

In the Basque Region of Spain: Art, Culture and a Puppy That Blooms

Does a culture-centric family trip have to be boring for the kids? Our writer finds the perfect balance of contemporary art, scary medieval weapons, Gothic cloisters and wide-open space.

By Andrew Ferren

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It's not every beach stroll that leads to a modernist masterpiece, let alone one set in the sea amid crashing waves.

After a bracing walk along the esplanade beside Ondarreta Beach in San Sebastián, Spain, I coaxed my family to keep going until we arrived at the western edge of La Concha Bay. There, anchored into the rocks and bashed by waves, was the 20th-century Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida's "El Peine del Viento" (the Comb of the Wind): three nine-ton, rust-covered sculptures. They resembled monumental claws or talons reaching out, trying to connect — a potent symbol of Basque endurance over the centuries.

It was also a sign to my husband and 11-year-old twins, Freddie and Frida, that we'd be spending the weekend seeking out art in some unusual places.

With its wildly vertiginous and verdant landscape and proud heritage, the Basque region has long been a place I've wanted to explore with my family. So in February, we spent three crisp, sunny, culture-focused days driving from San Sebastián to Bilbao with several worthwhile stops in between.

By the second day, my kids didn't want our adventure to end.

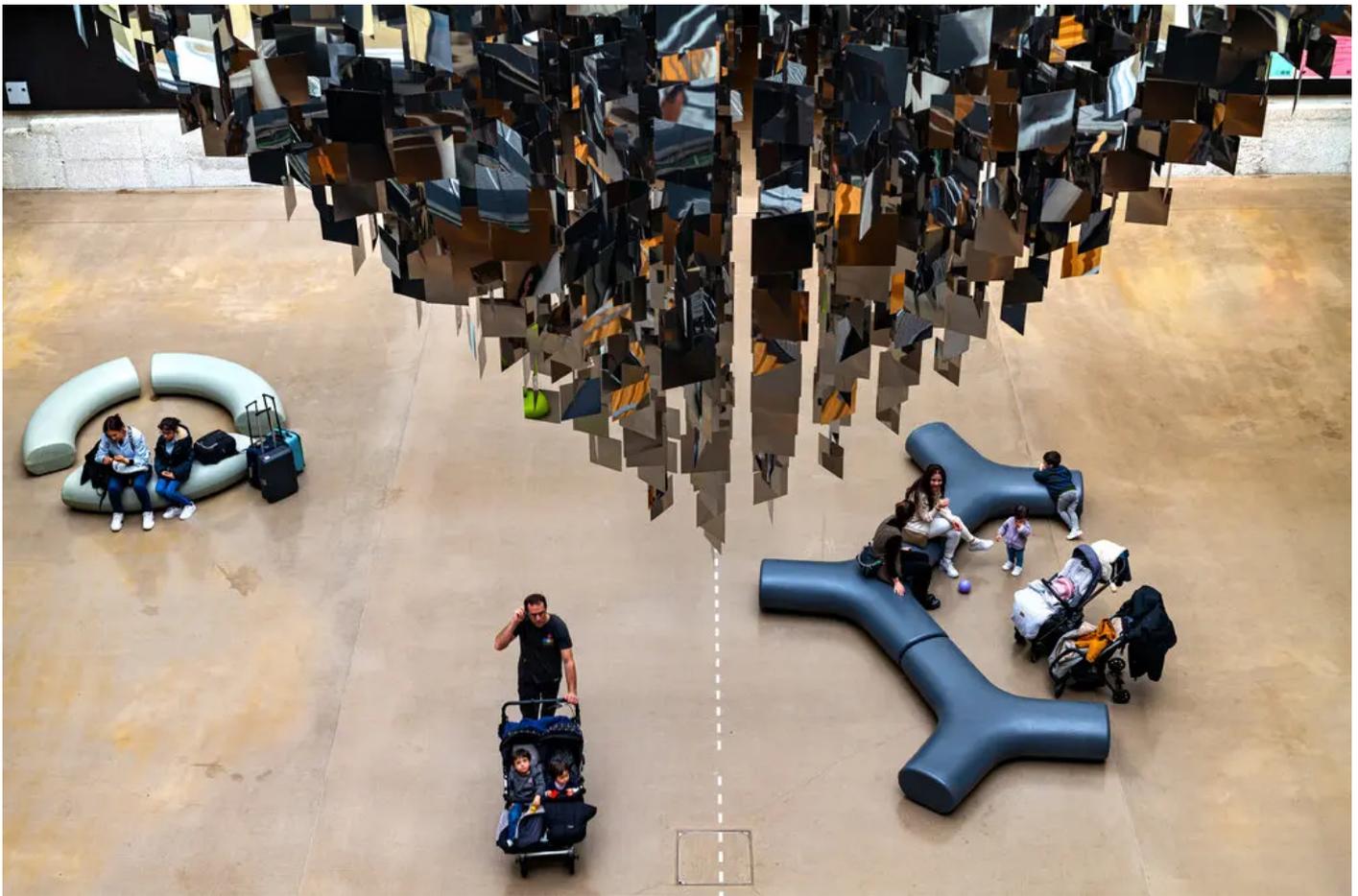


In San Sebastián, a pedestrian area overlooks La Concha Bay. The city's beaches and waterside setting are among its many draws. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

San Sebastián

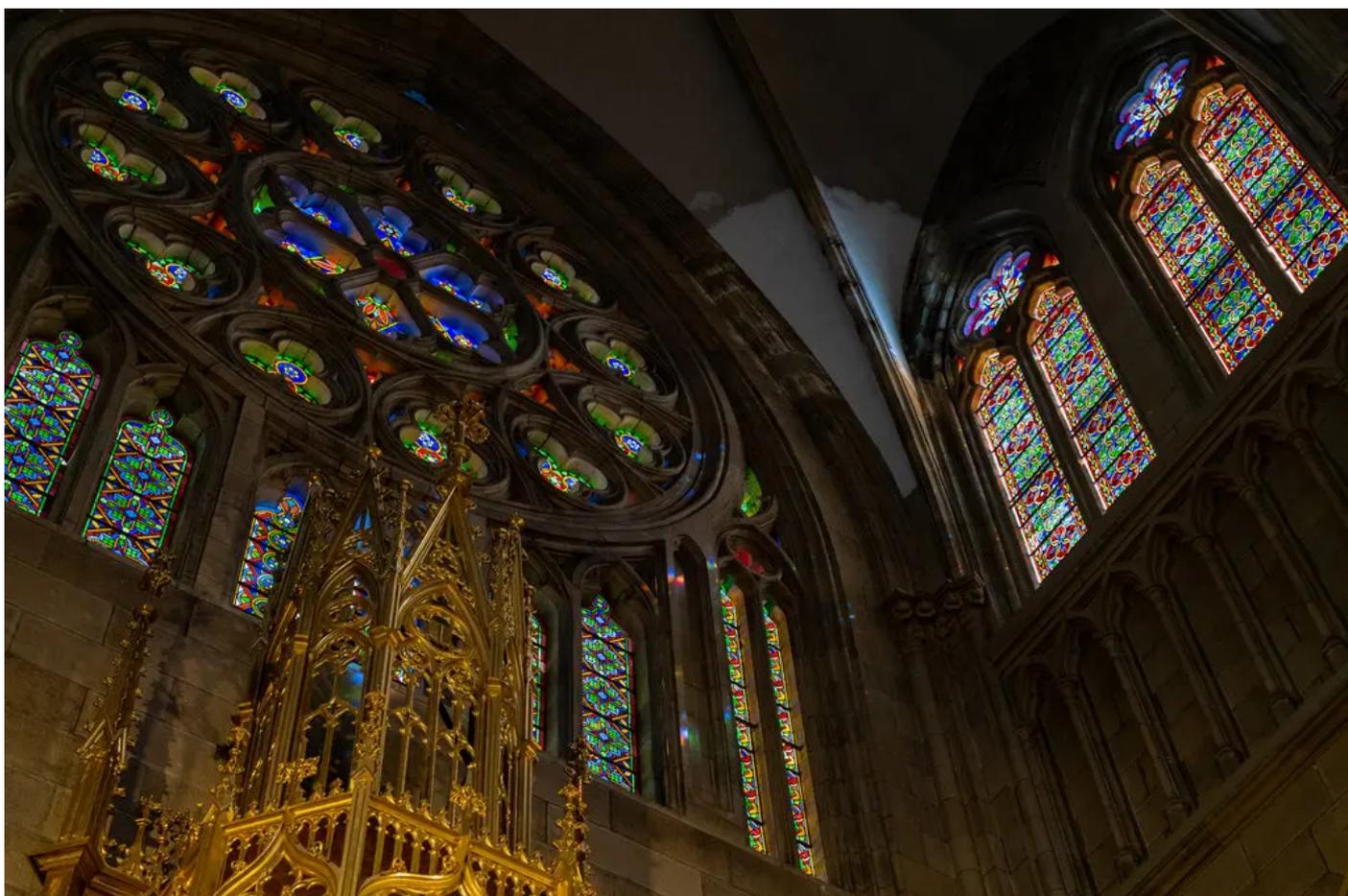
Driving into town earlier that day, past the grandly ornate buildings lining the final stretch of the Urumea River before it reaches the sea, Freddie declared San Sebastián “pretty cool” when he spied groups of kids carrying surfboards and heading toward the beach as they dodged fur-coat-clad shoppers hurrying along the sidewalks. With its world-renowned culinary scene, film festival and stunning natural setting on a crescent-shaped cove, San Sebastián can tick a lot of boxes for visitors with widely varying tastes. Even in February, the beach was buzzing, though only surfers in wet suits and dogs chasing sticks ventured into the water.

