

# BASQUE COUNTRY ROADS

## TAKE ME HOME

Words by **KATE HAMILTON**

Photos by **EMILY AMES**

Two friends on a road trip across the Basque Country – six days, three destinations and countless tasting menus. We began our journey in Bilbao, where the gritty remains of an industrial port brush shoulders with modern architectural innovation. Passing misty green hills we headed for the sea, arriving at what looked like a Games of Thrones set; in reality, an enchanting 10th-century hermitage. In San Sebastián we collected our thoughts, getting lost in the colourful web of Old Town pintxos bars and the rugged beauty of the coast. Finally, we drove to wine country, spending our last days in two unique design hotels and enjoying the rich pickings of the Rioja vineyards nearby.

Visitors today might find that the quiet beauty of the Basque Country belies its own fractious past. Having lived through a history marked by cycles of oppression and dissent, the region is fiercely independent both in spirit and in mind.

This political autonomy translates to the unique culinary culture that has developed here. Thanks to the region's privileged geographic position, local chefs have access to the freshest raw materials from land and sea. With more Michelin stars per capita than any other region in the world, a journey across the Basque Country is the ultimate epicurean pilgrimage.

THE BASQUE COUNTRY  
SPAIN



## First Stop BILBAO



Once upon a time there was a grimy port city that became an international art hotspot overnight. When the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao opened in 1997, a city mired in industrial decay was unexpectedly thrust into the limelight. Almost 20 years on, the eyesores of industry have made way for a refurbished riverside, stylish restaurants and innovative architectural experiments. In spite of this boost to the city's economy and self-esteem, Bilbao has not forgotten where it came from. With great food, impressive art and architecture – but enough rough edges to reflect its old roots – this is where your Basque journey should begin.

### TO STAY

#### HOTEL MIRÓ

Conceived by Catalan fashion designer Antonio Miró, and equidistant from the Guggenheim and the Museo de Bellas Artes, the boutique Hotel Miró is a practical option for artistic exploration of the city. The style of the rooms is modern and minimalist; red cushions offer an accent to the black carpets and the clean white walls embellished by contemporary artwork. The restaurant only serves breakfast – a Spanish-style buffet – but features impressive views of the Guggenheim over the road. After a day of exploring, book into the wellness suite for some R&R or put your feet up in the open-plan sitting room with complimentary tea, coffee and soft drinks.

*Rooms from £90 per night*

### TO EAT

The newly opened **Mr Marvelous** has a quirky interior and a cool, relaxed vibe. Their menu features light bites such as house-marinated smoked salmon, as well as more substantial mains.

For a traditional experience, **Café Iruña** – the city's oldest dining establishment – has acquired a near-mythical status. Pick pintxos from the marble counter or sit in the Moorish-style dining room.

Don't leave Bilbao without eating at Michelin-starred **Mina** – an intimate canal-side restaurant serving earthy, elegant cuisine. The open-plan kitchen is engaging and allows head chef and owner Alvaro Garrido to talk you through his seasonal creations, 90 per cent of which are sourced from the market opposite. The seven-course menu at €55 (£43) is excellent value and changes daily depending on what the market has to offer – possible options include turbot served with swiss chard and slow-cooked beef with chimichurri and watercress juice.

For pintxos, head to Plaza Nueva in the medieval Old Town. The square is lined with lively bars offering the best of the Basque Country's elaborate bar snacks. Try **Victor Montes** and the royal blue **Café Bar Bilbao**.

Eclectic furniture, a burning woodstove and brightly coloured bottles lining the walls make **Colombo** the ideal spot for those in search of international cuisine and innovative design. Try the fried aubergines with hummus and honey, followed by the steak with soy sauce and sesame oil.

### TO DO

Bilbao owes a lot to Canadian-American mastermind Frank O. Gehry. Set on the edge of the Nervión River and guarded by a 12-metre statue of a dog made of flowers, the **Guggenheim Museum** is a captivating fusion of curved metallic forms that hark back to the city's industrial past. The permanent collection includes works by Rothko, Modigliani and Pollock, whilst Richard Serra's *The Matter of Time* installation is sublime. Entrance costs €13/£10 and the museum is closed on Mondays.

