

IRON AND MOUNTAINS

The Triano Mountains area stands as a poignant symbol of the Basque Country's mining heritage, mirroring the industrious efforts that have shaped the landscape since the mid-19th century.

In the early 20th century, this corner of Meatzaldea (in Basque, 'the mining area'), which includes the towns of Trapagaran, Ortuella and Abanto-Zierbena, rose to prominence as one of Europe's most vital mining centres. Exploring these landscapes reveals a truly evocative space. Here, visitors can almost hear the echoes of the frenetic industrial activity, social life and passionate struggles of the early 20th century.

To explore the mining region near Bilbao (known as Meatzaldea), we recommend two unique routes that perfectly complement each other:

ROUTE 1:

> Larreineta funicular
> La Arboleda mining village > La Arboleda mines

The Triano Mountains have been known since Roman times for the abundance and quality of their iron, but it wasn't until the mid-19th century that the open-cast mines began to be exploited on a large scale. To discover these iron-rich mountains and their history, we recommend starting your journey at the Larreineta funicular (La Escontrilla station) in Trapagaran. You can get there by public transport, including Bizkaibus buses and the Renfe C2 suburban train line, or by car.

➔ Inaugurated in 1926, the **Larreineta funicular** linked the mining village of La Arboleda to San Salvador del Valle (now the municipality of Trapagaran). The steep climb, which takes about 10 minutes, used to take 1.5 hours by road. Because of this, the new transport **became essential for the families of the miners who lived in La Arboleda**.



Recognised as a **site of cultural interest**, the funicular stands out for its historical importance and social role. It was adapted to carry not only passengers but also mineral cargo and vehicles, making it unique in Europe. Beyond its functional aspects, the funicular is an attraction in itself, set in a picturesque natural environment, with a distinctive 1,198-metre route and a horizontal platform.

As you climb, breathtaking views will unfold. When you reach the Larreineta neighbourhood, **climb up to the terrace of the funicular station** for a **panoramic view**



Larreineteta funicular



of Meatzaldea, the mining area on the left bank of the Bilbao estuary, and even the city itself.

From the top of the funicular to the mining village of La Arboleda is a leisurely 20-minute walk. Alternatively, there's a shuttle bus for a shorter route if the weather is bad. The spectacular transformation of the landscape is evident from the first steps, as nature has reclaimed what was **a lunar landscape of mining pits a few decades ago**, turning them into tranquil lakes.

➔ Almost imperceptibly, you'll arrive at the **mining village of La Arboleda, the Basque Country's most representative historic mining site. Declared a monumental complex** in 2003, this remarkably preserved village stands as a testament to the area's intense mining activity. Today, La Arboleda is the Basque Country's most representative historic mining area.



La Arboleda mining village. 60s

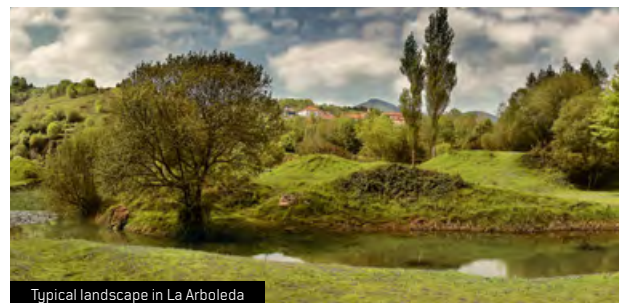
In 1870, around 400 people lived in the area we now know as La Arboleda. Initially, **wooden barracks** were built at the foot of the mines to house the families in anticipation of their possible removal or relocation to meet the needs of the mining operations. Some of these original wooden dwellings are still standing today and can be discovered during a visit to the Mining Museum of the Basque Country.



The village grew, and in 1911 La Arboleda was described as a "jumbled settlement inhabited by 3,000 people". Various facilities were added, including a hospital, schools, an old people's home, a church, a cooperative shop, a Catholic Workers' Circle and the People's House. The urban layout follows a grid of streets surrounding a central square. This square served as a hub for various facilities: the parish church, a bandstand and the headquarters of trade unions, such as the aforementioned People's House.



After enjoying the hospitality and local cuisine of La Arboleda (including the famous bean stew with chorizo, morcilla and bacon – the so-called 'sacraments'), we invite you to take a leisurely **stroll around the mining pits (now a recreational area)**. Beyond the mining village, La Arboleda offers a spectacular natural and scenic environment. At the end of the 19th century, explosives were introduced for the open-cast mining of iron ore. In some areas, the water table was reached and pumps were needed to continue mining.



