

PLACES

Killarney has a vintage tradition for holidaymakers — and it's totally deserved, says Fran Power. Travel, Page 22



Awakening the senses in San Sebastian



San Sebastian's food and beauty will take your breath away

SAN SEBASTIAN Hilary A White

EVEN by our standards it was obscene. Meals slotted into the day like playing cards. Breakfast and brunch become separated by a gap of half an hour or so — and even the word “supper” is decommissioned by night two of our brief jaunt in San Sebastian because it implies a start and a finish to the nocturnal eating.

To put things in context, the glorious little haven of the Basque coastline has a gastronomy culture unlike any other on the great Iberian Peninsula, save perhaps for Barcelona or Lisbon. Much is made of it having the highest density of Michelin-star restaurants in the world but that's not a reason to visit.

This is the realm of the pintxo and the tapas, the small dish and the finger food, designed to be wolfed down on the fly or savoured at a barstool with a glass of something. There are no rules really, except that you take your food seriously and embrace this culinary culture with both hands.

That person inside you who is a liability at any breakfast buffet? He lasts one day before you give him a stern talking to.

The first time you wander into

a pintxos taverna down a narrow street in the Old Town of San Sebastian, the first of many Pavlovian responses occurs as you witness counters crammed with delicacy upon delicacy.

You enter your first bar and proceed to horse down three servings of croquetas and two king prawn skewers with a glass of cold beer. And maybe some anchovies. And olives. Why not. Oh, tortilla de patatas, can't visit Iberia without some of that or indeed the local black pudding, just to be sure.

Next thing, you're groaning in a cab, clutching your belly and begging to be taken back to your hotel room to sleep for 12 hours. Your first night in the food capital of Europe is over and you have visited one establishment out of hundreds.

Not us. We don't have much time and must advance on this mythologised foodie Mecca with precision and guile. Little and often, is the rule. One pintxo, one glass of txakoli (a lightly effervescent dry white) or tart Basque cider per taverna.

Most of the proudest premises have a signature dish that is their way of carving out an identity in the maze of eateries lining the city's narrow streets and barrios. Foie gras with white beans. Black pudding served on a sliver of roasted red pepper. Squid with chestnut puree, and octopus in a simple olive oil and citrus juice. A mushroom tartelette

‘This glorious little haven of the Basque coastline has a gastronomy culture unlike any other...’



Try the pintxos in Bar Nestor — they're among the world's best

with pine nuts. All prepared in the kitchens backstage and served to you where you stand at the bar or at your table.

Or in the case of the chuleta at Bar Nestor, brought out to you on

a sizzling hot plate. Sprinkled liberally with salt flakes and served with nothing but a platter of sliced fresh tomatoes in olive oil and some roasted peppers, this thick, butter-tender steak brought us close to tears.

And then there is the city's great aphrodisiacal appetiser, tailor made to get the juices flowing with a kick-starting combo of green olive, guindilla pepper and anchovy. This is the mighty “gilda”, named for its ability to “awaken the senses” as thoroughly as Rita Hayworth's titular Hollywood sex siren.

Such is the Basque propensity for red-blooded appetites, but there is more to the city than just succulence and sexual metaphor. There is the weirdly soothing horseshoe of La Concha, the beach on which the locals of Donostia (to use the Basque title for the city) swim, stroll, or jog off last night's excesses at any number of the private gastronomy clubs dotted around the city (accessible by invitation only — and we came tantalisingly close).

Put on the map in 1845 following a visit by Queen Isabella II (whose doctors advised her to take the waters there to treat a skin condition), San Sebastian surged to popularity when that royal nod highlighted it as a wellness bolthole from the summer scorch of regal metropolises further south such as Madrid or Seville.

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TAKE TWO Top attractions



Pintxos tour

San Sebastian is unequalled for its gourmet culture, and a four-hour tour of this most walkable of cities with a series of delicious pit-stops is the best way to acquaint yourself with this foodie wonderland.



Hondarribia

Perched a stone's throw from the French border, this quiet medieval town is a gorgeous day-trip just minutes up the coast by bus from San Sebastian. Beautiful architecture and rustic charm combine.

