

TRAVEL

THE INSIDE STORY FOR BUSINESS TRAVELLERS

BUSINESS CITY GUIDE

BILBAO BASQUE IN GLORY

Northern Spain's industrial port has turned into a booming tech powerhouse. By **Sorrel Downer**

Bilbao's so-called 'Guggenheim effect' is a handy catch-all for the city's 'starchitecture', resurgent art scene, culture, gastronomy, new tourism and civic pride in the wake of Frank Gehry's gloriously alien museum, which opened here 20 years ago in the Biscay (Bizkaia) capital. It's also a metaphor for an equally surprising and radical shift in economic strategy by the Basque government around the same time. Faced with a collapse in heavy industry, and with indicators hinting at a looming economic crisis, it opted to invest in building an entrepreneurial culture based around innovation and high technology – industry 4.0. As a result, Bilbao now has one of Europe's most holistic and strategic startup ecosystems, particularly for hi-tech initiatives in the traditional sectors – auto, energy, aeronautics and machine-tool engineering – but also biotech.

"We work hard in the area of coordination between private and public bodies, between universities, technology centres, government offices and big companies, and it's a main factor in our success," says Ainara Basurko, director general of Beaz, the Biscay government department dedicated to advanced technology startups. Beaz is the gateway to comprehensive support, from seed funds and angel investors, to mentoring, incubators, product design, accelerator programmes and advanced services, such as access to lawyers, consultants and marketing.

6
MINS

DID YOU KNOW...

- The Basque tongue, Euskera, is the oldest living language in Europe and completely incomprehensible to non-Basques. It was banned under Franco, but is enjoying a resurgence in both business and daily life. It's estimated that 85 per cent of Basques under the age of 25 will speak Euskera by the mid-2030s.

- **It's said that Bilbao has two cathedrals, one of them – possibly the better attended – being San Mamés, the football stadium that's home to Athletic Club Bilbao.**

- Most Bilbainos have a close-knit group of a dozen or so friends, their *kuadrilla*, to whom they stick loyally through thick and thin for life.

- **Google Maps uses Basque street names, while most tourist maps use the Spanish ones. It's a complicating factor worth bearing in mind when setting off on foot for a meeting.**

- Bilbao has its own version of the mappa mundi, which positions the city at the centre of the world. It's the second most popular picture in bars – after the Athletic Club Bilbao team photo.

INSIDE

Flying to the edge of space

Meet hotelier Bill Walshe

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"We put them in touch with Basque organisations and professionals so they can see the possibilities in coming back to the Basque Country or they can start business relationships through our job intermediation service."

The scheme, also open to talented non-Basques, ensures an influx of new and worldly entrepreneurs with international perspectives. For Bilbao's startups, international exposure often reinforces a sense of confidence in the innovative work that's underway locally. There are new companies here that are literally reaching for the stars. Startup Satlantís has received a €2.3m contract from the European Commission for a binocular camera, effectively a micro-satellite weighing just 12kg and capable of taking images at a fraction of the cost of an Earth

Observation Satellite. It's due for launch in the second quarter of 2019. CEO Juan Tomás

Hernani says, "I am from Bilbao but have worked in Madrid, Sweden, the UK and done intense travelling around the world in general. That has produced a feeling of how tiny we are, and how humble we have to be to approach a world market. At the same

time, I realise that in our small land, we have a supply industry for precision mechanics and advanced electronics, engineering talent, serious institutions, financial capabilities and, moreover, a culture of work, delivery and seriousness in the context of an equal society. And this is a tiny uniqueness that can make the difference."

Bilbao Talent scours local universities for future entrepreneurs

Addimen benefits from well-equipped incubation space at the Bizkaia Science and Technology Park, the first tech park in Spain (created in 1985) and the largest after Barcelona. It's a hub for the most innovative startups in bio-nano, clean technologies and advanced manufacturing.

"There are companies that started from scratch in the incubator that are now among the leaders in their sectors," says Cristina Andrés, the Park's director of innovation.

Regarded as a model for entrepreneurial development, the Park boasts more than 8,000 innovative professionals, with around a quarter working in R&D. It's one of six multi-disciplinary campuses in the Basque Country Technology Parks network, created 20 years ago to exploit synergies between entrepreneurs.

New blood is also important for sustaining innovation, and the organisation Bilbao Talent not only scours local universities for future entrepreneurs but, explains managing director Ivan Jimenez, seeks out highly-skilled Basques working overseas:

"It's a relationship that doesn't finish," says Basurko. "There are now more than 1,200, some in early stages, others now big firms, and, in partnership with universities, tech centres and private businesses, we constantly design services to meet their growing needs."

It works: of the 183 startups assisted by Beaz between 2011 and 2015, the survival rate was 85 per cent, creating 950 jobs.

