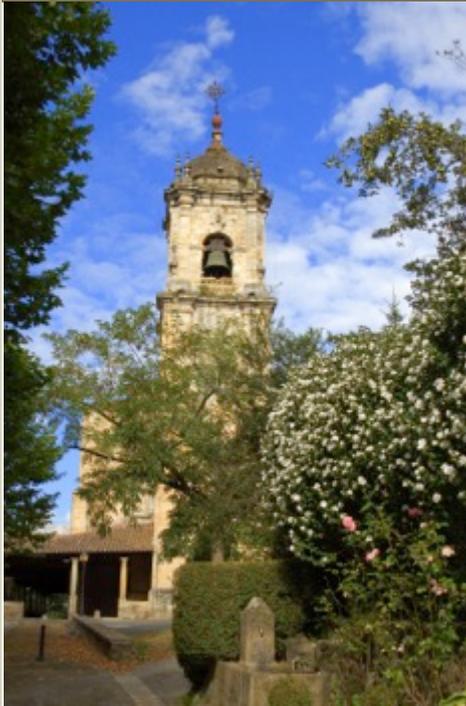


ST. AUGUSTINE OF EXEBARRIA



**CULTURAL HERITAGE
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Set in countryside some distance from the nearest housing, the church of San Agustín stands in a narrow water meadow that runs along the right bank of the river Zumelegi.

A church of great historical significance, part of San Agustín's interest lies in the fact that it was originally promoted as a temple with a convent for canons living in community.

According to a document of somewhat dubious historical validity, construction work on the church began in 1053. The document refers to the foundation of a *monasterio Varria*, which would appear to suggest the existence of an older building.

In the mid-12th century, the evidence shows that a Romanic church was rebuilt here. This is borne out by five chiselled ashlar, used as filler material in the pendentives of the present-day vaulting, which came to light during



the most recent repair work on the roof.

The church came fully into its own in the 16th century, when all previous work was substituted by the Gothic-cum-Renaissance nave we have today.

BUILDING

The external walls of the church comprise finely squared-up sandstone ashlar masonry, while the interior imitates ashlar decorated with cruciform motifs.



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The long nave is divided into four sections (parts of the last being used to the choir), with two chapels set into the northern wall between buttresses, a rectangular apse and a tower built onto the chevet. Also remarkable is the size of the nave, which originally seems to have been a good deal shorter.

The last section was added during the rebuilding phase.

Sections are divided by pointed transverse arches, from which springs groin vaulting, identical in the first three sections. The final section of vaulting at the foot of the church is done with tiercerons. All keystones are decorated with polychromed medallions. Arches and ribbing are supported on brackets carved with human, animal and geometric figures.

The rectangular presbytery, entered by way of a round triumphal arch, has a half-barrel vault decorated with a lacklustre Rococo-style fresco showing the crowning of the Virgin and musician angels. On the outside, the sections of the nave are echoed by powerful buttresses that climb to roof level.

Between the buttresses of the third section on the Evangelio or northern side is a Renaissance-style chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows and the recumbent Christ. The chapel has tierceron vaulting with decorated keystones resting on vase brackets.

Nearer to the foot of the church is another, smaller chapel, where the baptismal font is sited. A flight of steps leads from this chapel to Baroque 18th century choir that replaced a previous wooden choir. The present choir is structured on a segmental arch and is defended by a good quality iron balustrade.

Until recently, San Agustin had three entrances. The main entrance is a pointed arch set into the second section of the southern-facing wall. An ogive set in the opposite wall dating, like its counterpart, from around 1500, was blocked off some time ago. The third entrance, at the foot of the church, is what appears to be a basket-handle arch, although originally it was almost certainly a round arch. This last dates from the Renaissance period, rather later than the rest, probably from around the mid-16th century.

The tower is an attractive, rather grateful square structure in two sections crowned with an octagonal cupola that is clearly related to the tower-porticos so typical of religious architecture in Vizcaya (at Plentzia, Erandio and Orduña among other places). The finest contemporary names in Basque architecture involved in this construction: Lecuona, Ibero, Lizardi and Zuaznabar, the list ending in 1742 with Francisco Javier de Arizabaleta.

A wooden porch runs around the entire perimeter of the church, although only the section around the apse and the southern façade retains the roofing. There is also a rather unusual chapel, built at roughly the same time as the church (15th-16th century), the entrance to which is covered by the church porch. Inside the chapel are two stone sarcophagi containing, according to local legend, the remains of the church's founders.



FURNITURE

The chevet houses a magnificent plateresque reredos, surely one of the finest of its kind in Vizcaya. The central panel of the first two levels is taken up by a Gothic St. Augustine from a previous reredos.

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