

# San Sebastián

Sun, sea and (Michelin) stars — it's a short break on a plate

Eat your heart out: the Baroque Santa María basilica in the Old Town; fine fare at the three Michelin-starred Arzak; La Concha beach and Monte Igueldo; pouring Txakoli wine at Bar Goiz-Arzi

**Because:** The Basque city is easily Spain's best place for eating and drinking, across the board, from down-to-earth bars to upmarket Michelin stars.

**How:** Sometimes a solid-gold reputation can do a place a disservice — expectations can inflate, and disappointments result. Not so for San Sebastián (Donostia to the Basques), which really is as phenomenal as all those salivating foodies would have you believe. It doesn't hurt that it's such a friendly, good-looking place: elegant Belle Epoque boulevards, Art Deco lampposts, siren sweeps of sandy beach. But take all that away and your weekend would be just as delicious.

The lack of direct flights from the UK might put some off. But it's an easy

75-minute bus-ride from Bilbao airport's front door (£15 one-way) to San Sebastián's new terminus, far more central than the old one. Make your first food stop straight from the bus. *Pintxo* bar Hidalgo 56 (hidalgo56.com), 10 minutes away, has a typical bar-top spread of terrifically inventive little dishes for an average £3 a pop (much the same as in all the town's *pintxo* bars). Get in your first *gilda*, the town's signature nibble of a green olive, pickled guindilla pepper and white anchovy, speared together on cocktail sticks.

Offload bags at Pensión Amaiur (pensionamaiur.com, doubles from £71, B&B), a bargain guesthouse in the heart of the 19th-century Old Town's top *pintxo*-bar territory, or closer to the beach at Hostal Alemana (hostalalemana.com; doubles from £124, room-only).

*Pintxo*-hunting in the Old Town is easy. Maybe sit on the sunny steps of Santa María basilica with something from Atari (atarigastroteka.com) opposite, or order a pig's ear at La Cuchara de San Telmo (Santa Korda Kalea 4). But a tour will give you a shortcut to the best, and Mimo's (mimofood.com; from £97) not only has the best insider tips — what time Bar Nestor (Arrandegi Kalea 11) serves its sell-out unctuous tortilla, say, or which bar does the best sizzling prawns (Bar Goiz Arzi, Fermin Calbeton Kalea 4) — but might also provide an 'in' to one of the city's private dining societies (like working men's clubs, with cooking instead of darts; they really love their food here).

Set aside an afternoon or evening, and some savings (though less than you'd need for Berkshire's Fat Duck), for the town's Michelin-rated wizardry. San Sebastián has 17 stars, including a trio of three-stars; Try the father-and-daughter-run Arzak (arzak.info) — its eight-course tasting menu (£209) might include egg with tomato candy and *pozole* corn.

The region's mountains, sea and forests all contribute to the city's well-stocked larders. Upgrade your own with hard Idiazabal cheese, vac-packed Ortiz anchovies, lightly sparkling Txakoli wine and herby liqueur patxaran, all from La Bretxa market (cclabretxa.com) or nearby shop, Aitor Lasa (aitorlasa.com).

Summer's best, with its appetite-stimulating swims off La Concha beach, or surf lessons on wavier Zurriola. In less clement weather (that lush, produce-rich countryside gets watered plenty), take a bracing walk round (or up) the sculpture-punctuated headland Monte Urgull, then dive into a *sidrería* for desert-dry cider from the barrel and warming plates of cod or beef. Best of all, there are no must-do sights — nothing to interrupt the serious business of eating.

### Three more like this

- **Segovia:** The capital of ancient Castile is a city of churches and the world's finest roast suckling pig.
- **Logroño:** Rioja's charming capital city is unsurprisingly good for wine, but also tapas crawls, especially along Calle del Laurel.
- **León:** This is the 2018 culinary capital of Spain, in recognition of its fantastic local meats, cheeses, roasted peppers — and its huge number of bars.

Liz Edwards



# Girona

The Catalan city is pint-sized perfection — just made for mooching

**Because:** History, art, gastronomy and sunny-square people-watching are bound up in one neat package.

**How:** Kiss the lion's bum, locals say, and you'll be sure to return to Girona. But you can leave the medieval big cat on its stone pillar to the day-trippers up from Barcelona and the Costa Brava — they'll depart wanting more. Come for a couple of nights and the truth is you may not need to rush back. You won't have exhausted all options — far from it. It's simply that walkably compact Girona, with its medieval lanes and handsome modern streets, is the Mary Poppins of 48-hour city breaks: practically perfect in every way.

Scoot into the centre on the 30-minute airport bus (£5) and you're a couple of minutes' walk from modern Hotel Carlemany (hotelcarlemany.girona.com; doubles from £88, B&B); 10 minutes further is boutique-with-pool Hotel Nord 1901 (nord1901.com; doubles from £85, room-only). Don't stay in the Old Town, across the Onyar river; it's charming to get lost in, but a pain to navigate with luggage.

Most tour groups visit Girona before lunch, especially at weekends, so Friday afternoon is your golden moment to hit its star attraction, the splendidly imposing *Game of Thrones*-featured cathedral (catedraldegirona.cat; £6). Skip the nearby Arab Baths, another *GOT* location, to wander longer in the shady Alemany gardens and sigh over rooftop-and-mountain views from the medieval Torre Gironella and city walls.

Join Girona folk easing into their weekend with glasses of *vermut* at people-watching pavement tables in the colonnaded Plaça de la Independència. Save corner-spot Casa Marieta (casamarieta.com; mains about £11) for a trad lunch of chicken and langoustines another day. Instead, go grazing and tippling around the easy-reach, old- and new-town joints, such as lively El Vermutet Can Gombau (9 Carrer Bonaventura Carreras) and romantic Café le Bistrot (lebistrot.cat).

Intersperse the rest of your time with lots of wandering and alfresco coffees. Make sure you do a market browse — in Mercat del Lleó, look for

El Petit Productor, which sells the Más Farró cheese served at local three-Michelin-starred El Celler de Can Roca. Also, take in a museum. There's art, cinema and Jewish history to choose from, but most enticing is the Casa Masó, the gorgeous arts-and-crafts birthplace of architect Rafael Masó and the only one of Girona's iconic riverfront houses you can visit (rafaelmaso.org; £5; book ahead).

You'll also want a smart dinner — try Divinum (dvnvm.com; mains about £22) or Cal Ros (calros-restaurant.com; mains about £19). And at some point, an ice cream — everyone goes for the Can Roca family's Rocambolesc (rocambolesc.com), but it's pricey, with long queues. Duck round the corner instead to La Bombonera (labombonera.cat). And there's your weekend. Practically perfect.

### Three more like this

- **Mahón:** Menorca's laid-back capital has boutique hotels, handsome Brit-influenced streets and port views.
- **Bilbao:** Go for the Guggenheim modern art museum, the Old Town and its riverside walks.
- **A Coruña:** For its Roman lighthouse, urban beaches and Spain's finest *pulpo*.

Liz Edwards

The stuff of fantasy: a view over the riverbed and the cathedral of Girona, as seen in *Game of Thrones*