



# Basque to the Future

**Hugo O'Doherty goes to San Sebastian and explores why the region stands alone.**

**I**t's June 2010, and a slightly overweight, bearded man sits upright on a tall stool at the bar, gorging on pinxtos and glasses of beer. The giggling began around half time, as the barman and our protagonist mocked the Spaniards for their failure to be leading the Swiss by the break.

A few minutes later, the giggling turned to a more hearty slap-the-table-and-wipe-the-eyes guffaw. The Swiss had taken the lead, and not in any normal way – getting the ball out of defensive territory for perhaps the first time in the match, a series of comic blunders ended with Gerard Piqué, a Catalanian, getting kicked in the head as Gelson Fernandes, the Cape Verde-born Swiss midfielder, poked the ball home while nearly falling over himself.

I am in Spain, technically speaking. More precisely, I am in San Sebastián, a relatively small city near the French border. The man, who has now gone from giggling and sober to hysterical and inebriated, peels himself off his stool and out of the bar. Spain has lost its opening World Cup match to the unfancied Switzerland. Conventional wisdom suggests that the mood in town ought to be sombre, but it is anything of the kind.

## “ I am not Spanish, I am Basque! ”

This is the Basque country, a place that some people believe is worth dying, and killing, for. From the conspicuous Basque signposts to the ubiquitous pinxtos (or tapas in Spanish) at the bar, the visitor gets the sense that these idiosyncratic local customs are more than mere aesthetic or superficial displays. The fact that bearded stool man walked out of the bar into lashing rain and a cold breeze in mid-Summer suggests that this might not really be Spain after all.

A few days later, local side Real Sociedad achieved promotion back to La Liga, the top division in Spain. Taking a stroll through the old town hours before the match, teenagers could be seen with a football shirt on their torsos and Basque flags wrapped around their shoulders. Lacking a competitive national team of their own, club sides such as Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao fill the void. Indeed, the latter club continues its cantera policy to this day – the team is made up solely of players native to the greater Basque region. When the promotion party reached the small hours, club anthems were interspersed with nationalist chants by the thousands of fans lining the streets. To differentiate the two varieties of song would be to miss the point entirely.

Just a few weeks before the return of txuri-urdin (meaning “white-blue” in Basque) to La Liga, Madrid-based newspaper Marca reported that ex-Sociedad player Iker Sarriegi had been detained by Spanish state police on suspicion of working as a courier for ETA, the armed Basque separatist organisation that has killed over 800 people since 1968. Sarriegi, who got a degree in law after his football career was cut short by injury at the

tender age of 26, had made a name for himself by starting a practice that was very active in the defence of ETA suspects and sympathizers.

If ever there was a case of sport and politics mixing, this was it. The fact that Marca is generally seen as a daily Real Madrid press release – Real Madrid being the favoured club of both former dictator Franco and reigning King Juan Carlos – makes that newspaper’s coverage anathema to Basque sentiments. A sprinkling of irony is added via another fact; Marca was founded in December 1938 at the height of the Spanish Civil War in nationalist-held San Sebastián. Resentment runs deep.

Since Sarriegi’s arrest, ETA has announced a ceasefire. In the time-honoured style, three hooded individuals in a dark room released a video declaration of the ceasefire alongside flags and the ETA symbol – a snake, symbolising politics, wrapped around an axe, symbolising the armed struggle. Predictably, the Spanish government declared that the move was insufficient, and called on ETA to disarm and renounce violence completely. Spanish Prime Minister José Zapatero could be forgiven for feeling like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day; two ceasefires have been ended by ETA, the most recent one ending in 2006 with a van bomb exploding at Madrid Barajas airport, killing two Ecuadorian immigrants who were asleep in their cars.

Back to San Sebastián, and sometime later

in the week after Spain’s defeat and the promotion celebrations for Real Sociedad, one of our group was chatting to a local lady in a club when the courting took the usual course of international flirting.

“How would I say ‘hello, how are you?’ in Irish?” she asked.

My friend, who had not spoken the language since scraping a pass in ordinary level half a decade previously, was placed firmly on the spot.

“Eh... dee ah gwitch... um... ciúnas bóthar cailín bainne.”

And, just like the popular television ad suggested, the dark-haired beauty was suitably impressed. Seemingly on a roll, my friend attempted to seal the deal. A budding lawyer, he stuck firmly to the rule that one should not ask a question without already knowing the answer.

“So how would I say ‘hello, how are you?’ in Spanish?”

Her face dropped, her eyes narrowed, and she pulled her top up to reveal less cleavage.

“I am not Spanish, I am Basque!” she stated, and off she went without a kiss goodbye, or even a goodbye at all. The relationship was thus aborted in its embryonic stage.

While it is unlikely that the lady went off to join ETA and attack Ireland as a result of this blunder in cultural etiquette, I think my friend learned something about international relations that evening. A good rule of thumb is to note whatever language is most prominent on signposts and ask the lady or gentleman in question the phrase for ‘hello’ in that tongue. From Quebec to Spiddle to San Sebastián, it is a good rule to follow.



Photographer: Joaquin G. Novales