A five-minute walk away, the **Museo de Bellas Artes** houses a compelling trajectory of art from classical to 20<sup>th</sup>-century works. Come here to see Goya, El Greco and Basque painters José Arrué and Aurelio Arteta.

French designer Philippe Starck has transformed an old wine cellar into a multi-purpose exhibition centre that houses a theatre, a cinema, a library and a gym. The **Alhóndiga** is lit by a huge artificial sun and supported by 43 intricately decorated columns, each an example of a different artistic movement. Standing in the entrance hall, you can see the swimmers in the glass-bottomed rooftop pool when you look up.



### TO DRINK AND DANCE

Venture out to the **Ribera Market** for an evening drink overlooking the river, then cross the water towards San Francisco, Bilbao's most up-and-coming neighbourhood with a burgeoning underground arts scene. Housed in a former tavern, pastel-coloured **Bar Marzana** has views over the river and is popular with local students and artists.

### TO SHOP

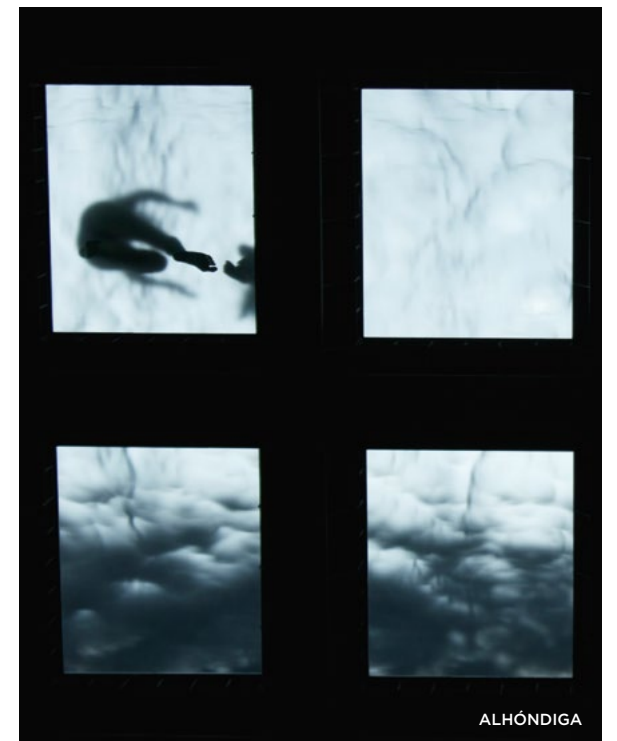
Nestled in the heart of the Old Town, **Quesería** is the place to go for first-rate speciality food products. Bilbao is not a destination for the fashion elite, but try **Persuade** for brands such as Issey Miyake and Comme des Garçons. The recently opened **Trimmer**, an urban Scandinavian-style cafe-cum-boutique, sells young, independent designers such as Masscob and Ölend as well as bouquets of wild flowers.

### HOW TO GET AROUND

Walk or take a tram.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Bilbao International.



## Pit-stop SAN JUAN DE GAZTELUGATXE



The coastal road from Bilbao to the legendary hermitage of Gaztelugatxe is quite an adventurous stretch. Anticipate confused GPS signals and hairpin-bend terrors, then prepare to forgive and forget them both as soon as you get there. The 10th-century church that sits atop the rocky outcrop is dedicated to John the Baptist, and the treacherous climb up the staircase that winds from the mainland to the highest point of the peninsula serves as a timely reminder of the hardships of sainthood. Park by Eneperi restaurant and follow the trail until you find a narrow bridge and 231 stone steps. It's not easy, but it's worth it.



## Second Stop SAN SEBASTIÁN



Known as Donostia by locals, the elegant heart of the Basque country lies just ten miles from the French border. Romantic Belle Époque buildings, a prolific international film festival and three beautiful beaches make San Sebastián an ideal choice for couples, cinephiles and surfers. Though home to a constellation of Michelin stars, the city is not only revered for haute cuisine, and for every elaborate tasting menu there is an equally delicious pintxo.



