

Bilbao Greeters

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I spent a few days on my own in Bilbao, Spain, in August '13 prior to joining a group tour. While researching the city, I came across the website for **Bilbao Greeters**, a volunteer organization and part of the **Global Greeter Network**.

Bilbao Greeters has a group of 70 volunteers who speak just about all languages. Its members are willing to help visitors to their city by providing general tours or tailoring tours to visitors' interests.

I sent an inquiry email about a month before the visit, as soon as I knew the name of my hotel and the date I would be there. Shortly thereafter, I received an answer.

In addition to a general walking tour of the city, I needed to find a Citibank, to obtain a local SIM card that had good rates for calling the US and to learn to use the Metro.

As luck would have it, Marta Cortina, one of the founders of the Bilbao organization, was my guide for the day. We met over coffee in the lobby of my hotel and organized the activities for our day together.

As Bilbao was in the throes of its annual 9-day Aste Nagusia festival, everything in the central city was closed. (*The 2014 festival will be held Aug. 20-28.*) This was no problem, as we took the Metro to neighboring Portugalete (about a 15-minute ride), where all stores and services were open.

Obtaining a local SIM card in Spain was not as easy as it sounded. Thanks to Marta's assistance in working with the agent at Orange telecom, paperwork was filed and I received a SIM with the best rates for international calls (about 2¢ a minute, with a 35¢ connection fee).

All our business things done, we did a walking tour of the old section of Portugalete, with its winding, medieval streets, 18th- and 19th-century buildings and 16th-century Basílica de Santa María. We found the brass directional markers for the Santiago de Compostela walk (which I would do a few weeks later).

At the **Grand Hotel Puente Colgante** by the Vizcaya Bridge, we enjoyed an excellent lunch — my treat. Maria hadn't expected me to buy lunch, but whenever I have a local guide, either paid or volunteer, I treat them to a meal if the timing is right. It is a way to continue our conversation in a more relaxed manner. With volunteer guides, I also offer to pay their transportation fees, but they usually have weekly or monthly transit cards.

Afterward, we returned to central Bilbao, did a walk along the river and ended our day at the Guggenheim Museum.

All the while, Marta answered my questions about the city and the festival, plied me with brochures and maps, gave me tips on restaurants and helped me understand local customs like tipping. She also was kind enough to suggest that I contact her during my stay if I had further questions or needed assistance.

The Bilbao Greeters provide a wonderful service in that city. They don't want tips, but, to help defray expenses for the website and advertising, there is a 12-euro (near \$16) membership fee that is paid through PayPal and is good for a year — a small price for this very personal assistance.

I now feel I have a friend in Bilbao.