

Take a bite of the Basque Country

Small snacks win big in San Sebastián,
discovers **SARAH MARSHALL** on a tour of
pintxos bars in the northeastern Spanish gem

Booking ahead to reserve a restaurant table is commonplace, but arriving early to secure a slice of tortilla baffles me. Clearly Nestor's potato-layered snack is the best in town, otherwise my guide, Eskerne Falcon, wouldn't have us queuing up at midday to order a slice for a strict 1pm time slot.

Eating is serious business in San Sebastián, which is a European Capital of Culture for 2016. Boasting more Michelin stars per square metre than Paris, the northern Spanish coastal town has a reputation for fine dining. But it's the lively culture of crawling between boisterous bars in the old town to sample pintxos (a Basque version of tapas) that brought me here.

Shunning the airport, I took an overnight Brittany Ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao, an hour from San Sebastián, arriving in time for lunch.

There are 200 bars crammed into the old town, serving what started in the 1950s as a small snack to encourage garrulous men to spend more time – and money – in the bars arguing about politics and football. Creations range from bread and jamón to elaborate Dalí-esque works of art.

"Whatever you do, just order one pintxo at a time – along with a drink," advises Eskerne, warning that bar-

tenders will try to pile tourists' plates high. The Basque-born founder of Discover San Sebastián started her food tours after she found herself constantly coming to the aid of foreigners in bars. She clearly has the best recommendations. At La Cepa she waves aside a plate of anchovies and demands a fresh order. When a plump, pert sliver of oily fish arrives on warm bread, I can see her point.

One of San Sebastián's most popular pintxos is a Gilda, named after Rita Hayworth's 1940s femme fatale. We have a chance to make our own at the bustling Atari Gastroteka, stacking green peppers, anchovies and olives onto cocktail sticks as patriotic Basque music triumphs through speakers. It's accompanied by a glass of Txakoli, a fruity local white wine.

If substituting pintxos for lunch, you'll need about six bites (approx. €2 each) but after six glasses of wine you might want to downsize to a zurito – a thimble-sized glass of beer.

For dessert we have an eggy, well-baked cheesecake from La Viña, where shelves are stacked high with its homemade star product.

San Sebastián's foodie credentials are linked largely to its position between mountain and sea, but it's

the fabled Gastronomic Societies that have provided a breeding ground for the city's wealth of Michelin-starred chefs. Members meet to cook dinners for each other, although only men are allowed to exercise their skills in the kitchen.

There are, though, plenty of other affordable restaurants, such as Ni Neu, where a six-course tasting menu with cocktail and wine costs just €38.50. A creamy rice with baby squid cooked in a pan punches far above its humble starter status.

With too many temptations available, it's a wonder residents stay in shape. But as I stroll along the Belle Epoque promenade overlooking the crescent-shaped La Concha beach, I realise health and fitness are considered as important as food. Kayakers paddle around the bay, while runners sprint along the pavement. I settle for pampering in the La Perla beachfront spa, dipping into Jacuzzis, jet pools and an underwater gym.

Two old ladies run out of the sauna, along the sandy beach hand in hand, and dive into the sea. Most people are still in winter coats and I shudder at the thought of what temperature the water might be. Whether eating, drinking or playing sport, Basque people are a determined bunch.

Brittany Ferries operates a cruise ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao from £670 return for a car plus two passengers in mid-season, including en-suite cabin accommodation both ways. Visit brittany-ferries.co.uk Visit spain.info and ineedspain.com



*Snack time:
Pintxos is
the Basque
Country's
answer to
tapas*



*Bay city
strollers:
exercise is
as important
as food
in San
Sebastián*