



TRAVEL

San Sebastian By Susan Irving Monshaw

Tourist destinations in Spain are known for so many things that you won't find in San Sebastian: no crazy crowds of young people celebrating their last flings before marriage, and no thumping night clubs. It is an exquisite corner of the country, just 12 miles from the French border in the famously independent Basque region, known for its delicious cuisine, warm people and fascinating history.

There is something magical about San Sebastian. You can hear children playing on the beach, someone strumming a guitar, and seagulls calling the day forth from your sea-view window at the Hotel de Londres y Inglaterra in San Sebastian, Spain. Your view of La Concha Bay sweeps to the right encompassing the city's Old Town, the waterfront promenade at your feet winds to the left where the imposing Art Deco La Perla Spa marks the beginning of the city's more contemporary quarter. Directly in front of you floats the picturesque and mysterious Santa

Clara Island. A small ferry bobs a path to the uninhabited island from the solid port wall, one of the last remaining suggestions that San Sebastian was once a fortified city. Inhale a soft, salty breeze tinged with a hint of the delightful breakfast waiting for you in the hotel dining room including classic potato tortillas, rich coffee, and milk-pastries topped with crunchy sugar. It's not an easy trip, but worth the effort. First, you must fly into Bilbao, a charming but gritty city, home to one of the most stunning museums in the world.

No matter how you feel about modern art, you must visit the famous Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Designed by Canadian/American architect Frank Gehry and opened in 1997, the building itself is the most beautiful and breathtaking piece of art on the site. Featuring huge outdoor installations including a giant metal spider, entitled "Maman," and the highly recognisable balloon animal sculptures of Jeff Koons, the collection is easily visited in

a few hours, then you are free to move on to the coastal town of Getaria for a right-out-of-the-water seafood lunch.

Travelling along the winding road skirting the Bay of Biscay, you are treated to wide, open ocean views where the verdant and rocky hills drop right down to the waves. Midway between Bilbao and San Sebastian, Getaria is home to the Elkano winery where they make the famous Basque white, txakoli. Deliciously crisp, easy to drink and very moderately priced, this artisan wine has been produced by the family-owned vineyard since 1830. The vines do not grow low to the ground, but are trained into an overhead canopy, with hanging grapes creating a shady, green parasol with sun-shot blue sky and sparkling azure water in the background. The massive vines cling to the steep, chalky hillside, making it easy to imagine the impressive physical challenge it must be to collect all of those grapes at harvest time.



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Plan to arrive in San Sebastian in time for a cocktail hour pinxtos tour. Similar to the tapas found elsewhere in Spain, pinxtos (pronounced peen-chos) are the expressly Basque way to enjoy delightful, little food creations along with a glass of local wine or cider. Comprised of sheep's milk cheese or the famous Iberico ham on rounds of bread, grilled shrimp captured on a toothpick (the name pinxtos comes from the Basque word for spike), fried croquettes filled with ham and cheese, marinated vegetables, and all manner of hot peppers, sweet peppers and tomatoes are just a few of the mouthwatering combinations you'll find. Sometimes you help yourself to the platters of prepared pinxtos on display, in others you order what you want. These savoury delights are consumed standing at tall tables, so it's easy to visit many bars to sample the huge variety of which the Basques are so proud, and San Sebastian is said to have the best. It is a singular experience to enjoy your pinxtos, sharing the space with friendly locals who don't mind your faltering Spanish and are happy to practice their English.

Food is very important here, and a great way to know Basque cuisine intimately is to take a cooking class at one of the many gastronomic clubs in the city. Originally designed for men only, the clubs usually feature large, commercially outfitted kitchens, spacious dining rooms and communal supplies, shared equally among the members. You can only enter one of these clubs if invited by a member, and nowadays there are women members too. Our host told us that these places sprang up in the middle of the 19th century in response to the men in the household needing a place to enjoy cooking and camaraderie away from their domineering womenfolk at home. Our visit featured the creation of a gorgeous paella and delightful local almond cake, served by a few male members of the club who were happy to join us at the table and share stories of their long-standing membership and friendship.

A highly recommended walking tour of the Old Town will take you to Constitution Plaza, a colourful square that served as City Hall until the 1940s, and today offers unique shops and restaurants. Numbers over the doorways lining the square date back to when this space served as a bullfighting ring and those rooms were used as luxury viewing spots for the rich and famous of the time. You will see the Baroque Basilica de Santa Maria which dominates the central Calle Mayor from the square which is exceptionally beautiful at night.

Shop your way back to the waterfront. All along the narrow, winding streets you'll find adorable places to buy exquisite hats, jewellery, pottery, art, clothing and shoes, all at very reasonable, un-European prices.

Emerging at the intersection of the newer part of the city and the Old Town district, you'll find the charming Alderdi Eder Park. Adjacent to this lovely antique green space lined with flowering plants, is the home of the present-day City Hall, housed in a magnificent 1887 building. Originally built as a casino for the Belle Epoque elite and aristocracy, this structure was once filled with political refugees and the famous German spy Mata Hari during World War I. Bullet holes remain on the façade today, a reminder of the Spanish Civil War which took place from 1936 to 1939. This was the conflict between the Nationalists and the Republicans and heralded Francisco Franco's rise to power which he held until his death in 1975.

As the sun descends, couples stroll the Concha promenade, replacing the laughing children at the beach. Lights begin to twinkle along the bay, you can hear that guitar player on the boardwalk but the seagulls have gone, leaving only the soft evening breeze as accompaniment.