### TO STAY

#### MARIA CRISTINA

Named after and inaugurated by Queen Maria Cristina of Spain, this luxury hotel pays homage to its aristocratic heritage. The lobby's sumptuous upholstery, original marble floors and ornate chandeliers evoke the glamour of days gone by, while the rooms, decorated with colourful contemporary art, exude a subtler sophistication. Ask for a balcony for views over the Urumea River. The beds are so comfortable and the bathtubs so deep that it might be the only taste of the outdoors you need.

*Rooms from £196 per night*

#### ASTORIA7

Inspired by the San Sebastián International Film Festival and built on the grounds of the town's first multi-screen theatre, this cinema-themed boutique hotel has 102 rooms dedicated to stars of the silver screen. The décor is charming, more 1970s kitsch than modern Hollywood glamour. Brown, circle-patterned accents on the bedspread and curtains contrast with teal headboards and large prints of stars such as Alfred Hitchcock and Rita Hayworth. Don't leave without perusing the cinema library in the lobby and eating your fill of the excellent buffet breakfast.

*Rooms from £62 per night*

#### HOTEL DE LONDRES

Located on the promenade overlooking La Concha Bay, this stately hotel is something of a San Sebastián landmark. The original building dates back to 1865 and the décor exudes a fittingly old-world feel. The rooms are comfortable, and it's worth spending a little extra to ensure spectacular seafront views. Relax on your balcony and watch local surfers test the evening waves before sundown.

*Rooms from £78 per night*

#### VILLA SORO

Elegant yet low-key, the vibe at this 19<sup>th</sup>-century villa is homely country retreat meets stylish boutique. Villa Soro's 25 rooms are split between two buildings – rooms in the villa have more character, while those in the carriage house open onto private terraces. Both options are fitted with big beds, and spacious bathrooms with Molton Brown products. If you don't feel like taking the ten-minute stroll into the Old Town, there's a fire-lit living room and a wood-panelled library that doubles up as a cosy bar.

*Rooms from £97 per night*

## TO EAT

### HIGH-END

#### ARZAK ★★★

The 1897 building that accommodates Arzak is as much a family home as it is home to the eighth-best restaurant in the world. If you're lucky enough to visit when joint head chefs Juan Mari, 72, and his 45-year-old daughter Elena are in residence, then you'll witness the dynamics of the Arzak dynasty first-hand. Serving cutting-edge Basque cuisine, highlights of the tasting menu include a starter of chorizo and tonic served in a Schweppes can, and lobster presented on a Samsung tablet with rolling waves on the screen. To finish, chocolates cut in the shapes of keys, nuts and bolts from 'Ferreteria Arzak' (Arzak's workshop) offer a reassuring sign that Spain's most celebrated restaurant is not taking itself too seriously.

#### MARTÍN BERASATEGUI ★★★

Minimalist décor in muted colours and a notable absence of background music leave the food to do the talking here. Though the tone of this hillside restaurant might be somewhat serious, chef Berasategui's approach is exuberant, playful and imaginative. Infusing traditional Basque cuisine with exotic flavours, he creates unique dishes such as an oyster starter with cucumber, kefir and coconut. Courses come presented with an artist's attention to detail – the vegetable heart salad looks more like a Jackson Pollock painting than a plate of lettuce and seafood. The gin and tonic dessert made with gin-infused jelly and cucumber is just as good as it sounds.

#### MUGARITZ \*\*

It's hard to outwit your competition when your opponents include San Sebastián's dining elite, but Andoni Luis Aduriz uses a mischievous form of humour to impress his guests at Mugaritz. Set in a verdant valley that is perpetually filled with the fragrance of smouldering wood, the restaurant is as famous for playing with its diners as it is for the quality of the food served. To start the meal, waiters leave a pile of rocks on the table, saying only 'eat it' before walking away (they were potatoes so luckily no teeth were broken.) Later, guests are asked to grind up sesame seeds with a mortar and pestle for a soup, making the dining room vibrate with the humming of stone brushing stone. Each course is a spirited feast for all the senses.

