

Small history on the origin of the Basque Country

Although the Basques were probably inhabiting the area they now do since the stone age, our oldest historical records come from the time of the Romans. Around 75 B.C., the Romans established the city of Pamplona as a regional centre. The Basques seem to have come down from the hills to trade with the Romans, but the Romans seem never to have extended actual control of the Basques living in the hills. The Basques living on the plain around Pamplona probably adapted to the Roman presence, but we don't know to what extent.

Around A.D. 830 century A.D., toward the end of the tumultuous period that followed the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Navarre (Nafarroa in Basque), centred in Pamplona, came into being. Originally this kingdom covered all of modern Navarre, plus the three Vascongadas (Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, Araba), the modern French Basque country, and into neighbouring areas in modern Spain. Navarre was not conquered by the moors. Navarre was probably not a "Kingdom of the Basques", but it was a kingdom whose dominant ethnic group were the Basques. Through the high and late middle ages Navarre gradually lost bits of its territory through various dynastic marriages and inheritances. Between 1200 and 1332, the three Vascongadas placed themselves in allegiance to the crown of Castille. By 1500 the Basques lived in three kingdoms: Navarre, Spain, and France. In 1515 Navarre was divided and absorbed into Spain and France along the current border (more or less).

The age of whaling

In the Middle Ages, Biarritz was a small port whose fishermen were renowned for their skill in harpooning whales. Whale oil was then highly sought for fuelling lamps in houses. Their bones and ribs were also used to make fences; the skin, cut up into strips, was used to make seats or caps. Of course the flesh was also eaten, particularly the tongue, a choice delicacy for notable visitors. The site is particularly well suited to whaling. The cove which today is home to the Old Port was sheltered from the rough sea. A channel guaranteed boat access to the bay. The gently sloping beach enabled whalers to beach the cetaceans in high tide, then wait for low tide to cut them up. The villagers worked on the beach, where they installed ovens to melt the blubber, fireplaces to cook and smoke the meat, and amphorae to conserve the oil.

Whales provided a living for the fishermen up to the mid 17th century. They then went further and further out to sea and whalers had to go as far as Newfoundland to find them.

Biarritz becomes a "seaside resort"

Biarrots "did not await the Emperor Napoleon III and Impératrice Eugénie to taste the sea bathings on their long sand beaches. Since 1609, an observer, the Adviser of Lancre, notices this practice which it judges extremely bad: "this mixture of big girls and young fishermen whom one sees at the coast in "mandille", and very naked below, mixing in the waves"... Biarrots do not certainly have cure of it, and continue to be plunged in the sea, although in 1774 the city refused to them to set up "guérites" to change.

It was not until the middle of the 18th century that bathing was recognized as an efficient therapy for all sorts of ills. One of the very first famous converts to the Biarritz cause was Victor Hugo, who came here in 1843. Charmed by this "white village with red roofs and green shutters, set on crops of grass", he immediately anticipated that "Biarritz would become fashionable". "The day will come soon!.. he remarked with prescience.

Indeed, eleven years later, the countess of Montijo, who had stayed there when she was a child, set up a home there in great luxury after her marriage to Napoleon III, for a two-month stay. Welcomed by a cheering crowd, the imperial couple chose Château de Gramont, which belonged to the Mayor of Bayonne, as their residence. Napoleon very soon had a summer residence built for his wife, called La Villa Eugénie, and the couple came every year until 1868, to enjoy the benefits of the sea and the climate. In their wake came many royal heads to discover this town. Kings of Württemberg, Belgium and Portugal, Russian, Polish and Rumanian princes, Grands of Spain and Lords of England all gave an elevated status to Biarritz, which by then counted 10,000 holidaymakers each season.

The King of England, Edward VII

Also fell under the charm of Biarritz. He spent much of his holiday taking long walks. During his stays he liked to take the "beach" exit of the Hôtel du Palais, where he resided. Invariably, two "tramps" were waiting for him and he gave them a generous tip every day. As he liked to go incognito as much as possible, he willingly mixed with the other walkers. Sometimes in the company of his personal doctor, he stopped off at the famous mineral water stand on the Grand Beach.

Society life and night owls

At the end of the century, the Belle Epoque succeeded the Second Empire and the royalty of the Republic adopted this holiday place. By this time the town had taken on residences of varied, flamboyant styles. Sadi Carnot, Poincaré, Clemenceau, Jules Ferry, Alexandre Dumas, Zola met each other along the beaches. The English aristocrats whose ancestors had discovered the place at the beginning of the century during the Napoleonic wars, came here in the wake of the Prince of Wales, future Edward VII, who spent five seasons in the former imperial residence, transformed into a hotel in 1893, the Hôtel du Palais.

It was the English who gave Biarritz its first golf course, the Golf du Phare, and its first horseriding competitions. As for the beautiful Elisabeth of Austria, known as "Sissi", she found consolation here in her suffering.

At the turn of the century, the brand new Casino Municipal and the Casino Bellevue attracted stars from the entertainments world, as well as big-time gamblers. Sarah Bernhardt and Lucien Guitry, father of Sacha, entertained there. Once the show was over they danced all night. The distinguished society entertainment of the previous century was replaced by the wild nights of the new Parisian night owls. Here, people danced the brand new charleston in the 1920s, and the owners of the big villas held dances for their friends in their parks. Including the palace of Queen Nathalie of Serbia, which became "le Pavillon Royal".

After the second world war, Biarritz cheered up again thanks to the sumptuous parties given by the Marquis de Cuevas. Royalty always came: Farouk of Egypt, Michael of Roumania, Peter of Yougoslavia. But also cinema stars, such as Rita Hayworth, who stopped by with the Aga Khan, or Frank Sinatra, Gary Cooper and Bing Crosby. The parties continued in full swing in the 1960s, perhaps more discreetly but no less brilliantly. In the 70s and 80s, Biarritz added new activities to the nightlife - diurnal ones this time, designed to appeal to the busiest people.