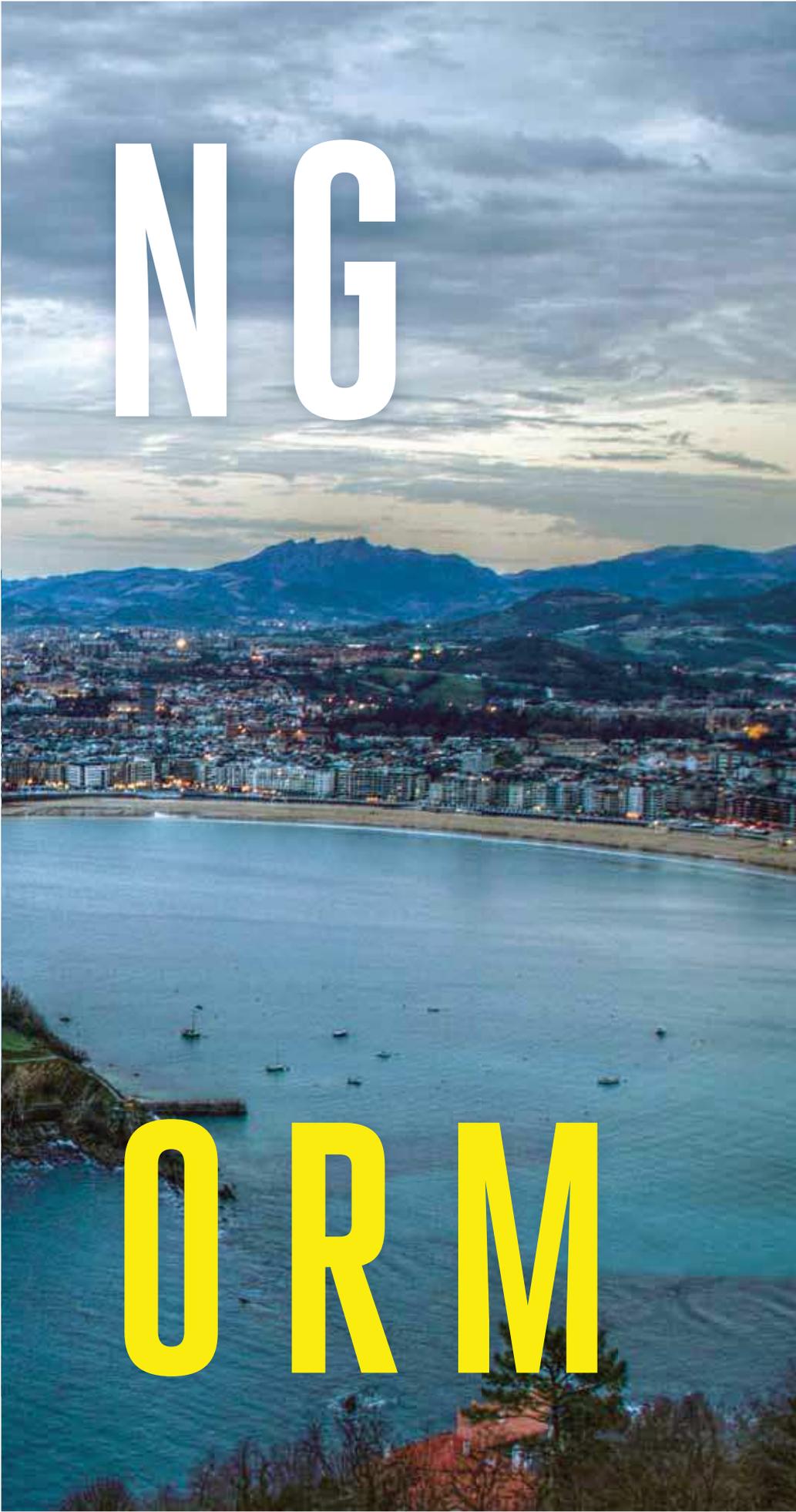


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San Sebastián lies at the heart of Basque country, a region with a well documented turbulent history. Could its status as a European Capital of Culture for 2016 shape a more positive future? Six locals explain...



