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Basque beauty: San Sebastian at sunset



by DOMINIC MIDGLEY

Eat, drink and make merry in delicious SAN SEBASTIAN

ENTION San Sebastian to foodies and they'll go into rhapsodies over the many culinary delights this Spanish port city has to offer.

But while it has more Michelin stars per capita than any other city in the world, bar Kyoto in Japan, there is much more to it than stomach-expanding munching.

For starters, there's the magnificent vista of the city, set on three beaches, the most impressive of which is the sweeping La Concha, with its mile of fine golden sand.

Walk along La Concha promenade and you'll see dozens of surfers catching the waves that surge in from the Bay of Biscay, although the biggest surfers are off the coast, beneath La Zurriola.

San Sebastian lies on a floodplain between green hills that once enjoyed the protection of the Castillo de la Mota, a fortress whose original ramparts date back to the 15th century.

But it was not until 1845 when Spain's Queen Isabella II visited San Sebastian, in the belief that the healing qualities of its seawater would ease her skin problems, that it became a fashionable resort for Madrid's smart set.

I'm staying just over a mile inland from La Concha at Villa Boro, a meticulously refurbished 29-room boutique hotel, with stylish decor and a fleet of complementary bikes available around the clock.

Apart from the Michelin restaurants, San Seb's old town has dozens of pintxos bars, the Basque version of tapas.

Our guide for the evening is Eskerne Palcon, who holds a Masters in 'gastronomic tourism' from an American university. First stop is Casa Iruja, where we are inducted into the art of cider pouring — and Basque cider is a very different beast to Magners.

It's so flat that to give it some fizz, you need to pour it into the glass from a height of a good 3ft — not a simple procedure even when completely sober. Once, there were 3,000 cider houses in and around San Sebastian, and even today there are 300. Regional cuisine has long been a distinctive feature of Spanish cookery and nowhere has a better sense of local identity than the Basque Country.

For decades, the parliamentary group ETA waged a violent campaign in pursuit of its aim of gaining independence for the region. But it gave up the armed struggle in 2011, and today support for independence hovers below 20 per cent.

San Sebastian also offers a feast of art. There's the Museum On Basque Society

devoted to the works of two Basque sculptors, Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida. The latter was Real Sociedad's goalkeeper in the early 1940s and was shipped to join Real Madrid until a crushing tackle ended his career.

Real a loss was the art world's gain. Chillida went on to become a sculptor of global repute, with pieces on display around the world, including at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and the courtyard of the offices of the World Bank in Washington.

The best place to see his work is not at the Basque Museum but at the Museo Chillida Leizaola, a unique outdoor gallery just 15 minutes outside San Sebastian.

THE biggest of the 40 works on display is the 54-ton monster that was originally destined for a site in the British port of Whitehaven.

In 1965, the city fathers of the Cumbrian town invited Chillida to create something in the spirit of his El Peine Del Viento (Comb Of The Wind) sculpture, which is comprised of three iron pieces embedded in rocks on the coast at San Sebastian.

Chillida duly went to Whitehaven, donned oilskins as protection against the foul weather and identified a site.

But his resulting vision proved a little too edgy for local tastes, with one arguing that his proposed design suggested 'a prototype of the first big replacement'.

Chillida — known as 'the man of iron' — made it anyway and it now stands in the park of the museum he created in the Basque Country.

The work of another local sculptor, Inigo Montolio, occupies pride of place in the centre of the circular lawn at my hotel.

where a single line on the room service breakfast menu tells you everything you need to know about its attention to detail: guests ordering boiled eggs are invited to specify not only how many minutes they would like their eggs to spend in the pan but how many seconds, too.

They certainly take their grub seriously in this part of Spain.

TRAVEL FACTS

DOUBLE rooms at Villa Soro start from £250 (£202 per night B&B, hotelvillasoro.com. British Airways offers direct flights to San Sebastian. Easy Jet and Vueling fly to Bilbao, and so 60 miles away, Brittany Ferries has two sailings weekly from Portsmouth to Bilbao, brittanyferries.co.uk. For more information about San Sebastian, visit sansebastianturismo.es/en/



Luck in: A pintxos bar in the city

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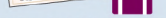
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OPEN-AIR THEATRE
The Four Seasons Hotel in Hampshire is hosting outdoor theatre events. Shake-spere's Much Ado About Nothing takes place on July 25 while Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest is on August 1. Tickets are £20 for adults and £16 for children (ourseasons.com).

CORFU ALL-IN
IKOS Resorts is opening its second property on Corfu in May 2023. Odessa is an all-inclusive, waterfront resort near Corfu Old Town. There will be ten pools, a selection of restaurants and 420 metres of beach for guests. Rooms from £297 per night (ikosresorts.com).

Travel Notes
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