Typical landscape in La Arboleda

When mining stopped, the groundwater gradually filled the mines of La Arboleda – Hostión, Blondis and Parkotxa – transforming them into the fantastic lakes you see today. Explore these picturesque wonders of nature and discover the Meatzalde Goikoa **Sculpture Park**, with large-scale works by renowned artists such as Nestor Basterretxea.



A lunar landscape

What is now a haven of nature was, just a few decades ago, a veritable moonscape, teeming with mining operations.

Today, however, the vegetation has reclaimed its territory and the former mines have turned into lakes.



The **Hosti3n pit**, near La Arboleda, is the largest of the three. It covers the areas of the Mame, Carmen and Orconera mines. It takes its name from a Basque foreman who struggled with Spanish and would often say 'Yo dar hosti3n' (I'll give you a beating) as a threat to poorly performing miners.

In addition to exploring the village and the mines, we recommend that you complete your visit with a tour of the **Peñas Negras Environmental Interpretation Centre**. Located about 2.5 km from La Arboleda, it can be reached on foot (about 40 minutes), by bike (about 15 minutes) or by car (about 10 minutes). This centre offers insights into the transformation of the environment due to human industrial activity, seen through an 'environmental lens'.

ROUTE 2:

Basque Country Mining Museum and Bodovalle (Concha II) mine

This route is a perfect complement to the previous one, and it is highly recommended that you combine the two. The route takes you easily to Gallarta, in the municipality of Abanto-Zierbena, home to the **Basque Country Mining Museum**. These two must-see attractions are just 5 kilometres from the mining village of La Arboleda. However, public transport doesn't connect them directly, so you'll need a private car or bicycle to visit them in succession.



Inaugurated in 2001, the **Basque Country Mining Museum** unfolds its story in the renovated premises of the old slaughterhouse in Gallarta. Its mission is to present an outstanding collection of artefacts, tools, machinery and documentation curated since the 1980s by former miners and steelworkers from the rugged terrain and industrial havens. The museum also unveils a room dedicated to Dolores Ibarruri, known as Pasionaria ('The Passionate' or 'Passion Flower'), a famous political leader who was born here in 1895.



Mining pits in La Arboleda



Adjacent to the Basque Country Mining Museum is the massive **Concha II mine, also known as Bodovalle or Concha the 2nd**, which proudly claims to be the largest open-cast mine in the Basque Country. The mine began operations in 1968 and closed in 1983, unearthing a staggering 14 million cubic metres of earth in its wake.

To achieve this, the company that owned the land chose to demolish the old town of Gallarta, forcing the relocation of over 225 families to facilitate the extraction of the iron ore beneath the surface.



This endeavour gave rise to the Bodovalle open-cast mine, which created 50 kilometres of underground labyrinths that fed the local steel industry for decades. A fascinating scar of the industrial age, it has dramatically reshaped the landscape. Viewing this spectacle from the vantage point of the Ekoetxea Meatzaldea Environmental Centre is a must for any visitor.



Bodovalle open-cast mine - Gallarta



Declared a landmark in 2011, its dimensions are striking: a monumental inverted cone with a perimeter of 700 metres, a diameter of 350 metres and a depth of 150 metres, reaching its lowest point 37 metres below sea level.



Apold-Fleisner calcination furnaces



A trip to **Ortuella** reveals the rich mining history of the Basque Country. This town was at the heart of it all, being the terminus of the first mining railway (the Triano Railway) and boasting the most extensive intermodal mineral transport network in Biscay. Ortuella served as a strategic hub for the Franco-Belga and the Orconera companies, the largest mining conglomerates of the time. Huge mineral deposits hummed with activity, and calcining furnaces blazed away, pre-treating the minerals. Once ready, these minerals were transported to the loading docks by a dedicated railway, either for export or to fuel the mighty Altos Hornos de Vizcaya, a giant in the world of metal production.



However, the true crown jewel of Ortuella's heritage is a revolutionary siderite calcination furnace. This masterpiece, built by the Franco-Belga mining company and known as the **Apold-Fleisner furnace**, stands out for its unique design. Declared a landmark of cultural interest in 2008, this European marvel revolutionised iron ore beneficiation between 1961 and 1975. Unlike its predecessors, it used clean-burning fuel oil instead of coal, achieving a perfect separation of pollutants from the ore and minimising air pollution thanks to its advanced exhaust system. Today, the Apold-Fleisner furnace has been reborn as a social, cultural and administrative centre. Beneath its surface are remnants of the past – the loading dock, the washers and a section of railway line where the ore wagons once started their journey.