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# ORM

**WORDS: GARETH REES**  
**IMAGES: REBECCA REES**

On June 28, 2011, the Spanish city of San Sebastián (Donostia in Basque), a popular tourist destination located in Spain's Basque Country, was one of two cities named European Capital Culture for 2016 - the other was Wrocław, Poland. Just four months later, on October 20, 2011, the Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, who had been devoted to a violent struggle for Basque independence since the 1950s, announced an end to all armed activities.

For the organisers of Donostia/San Sebastián 2016 (DSS 2016), this historic moment inspired what Pablo Berástegui, CEO of DSS 2016, calls a "radical" approach. "Instead of investing a lot of money in building new spaces for culture - the city already has many - we decided to do something different. For us, it was very important that peace was the core theme."

A lighthouse was chosen as the symbol to represent this goal. "The idea of the lighthouse is that its light guides you somewhere," says Berástegui. "It's not the goal, you don't have to reach the lighthouse. But through the activities we have planned, hopefully, we can learn to work differently; to work together."

The organisers decided not to arrange the schedule for DSS 2016 using conventional categories such as 'film', 'theatre', 'music' and so on, but rather to fit the year's activities into three conceptual groupings. Lighthouse Of Peace will promote coexistence, pacifism and respect; Lighthouse Of Life represents what Berástegui calls an "anthropological approach to culture" and will explore how we relate to ourselves, to others and to the natural environment; and Lighthouse Of Voices will use artistic mediums to cultivate mutual understanding.

Berástegui says that DSS 2016's programme should be interesting to anyone with a desire to get to know the city of San Sebastián in a new context. But its aim is not simply to boost tourism. "It's not about attracting more visitors," he says. "It's about the people who live here and what they are doing."



**JUDAS ARRIETA**  
ARTIST

**“SOME ARTISTS HAVE TRIED TO CREATE A BASQUE ART. I LIKE THIS STUFF, BUT I’M NOT IN THIS CATEGORY... I AM BASQUE, BUT I FEEL I AM A UNIVERSAL ARTIST”**

Judas Arrieta was born and raised in Hondarribia, a small fishing town approximately 25km from San Sebastián. His work is collected by institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, and has been exhibited across Europe and Asia. He lived and worked in China from 2005 to 2013, where, in 2007, he founded MA Studio, the country’s first residency programme predominantly for Spanish artists.

Arrieta, whose work is inspired by both the Manga comics and kung-fu movies he loved when he was growing up, and traditional Asian painting, has an international outlook. “In the Basque Country after the Spanish Civil War we had problems with [Francisco] Franco, a struggle to keep our language, to keep our identity,” he says. “So some artists have tried to create a Basque art. I like this stuff, but I am not in this category, I do not feel this pressure. I am Basque, but I feel I am a universal artist.”

For DSS 2016, Arrieta was one of five artists asked to produce a mural for Speaking Walls, a Lighthouse of Peace project. The artist has created a mural using skateboard decks, produced by a company in Hondarribia and painted with a mountainous landscape, referencing Japanese and Chinese painting while simultaneously suggesting the mountains of the Basque Country. In deference to the neighbourhood’s history, the mural, which has been created on the wall of Casa Ciriza, a former fish processing warehouse in Pasaia, incorporates an old work of graffiti art depicting a mermaid.

Arrieta is glad his mural will bring people to the town on the outskirts of San Sebastián, which he feels is really in need of regeneration. While he’s uncertain what DSS 2016’s legacy will be, he hopes it will help Basque society appreciate artists a whole lot more. “In our society artists are vagabonds, outsiders,” he says. “We still don’t have a society that understands what artists do. Maybe this year will help.”



**ANDONI MUNDUATE  
DORRONSORO**  
ENTREPRENEUR

**“WE CANNOT IGNORE IT OR CHANGE THE PAST, BUT WE CAN AND SHOULD TALK ABOUT IT AND WORK HARD TO ENSURE IT CAN’T HAPPEN AGAIN”**

Andoni Munduate Dorronsoro describes himself as a “serial entrepreneur” but says that he is known best for his gastronomic projects. Born in the tiny village of Ataun in the south of Gipuzkoa, the province of which San Sebastián is the capital, he left the Basque Country at 18, living in Madrid for three years and then London for a decade, before returning to the Basque Country. He now lives in Gros, which he describes as the “hipster, cool, surfer neighbourhood of Donostia”.

