

# Joëlle Darricau, Matriarch of Isturitz

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

ALTHOUGH WORLD-RENOWNED, THE CAVES AT ISTURITZ-OXOCELHAYA REMAIN ALMOST UNKNOWN IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY.

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

*'Envisioning a heritage asset embodying the entire history of humanity and itself positioned against the even more ancient historical backdrop of our own planet's geological formation surely influences our current vision of managing a tourism site of the cultural and scientific importance of the Isturitz-Oxocelhaya caves in their rural setting. The major concern in this situation is finding the right balance between protecting and exhibiting... between scientific discipline and public access... between respect for an active rural environment and accommodation of visitors in this largely agricultural area.'* So begins a conversation with Joëlle Darricau, the site's knowledgeable and enthusiastic owner.

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. Evidence of this has often been preserved perfectly in the underground world, including at Lascaux, Chauvet and Altamira. 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.

*'... 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

## 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. However, the project currently occupying most of her time and of greatest interest to her is the cultural space. Founded in 2007, *Isturitz-Oxocelhaya, cultures, patrimoines et préhistoire* is a non-profit, general-interest association. Its objective is to bring heritage to life, to have artists embrace and experience the caves as a source of energy, inspiration and creation, affirms Mme Darricau: *'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. The project also targets fostering ties and creating links between the multiple cultural, artistic and scientific domains making up its identity.'* Shows, exhibits, presentations and workshops are organised here in a spirit of multidisciplinary, intercultural interaction and sharing. Regular events held on-site include *Les Poétiques* on Saturdays and science encounters on Wednesdays, whilst the Homo Sapiens Café provides an ideal forum for exchanging ideas. The Isturitz Contemporary Cultural Project successfully 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'*.

*Landscapes shaped by time – an invitation to explore the valleys of the Basque Country*

## A UNIQUE TOURISM CONCEPT

Joëlle Darricau's other primary focus has been 'Homo touristicus'. In the interest of preserving the site and the quality of its presentation, she was forced to make a decision: to reduce the number of visitors. *'We receive approximately 55,000 visitors every year, including 6,000 students. For purposes of conservation and protecting the caves, we decided to limit the daily number of visitors to 900 during July and August.'* A paradox indeed: limiting in order to develop! Today's tourist is demanding, hurried and nomadic with a short attention span and forever seeking new sensations and experiences: *'With the help of our guides and partners including Aulame, a company specialising in prehistory mediation, and the geology association Les Pierres du Pays Basque, we offer tours under a range of different themes,'* explains Mme Darricau.

Far beyond simply managing the site, the enthusiastic owner and director has also been involved for years in local and international tourism organisations. She campaigns for promotion of 'responsible' tourism that respects the environment, people and cultures past and present. Her observations are sobering: *'Over time we have been seeing changes in the approach to tourism development in our region. Since the prosperous years of the 1990s, with their dramatic peaks in tourism traffic,*

*numbers have slowly slipped downward. Tourism offerings continue to expand, and the result is significant competition.' Her convictions are clear: 'The Basque Country needs to adopt a general tourism policy.'* And she has little patience for those complaining about the current crisis, whose effects, according to Mme Darricau, should be positive over the medium to long term. *'What's happened has happened; it's time to get inventive!'* Lacking no energy, she naturally has her own thoughts on the matter: *'At times, these caves have served as a gathering place evidently with a definite sense of the sacred as well as a site for interacting, exchanging expertise and sharing cultures and a forum for creation. Mythology also has its place here: for example, legend gives us the story of the Laminak... Laminen ziloa! The site of today needs to maintain its ties to our ancestors and their histories, beliefs, practices and cultures. In the same manner, it also has to incorporate contemporary influences to keep the cycle of evolution moving forward. Evolution that is both "reasonable and human"! This site has endured through the ages as a place of stability where one can reconnect with oneself through the completely natural authenticity of the underground environment and the preserved Arberoue valley. People can find new energy here and understand their place in time.'* For Joëlle Darricau, finding the meaning in things is paramount, without demagogy and without concession. *'That's not always easy!'* she chuckles.