The city's museums were alive with a similar mix of youthful energy and old-school European cultural appreciation. Tabakalera, a giant multipurpose art space inside a former cigarette factory, features exhibitions, film series and huge open-space lounges — some with table tennis and other amusements. It's a place where kids can be exposed to accessible culture, but still have room to run around. There is also a vast library, a pizzeria and, on the top floor, a restaurant called LABe run by students at the Basque Culinary Center, so it can be a full-day experience.



At Tabakalera, kids are exposed to accessible culture but still have plenty of room to run around. On rainy days, the center can be a lifesaver for families. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

On a rainy day, Tabakalera could be a lifesaver for a visiting family. But it was sunny during our visit, and the city's cathedral, with its vast expanses of jewel-toned stained glass, was especially beautiful. This summer we'll be making a trip back to San Sebastián — both to swim in that beautiful cove and to see the Lighthouse, a monumental sculpture inside a derelict lighthouse on the city's picturesque Santa Clara Island. The Spanish artist Cristina Iglesias dug up the floor of the structure and recreated in bronze the geological features of the rock beneath it. Reached by boat, it's only open from June through late September.



The late-19th-century, neo-Gothic Buen Pastor Cathedral is one of the most distinctive buildings in San Sebastián. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Unexpectedly, the San Telmo Museum, which we assumed would be a display of regional pride, turned out to be a highlight of our trip and, like the city itself, had something for everyone. Though one enters through a small, minimalist glass-and-concrete pavilion, the museum is built around a staggeringly beautiful Gothic monastery cloister with elaborately carved stone arches. Opening a side door to the dark and moody chapel, I was blown away to discover vast murals by one of my favorite Spanish artists, José Maria Sert, whose best-known works were sometimes painted on gold or silver leaf, and are more typically encountered in glamorous settings like Rockefeller Center or the palatial homes of wealthy clients rather than somber monastery chapels.

Around the corner were shimmering suits of armor, swords, maces and other weapons, which Frida — currently enamored of all things medieval — explained to us in all their lethal goriness.

Freddie's most frequent question upon entering a museum is: "Do they have any cars?" Indeed, this museum did — groovy 1970s ones (along with scooters and bicycles). The vehicles highlighted the Basque region's role in modernizing Spanish society from the 1960s to the '80s, during the final years of the Franco dictatorship and the beginning of the country's democracy. Going further back in time, a display of more than a dozen examples of the bizarrely elaborate 17th-century linen headwear traditionally worn by married and widowed women had Frida perplexed enough to declare (and not for the first time) that she

