

# PREHISTORIC CAVES OF ISTURITZ & OXOCELHAYA

In the Basque region- Euskal Lur - To Visit in the Arberoue's protected valley!

Listed as an Historical Monument – Two stars in the Michelin Green Guide

## **Locality:**

10 km from Hasparren – 30 minutes from Biarritz and Saint Jean Pied de Port -1h from the Spanish border and Pau – 2h1/2 from Toulouse

## **Entrance fees 2015:**

**Individuals** - Adult 10 € - Child (7-14) 3,90 € - Family (2 adults/3 children) 29 €

**Groups** (mini. 20 pax – maxi. 50 pax) - Adult 8 € - Teenagers (15-18) 3,90 € - Child (7-14) 3,80 €

**Special visit** “prehistory and geology” (maxi. 20 pax) 13,50 € - Bank cards, visa, vouchers accepted

## **Opening times from 15 March to 15 November every day:**

- March, April, may, October, November: Guided tours from 2 pm to 5 pm

When schools and public's holidays: visit also at 11 am

- June & September guided tours at 11 and 12 am and from 2 to 5 pm

- July & august open from 10 am to 6 pm: departure every 20 minutes

- Special visit “prehistory and geology” (in French) every Sunday from 11 am to 1 pm

## **Open all year for groups upon reservation:**

- 1 h guided tours in French, English, Spanish and Basque

- Year-round temperature is 14 ° C

On site: Museum area - free entrance - Shop « Prehistory et Nature » (books, minerals, documents) – Cafeteria - Typical Fast Food with local products opened in July & August.

Panoramic view of the Arberoue valley, listed area

No dogs allowed in caves - Photographs not allowed inside the caves

## **Reservations and inquiries:**

Grottes d'Isturitz et Oxocelhaya

64640 Saint Martin d'Arberoue - Donamartiri

Phone: 33 (0) 559 29 64 72 Fax: 33 (0) 559 47 30 17

E-mail: [reservation@grottes-isturitz.com](mailto:reservation@grottes-isturitz.com) - Website: [www.grottes-isturitz.com](http://www.grottes-isturitz.com)



**Espace Culturel:** [www.grottes-isturitz.com](http://www.grottes-isturitz.com) - Comments: Important archeological site: one of the largest Paleolithic sanctuaries in the south of Europe – 80 000 to 10 000 years B.C. Circuit « Inland Basque country discovery day » starting at the caves upon request.

In such places, rich in geological and prehistoric features, you can sense the presence of **the original spirit of Man.**

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## WHO WOULD KNOW THAT NESTLED AMONGST THE HILLS AND VALLEYS LAYS A TREASURE FROM OUR VERY PREHISTORY ?

Gaztelu hill includes three superimposed caves : **Isturitz Oxocelhaya and Erberua** .Only two are open to visit Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was known that there had been a human presence there for 80 000 years. From Neanderthal Man (middle Paleolithic) to Homo sapiens Sapiens (Upper paleolithic) In Isturitz caves one can observe the most interesting stratigraphic displays in the pirenean region Gaztelu hill offers a quite remarkable overview of the development of the occupation of a site from the present day back to prehistoric times.

Located a few short kilometres from Hasparren, Gaztelu Hill belongs to the magnificent landscapes of the interior Labourd and Lower Navarre regions. Carved out by the river Arberoue, the hill's three caves were originally occupied by humans sometime between 80,000 and 10,000 B.C.: first Isturitz, then Oxocelhaya and, finally, Erberua, through which the river still runs today. A veritable curiosity, these decorated caves and their magnificent, surprising concretions first served as an essential habitat for the populations of hunter-gatherers already exploring the Pyrenees. Since sheltering our oldest ancestors, those we call the 'cavemen', these structures have been occupied almost continuously by humans and animals. Such animal and human traces, including parietal art, are found almost exclusively in caves. The Isturitz site emerged as a main hub and gathering place where communities, cultures, industries, styles and the sense of the sacred itself flourished. As many as 500 people likely lived at the site at any given time. The Neanderthals were the site's first occupants, followed by the Cro-Magnons with their art, crafts and tools. More than 70,000 objects, paintings and etchings have been unearthed at the site, demonstrating the caves' importance. The arrival of prehistoric populations at Isturitz is explained by the geography, climate, fauna and even flora of the various prehistoric periods. Palaeolithic tribes migrated to these sites due to their easy access to the Arberoue valley. The region has benefited from a unique climate in that the oceanic influence eased the harsh effects of the last glacial period.

