

DEPARTURES

the **FRANCE** **ISSUE**

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WITH A **SPECIAL BLACKBOOK** ON

* **PARIS** *

**PLUS, REDISCOVERING FRANCE:
THE OFFBEAT AND THE PERSONAL**

BIARRITZ

During a stay at Biarritz's grand **Hôtel du Palais** (rooms, \$600–\$5,690; 1 Av. de l'Impératrice; 33-5/59-41-64-00; hotel-du-palais.com), you may wish for an evening of pared-down authenticity and gourmand good humor. In that case **Chez Mattin**, in Ciboure, about 20 minutes south of Biarritz, is the address to know (dinner, \$50; 63 Rue Evariste Baïgnol; 33-5/59-47-19-52). The low-key clientele includes red-faced sailors, porcelain-skinned retirees, families, and groups of friends. You must try an exquisite dish called *ttoro*. A celebrated soup made with fish, shrimp, and mussels, it's silky in its broth and spicy in its seasonings. There are surprises to be had off the menu, including special fish dishes such as hake grilled with garlic and deglazed with vinegar.

In Biarritz, don't miss **Maison Adam** (27 Place Clémenceau; 33-5/59-24-21-68; macarons-adam.com), a superb pâtisserie selling irresistible *macarons*, especially the chocolate. And **Cazaux Biarritz**, which has been making pottery since 1750 and is run by seventh-generation ceramist Joël Cazaux, produces distinctive vessels decorated with colorful, often iridescent glazes. In addition to the boutique (10 Rue Broquedis; 33-5/59-22-36-03; cazauxbiarritz.com), the Cazaux atelier is open by appointment (15 Rue de Larreguy; 33-5/59-23-15-01).

SAINT-PEE-SUR-NIVELLE

L'Auberge Basque is the perfect example of an innovative property whose lesson in modernity neither exhausts nor tries too hard to convince. Opened just a couple of years ago, this inn is an authentic success, simple and sentimental, not driven by competition or guidebook ratings. The rooms—be sure to request one that looks onto the landscape—display a quiet sophistication. Owner Cédric Béchade, who trained with Alain Ducasse, also helms L'Auberge's charming eatery. The recipient of a Michelin star, Béchade's cuisine offers unadulterated flavors in a constant balancing act between innovation and tradition.

Witness his *piperade*, which is handled with extreme delicacy, served with fingers of bread in onion *jus*, poached egg, and shavings of *Ibaïona* ham; or his *maigre* (a local bass) done au gratin with fine breadcrumbs and spider crab on a bed of baby spinach, accompanied by young carrots cooked with their greens in a bouillon of *livèche*, the Basque region's celery. Supported by a cunning sommelier, Samuel Ingelaere (try asking him for off-the-list wines, but don't say this came from me), a meal here is true bliss. Breakfasts of *gâteau Basque*, housemade marmalade, goat's-milk yogurt, and fresh juices are similarly exquisite (rooms, \$130–\$360; dinner, \$85; \$35-per-person lunch is served on Wednesday and Thursday, September–June; D307 Old Rd. of St.-Jean-de-Luz; 33-5/59-51-70-00; aubergebasque.com).

Elsewhere in Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle, **Boulangerie Darrigues** (Place du Château; 33-5/59-54-52-37) may not be the prettiest bakery you'll find, but it is indeed the best, notably for its *gâteau Basque*—velvety, light-crust, and not too *brisé*—as well as for excellent breads and brioches with quince paste and nuts. It's the perfect place to put the finishing touches on a picnic to enjoy in the nearby Chipataya forest or next to Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle's lake, where tables are set under centuries-old oak trees.

Plus, a short drive from the town, along a narrow road flanked by enchanting panoramas, there is a small country restaurant, **Chez Saint-Pierre** (dinner, \$70; Maison Soldaten-Borda, Itxassou; 33-5/59-29-70-61), with a shady terrace that overlooks the river, 1,500 feet below. The carefully prepared dishes here are served family style. Don't miss the *mamias*—curdled milk pots, made by grandma.

SARE

Located in beautiful Sare, **Hôtel Arraya** became an instant favorite. Not that the cuisine will have you swinging in ecstasy from the superb Basque linen drapes, but this house has

an atmosphere, a feeling, that will win you over right away. The handsome 16th-century mansion has been passed down through generations to brothers Sébastien and Jean-Baptiste Fagagoa, the welcoming owners who offer a rather surprising wine list at near-retail prices (a 2002 Sociando Mallet is \$72). They also serve an unbeatable prix fixe menu with pleasing dishes such as a salad of broad beans and duck gizzards, followed by honey

rabbit and a *crème brûlée* of curdled goat's milk.

The rooms, with their artisanal linens and cozy wood paneling, are delightful—ask for one in the back, where it's quiet. And the breakfasts are exquisite. This is the sentimental side of the Basque region (rooms, \$95–\$195; dinner, \$58; Place du Village; 33-5/59-54-20-46; arraya.com).

During your stay, be sure to pop into Hôtel Arraya's boutique. It sells a remarkable selection of Basque linens, among them the renowned table linens woven by artisans at the **Ona Tiss** atelier. Located about an hour away, in the eastern Basque town of Saint-Palais, the workshop (23 Rue de la Bidouze; 33-5/59-65-71-84) is open to visitors.

HASPARREN

If it's a gastronomic excursion and pure happiness you're after, then you must reserve a stay—with breakfast and dinner included, please!—at Véronique and Arnaud Daguin's tiny five-room inn, **Hégia**, just outside Hasparren (room, dinner, and breakfast, \$925, discounted to \$850 for two nights or more; Chemin de Curutcheta, Quartier Celhai; 33-5/59-29-67-86; hegia.com). The landscape is sublime, the rooms (designed by architect Xavier Leibar with Véronique

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Basque cooking
is as simple as
hello, a deceptive
poor man's cuisine.