### MID-RANGE

#### NI NEU

Located inside the Kursaal congress centre, this restaurant's sleek, monochrome interior and open-plan kitchen make it a popular choice for working lunches and casual dates. Ni Neu means 'myself' in Basque and the emphasis here is accordingly placed on the creative presentation of homegrown seasonal produce. To start, lettuce infused with garlic oil accompanied by walnuts, bourbon and idiazabal cheese is a dish that is intense both in flavour and in texture. The pork with hazelnut sauce and spinach is equally delicious, while the French toast with lemon ice cream is out of this world. Take your coffee out on the terrace for dramatic views over the Cantabrian Sea.

#### BODEGÓN ALEJANDRO

Stepping into this subterranean restaurant is like stepping back in time – a backlit mural of a mountain range dominates the dining room walls, while intricate Andalusian tiles evoke an authentic taverna feel. Martín Berasategui earned his first Michelin star here at the tender age of 25, and today Bodegón Alejandro offers a welcome break from a city filled with mind-boggling menus; the food is elegant, simple and delicious. Try the tomato salad or grilled mushrooms and poached egg to start, follow by a cod and pil-pil sauce taco, then seal the deal with apple pie and lemon ice cream. The six-course tasting menu is excellent value at €40 (£31).

#### LA FÁBRICA

Exposed brick walls and copper sheeting on the low vaulted ceiling create an ideal atmosphere for an evening date. La Fábrica means 'factory' in English, but there is nothing of the mechanical about this intimate restaurant. Service is discreet and very efficient while the tasting menu, at €54 (£42) for nine courses, is excellent value. Highlights include a trio of starters including green olives stuffed with vermouth and black olive paste, chilled tomato soup topped with basil oil and foie gras with caramelised apple compote. Eat your fill and then take a short stroll to the nearby Santa María church.

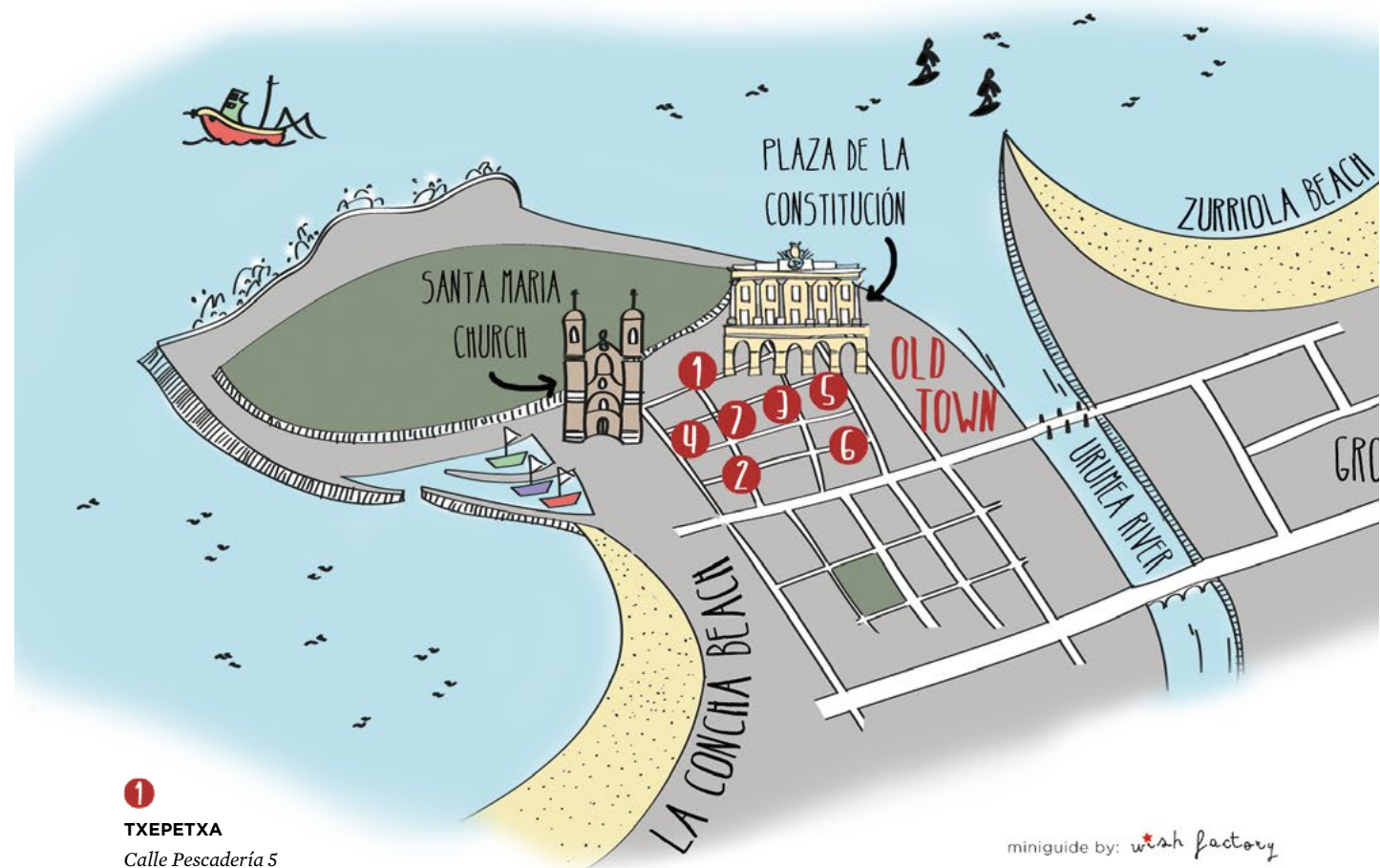
### BORED OF BASQUE?

