

## A weekend in . . . San Sebastian, Spain

From Michelin-starred restaurants to hidden-away bars, there is amazing food at every turn

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La Concha beach, San Sebastian  
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there are so many we want to try in a weekend. However, this is too good. The anchovy on toast tastes meatier and less salty than any I've tried before, the slice of roasted green pepper underneath it a perfect foil for the dense, flavour-packed fish. Wash it down with a glass of the local spritzzy, zesty white called txakoli (pronounced chacoli) and you're in food heaven.

If you haven't guessed, I'm in San Sebastian, in the Basque region of Spain, where they eat pintxos instead of tapas. The Basques will tell you that the tradition of pintxos started long before tapas, in the 15th century. They move from one bar to the next, downing a pintxo or two in each, in what is known as the txikiteo (pronounced chikiteo). And the pintxos bars in Parte Vieja, the old quarter, are worth the trip alone.

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You can do a pintxos tour with a guide, who will steer you around the narrow streets and elbow their way through the throng. Or you can go it alone. Our hotel, the Maria Cristina, offers both options, with a handy map that highlights the best places. It even offers pintxos cookery lessons in its basement cookery school (I love the fact that this grande dame of a hotel filled in its swimming pool to make room for this).

However, I can't imagine you'd find anything mediocre here even if you did choose bars randomly — there are Michelin stars galore. Of the eight restaurants in Spain with three Michelin stars, three are here — Arzak, Akelarre and Martín Berasategui.



A dish at Martin Berasategui's restaurant

You can splurge on gourmet meals then enjoy a bargain feast of pintxos, so it sort of balances out. Or that's what we tell ourselves the next day as we tuck in at Ni Neu. The restaurant is owned by the same folks who have San Sebastian's only two Michelin-starred restaurant, Mugaritz, and you can expect polish and innovation on the chef Mikel Gallo's €29.50 (£25) menu — I'm still salivating as I think about his baby squid rice in a squid ink crepe.

We walk off lunch on the nearby wide sandy beach, one of three impressive beaches that dominate San Sebastian, and watch

People have been holidaying in San Sebastian since the middle of the 19th century, and many more are set to come, to judge from the 14 hotels scheduled to open here by the end of next year. It started life as a fishing village and, after a chequered history, was reborn as a resort thanks to the Spanish royal family, who were fans of its restorative waters. Queen Isabella II chose the city as her resort of choice. The European upper classes followed, and along with them came handsome Belle Époque mansions.

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However, if you're expecting a mansion to house Arzak, you can think again. We walked twice past this humble building concealing a legendary restaurant. It came to fame under its third-generation owner, the chef Juan Mari Arzak, and is now run by his daughter, Elena, who also oversees the London outpost, Ametsa with Arzak Instruction at the Halkin hotel.

The nine-course €205 tasting menu is a dazzling romp through Elena's unfettered imaginings and through the area's sparkling produce, which she generously shares information about as she works the tables during service. "If I had to choose one pintxos, then it would be the Gilda at Ganbara. I also love ventresca with a tomato salsa in the summer. And kokotxas al pil-pil — it lies at the heart of Basque cooking."

We pounce on Ganbara that night, muscling our way to the bar to order the Gilda, a pintxo named after Rita Hayworth's character in the film of the same name. It's a satisfying

It is a 25-minute cab ride (or €3 bus journey) to the Basque fishing village of Getaria up the coast. It's famous for its fish, or rather the way it cooks fish, in restaurants called asadores. Sole or highly prized turbot are held in a long-handled wire clamp and cooked over charcoal on grill bars that are raised and lowered by the turning of a wheel. It might look easy, but it's not, and the parillero (grill chef) is paid handsomely.

