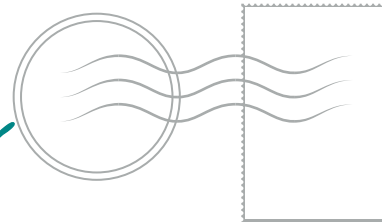


DESTINATIONS

SPAIN & PORTUGAL | BASQUE COUNTRY

POSTCARD

Basque Country



This region in northern Spain has a reputation as a leading destination for the LGBTQ+ community – and it's richly deserved, finds **Domhnall O'Donoghue**

Puppy, a flower-covered sculpture, stands sentinel outside Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. The gigantic artwork promotes "optimism, trust and security", according to the accompanying information panel.

These words perfectly summarise the Basque Country's new promise to LGBTQ+ travellers. Among its lush landscape, culinary offerings and rich heritage is a destination that champions inclusivity.

Many regions present themselves as gay-friendly to profit from the lucrative pink pound, and understandably so, with the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association valuing the LGBTQ+ tourism sector at more than \$200 billion a year.

With the Basque Country seeing a 40% jump in British visitors to 183,000 UK travellers in 2025, this region appreciates the impact of opening its doors to all. Among many initiatives, nearly 200 tourism providers are being trained in LGBTQ+ travel. In Bilbao, there are gay bars and themed walking tours, while Axel Hotel, a pioneering hotel chain specifically designed for the LGBTQ+ community, has opened overlooking the Nervión river.

The Guggenheim plays its part to include and recognise the contribution of gay people, with plenty of exhibits spotlighting queer artists, setting a new benchmark in the museum and tourism industries worldwide. Elsewhere, welcoming experiences await in the nearby regions of Alava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa.

In recognition of these initiatives, Queer Destinations, a company whose mission is to create safer and more-inclusive spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, has named the Basque Country as Queer Destinations Committed – the first European region to achieve this distinction.

"Diversity, equity and inclusion are human values not trends," said Oriol Pamies, founder of Queer Destinations, one of several industry experts speaking at last year's LGBT+ Travel Symposium held in Bilbao. "For every region rolling back hard-won freedoms, another embraces equality, like the Basque Country – and they will have our loyalty."

An inclusive destination appeals to more than just our community – it also benefits people of colour, those with disabilities and solo travellers looking for a safe, welcoming stay. After all, a place that values its most vulnerable communities is more likely to treat all visitors well – and the Basque Country proved to be a perfect example. **TW**



BOOK IT

Axel Hotel Bilbao has rooms from £63 per night in March and is featured by operators including Tui, which has just added Bilbao city breaks flying from Manchester. The LGBT+ Travel Symposium was produced by luxury travel journal *OutThere* along with Queer Destinations and BasqueTour/VisitEuskadi. For more information, visit tourism.euskadi.eus/en/euskadi-lgtbiq



TOP: Jeff Koons' *Puppy*, outside the Guggenheim
ABOVE: Couple enjoying the Basque Country's many beaches

PICTURES: Tourism Euskadi/Steven Bernhard