

Basque in **BEAUTY**

Reaching the peak of enjoyment with mountains, valleys, coasts and cols – and a train or two

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Mel & Stuart Gill

We were having some very hot days on our journey south through Aquitaine, heading for the Midi and High Pyrénées. Driving with the air-con on full blast, we only parked up for the night when it had cooled somewhat.

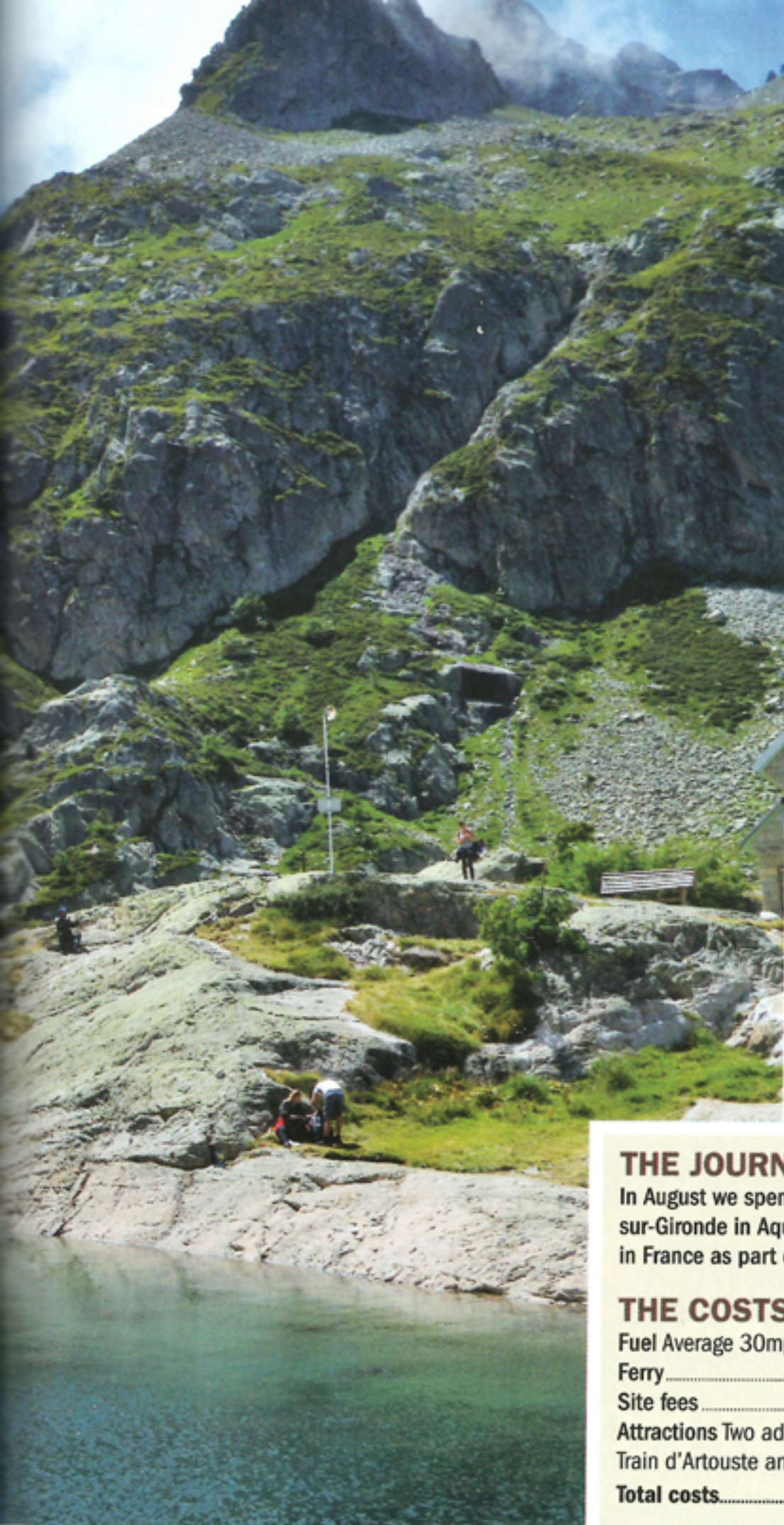
A couple of enjoyable stops along the way took us to places we hadn't seen before, including Talmont-sur-Gironde, perched on a narrow promontory overlooking the Gironde estuary. With its pretty whitewashed cottages, very narrow streets and tall hollyhock flowers, it is one of the Bastide towns planned and built by Edward

ABOVE Lac d'Artouste reached by cable car, a little train and a 20-minute hike!