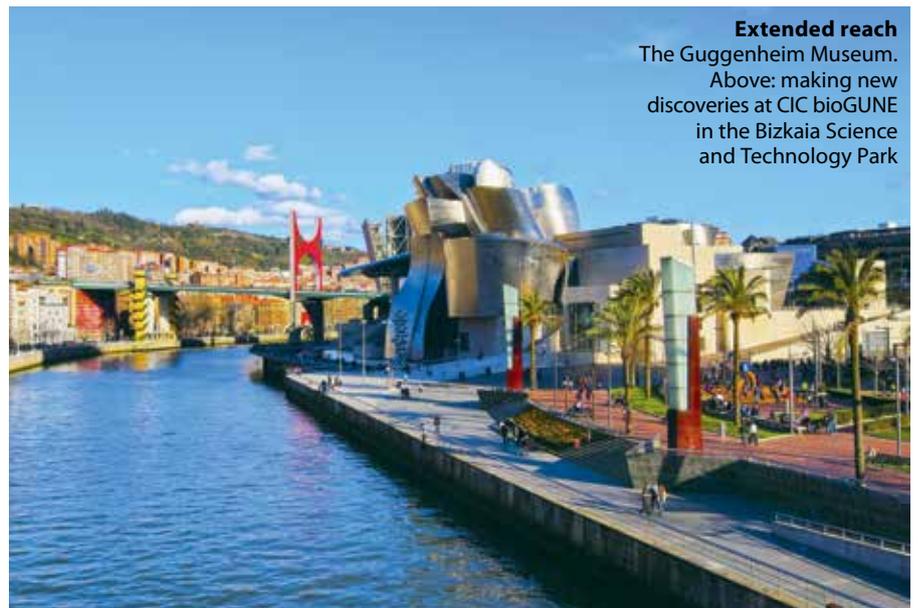
"Bilbao is one of the best places for startups in Spain," says Leire Atxa of Noismart, the company behind Noisense, a traffic light alarm system to detect and regulate ambient noise in closed spaces. After initial funding and co-working space from her local town council, she was able to collaborate with the Faculty of Engineering at the Universidad del País Vasco and was given access to workspace and advice via the university's Zitek programme, as well as Seed Capital investment, financial advice, and help recruiting staff. "Beaz then helped with the company registration, the development of the technology, and launching into market, and they are now one of the bodies helping us take the first steps in internationalisation," she adds.

The practical 'to market' element of support for startups with strong products sets Bilbao apart. The links between academia and workplace are strong, and mutually beneficial cooperation underpins an annual acceleration programme, Bind 4.0. Industry giants (Google, Siemens and Microsoft among them) identify areas for potential collaboration – recently, cyber-security, additive manufacturing, robotics and artificial vision – and startups from around the world at the cutting edge of these specialist fields pitch for an opportunity to work fully paid for 24 weeks in a supplier-client relationship with a company, trained and mentored through the acceleration period by Baez and hosted in a Bilbao incubator.

Startup Addimen specialises in the additive manufacture of metal parts and was partnered with Mercedes and Repsol/Petronor, and is now an official supplier to both with a growing client list. "Bind provided a framework for relationships with leading companies," says Addimen's Jon Urrutikoetxea.

Extended reach

The Guggenheim Museum. Above: making new discoveries at CIC bioGUNE in the Bizkaia Science and Technology Park





LOCAL VIEWS

"The area all around the Guggenheim is an example of the city's transformation. It was totally different 25 years ago – grey with heavy industry. Now it's green and brilliant."

Anaira, Beaz

"Visit the old port of Getxo, in Algorta, where you can taste informal, typical Basque food in a charming old fishing village."

Leira Atxa, Noismart

"Go for a bike ride from the Maritime Museum to the Arriaga Theatre, and finish with *bacalao al pil pil* at Sorginzulo, in Plaza Nueva."

Charly Rodriguez, Lluvia de Bilbao

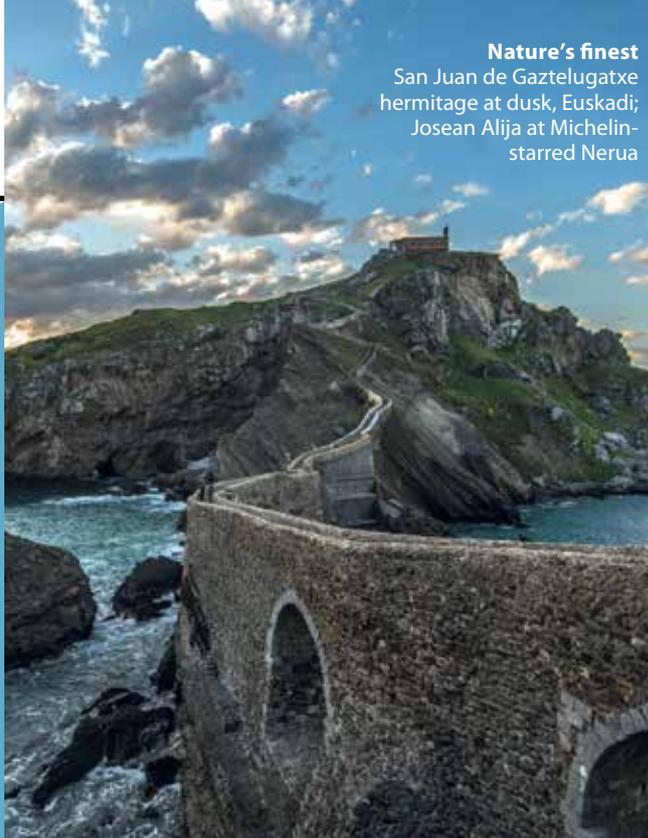
"Visit San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, on the coast at Bermeo. It's connected to the mainland by a man-made bridge. On top of the islet is a hermitage that dates from the tenth century. The place is unique and the views are amazing."