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## THE GREAT HISTORY OF MANKIND

The adventure began in 1895, when a number of objects were discovered by workers. The Darricau family, which owned the site, carried out an excavation and subsequently also began a tourism operation. In 1922, the famous engraved pillar was found in the main chamber at Isturitz. In the interest of protection, the caves were classified as *historic monuments* in 1953, making them a scientific and public site. The discovery of a series of etchings and drawings of horses and bison over the years that followed reaffirmed the caves' archaeological importance. Ongoing excavations and research have over time added to knowledge about the rocky spur making up the site. *'Because people don't come here just to view archaeological finds; they come to experience an entire history, the great history of which we are all a part, whether researchers, excavators or visitors... For from the Neanderthals to the Cro-Magnons, from the Bronze Age to the mediaeval period, from the mythology of the modern era to the science and curiosity of the 20th century, we remain forever interested in the same story – the story of the people who came together here to witness, occupy and become familiar with this odd little hill'*, recounts Joëlle Darricau earnestly.. Her objective is to bring heritage to life, to have artists embrace and experience the caves as a source of energy, inspiration and creation. *'We want to offer a multi-faceted cultural approach at this site to reflect its full diversity. Our goal is to pique visitors' curiosity and encourage them to venture down new roads of discovery.* Exchanging ideas reconciles scientific discipline, artistic rigour and open access. It also provides a showcase for the Basque culture. In keeping with Joëlle Darricau's objectives and focus, *'the cultural project extols responsible tourism whilst seeking to convey to visitors not only the beauty of the site and the information it holds but also the values of humanity and universal heritage that have been passed down through its history'.*

THERE ARE PLACES WHERE THE BIRTH OF MAN IS STILL CELEBRATED.

***'... When the Neanderthals still occupied Europe, there was no art as such. Art began with modern man, that is, Homo sapiens or the Cro-Magnons...' Jean Clottes***

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# ISTURITZ & OXOCELHAYA

## The decorated caves of Gaztelu hill

(Saint Martin d'Arberoue, Pyrénées-Atlantiques)

**Director: D. Garate.**

Starting in 1913, E. Passemard inventoried some fifteen animal etchings on the central pillar of the *Main Hall of Isturitz*. A new in-depth examination of the figures of this pillar, done in 1970 by I. Barandiaran and G. Laplace, authenticated six animal representations: two small deer, a reindeer, a bear, an ibex and a horse.

In the Oxocelhaya-Hariztoya cave, the second karstic network, G. Laplace discovered parietal figures in a terminal gallery in 1955. In 1982, J.D. Larribau identified new etchings of horses and bison in a median gallery. S. Prudhomme undertook a study of all of the parietal art of the caves of the hill in a thesis defended in 1989.

In 1995, the Regional Archeology Service of Aquitaine undertook an operation to determine the archeological potential of the entire Gaztelu hill, in the form of a "white paper". This led, among other things, to the carrying out of several surveys in the Isturitz cave, under the co-direction of A. Turq and C. Normand between 1996 and 1998 and the revision of the parietal art of Isturitz and Oxocelhaya by A. Labarge. This period of surveys led to 10 years (2000-2010) of organized excavations focusing on the Aurignacian sequence, under the direction of C. Normand.

Given the history of the site, it seemed obviously necessary to resume the study of the parietal art, and to thereby establish links between the dwelling site, parietal art and mobile art. In 2010, a new multi-disciplinary and cross-border team of some twenty researchers was established under the direction of D. Garate (Conservator at the Bizkaia Museum of Archeology, in Bilbao).

Various work orientations were defined based on the main objectives of the project:

- Topographical restitution of the caves (M. Douat).
- Geomorphological characterization of the caves (N. Vanara).
- 3D restitution of the caves (J. Darricau).
- Inventory of the paleolithic parietal activities (D. Garate).
- Chemical determination of the composition of the paints (K. Castro).
- C14 dating of the parietal activities (C. Szmidt).
- Analysis of paleolithic dwellings (C. Normand).
- Analysis of the incorporated objects (M. Peyroux).
- Technological analysis of the graphic activity (R. Bourrillon).
- Plastic analysis of the graphic activity (A. Labarge).
- Stylistic analysis of the graphic activity (D. Garate).
- Geographic and chronological contextualization of the parietal activities (D. Garate, A. Labarge, M. Peyroux, R. Bourrillon, C. Normand, O. Rivero).

