

Travel

THE BIG WEEKEND

Surf the bay, stroll the markets, then embark on the mother of all *pintxo* crawls in Spain’s best beach city, says *Liz Edwards*

Spain does a lovely line in beachy cities, and the best of them all is San Sebastian, the *belle époque* Basque beauty an hour east of Bilbao. This place is all about seriously seductive curves: the wide, rounded W of sweeping sandy bays; the swelling waves; the perky hills. When you’re not making the most of those contours, you’ll be filling out your own. San Sebastian (Donostia to the locals) was foodie before the word was a twinkle in other cities’ eyes, so top of the to-do list is indulging.

FRIDAY
Late morning

Bite the bullet and take the crack-of-dawn flight – you’ll roll into town in good time for lunch, rather than mid-afternoon, when everyone’s sleeping it off. From the bus station, walk a few minutes east to one of the city’s best bargains, the set lunch at trendy concrete and wood **Restaurante Rita**. For £20, you’ll get three excellent courses – Tudela artichokes with romesco

and pork, say – with half a bottle of wine thrown in (restauranterita.com). Squiffily content? Good. Now take the art deco-style Zurriola bridge over the River Urumea. It will deliver you into the **Parte Vieja**, or old town, but do pause halfway – sea air from one direction, mountain views from the other. The Parte Vieja, a close-knit grid of yellow stone bounded by river, sea and the Jesus-topped Monte Urgull, is the heart of the *pintxo* action – counters in dozens of bars are heaped with this tapas-as-art-form – but you’ll come back to that this evening. For now, wander past gents’ hat shops (trad Basque berets a speciality) through the arcaded Plaza de la Constitucion, emerging on the other side onto **La Concha**. This wide, sandy bay, which swoops beguilingly round to Monte Igeldo, 1½ miles away, is where Donostiaras go for their constitucionals – swimming, walking the dog, scrawling 10ft-tall messages in the sand. Join them. You *could* have a handmade *txurrón* ice cream, made with local milk, from the seafront institution **Arnoldo** (£1.70;



ILLUSTRATION BY CLARE COLLINS AND DANIELA ALTERI

SAN SEBASTIAN

arnoldoheladeria.com), but remember you’ll need an appetite for later.

Evening

Tonight’s *txikiteo* – there’s an official word for a *pintxo* crawl – in the Parte Vieja will be memorable. First, *pintxo* etiquette: don’t load up a giant plate from the bar-top displays. Choose one per drink, two if you must, then move on. Try the prawn skewers at **Goiz Argi** (£2.20, Fermin Calbeton 4); the mushroom and cheese tartlet in the ground-floor bar at **Casa Urola** (£2; casaurolajartetxea.es); a classic anchovy-pepper-olive *gilda* from newbie **Tambo** (£1.80; Arrandegi 2); and the pig’s ear at **La Cuchara de San Telmo** (from £3.60; Santa Korda 4). Drink like a local: pucker-dry cider or slightly sparkling white txakoli wine, both about £2 and poured splashily from a height. Now bed. It’s been a long day.

SATURDAY
Morning

Start amid the headscarved and bereted locals at **La Bretxa** market, in the Parte Vieja – buy pickled guindilla peppers and tinned anchovies to take home. Look out for the giant clock, once used in tuna auctions. Now it’s back east to San Sebastian’s second beach, **Zurriola**. Wilder, wavier and altogether more rad, this is where the city’s surfers hang out. Fling yourself into

the spirit – and, indeed, the Atlantic – and hire a board or take a lesson. It’s exhilarating, even if you’re, ahem, terrible. **Hawaii** has enthusiastic English-speaking teachers; a 1½-hour lesson for two costs £49pp, including gear hire (hawaiidonostia.com).

Afternoon

Hungry now? It’s time for more *pintxos*. Gros, the district behind Zurriola, has a good few bars, so lunch is at hand. At **Bodega Donostiarra**, order a fresh tortilla (from £2; bodegadonostiarra.com); at the nearby **Hidalgo 56**, try the “volcano” of *morcilla*, Spanish black pudding (from £2; hidalgo56.com); and at the more modern **Bergara**, have the mushroom and prawn *txalupa* (£2.60; pinchosbergara.es). Time for some culture. The **San Telmo Museum** explores Basque society and has convent-meets-concrete architecture; the best bits are the huge, atmospheric church, hung with historic scenes and local designer Balenciaga’s medieval hat collection (£5; santelmomuseoa.eus). If time allows, walk up the leafy slopes of nearby Monte Urgull to share Jesus’s views of bay, beaches and Atlantic-crashed coast. Before you eat anything else, learn how to cook it: **Mimo**’s late-afternoon One Bite classes are designed for the appetite- and time-poor; chef Agus will have you making Bodega Donostiarra-worthy tortilla in no time (from £60pp; mimofood.com).



GETTING THERE

Fly to Bilbao with British Airways or easyJet, then catch a bus: they run hourly from outside arrivals. It takes just over an hour to get to San Sebastian (£15; pesa.net).

WHERE TO STAY

Design-conscious newcomer **Room Mate Gorka** is in a sweet spot on a pretty square, handy for beaches and the Parte Vieja (doubles from £132; room-matehotels.com). **Pension Amaïur**, in the oldest building in the Parte Vieja, is a bargain (doubles from £50; pensionamaïur.com).

Liz Edwards was a guest of Room Mate Gorka and sansebastianurismoa.eus

Evening

London has one Michelin star per 94,000 inhabitants. Little old San Sebastian? One per 10,000. The city’s food obsession cannot be overstated. So, tonight, mop up 30,000 people’s worth of stars in one go with a blowout dinner. **Akelarre** might win at lunchtime for its cliff-top sea views (10-course tasting menu £205; akelarre.net), but our pick is the father-and-daughter-run **Arzak**: masterful, playful and rooted in local ingredients from sea and mountain (11-course tasting menu £205; arzak.es). Past midnight, dance it off with live music at **Dabadaba** (tickets from £9; dabadabass.com).

SUNDAY
Morning

Some might head for the spa at Akelarre’s hotel, but for proper therapeutic, no-nonsense thalassotherapy, book a session at **La Perla**. It’s right on La Concha beach, so you’ll have cracking views as you wrinkle under pummelling jets and make use of the sauna, steam room, cold pool and underwater gym (from £16.50; la-perla.net). One last *pintxo* for the road? The *secreto ibérico* pork from **Biarritz**, just along the front, is a fine choice (£4.30; restaurante-biarritz.com). Have a final drink to wash it down – make it the herby-sloe *patxaran*, a local digestif.

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