

Bilbao and Basque Country

We have three full days of touring planned in Northern Spain. Most of the tips and suggestions are covered in the cruise orientation letter. This addendum deals mostly with the specifics of what we'll cover on our tour days from Bilbao. Here's what you need to know:

We're staying in the Catalonia Gran Via Hotel in Bilbao. I was quite pleased with the hotel chain during a stay in Barcelona last year and in 2018. It's a very central location.

Catalonia Gran Via Bilbao Hotel

Gran Vía de Don Diego López de Haro, 73, 48011 Bilbo, +34 944 00 79 46

A rooftop pool, breakfast buffet, wi-fi throughout the hotel, A/C, and a lobby bar are welcome amenities. The hotel is well placed near the Guggenheim Museum, a downtown park, and many restaurants and night spots.

When you arrive at the hotel, you need only present your name to the desk. They've got you registered by last name. You'll be asked to present your passport at check in.

Arrival Bilbao

The airport is less than 20 minutes from the central part of the city and our hotel. Uber is really the best way to travel from the airport to the hotel. Costs for Uber X should be under €20.

Tour schedule

Wednesday, May 17th

Our tour officially begins the evening of May 17th. Most of the group will arrive at the hotel that day. I'd like to meet at 7:00 PM in the bar downstairs for a welcome drink before people head out for dinner afterward.

Thursday, May 18th

We'll meet our guide in the lobby at 10:00 AM this morning with a first visit at the Guggenheim Museum, followed by a walk into the historic center. We'll visit the Seven Streets area, meet with the locals and try some bites.

Friday, May 19th

Today is our day in San Sebastian, about an hour away by coach. We'll meet downstairs in the lobby at 9:15 for a 9:30 AM departure. Our guide will show us the sites, point out some spots for lunch, and we'll return about 4:00 PM that afternoon. I was asked about visiting a cidery. Upon investigation, the season for fresh cider runs January to April. After that, the cider is bottled and the fresh cider season is over. We'll sample the Basque Cider or Sagardo when we're trying the pintxos (tapas).

Saturday, May 20th

We'll depart the hotel at 9:30 again for the drive to the Rioja region. We'll sample some of the wines, enjoy a local lunch, and return to the hotel by 5:00 PM this evening.

Sunday, May 21st

We'll transfer to Bilbao Airport together this morning for our flight to Porto. This means that we'll depart from the hotel at 4:15AM because the airline wants us to check in 2 hours prior to departure. Sorry about that. Hopefully you can get a little more sleep on the plane. Again, apologies for the early hour.

We are on Volotea Airlines, flight 3574. We depart from Bilbao at 6:45 AM, arrive in Porto at 7:00 AM. Your seats are assigned, per couple, in an aisle and window with the center seat empty. You can adjust your seating at check in if you like. The flight is not full. I have your boarding passes.

You are allowed a checked bag of 20kg or 44.9 pounds. You're also allowed a carry-on bag for the overhead compartment. Hand baggage dimensions are limited to 10kg (12 pounds) and measure 50cm x 40cm x 20cm.

Porto Arrival

Upon arrival, we'll collect our bags before exiting the arrivals area. We'll be met by our driver/guide outside of baggage claim for the short drive to the ship. We'll enjoy a walking tour of the pier area of Vila Nova de Gaia, followed by a port tasting at one of the warehouse tasting rooms along the pier. Your bags will be dropped at the ship to be in your cabin when you board. Be certain that your name shows somewhere on the outside of your bag.

Officially the cruise line would prefer that you don't board until 1PM as they are busy with cleaning, staff changes, etc. I've spoken with Uniworld and we will be able to board the ship directly from the airport. This is great news in that I could not locate a quinta or tour that would operate that early on a Sunday morning. So you can choose to relax in the lounge or top deck or stroll Vila Nova de Gaia. There is a museum complex a short (1km) walk up the hill featuring Wine, Chocolate, and Cork. It has good reviews, though it wasn't yet open the last time I was there.

I am arranging a port wine tasting that will be near the ship at 11:00 AM. I'll have more information to share with you when we're in Bilbao.

I've started a whatsapp group profile. If you'd like to join this group, send a text to me at 425 417 3322. This group will be used to communicate adjustments to our tour schedule. Inevitably, it's also used as a posting site for photos and comments as well. You can silence the notification feature, but it's important to check the messages for important posts occasionally.