**Va Bene** for delicious freshly made burgers, hot dogs and grilled sandwiches.

**La Madame** for a New York-style brunch – French toast and huevos rancheros.

**The Loaf** for roast beef sandwiches, carrot cake and brownies.

## PINTXOS MAP



1

#### TXEPETXA

Calle Pescadería 5

Gilda – a pickled pepper, a salt-cured anchovy and an olive on a toothpick.

2

#### GANBARA

San Jeronimo Kalea 19

Hongos a la plancha – griddled mushrooms.

3

#### LA CUCHARA DE SAN TELMO

Calle 31 de Agosto 28

Foie con compota de manzana – foie gras with an apple compote.

### TOP TIPS

1. Don't spend more than ten minutes in each bar. Choose a pintxo and move on to the next.
2. Accompany your selections with a glass of Rioja red, txakoli (a very dry, slightly sparkling white wine) or local sidra (cider).
3. Don't be alarmed by the amount of paper on the floor. It's considered good manners to throw your napkin down in appreciation for the chef.

4

#### LA VIÑA

Calle 31 de Agosto 3

Tarta de queso – cheesecake.

5

#### A FUEGO NEGRO

Calle 31 de Agosto 31

Mini hamburguesa – mini hamburger.

6

#### GOIZ ARGI

Fermin Calbeton Kalea 4

Brocheta de gambas – prawn skewer.

7

#### TABERNA GANDARÍAS

Calle 31 de Agosto 23

Solomillo – sirloin steak.

## TO DO

### TAKE A HIKE

Monte Igueldo, Monte Urgull and Monte Ulia frame the rugged landscape surrounding San Sebastián. Though these 'mountains' are in reality mere sizeable hills, some exercise is likely to be a welcome relief from your excessive pintxos intake. The Old Town huddles around the base of Urgull. Pick up the trail behind the Santa María church and scramble through the woods to the summit for dramatic views over the city. On your way down, pay a visit to the San Telmo museum, which covers an impressive amount of Basque history. Entry is free on Tuesdays.

### HIT THE BEACH

The horseshoe-shaped Playa de La Concha is San Sebastián's most celebrated stretch of sand. The beach is a popular spot for sun-seekers during the summer months, while the winter waters of the Cantabrian Sea keep all but the hardest surfers at bay. If you'd prefer to stay dry, take a stroll along the promenade towards the dock, taking in the brightly coloured boats and eclectic architecture of the fishermen's houses behind. For surfing, Zurriola beach is your best bet, while Ondarreta is a favourite amongst local families.