Within the town, Otxartaga Park holds a monument honouring the town's miners. Another monument, located right by the Basque pelota court, celebrates the 'Barrenadores', known for their skill in a traditional stone drilling sport. Head down Estación avenue towards the RENFE station, and you'll find yourself in the town square. Here, the Town Hall stands proudly, while across from it, the Church of San Félix de Cantalicio, built in 1928, watches over the square, dedicated to the town's patron saint. As you continue along the street towards the station, look out for the intriguing calcination furnace of the Bilbao mine, built in 1958 between the neighbourhoods of Saugal and Bañales.

Another option is to explore the mining past through the **Orconera Greenway** (4 kilometres). This scenic route, perfect for cycling, runs between the towns of Ortuella and Trapagaran. It follows the route of the old mining railway and passes through six tunnels – so make sure you bring a torch! Along the way, three picnic areas offer stunning views of the towns on the left bank of the Bilbao estuary.

From Orconera, a leisurely walk or cycle takes you to the **Basque Country Mining Museum**. Once the two-toned bike lane ends, a quiet road with pedestrian and cycle markings (although caution is always advised) leads you to the Basque Country Mining Museum after 2 kilometres. The museum is located in the Campodiego neighbourhood of Gallarta.

HOW TO GET THERE

Both routes offer flexible starting points so you can tailor your day's adventure. They complement each other perfectly for a full day of exploration.

For Route 1, we recommend starting your journey at the Larreineta funicular station in the La Escontrilla neighbourhood of Trapagaran. You can get there by public transport, including Bizkaibus buses and the Renfe C2 suburban train line, or by car.

The Basque Country Mining Museum is also easily accessible by public transport. There are several Bizkaibus bus stops and a Renfe train station (on the C2 train line from Bilbao) in the vicinity of Gallarta. For cyclists, the Iron Mountains Greenway, a scenic route connecting the towns around the Bilbao estuary, passes close to the museum. It also links up with our other two industrial tourism routes: Iron and Sea and Iron and Water.



By bus

<https://www.bizkaia.eus/es/web/bizkaibus/lineas>



By train

Gallarta



[43.319196, -3.067443]:



<https://www.renfe.com/es/es/cercanias/cercanias-bilbao/horarios>

Trapagaran (Urioste stop)



[43.307582, -3.040183]:



<https://www.renfe.com/es/es/cercanias/cercanias-bilbao/horarios>



By private car

Of course, a private car offers the greatest flexibility, allowing you to explore the entire area at your own pace.

Basque Country Mining Museum



[43.311463, -3.070415]:



<https://maps.app.goo.gl/phpXFr1C91kFDxgHA>

Larreireta funicular



[43.301147, -3.042306]:



<https://maps.app.goo.gl/FryNGNNqU3dutHma6>

La Arboleda mining village



[43.285923, -3.053904]:



<https://maps.app.goo.gl/XYK7sgyXrzGlrSEL7>



RENT A BIKE AND GO CYCLING:

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THE MUST-SEES



Don't miss the **Basque Country Mining Museum** and the **Ekoetxea Meatzaldea** – both in Gallarta, under the impressive Concha II mine. These facilities explore the mining history of the area and its dramatic transformation of the landscape. The museum displays a fascinating collection of mining artefacts, tools and machinery. It has a room dedicated to Dolores Ibarruri, La Pasionaria, a prominent political leader born in Gallarta in 1895. We recommend that you book a guided tour for a deeper insight into the museum's treasures.



Step back in time at La Arboleda, a remarkably well-preserved **mining village** and the pinnacle of the Basque Country's historic mining sites. Today, this picturesque town has undergone a surprising transformation. Mining has ceased completely and the groundwater has filled the abandoned **open-cast mines** (such as Hostión, Blondis and Parkotxa), creating beautiful lakes.

Explore this fascinating area with the expert guidance of **Lugorri**, professional tour guides, and the **Basque Country Mining Museum**.



Finally, take the historic **Larreineta funicular** railway, inaugurated in 1926. This funicular linked the mining village of La Arboleda to San Salvador del Valle (now Trapagaran) and played an important role in the lives of the miners. Declared a landmark of cultural interest, it's celebrated for its historical and social significance, as well as its unique design. Do not hesitate to take a trip to La Arboleda on this iconic transport!

TIPS



Wear comfortable walking shoes..



Respect the environment, local people and animals.



Enjoy nature without noise or haste.



If you're driving, remember that cyclists and pedestrians have priority.



Adhere to general traffic rules.



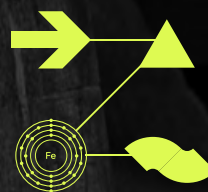
Be careful, especially in tunnels and viaducts.



If you're cycling, always wear a helmet and ride carefully on sections shared with vehicles.

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