

# Route 7: The Arratia Valley

## Rural charm amongst mountains and meadows



*The gigantic Mount Gorbeia majestically keeps watch over the valleys which surround it. The shepherds and their sheep learnt, many centuries ago, to recognise the best hillsides with fresh grass. This route is immersive, experiential, unique. Savour, herd, and then submerge yourself in the thermal waters or in dams which appear straight off a postcard. Arratia is rugged, authentic and special.*

We leave Bilbao towards the the **Arratia Valley** which winds its way between the tips of Gorbeia and El Anboto. Take the AP-8 towards Donostia/ San Sebastián, take exit 105 to Galdakao and continue on the N-240 Vitoria-Gasteiz/Galdakao Hospitalea until you reach **Igorre**. This quiet town perfectly reflects finding pleasure in the small things. Within its heritage, the Vildósola Palace from the 17th century stands out, as does Casa Zubizarreta and the town's different baserris (farmhouses), the construction of which dates back to between the 16th and 18th centuries.

We leave Igorre behind us in order to move on to **Areatza** on the N-240. This town is sheltered by **Gorbeia**, the highest mountain in Biscay (1,842m) which gives its name

to the Natural Park. Areatza has an important architectural heritage: the Convent of Santa Isabel, the San Bartolomé church and, in the square; the Gortazar palace and the city hall which is of a Neo-classical style. Here we also find the Areatza o Parketxe Interpretation Centre which invites families to better get to know this natural environment.

The **Gorbeia Natural Park** stretches out over more than 20,000 hectares between Araba and Biscay, making it the most extensive natural reserve in the Basque Country. A cross stands at the summit of Mount Gorbeia which is 18 metres high, the symbol of the Park.



If you want to climb to the peak, we recommend that you use the road which ascends from Areatza and leave the car in the recreational area of **Pagomakurre**. From here, this hiking route is signposted and has a

difficult descent. It can be completed in 4 hours, there and back (12km).



Areatza

Gorbeia

You can enjoy a spa circuit at the Balneario Areatza Hotel or maybe visit a cheese dairy where you can watch the elaboration process of Idiazabal, the Denomination of Origin Cheese and partake in a tasting.

You will also be introduced to the "latxa" sheep, a breed native to the Basque Country, as well as the work of the Gorbeia sheepdogs (Information and reservations: +34 946 941 212, www.viajesporeuskadi.es).

From Areatza, on the N-240 following the signs towards Vitoria-Gasteiz, you will discover the spectacular Hayedo de Otzarreta. To get there, at kilometre 38.5, when you get to the top of Barazar, take the concrete road which is on your right. There is a sign which says: "Gorbeia Natural

Park". Continue along this concrete path and after approximately 1km you will come to a fork in the road. Take the path on the left and carry straight on until you arrive at the car park which is next to Otzarreta.

The Hayedo de Otzarreta is a magical place, full of charm, where you can take in landscape which appears to have come straight out of a fairytale. Its centenarian beech trees do not grow horizontally, but vertically, as more than 50 years ago their branches were pruned in order to obtain carbon from their firewood.

We go back along the N-240 towards Vitoria-Gasteiz and then continue onto the A-2620 Legutio-Aramaio-Arrasate/Mondragón, we head for **Legutio**, a beautiful corner of Álava, surrounded by green pastures and the nearby reservoirs of Urrunaga and Albina. At its entrance, an old gateway with a double pointed arch from the medieval era guides us

towards the typical Basque houses on the inside. You can refresh yourselves during the summer months in the reservoirs' artificial beaches and also partake in water sports.

The A-623 and the BI-3941 take us to **Otxandio**, back in Biscay again. From the Town Hall to the Santa Mariñe church, with the Vulcano fountain being a main attraction, you will be fascinated by its monumental richness. Our next destination is **Dima**. To reach this town, take the BI-2543 road. The San Pedro Apóstol parochial church, the Humilladero shrine, the Urizar palace, the Ziarrusta tower and the Gothic church of Magdalena de Lamindao all form part of the historical patrimony.

Returning to Bilbao, we head towards Igorre and, via the N-240, we reach the A-8 which takes us to the capital of Biscay.