### SURF

As the sun goes down in San Sebastián and weary travellers head back to the comfort of their hotel rooms, a band of wetsuited figures dive into the surf at Zurriola. Watersports are big business here, and the relatively calm waves make it an ideal location for beginners. Pukas is the longest-running surf shop in Spain and the one with the coolest window displays. Find them on Calle Mayor and book a class with one of their experienced instructors, or just buy a bikini so you at least look the part. An hour-long lesson for two people is €40 (£31) each.

### BALENCIAGA MUSEUM

Though Paris was to become his adopted home, Cristóbal Balenciaga was born in Getaria, a small seaside village located 25km from San Sebastián. Drive along the winding coastal roads to this sleek, modern museum that has been constructed in memory of the Basque couturier. The permanent exhibition is vast and houses the world's most significant collection of his work.

## TO DRINK AND DANCE

### DABADABA

Inspired by multifaceted cultural venues in cities such as Berlin, the newly opened Dabadaba is a bar, café, concert venue, screening room and host to weekend roller discos. Be sure to check their website before you venture out – the space is located in the city suburbs and is quiet if there is no event scheduled. San Sebastián has recently been named Spain's most expensive city in terms of living costs, so many young Basques have ventured elsewhere in search of work, but the ones that remain can be found here.

### ATARI GASTROTEKA

Situated in the shadows of the Old Town's Sant María church, this bar is the perfect place for an atmospheric evening drink. It's a popular pintxos stop for tourists, but really the best food is to be found elsewhere. Skip the calamari, stick with the locals and take a glass of wine to one of the tables outside.

### PLAZA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN

Always buzzing with activity, this colourful square is the heart of the Old Town. Choose one of the bars that line the plaza's edges and spend an evening fantasising about the lives behind the shutters of the numbered balconies – they date back to a time when the square was used as a bullring.

### CÔTE

Local wine, local cider, local beer – in spite of all the Basque bounty, sometimes a traveller gets a hankering for home. Cocktail aficionados might find their fix at Côte, an intimate bar with an eclectic drinks menu and a low-key vibe. Order your cocktail of choice – most are €9 (£7) – and head to one of the window seats.

### POKHARA

Located in the up-and-coming neighbourhood of Reyes Católicos, this corner bar leads a double life. By day, come to spy on local surfers, students and shoppers; by night, swap your coffee for a cocktail and electronic music. Be sure to get there early to grab a seat on the terrace.

### BAR ALTXERRI

San Sebastián hosts an international jazz festival every July, and the city's enthusiasm for music remains year-round. This jazz and blues bar has regular live performances from local and international acts. Their cocktails are good too, although a little on the strong side.



## TO SHOP

### REYES CATÓLICOS

San Sebastián's coolest neighbourhood makes for an alternative shopping experience. Try **Ā Photostore** for second-hand cameras and graphic prints, while **Diner** is the place to go for re-worked vintage clothing. **Flow** and **Dela** are sibling shops, and both stock surf-style clothing, trainers and sunglasses.

### NOVENTA GRADOS

Halfway down the cobbles of Calle Mayor lies this innovative space, accommodating a range of internationally recognised brands as well as Spanish favourites – Marc Jacobs, Stella McCartney and Proenza Schouler brush shoulders with Hoss Intropia and Ash. Their range of cosmetics and fragrances is also impressive, and they even have an in-house hair salon if you're in need of some holiday hair rescue.



## HOW TO GET AROUND

San Sebastián is a small city and one that you can easily cover on foot. For those eager to move a little quicker, Sanse Bikes rents reasonably priced wheels for about town and also organises mountain bike tours for groups. Taxis are easy to find and won't break the bank, although the late-night meters start at €6 (£4.70).

## HOW TO GET THERE

There are no international flights into San Sebastián airport, so fly to Bilbao or Biarritz instead. Bilbao is located 62 miles or a 1hr and 30min drive from the city, and if you choose not to rent a car then there are hourly transfers with the PESA bus company that leave from outside the terminal. Biarritz is closer (25 miles) but is not serviced by as many airlines so compare flight prices beforehand.