I when the English controlled Aquitaine.

We found motorhome parking close by and chose an aire recommended by friends at Mortagne-sur-Gironde, which is on the estuary alongside a marina.

Our second stop was Biarritz for some coast and beach time before hitting the mountains. Our guidebook suggested that we were making a faux pas in visiting this part of the coast in August, saying it would be too hot and busy. As we pulled into the aire at Anglet beach, a few miles north of Biarritz, in the late afternoon we could certainly see that it was busy. Luckily, there were a few places



THE JOURNEY

In August we spent 10 days travelling from Talmont-sur-Gironde in Aquitaine to the Pyrénées National Park in France as part of a four-week 2,147-mile tour

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 30mpg.....	£95
Ferry.....	£317
Site fees.....	£52.43
Attractions Two adults: Kakuetta Gorges, Train d'Artouste and cable car (€62).....	£55.14
Total costs.....	£519.57

489
miles



left, though it was a tight fit.

The sea and spacious beach are just behind the aire, with great views of the lighthouse on the headland by Biarritz itself and tremendous surf that draws the adventurous to this area. We cycled into Biarritz (about five miles) in the cool of the evening, zooming downhill to the scenic beaches lining the bay and stopping to watch a talented sand artist create intricate patterns that would be gone with the next tide. Sitting at a seafront café, we watched the stunning sunset with an ice cream and coffee sundowner, a great prelude to our

drive into the mountains the next day.

Heading for the small mountain town of Sare, we hoped for cooler temperatures in the Pyrénées. We had intended to stop at the cog and pinion mountain railway (Le Train de La Rhune), but the huge queues and lack of parking put paid to that.

The peaks around us grew more rugged as we ascended until we could see the church tower and roofs of Sare above us. The path from Sare's aire is short but very steep.

In the tourist information office, an attractive old building, we browsed the exhibition of the traditional Basque sport ▶

ABOVE Traditional Basque dancers, St-Jean-Pied-de-Port; Cows on the road between St-Jean-Pied-de-Port and Forêt d'Iraty

US AND OUR 'VAN



Mel & Stuart Gill...

...gave up sailing for motorhoming and have never looked back. Mel is a lecturer and student support tutor and Stuart is a retired training manager



2015 Marquis Majestic 125 2.2Hdi. It's large enough to live in comfortably for a month or more at a time and small enough to access most narrow mountain roads and villages. It's also economical

of pelota, which is played in a court facing a wall or 'fronton'. The game is taken very seriously (with professional teams) in the region. This explained the public courts we saw in almost every town we passed through.

In a nearby field we found one of the distinctive sturdy local ponies called 'pottok', an endangered, semi-feral, ancient breed. We would see more of them roaming freely, along with cream-coloured cows with bells around their necks. Griffon vultures circled and soared on the ridges.

From Sare we travelled through scenery that got more and more amazing, stopping for lunch in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port. Braving the midday heat, we climbed up to the shadier old citadel part of the town that is a popular stop on the camino trail – as evidenced by the pilgrims with shells hanging from their rucksacks waiting for the many hostels to open their doors.

Basque culture and tradition (with its ancient, unique language) is very much in evidence here – the beret is widely worn by the men, though we felt sure that the colourful shop we saw mostly sold them to eager tourists. After watching a lively

