

Interview with Agustin Ciriza

When tour members return from nine days in the Basque Country with Agustin Ciriza, they describe him (over and over) as "humorous, delightful, energetic, impressive, outstanding, amazing, fabulous, charming, calm, and very sweet."

Since 2013 Agustin has been a mainstay of Rick Steves' [Basque Country of Spain & France in 9 Days tour](#), and the passion he has for his region and for teaching is already legendary. We caught up with him recently...

What was it like to grow up in Spain's Basque Country?

I feel very fortunate to be born and raised in the Basque Country with the access to the ocean and the beautiful mountains, and our local cuisine and wine. But when I was young, it was a violent time there. There were killings, car bombs, riots, lots of bad things happening. It made me interested in seeking out the peaceful places — the mountains, and the sea, and eventually other countries.

Even when I was a small child I was hiking the mountains around here. As a teenager I started surfing and kayaking in the area. It was then that I started to be the explorer I've become. When I was old enough to leave home, it was in search of new rivers, mountains, and places to enjoy surfing, but also the chance to meet new people and discover new cultures. This opened my mind, and since then, I have never stopped traveling.

One of the best things about working as a tour guide is how I get to meet new people from anywhere in the world and learn from them, their history, heritage, and culture. All this while we can be together,

sharing and enjoying the great experiences that my now-peaceful region has to offer.

What do you enjoy doing when you're not guiding groups?

I love spending time with my family. I'm married, and we have a lovely three-year-old boy. On a typical day off, we like to travel over to the Basque part of France or Spain's Rioja wine country. Both are quieter rural areas, with charming towns like St-Jean-de-Luz and Laguardia. No matter where we pick, it always involves some kind of culinary or wine experience (for the grown-ups, that is).

The famous "running of the bulls" — what is that event like for a local person?

The San Fermin festival is the most exciting event of the year in Spain. Not many people realize that it's about much more than the bulls. There are all kinds of activities for kids, families, seniors — everyone — organized across nine days. Music concerts, all sorts of competitions, fireworks, bullfights and, of course, the running of the bulls in Pamplona. There's nothing I've ever done in my life that produces such an adrenaline rush as that!

What are your favorite moments on the Basque Country tour?

I love watching our tour members' reactions at those moments when their travel dreams are coming true. Sometimes it's when they walk along the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route, or enjoy the food and wine of the area, see our beautiful coastline for the first time, or have conversations with locals as they get to know our culture, heritage, and art.

What do you like about traveling with people who take Rick

Steves tours?

Rick Steves travelers are well-informed and well-prepared. They are positive, open-minded, and ready to explore. They are hungry to see new things and feel new experiences. It's wonderful when the guide and every tour member shares the same goals and expectations of a tour. This makes my job more satisfying, and it also means that tour members are more relaxed and confident that things really will turn out well!

Carrying these attitudes helps to make travel the most enriching and eye-opening experience you can enjoy in life.

Here's what Agustin won't tell you...but his tour members will:

"Agustin was excellent in all respects. Very knowledgeable, completely conscientious with total focus on details — and funny and entertaining to be around! At our group dinners, it was interesting to see folks jockeying to get a seat close to him. He is very charismatic in a quiet way. A delightful guy. Not showy, just very warm and solid to be around and seemed genuinely interested in what each person had to say."

— Andrew in Issaquah, WA