





TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

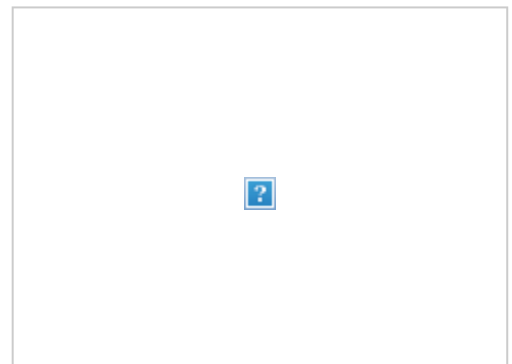


La Rioja, Spain's bountiful wine region

By John Blanchette

LOGRONO, Spain - It is 2 a.m. and the party is still going strong. Wine is spilling out on the streets, along with song, celebrators of all ages and buoyant camaraderie. I am in Logrono, the capitol city of the La Rioja region of Spain, for the annual weeklong wine festival in late September, the Fiesta de San Mateo.

This is the land of the Tempranillo grape, and one of the great wine-producing areas of the world. To say La Rioja



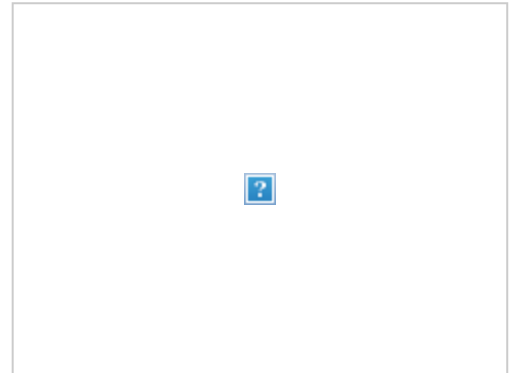
is to say wine. There are 473 bodegas (wineries) within its borders, each uniquely its own. Logrono is central to the wine country and the best place to stay for daily forays into the area.

Some of the wineries are enormous, stretching to the horizon over hundreds of acres, and some are boutique family enterprises that have made wine in the same way for hundreds of years. You can visit wineries in monasteries, medieval villas, country homes, futuristic structures built underground and even one that contains the world's largest wine museum.

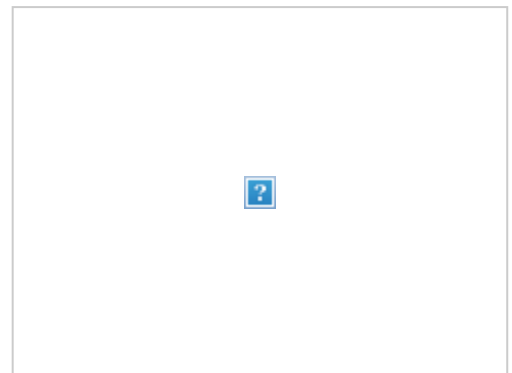
One of Spain's most prosperous regions, La Rioja has a thriving economy based on industry and agriculture. The fertile land produces a wide range of meat and produce and, of course, its leading export, wine. Located in North Central Spain and wedged under the Basque country, its main waterway is the Ebro, but it is named after the Oja River. La Rioja is the smallest of the 17 independent regions of Spain, with 250,000 inhabitants. But it is a bountiful, landlocked Eden that has everything except a seacoast.

Only about 3,000 square miles in area, it is a land of contrasts in climate and terrain, composed of flatlands, mountains and valleys. The Upper Rioja is heavily influenced by the Basque culture and the Lower Rioja has a warmer climate and a Mediterranean sensibility. Logrono is a pleasant little city of about 132,000, with wide boulevards, a beautiful central park, plenty of shade-giving plane trees to cool the summer heat and some terrific shopping, especially for furniture, woodwork,

LA RIOJA - Vineyards in Briones, the heart of La Rioja wine region. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



SINGING IN THE SQUARE - Traditional jota songs fill the air during the Fiesta de San Mateo in Logrono, Spain, as well as smoke from the lamb chops cooking on the grapevine fires. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



crafts, pottery, shoes and leather goods. It is the commercial center for the region and was voted Spain's leading shopping city in 1998.

The old town is where most of the revelry and dining occurs, boasting the city's best tapas bars, cafes and colorful restaurants. Thousands roam through the streets deep into the night along these narrow lanes and plazas during the Fiesta. And it is a family affair. Children, parents and grandparents celebrate together on the streets and in sidewalk cafes, well past midnight.