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Up here, on the lips of the Bay of Biscay, we are met on our first day with horizontal rain and gunmetal skies that would put Ballyconneely to shame. Day two is mild and overcast. Day three, T-shirts. And then back to cloud cover.

We are told this is typical April weather and all is as it should be in a city that has Spaniards and the rest of the world clambering to buy and rent property, making it an increasingly expensive place to live, we are told. While there is some comfort in hearing that Dublin is not the only spot enduring a housing crisis, most of our mental energy goes into feelings of envy about actually being able to claim a foothold on somewhere elegant, varied, calmly robust, and spotlessly clean.

Leaving the pedestrianised, tree-lined shopping district around San Martin, we are seconds later in the Old Town. Here, the period architecture is in splendid condition for the simple fact that most of it was rebuilt in the early 19th Century following a terrible siege that saw British and Portuguese troops lay waste to Donostia and her innocence.

We slip through the narrow lanes and alleys, past the warm sweet vapours of bustling bakeries and tavernas busy decorating their bar counters with floral arrangements of pintxo platters for the morning ahead.

From there, we exit out the back of Old Town and hike up along the network of pathways draped around Urgull, the eastern of the two headlands that hug La Concha's crescent of sand. Atlantic waves crash right down below us against the rocks, the thrill of watching their foamy explosions a popular spectator sport with locals.

Our backs to the sea, we stand at the Napoleonic fort at the summit and face south, looking over the terracotta rooftops so often symbolic



And what's so wrong with succulence anyway?

of a successful escape to continental Europe. We see the golden sandstone square of Gipuzkoa, a small and swoonsome garden plaza that feels more beautiful and contained than anything in Salamanca or Paris. It was here that we slurped down torrijas, a particularly moist and decadent take on French Toast.

We see the Avenida Libertad, a main artery where we ducked in for an artisan cafe cortado before crossing the central Urumea river over to the neighbourhood of Gros and its promise of mostly locals-only pintxo joints.

Over to the east of the city is another beach, the Playa de Zurriola, where the surfing community of Gros come to wax, paddle, and be achingly cool (as is the wont of surfers the world over).

Wasn't it there that yesterday's second lunch was interrupted by a few trotting past us down the street, wet-suited, bare-footed and board under arm? Sounds about right.

To the west, we have the bay of La Concha and the small (and until recently) uninhabited island of Santa Clara lounging between the headlands

'There's more to San Sebastian than succulence and sexual metaphor...'

and daring cocky swimmers to stroke out to it. You can just make out the Palacio Miramar looking back at us — Isabella's quarters when she was reviving here all those moons ago.

On the bus later that final morning, it becomes clear to us that we'd been unable to look upon the various zones of San Sebastian we had come to know during our four days without our bellies smiling nostalgically.

Our excursion to the nearby border town of Hondarribia with its magnificent fortified centre will surely offer distraction and allow us to break the incessant gluttony that has soundtracked this holiday.

It takes an hour walking through this magical little hamlet before the internal nudges begin. The 10th Century castle (now a four-star hotel) does resemble a slice of torrija in a certain light. The cobbled streets have the sheen of an inky squid risotto, wouldn't you say?

Noshy noise keeps barging into our cultural saunter before we "accidentally" find ourselves in Hondarribia's gastronomy quarter, where fierce competition among a community of precocious young chefs has made the town a culinary destination in its own right.

Oh well. At least we tried.

GETTING THERE



Hilary White flew with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) from Dublin to Biarritz in France then took a direct bus from Biarritz Airport to San Sebastian (about 40 minutes).

■ For information about bus transfers from Biarritz Airport to San Sebastian, see www.biarritz.aeroport.fr/en

■ Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) offers flights from Dublin to Bilbao (bus transfer to San Sebastian takes just over an hour).

■ The four-star Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra is situated on the waterfront of San Sebastian's La Concha Beach. See www.hlondres.com/en

■ For further information, see www.sansebastianturismo.com or www.spain.info

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