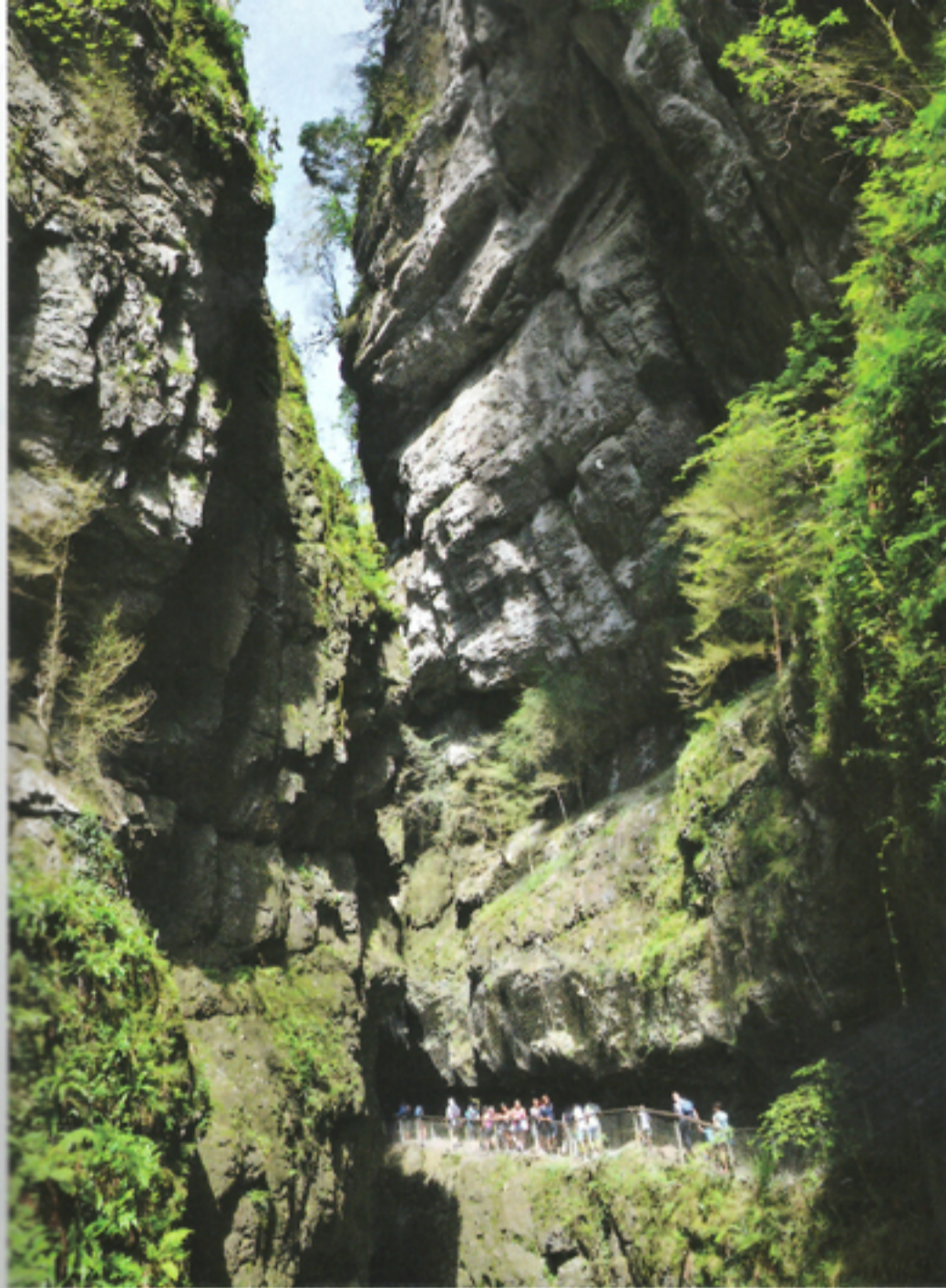
display of traditional dancing by villagers, we found the shady courtyard of a small restaurant and enjoyed a simple, but incredibly tasty, salad lunch made with local produce. A most memorable stop!

Our luck continued as we drove into the mountains with no real destination in mind, the scenery making the journey more important than the destination. We stumbled upon a hidden gem. Just as the road began to flatten at the top of Col d'Iraty, we saw a sign for an aire with 'vans parked next to a sparkling river running through a large open field in the valley. It was just too good to miss.

Pitched by the water, we paddled in the cool stream and marvelled at our fortune in finding this place. The hillside opposite is the only remnant of the ancient Forêt d'Iraty, the other hills surrounding the aire now mostly cleared for grazing and with a ski station visible in the distance. The only facilities here were blue skies and 360-degree scenery, all for €5 (£4.45) a night.

After a peaceful night, with clear skies encouraging us to stargaze, we awoke to find a small herd of pottok ponies emerging >






TOP TIPS

Look out for cows and ponies in the middle of the road in the Basque Pyrénées!

Visit the Kakuetta gorge early morning or late afternoon to avoid the crowds

Wear warm clothes on the Train d'Artouste – even in high summer – as carriages are open

Book online in advance to avoid queues at the ticket office – train runs from 21 May to 4 October 2020

 artouste.fr

from the forest to drink in the river – one happily warmed his rear end on our fridge vent! We were sad to leave this enchanted place but, with storms forecast for later, had ambitious plans for the day ahead...

Driving over the Col d'Iraty we were treated to stunning views in the early morning light: the blue hills and mountains retreating into the hazy distance in true picture-postcard style. Pressing on, we had planned two walks before the storms broke.

The first was to walk the Holzarte Gorge as far as the spectacular suspension bridge. We successfully found parking at this popular place in a layby 200 yards from the main car park.