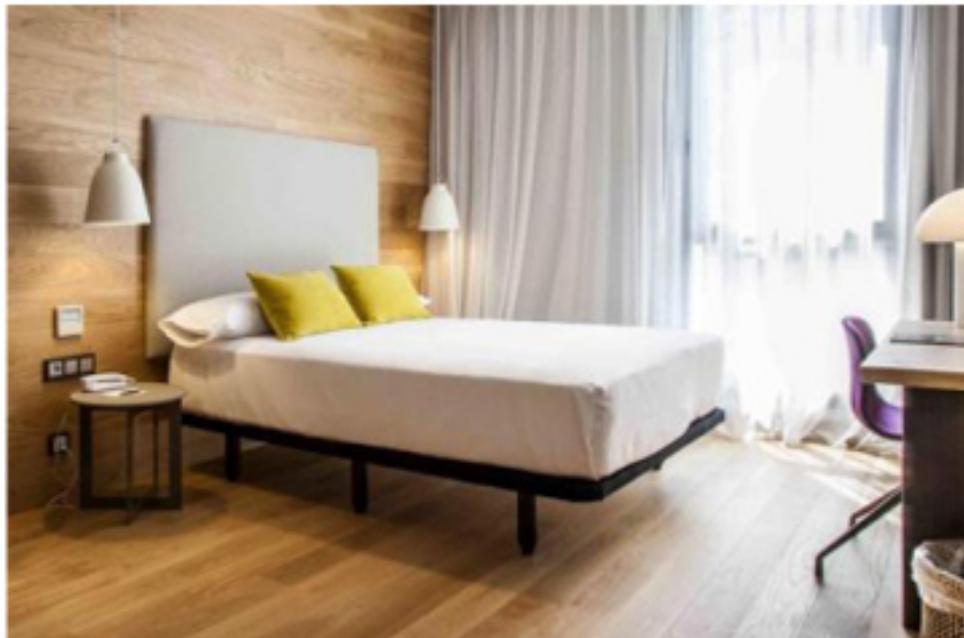
Elkano is considered the best asador in town and has been awarded a Michelin star. I will never look at fish in the same way again – we relished nibbling on bits that we didn't know that you could eat, including the kokotxa (jowls or throat). It's delicately flavoured and pleasingly gelatinous, and is served two ways at Elkano, chargrilled or with the region's well-known pil-pil sauce.

If we hadn't spent so long savouring this, we would have had time to visit the Cristóbal Balenciaga museum, dedicated to the fashion designer born here. However, it was a toss-up between that and anchovies – and the anchovies won.

We made tracks to Maisor, an artisanal anchovy shop in the harbour, where we watched women painstakingly fillet each fish before packing them into glass jars that were then filled with oil. They were well worth the €7 price tag for 40g. Then we headed back up the hill to check out the txakoli at the local winery Gaintza, where the vineyards are within sniffing distance of the sea and which offers tastings and tours.

Incredibly, we find room for more pintxos that night, and get a tad carried away at the innovative A Fuego Negro, with its bold combinations dreamt up by the young chef Santi Sánchez, such as sardine, pineapple and mustard. But then it's scarily easy to get carried away here.

from Heathrow to Bilbao from £79 return. A three-hour pintxos tour with the Discover San Sebastian founder Eskerne Falcón costs €90pp, including food and drink ([discoversansebastian.com](http://discoversansebastian.com))



It's a 25-minute walk to the old town from the Zenit San Sebastian

### **The budget hotel**

Zenit San Sebastian is a stylish, modern hotel slightly off the beaten track in the mostly residential Amara neighbourhood. The stunning roof terrace and 78 chic rooms should make up for the 25-minute walk to the old town. Doubles from £62 (00 34 943 325 325, [sansebastian.zenithoteles.com](http://sansebastian.zenithoteles.com))



There is a cooking school at the Hotel Maria Cristina

### **The luxury hotel**

Hotel Maria Cristina is a stately Belle Époque mansion, the city's only five-star hotel and home to Hollywood stars during the San Sebastian film festival. A highlight is the cooking school and the food shop ([mimofood.com](http://mimofood.com)). B&B doubles from €300 a night (00 34 943 437 600, [hotel-mariacristina.com/en](http://hotel-mariacristina.com/en))