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These various research approaches will be developed over the next six years. They will allow us to grasp the place of art in prehistoric societies, and also the major role of the caves of Isturitz and Oxolcehaya in the Pyrenees-Cantabria region.

This project was approved by Mr. Dany Barraud (Regional archeology conservator) and received financial support from the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC) of Aquitaine. Mrs. Joëlle Darricau, owner of the caves, and the Association Gaztelu also provided logistical and financial support for the project.

Several organizations are thus involved in the project: Isturitz Oxocelhaya Espace Culturel Arts et Sciences, Association Gaztelu, University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, University of Bordeaux I and the University of the Basque Country. Within the context of the integration of new technologies in archeology, a partnership was established with the Bidart Engineering School (ESTIA).

The first campaign is currently underway. We are revising the inventory of the art that was published earlier. A detailed topography of the caves is now being done. Also, tests are being carried out in order to best combine the application of the new technologies to the study of the site (three-dimensional restitution and photogrammetry). Therefore, in the years to come, this work will allow us to define the detailed prospection of the walls and the in-depth studies of the art.

The initial work of this original and ambitious project has already brought us promising results. We know that they will be further enriched in the years to come.

Saint-Martin-d'Arberoue, April 29, 2011

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# Pyrenean Prehistory Network

**Under the auspices of the Association pour le Rayonnement de la Préhistoire et de l'Aurignacien (ARPA)**, located at the municipal offices of Aurignac, an extraordinary meeting was held recently to create the '**Pyrenean Prehistory Network**'.

All sites in the network are registered or classified as Historic Monuments, including Tautavel, Bédeilhac, La Vache, Aurignac, Lespugue, Gargas, Labastide, Oxocelhaya and Isturitz.

**The objective** of this Pyrenean circuit is to implement actions in order to:

- foster and promote awareness about the Pyrenees;
- develop and showcase the rich content, outstanding hospitality and innovative offerings that the members propose to visitors;
- encourage the general public to learn more about this fascinating destination through visits and all types of cultural mediation and tourism activities;
- share resources, means, solutions and methods to assist in achieving these objectives.

In positioning the network it will be distanced from conventional tourism offerings and visitors' experiences will be qualified.

## **Prehistory:**

Man interacting with his space and the environment

Brilliant artists and inventors

Nomadic peoples exploring and sharing...

## **A unique encounter:**

Inviting visitors to interact with prehistoric man

Sharing the adventures of researchers and inventors

Investigating collectively the knowledge, questions and, occasionally, lack of responses.

## **Pyrenees:**

The cradle of scientific and historic adventure

A living conservatory of prehistory

Important preserved sites

An imaginary journey in the mountains

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### **The focus of our tourism offering:**

Providing easier access to highly visible content

Helping visitors to grasp the network's identity through a common offer

Proposing a tangible offering as part of a strategy targeting awareness and image

Promoting educational tourism: renewal, dissemination, innovation

Developing an original cultural offering; encounters with art and science

### **Action plan:**

Set up the Pyrenean Prehistory Network structure

Oversee formulation of the network's offerings

Review and ensure the consistency of content and its appeal

Embrace a network-wide cultural offering

Convey key messages: brochure, ICTs

Collaborate on innovative sales initiatives; identify network targets: 'nomad' tourism, agencies specialising in cultural travel (Ictus)

Work with various departmental tourism committees (CDTs) throughout the Pyrenees

**Key actors in the network** each responsible for one or more sites include:

Jacques Pernaud (Tautavel), Nicole Pailhaugne (Bèdeilhac-La Vache), Nathalie Rouquerol (Aurignac, Lespugue), Yoan Rumeau (Gargas), Francis Ferrand (Labastide) and Joëlle Darricau (Isturitz, Oxocelhaya).

**Departemental Committee of Tourism's:** Eastern Pyrenees – Ariège – Haute Garonne – Upper Pyrenees – Atlantic Pyrenees.

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