The information boards suggested a two-hour round trip and, as we strolled along the shady path by the river, we knew we were in for a treat. This treat, however, had a sting in its tail. As we left the shade of the trees, the full force of the sun hit us and the path became much steeper and rockier.

There seemed to be no respite from the heat as we sweated our way onwards, searching for signs of the elusive bridge.

At last we came to the suspension bridge strung across the gorge some 150m (492ft) above the river. It was 'Indiana Jones' time as we traversed the quite wobbly and very exposed bridge, looking for shade in which to rest on the far side.

The day's first adventure completed, it was time for our second. We hoped that exploration of the Gorges de Kakuetta would be less strenuous.

Actually, this gorge is so steep-sided and narrow that, once on the walkway, it is mostly shady with lush vegetation and dripping water. In fact, the guidebook described it as a rainforest-like experience. So it proved, as we sheltered from the occasional heavy rain shower.

We could hear the end of the gorge before we even got to it. A large waterfall emerges from halfway up the cliff face, marking the end of the river's journey through a large cave system.

Although overnighting is possible in the gorge car park, we made the short drive to an aire at the ski station at Arette Pierre-St-Martin (1,622m/5,321ft).

We had the company of just a few other 'vans as huge banks of fog rolled in and large hailstones battered us, leaving a white coating over the countryside.

We were very much hoping for good weather as our plans were to stop by the Cirque de Lescun in the Vallée d'Aspe on the way to a high-altitude train ride, both of which promised spectacular views if the clouds held off. But the clouds hung obstinately over the cirque as we drove up.

Travelling onwards, more in hope than ►

ABOVE Boardwalk along the Kakuetta gorge; Mortagne-sur-Gironde marina and aire; Ponies in the High Pyrénées



ABOVE The little train at Artouste

expectation, we ascended the Vallée d'Ossau towards the departure point of the Train d'Artouste at Lac de Fabrèges. As we did so, glimpses of sun began to appear.

Driving around the lake at the head of the valley, the plentiful motorhome parking is easily spotted along the shore.


Even though it was midday in high season, we secured a booking (you pre-book the outward and the return journey). As we soared upwards in the cable car, the by-now blue skies with white fluffy clouds entranced us as more peaks appeared and the sun glinted on the lake below.

The train looks more like a children's park train at first glance, with simple, open carriages and we were glad of our jackets and hats as we rattled along for 55 minutes.

Exiting a tunnel, our breath was taken

away as we emerged to superb views of the valley and surrounding peaks. We could see the track clinging to the steep valley side as it twisted and turned ever upwards. Occasional glimpses of vultures soaring overhead took our minds off looking down at the steep drops at the track edge.

Lac d'Artouste greeted us at the top station and we spent a couple of hours strolling over the dam and relaxing by the side of the crystal clear waters. Many of the higher peaks were now visible, including Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2,884m/9,462ft) which had eluded us until now. The ride down was every bit as enchanting as the ascent.

As we relaxed that evening at the free motorhome aire by Lac de Fabrèges, we agreed that our day here was one of the most memorable of our trip so far. 

WE STAYED AT

Aire de camping-car, Quai des Pêcheurs, 17120 Mortagne-sur-Gironde, Poitou Charentes ☎ 0033 546 906001 ⓘ All year
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: €9.30 (£8.27)

Camping Municipal Bord Dordogne, 12 Avenue Charles de Gaulle, 33350 Sainte-Terre, Gironde ☎ 0033 557 471623
 ⓘ Mid-June - mid-September
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €15 (£13.34)

Parking Taussat, Allée Albert Pitres, 33148 Taussat, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 556 038600 ⓘ All year £ Free

Aire de camping-car de la Barre, Avenue de l'Adour, 64600 Anglet, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 559 030776 ⓘ All year
 £ From €6 (£5.34)

Aire de camping-cars Sare, D406, 64310 Sare, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 559 542028
 ⓘ sare.fr/fr/ou-dormir ⓘ All year
 £ €8 (£7.11)

Aire Lac d'Iraty, D18, 64220 Lac d'Iraty, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 559 373163 ⓘ All year
 £ €5 (£4.45)

Aire de camping-car de la Pierre St Martin, 64570 La Pierre St Martin, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 559 889082 ⓘ All year
 £ €10 (£8.89) in ski season, free at other times

Camping Despouirins, 64490 Accous, Pyrénées-Atlantiques
 ☎ 0033 647 950739 ⓘ March - November
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €12 (£10.67)

Aire de camping-car d'Artouste, D431 Lac de Fabrèges, 64440 Laruns, Aquitaine
 ☎ 0033 559 053400 ⓘ All year £ Free