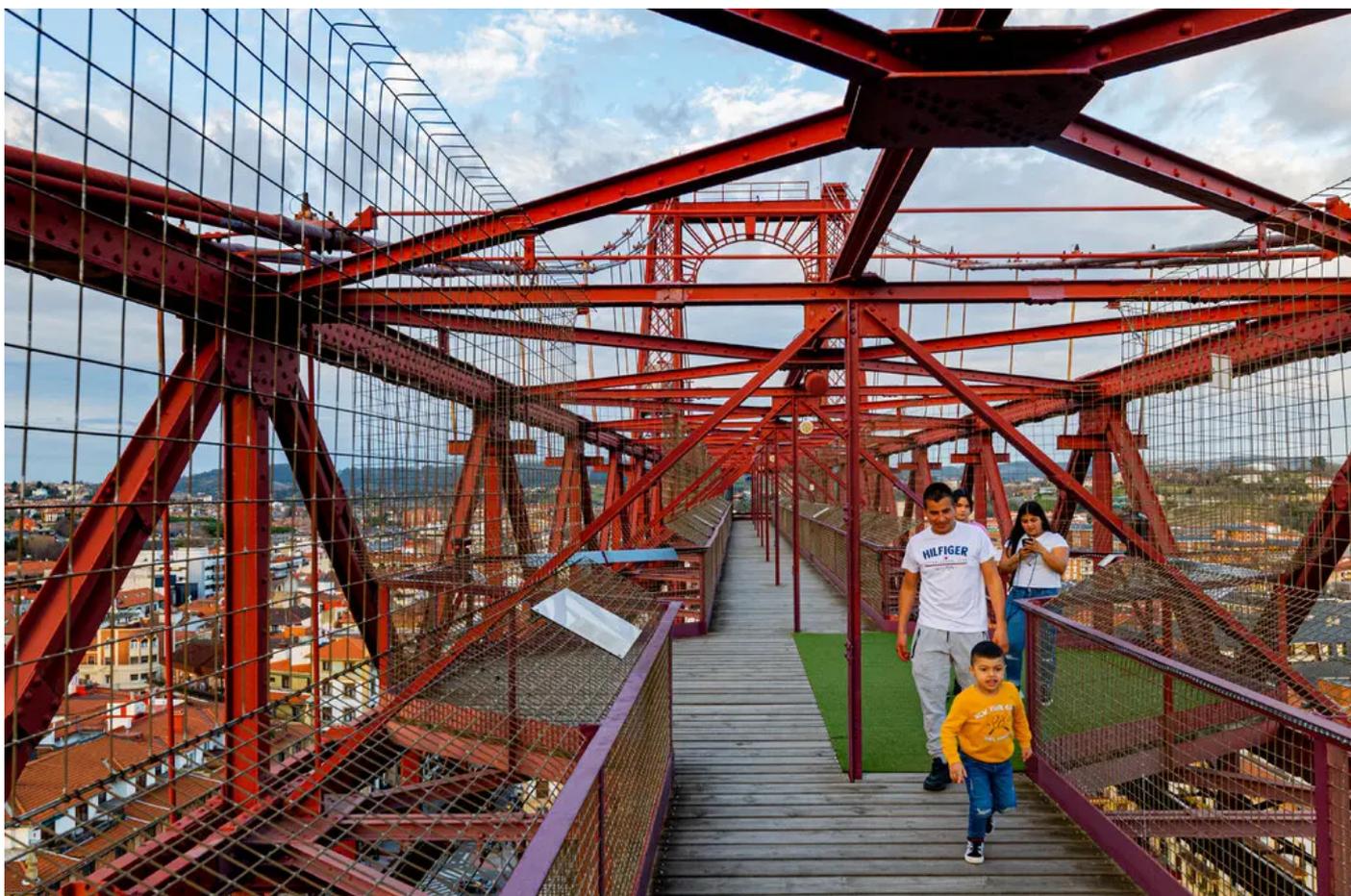
would never marry.



Chillida Leku, on the outskirts of San Sebastián, is an art space devoted to the works of the 20th-century sculptor Eduardo Chillida. The artist's abstract works are installed both outdoors and inside a farmhouse on the property. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

At the opposite pole of this potpourri of regional art is Chillida Leku, a space dedicated to the oeuvre of just one artist, Eduardo Chillida, whose monumental sculptural works — including variations of “El Peine del Viento,” which we saw on the beach the day before — are in (or often in front of) major art museums around the world. In the 1980s, the artist purchased the property — which is near the town of Hernani on the outskirts of San Sebastián and includes a 16th-century farmhouse — to create a compendium of his works installed both indoors and outside for pastoral contemplation. And even with two kids running around the grass trying to scare each other by jumping out from behind the artist's massive yet elementally simple steel or stone or concrete sculptures, Chillida Leku (leku means “place” in Basque) provided delicious hours of just that. I was particularly struck by the way some of the largest sculptures branched out at the top and seemed to reach for one another but never touch, like many of the ancient trees nearby.

Inside the beautifully restored stone and wood farmhouse, a gallery attendant named Anabel got us all talking about the sculptures and provided a wealth of fascinating details about the artist, such as the fact that he trained for years with the local blacksmith — which explains why some of his early works incorporate elements of farm tools.



The Vizcaya Bridge connects the towns of Guecho and Portugalete near Bilbao, Spain. It was designed by the engineer and architect Alberto de Palacio y Elissagüe in the late 19th century and recognized by UNESCO in 2006. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Driving west

The seaside hamlet of Getaria, about 30 minutes west of San Sebastián, may be tiny, but it gave the world two titans who changed history in one fashion or another. The first was Juan Sebastián Elcano, the Spanish explorer who completed the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1522 after Ferdinand Magellan was killed midvoyage in what is now the Philippines. He made it back to Spain after some 1,200 days at sea, returning with just one ship and only 19 men (five ships and some 265 crewmen departed Spain in 1519). He is a celebrated hero in his homeland, but is largely unknown outside Spain, where credit for the voyage goes almost entirely to Magellan.

