engage in the culture you shouldn't go to clubs in the first place.

There is very little information about the history of the Basque Country compared to other parts of the world. Mostly they are guesses, since the area is surrounded by mountains and is very isolated, it took a long time for the rest of the world to find it. There are almost no records about how people even went there and started living there. This is the reason why the Basque Language is very isolated and is nothing like any other.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was forbidden to use and to teach the Basque language, therefore two generations grew up not knowing it. This plays a huge role in why younger generations are so proud of their language and are using it so commonly. For them it is an honor to be able to speak Basque and they are doing everything they can to keep their language alive, which I think is a beautiful and respectable thing.