Cristina Andrés, Innovation Director, Technology Park

"Take the Metro and explore Getxo, one of the wealthiest places in the Basque country. It's famous for its port, beaches and mansions belonging to aristocratic families."

Ivan Jimenez, Managing Director, Bizkaia Talent

"Go to the Bilbao Berria restaurant for a *bacalao a la vizkaína*." *Juan Tomás Hermani, CEO Satlantis*



Nature's finest
San Juan de Gaztelugatxe hermitage at dusk, Euskadi; Josean Alija at Michelin-starred Nerua



FOOD

Exquisite, inventive gourmet food in the form of pintxos, bite-sized edible sculptures of caviar, spider crab, quails' eggs, artichokes and black pudding, is available in even the most basic of bars. The easy option is to graze along the central and pedestrian **Calle Ledesma**, lined almost in its entirety with bars serving pintxos. Alternatively, head to **El Globo**, a stylish bar populated by people working in the nearby Palacio de la Diputación, fight for a seat at the bar, and help yourself to whatever pintxos you can reach. The nearby family-run **La Viña del Ensanche** is the venue of choice for a raucous business lunch washed down with wine, while Josean Alija's Michelin-starred **Nerua**, the restaurant at the Guggenheim, is an oasis of absolute peace. Its tasting menu is sublime, underpinned by Alija's soulful philosophy. Spend a night exploring the

lively bars and restaurants of boho hipsterville, **Bilbao la Vieja**, across the river. **Dando la Brasa** serves up hearty food and has the best soundtrack in town.

OUT AND ABOUT

The **Guggenheim** is a must, although many people secretly prefer the exhibitions at the **Museo de Bellas Artes** in the Doña Casilda Iturrizar park. There is so much art and arty architecture in the city – from the Philippe Starck designed cultural centre **Azkuna Zentroa** (formerly the Alhóndiga) to Norman Foster's snail-shell Metro entrances – that the blood-red **Vizcaya** 'hanging bridge' might be mistaken for an installation – but it's real, a manifestation of the industrial past. Crossing the river suspended in its lofty gondolas is a memorable experience, especially if it's windy. Access it from the Metro, which glides from downtown Bilbao to the city's coastal suburbs, seaside resorts and wild surfing in 30 minutes. On the first and last Sundays of the month there's vintage, vinyl

and vermouth at flea markets in **Zorrozaurre** (an area earmarked for a development designed by the late Zaha Hadid), and every Sunday, boisterous crowds gather in **Plaza Nueva**. Even if you don't need the antique coins, canaries or football cards peddled by its vendors, it sits at the heart of the **Casco Viejo**, its narrow streets lined by some of the region's best pintxos bars.

WHERE TO STAY

ALL THE HOTELS BELOW CAN BE BOOKED AT BA.COM*

MELIA BILBAO

Like a microcosm of Bilbao itself: solid, bold, discreetly luxurious and inherently arty, this hotel, designed by Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, is all warm, dark tones, with a spectacular atrium lit by a towering lamp of alabaster blocks, and good location flanked by the Nervión and Doña Casilda Iturrizar park.

GRAN HOTEL DOMINE

Tasked with designing a hotel opposite the Guggenheim, Javier Mariscal embraced his arty brief boldly, creating this light, airy hotel filled with nods to 20th-century art and topped with a splendid roof terrace bar.

PETIT PALACE ARANA

A modern, well-equipped and friendly hotel in a grand 19th-century building opposite the Arriaga Theatre, close to the social hub that is the Plaza Nueva in the Casco Viejo.

MERCURE BILBAO JARDINES DE ALBIA

Crisp, modern and stylish hotel with a Basque restaurant and a good location in downtown Abando, close to the pedestrian eating street of Ledesma, and the lush and picturesque landmark of Café Iruña. ■



HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways flies daily from London Heathrow to Bilbao. A taxi to the centre from the airport costs about €20 and takes around 20 minutes. A single bus ticket costs €1.25 and a metro ticket €1.60. For flight information, visit ba.com