In contrast, Getaria's other native son has a name that is known far and wide and has become a global brand. Cristóbal Balenciaga — the couturier whom Christian Dior, Coco Chanel and other designers considered, in Dior's words, "the master of us all" — was born here to a local fisherman and a seamstress in 1895. By his teens, he had clients among the Spanish nobility and eventually the royal family. He moved to Paris during the Spanish Civil War, where his talent and list of clients became legendary.

To great fanfare, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum opened in Getaria (in the former palace of his most ardent early client) in 2011, bringing the rarefied world of haute couture to this quaint village. Many of the stunning dresses on display were donated by the likes of

Princess Grace of Monaco; the American philanthropist Rachel Mellon, known as Bunny; Balenciaga's friend and protégé, Hubert de Givenchy; and other beau monde figures. It's a fun romp for kids through the dimly lit galleries of fanciful clothing from a different age. This year's exhibition, "Balenciaga Character," focuses on the essence of his designs and what made them so innovative and beautiful that other designers felt almost obligated to follow his lead for decades.

How many UNESCO World Heritage sites allow you to drive your car on them? Heading farther west from Getaria, we bypassed downtown Bilbao and went straight to Las Arenas, the posh seaside enclave where the Nervión River meets the Bay of Biscay. Our goal was to see (and use) the Vizcaya Bridge, a pioneering type of suspension bridge built in 1893 and recognized by UNESCO in 2006. It was designed by Alberto de Palacio y Elissagüe (who also designed the iconic Atocha rail station in Madrid). The brief was to create a link between the towns of Guecho and Portugalete on opposite sides of the river without impeding the shipping traffic that was crucial to Bilbao's booming steel industry. Palacio's novel design was not a roadway but a suspended gondola that today shuttles about eight cars and a fair number of pedestrians across the river in one minute — as thrilling for my husband and me as it was for the kids. The deck supporting the gondola is more than 150 feet above the water, so even today's tankers, aircraft carriers and a few airplanes have managed to get under it.

Back when it opened, there were set fares for pigs, cattle and funerals — today it's just cars, scooters, bikes and pedestrians (1 euro, or a little over a \$1, round-trip for pedestrians). As we approached the soaring tower on the Portugalete side of the river, Freddie squeezed my hand and said, "This is the best day ever" — words he also uttered amid the giant redwoods of the Sequoia National Park in California.



A floral sculpture of a puppy by the artist Jeff Koons greets visitors to the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Bilbao. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Bilbao

Ever since the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Bilbao opened in 1997, the city has occupied an important perch on the European cultural travel circuit. Many kids will go bonkers over the giant floral puppy, a large petunia-based sculpture by Jeff Koons that stands in front of the museum. If you're visiting in the summer, you'll want to know about the nearby "water park," a fountain with variable jets of water spouting from the ground, where children and adults can cool off in the midday heat.

Whatever exhibitions are on view (until May 28, there's a beautiful Joan Miró painting exhibition focused on the artist's early years in Paris), a ride up the glass elevators in Gehry's torqued, bendy central lobby is enough to satisfy most kids. Do not miss the long gallery of monumental spiral sculptures by Richard Serra; exploring the mazelike spaces created by the circular steel walls is, I've found, a home run for children.

By the time we got to Bilbao's maritime museum, Itsasmuseum, we were pretty exhausted, and I told the ticket seller we'd be in and out in 30 minutes. In the end, the guards had to move us out at closing time as we were so engaged with the displays of antique model ships and paintings of historic shipwrecks. There are also more modern exhibitions about surf culture and the role of the river and the sea in Bilbao's development, as well as what's being done in the city to adapt to global warming and preserve the ecosystem that's been its lifeblood. In warmer weather, a small dry dock in front of the museum allows visitors to

explore various types of vessels in use on the city's waterways.



“The Matter of Time,” a monumental sculpture by Richard Serra, dominates a gallery in the Guggenheim Bilbao. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Like San Sebastián, Bilbao has its own vast multipurpose cultural center in the Azkuna Zentroa Alhóndiga, a former wine and olive oil warehouse that sat empty for 30 years until the architect Philippe Starck reimagined it as a library, exhibition space and gym, where there are two indoor pools on the roof that anyone can visit for a few euros per day.

And splashing around in pools designed by Mr. Starck — one of which has a glass floor that looks down on the galleries below — counts as a cultural activity, no matter your age.

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