His first involvement with the organisers of DSS 2016 was way back in 2010, when La Saisera (The Gravy Boat), a company he founded with a couple of friends, collaborated to launch Musika Parkean (Music in the Park), a series of music festivals aimed at utilising San Sebastián’s previously ignored public parks; there are now six concerts every month between April and September every year.

For DSS 2016, Dorronsoro’s new company, Platypus Labs, has organised On Appétit, a Lighthouse of Life initiative that will see 10 European chefs hosted for a week by Basque chefs. “The project is an exchange of gastronomic culture between the Basque region and other European regions,” says Dorronsoro. “As a result, On Appétit will enable a series of recipes to be developed that will merge local and foreign ingredients, techniques and recipes. We would like the region to evolve to a more diverse, multicultural gastronomic culture.”

Dorronsoro has high hopes for DSS 2016. “The political violence made [people living in] this society narrow-minded and fearful of being seen as different. The most important thing DSS 2016 is doing is simply acknowledging that this is part of our culture. We cannot ignore it or change the past, but we can and should talk about it and work hard to ensure it can’t happen again. As a consequence of this, I think Donostiarras, the people of San Sebastián, will be more tolerant of difference and therefore more culturally rich.”



**TXEMA GARAY**  
PRESIDENT OF CLUB  
VASCO DE CAMPING

**“WE WANT THE WHOLE COUNTRY TO BE PART OF THE EVENT. IT’S AN OPPORTUNITY FOR US TO SHOW EVERYBODY THE RICHNESS OF OUR GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE”**

Fifty-four-year-old Txema Garay has been a member of Club Vasco de Camping, a mountaineering and skiing society, since he was 15. “The contact with nature motivates me, feeling how vulnerable we as human beings are, how insignificant we are in comparison to the magnificence of nature,” he says. “It’s also the feeling of freedom and other sensations like the fatigue in my legs, the cold wind in my face, the rain, the heat, the snow – it’s magical, challenging both body and soul.”

Now President of the club, Garay is responsible for organising 2016 Bidea, a Lighthouse of Life project with the tagline “culture is made by walking”. A celebration of trekking, which Garay explains has been an important activity in Basque society for more than a century, this continuous 600km trek across the Basque Country will take place between March 27 and October 30. The trek, which will incorporate other cultural activities such as theatre productions, musical performances and museum visits, will be split into 32 separate stages of varying degrees of difficulty, with the baton being passed on from one group of hikers to the next each Sunday.

“The aim of the cultural walks is to pass the baton representing the European Capital of Culture through the Basque Country,” says Garay. “We want the whole country to be part of the event. It is an opportunity for us to show everybody the richness of our geography and culture.”

And the legacy of DSS 2016? “Learning to live together, to be more tolerant – and that is a very valuable legacy,” says Garay.



**FERNANDO BERNUÉS**  
FILM AND THEATRE DIRECTOR

**“HOPEFULLY THIS EVENT WILL HELP STIMULATE PEOPLE’S CURIOSITY, INSPIRING THEM TO BE MORE OPEN MINDED AND ALSO AWARE OF OTHER PEOPLE’S REALITIES”**

Fernando Bernués has worked in both film and theatre. He has directed feature films, including *Kutidazu bidea*, *Ixabel* (2006) and *Mugaldekoak* (2010), as well as numerous successful theatre productions.

Bernués was responsible for cultural management of DSS 2016 for a year during the build-up to the event, and has directed a production of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the Lighthouse of Voices. The play opens on June 21, the start of the summer solstice, and will run until July 24, with each performance taking place in front of an audience of 300 people, who will be invited to participate in the drama, playing the part of guests at Hermia and Demetrius’s wedding, a key scene in the play.

The setting for the play will be Cristina Enea Park, which Bernués describes as a place of “extraordinary beauty”. “It is a public space that should be appreciated more from a cultural point of view and utilised more by the people of Donostia who, despite living close by, haven’t got to know it.”

Bernués has been working in Madrid and Barcelona for the last five months, but says that he chooses to live in San Sebastián because it is a city he understands. “It has a stimulating beauty – it gives you balance, pleasure and sensuality. Its relatively small size encourages intellectual and artistic engagement. Sometimes it is less cosmopolitan than other cities, but it has a substantial cultural offering.”