### BERRIZ

A slice of Paris in the centre of San Sebastián, this sophisticated boutique stocks designers such as Isabel Marant. The minimalist interior and muted colours make for a calm shopping experience, so you can take your time to peruse the carefully selected pieces on offer.

### SOLBES

This celebrated delicatessen stocks an excellent range of local produce. Their elegant packaging means that their select varieties of wine, ham and cheese make the perfect presents to bring back home; ask one of the friendly staff for advice.



## TIPS AND TRICKS

The high quality and variety of food remains constant year-round, but the crowds in this coastal city differ dramatically between seasons. In the summer, San Sebastián is a popular destination for young people from southern France, Madrid and Barcelona. In the winter months, you risk being caught between zimmer frames and surfboards as the season dies down.

'Pintxo' comes from the Spanish verb 'pinchar' meaning 'to pinch' and traditionally refers to food that fits on the end of a cocktail stick. Today, pintxos can mean any variety of small plates or appetisers that are eaten socially with a glass of wine or beer. They are not to be confused with tapas; learn this early on and save yourself the trouble.

Speaking a little Basque goes a long way: kaixo means 'hello' and agur means 'see you later'.

## Final Stop RIOJA ALAVESA

### HOW TO GET THERE

Driving is the only option.



A dramatic change in landscape marks the journey to Rioja Alavesa. Winding away from the Cantabrian coastline towards the sprawling vineyards of wine country, the road carves a sinuous trail between valleys and ash-coloured mountains. The scent of fermenting grapes hangs thick in the air; follow your nose, aim for one of these contemporary hotels and sample the best of the region's red wine.

### HOTEL MARQUÉS DE RISCAL

Turning into the driveway of this remarkable building is sure to bring the extra-terrestrial to mind; sweeping curves of purple titanium contrast vividly with the deep green hues of nearby valleys and vineyards. Frank O. Gehry, the architect who gave Bilbao the Guggenheim, is the man behind this alien creation.

The hotel's 43 rooms are divided between the main house and the spa wing – the rooms in the main house showcase dramatic angles and overlook the village, while those by the spa have views over the wine fields. All are appropriately sleek and modern, fitted with Gehry's cloud lampshades and cavernous black marble bathrooms. The Caudalie spa has an indoor pool and practices vinotherapy, using the natural healing properties of grapes in their wraps, scrubs, baths and massages.

It's worth stopping off here even if you don't stay the night (rooms are expensive and prices rise with demand.) Take a tour around the winery that dates back to 1858, making it the oldest in La Rioja. Sample one of their own vintage bottles at the wine bar – they are reasonably priced and make great presents – or as an accompaniment to a meal in their excellent Michelin-starred restaurant. Spend an afternoon enjoying the earthy local fare of the 14-course tasting menu (€85/£67). Highlights include a delicious starter of langoustine, avocado, quinoa and white garlic and a main of glacéed lamb with ginger and roasted red onion.

*Rooms from £235 per night*



### HOTEL VIURA

Ten minutes down the road, a winding trail leads to the pretty village of Villabuena de Álava and another architectural marvel. In the heart of wine country, Hotel Viura was inspired by a bunch of grapes, but takes the form of a jumble of colourful cubes. While Gehry's creation stands out dramatically from its environment, this hotel goes some way towards blending in; the main building is cut into the side of a rock and glass walls bring the views of the village inside. An ideal choice for couples, here cutting-edge designs meet natural beauty and cool, understated elegance.

The 33 rooms continue in the same vein, with polished concrete floors, a cream palette and glowing white cube lamps that also function as bedside tables. Beds are incredibly comfortable and the oversized power showers are divine. Be sure to head to the sail-covered roof terrace with white lounge sofas and views over the 14<sup>th</sup>-century church to the mountains behind. The lobby also has an interesting collection of design books, daily papers and a small exhibition space. In the summer, guests have access to the local village pool.

Meals are served in the basement restaurant, which offers an impressive range of fish and local meat. Come sundown, it's all about the wine bar that spills out into the village square. Ask the accommodating staff for advice and spend an evening shooting the breeze over a bottle of Rioja red.

*Rooms from £86 per night*