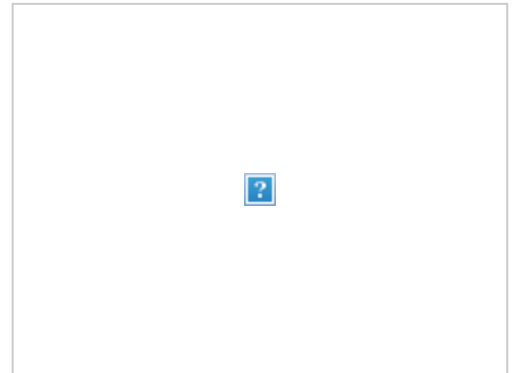
Outdoor concerts, theater and a parade of entertainers from mariachi bands to Louis Armstrong impersonators perform free every night. Be sure to catch the organ concerts at the Saint Maria de La Redonda Church.

It is difficult to get used to Spanish eating habits. It seems like they eat and drink all day long, even if moderately. Continental breakfast on rising, midmorning snack, tapas at noon, followed by the day's biggest meal and usually a two-hour siesta, tapas in the early evening, dinner at 10 p.m., followed by a late-night stroll through the town and perhaps some wine, beer or cocktails and more tapas.

This is also the time of year for the bullfights. As in Pamplona to the north, the bulls run through the city streets, ending at the arena, Ribera Plaza. Lasting three days, tickets cost between \$25 and \$100 for each afternoon. The performance features great pageantry and color, roaring crowds and live music throughout the "contests." Gloriously clad matadors each have an entourage of two picadores on horseback, who stab the bull with long poles, three flying acrobats (banderilleros) who stick brightly colored barbs into the bull's back, four taunters who rile up the animals before the matador appears, and every day six angry, unlucky bulls.

Each fight is like a ceremony, a bloody mass that has a procession of ritual leading to the final battle between matador and bull, always with the same outcome, a sword thrust into the soft tissue behind the bull's neck, plunging into the heart of the beast. The animal pants and staggers before keeling over in the throes of death. His spinal cord is severed, and in particularly well-fought matches a part of his anatomy is sliced off and awarded to the slayer as the bloody carcass is dragged off by horses, leaving a trail of blood upon the sand. It was my first and last bullfight.

A SPANISH TRADITION - At the bullfights, the performance features great pageantry and color, roaring crowds and live music throughout the "contests." CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



DANCING THE NIGHT AWAY - Brightly colored flamenco dancers swirl outside the grounds of the new conference center in Logrono, Spain, during the Fiesta de San Mateo. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

Later that day I went to the XXVI Festival of the Lamb Chop (Chuleta al Sarmiento), a more joyous celebration of local culture, food, music and dance. Thousands of lamb chops are roasted on the embers of grapevines in the Plaza del Mercado and consumed with pulls of bread, hunks of cheese and jugs of local wine. The plaza fills with smoke and dancing as the sound of jotas, the special music of La Rioja, wafts over the crowd. The songs are deeply emotional and sung by men and women clad in traditional garments. As each performer bares their soul, it is impossible not to be effected by the spirit of La Rioja.

The last night of the fiesta we ate dinner at the new riojaforum (conference center), which has one of the best chefs in the region and great wines. Outside on the grounds, the entire city was treated to swirling and brightly colored Flamenco dancers and a spectacular fireworks demonstration, a dramatic note on which to end the fiesta. Thundering volleys echoed off the surrounding mountains, as the earth seemed to take part in the celebration.

The Spanish know how to do fireworks, it's a part of their incendiary and wonderfully explosive nature.

IF YOU GO

How to get there: Iberia Airlines, (800) 772-4642.

Where to stay: Hotel Tryp Bracos, 29 Breton de los Herrereos in Logrono, e-mail tryp.bracos@solmelia.com, but be careful not to store your soiled clothes in the plastic bags provided in the room or you may end up paying \$30 to launder five pairs of sox and two T-shirts. Hotel Conde de Badaran, www.condedebadaran.com (be sure to try their homemade wine liquor) and Hotel Rural in Abalos.

Where to eat: El Rincon del Vino in Logrono, La Sidreria San Gregorio in Logrono (an authentic cider house specializing in regional cuisine and its own homemade cider), El Portalon in Logrono, Chef Chino Restaurant in Calahorra, La Vieja Bodega in Casalarreina, Las Ciguenas in Alfaro, Riojaforum Terrace, or look for a crowd tapas bar in the old city.

Wineries: David Moreno in Badaran; Juan Alcorta in Logrono, a spectacular, modern facility built underground and one of the area's largest producers; Bodegas de la Real Divisa, in Abalos; Hermanos Torres-Librada Winery in Alfaro; Ruiz Jimenez Winery (ecologic wines) in Aldeanueva de Ebro; the Museum of Wine Culture in Briones; Condede los Andes winery in Ollauri; and Bilbainas Winery in Haro.

The Spanish Tourist Office, www.okspain.org, (323) 658-7188 or www.lariojaturismo.com, publishes a number of free pamphlets and maps with information on events, guided tours of the wineries and places to stay and dine in all price ranges.

John Blanchette is a freelance travel writer.

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