He hopes that DSS 2016 will stimulate people’s curiosity, inspiring them to be more open minded and aware of other people’s realities. “The debate that is going to be started will make us rethink and go into great depth on a range of important topics.”



**OLATZ PRAT**  
COORDINATOR OF THE  
FORUM THEATRE PROJECT

**“WE ALL HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY AND A CAPACITY WHEN IT COMES TO PEACE BUILDING, IT’S NOT ONLY THE POLITICIANS’ TASK”**

Olatz Prat lives in the town of Azpeitia in the province of Gipuzkoa, 40km from San Sebastian, where she was born. A former journalist, she currently works for the Baketik Foundation, where she is responsible for coordinating the Forum Theatre project for DSS 2016.

Forum Theatre is based on Brazilian director Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, which Prat explains “advocates theatre as a tool to address the feelings, contradictions and archetypes provoked by violence and social unrest.” During regular two-hour sessions throughout 2016 audiences will watch a six-act play entitled *What About You?* which deals with the recent social and political troubles faced by Basque society by focusing on everyday scenarios. The play is interactive, with audience participation encouraged. “The idea is the empower people to change those things that don’t work in their lives, so they feel capable of resolving and overcoming both personal and social problems,” says Prat.

Forum Theatre, a Lighthouse of Peace project that is open to anybody who wants to participate, will focus on personal relationships and promote tolerance, respect, empathy and communication. “We all have a responsibility and a capacity when it comes to peace building, it’s not only the politicians’ task” says Prat. “This project aims to give people the tools they require to build peace - to create a multiplier effect, spreading the seeds of social harmony, while remembering that each individual must take care of their own garden.”

Prat says San Sebastian has changed for the better in the last decade, but she worries about the city transforming into a showcase for tourists at the expense of local culture, losing its unique Basque identity. “I hope DSS 2016 uses this opportunity to present local and regional [Basque] culture, showing the whole world that there is a small country in the corner of Europe that is proud of being unique, and that one of the oldest cultures on the continent is still alive.”



**KOLDO ALMANDOZ**  
FILMMAKER

**“THE RISK IS OF CONFUSING TOURISM AND CULTURE, AS OUR POLITICIANS DO ALL THE TIME. THE RISK IS BECOMING BARCELONA - A DECORATIVE CITY FOR TOURISTS”**

A filmmaker and co-founder and editor of San Sebastián art and culture magazine *The Balde* (thebalde.net), Koldo Almandoz recently presented his film *Sípo Phantasma* (Ghost Ship) at the International Film Festival Rotterdam.

He was chosen by the organisers of DSS 2016 to contribute to *Kalebegiak*, a feature-length film comprised of shorter works by 12 filmmakers. *Kalebegiak* is a Lighthouse of Voices project. Almandoz is also artistic director of *Speaking Walls*.

*Narciso*, the short film Almandoz has produced for *Kalebegiak*, is the story of a citizen of San Sebastián - the Narciso of the title - who travels back in time from 2066 to visit the city in 2016. The story is based on that of the mythological figure Narcissus and is a comment on the high regard in which Almandoz believes San Sebastián holds itself. “It is a city in love with itself,” he says. “The whole project [DSS 2016], *Kalebegiak* included, is pretty narcissistic.”

The setting for *Narciso* is Paseo Nuevo, a promenade wrapped around Mount Urgull, a prominent tree covered hill in the centre of San Sebastián. “I love that part of San Sebastián, where the city meets the sea,” says Almandoz. “It’s a place where the city finds its limit but you can escape anywhere.”

Almandoz, who was born in San Sebastián, says he has to travel a lot for work but the city is the perfect place to come back to. “Even though it’s quite conservative in many respects, there’s a rich cultural life and you can live next to nature,” he adds. “There is a big [cultural] offering. The risk is saturation on one hand and on the other falling into the trap of confusing tourism and culture, as our politicians do all the time. The risk is becoming Barcelona - a decorative city for tourists.”



Emirates serves two destinations in Spain – Madrid and Barcelona, with two non-stop daily services to both cities. There’s also a daily A380 service to each city, and starting June 1 both flights to Barcelona will be operated by the flagship double-decker aircraft.