



# Five things to know about San Sebastián

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*San Sebastián has beautiful beaches (Picture: Alamy)*

**Surfing? Eating? Learning? The European City of Culture 2016 is rich in food for the soul, and it's time to ride the wave.**

## **SMALL CITY, BIG FLAVOUR**

It has 25 Michelin stars – three restaurants with three stars – and four of the World's 50 Best Restaurants. Despite its relatively small size, this elegant Basque Country outpost packs a huge culinary punch. The hallmark of the seafood-based northern Basque cuisine is an adventurous approach to ingredients – pigeon, partridge and pickled pig's ears make snug bedfellows for fish – coupled with an obsessive attention to visual detail.

With this in mind, you'll want to be eating as frequently as is allowed, and this is where pintxos come in. Like a Basque version of tapas but with infinitely more flair, they are the unique selling point of San

Sebastián and best sampled on a txikiteo or ‘pintxo bar crawl’. Pintxos are impossibly cheap – £1 to £4 – in line with San Sebastián’s dictum that all citizens should eat well. Remember what you’ve had, as many places work on an ‘honesty bar’ basis.

Start at [La Cuchara de San Telmo](#). Its seared foie with apple sauce (£2.50) is legendary – pair it with txaoili, the traditional sharp, effervescent white wine. Then head over to [Borda Berri](#) or [Zeruko](#), both packed with hip young foodies eating mind-blowing mini morsels.

End up at [A Fuego Negro](#), a sultry, forever midnight temple to indulgence, where molecular gastronomy rubs shoulders with slinky drinking.

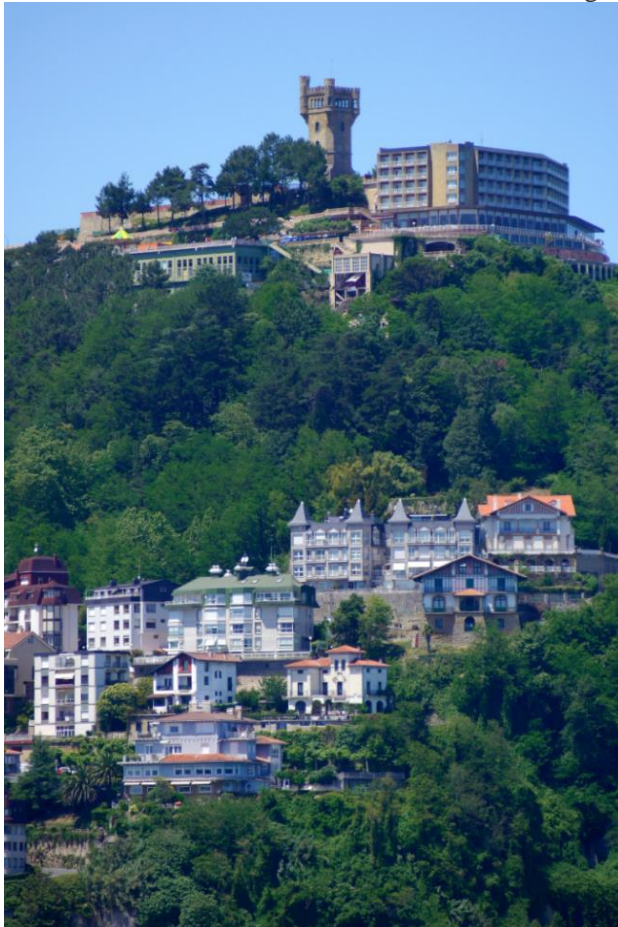
Juan Mari Arzak is the godfather of modern Spanish cuisine and diners at his three-Michelin-starred [Arzak](#) can expect lamb veiled in café con leche, foie gras ice cream and hake with garlic wafers as part of a sensational 16-course molecular tasting menu (approximately £160).

Those truly interested in the relationship between food and the city should try to wangle an invitation to one of the hundreds of txokos or gastronomic societies in the city. These members-only (and almost entirely male) cooking-and-dining clubs occupy a space somewhere between home eating and a restaurant table, and are deeply entrenched in Basque culture.

### **CITY OF CULTURE**

While San Sebastián is no longer a hotbed of bullfighting (thankfully), tradition still reigns supreme. The recently restored [Museo San Telmo](#) pays homage to Basque history and artefacts, while summer’s brilliant [Film Festival](#) exerts huge international pull, but it’s the January 20 Tamborrada festival that is Basque to the bone.

Expect drumming processions, religious iconography and gastronomic street parties galore. For those who’ve caught the foodie bug, the [Basque Culinary Centre](#) offers the world’s top chef’s training, otherwise the Santo Tomas food festival on December 21 is a gluttonous celebration of cheese, wine, ham and honey.



*Igueldo Mount in San Sebastian (Picture: Alamy)*

## **AROUND TOWN**

San Sebastián life centres in the Parte Vieja, or Old Town, nuzzled between the scalloped shores of La Concha beach and the mouth of the Urumea river, below Mount Urgull.

Chic shopping clusters along Calle Loyola and the cobbled lanes exude a fishing-village charm. Head up to Plaza de la Constitución for a taste of old city life – numbered balconies from the days when bullfights were held surround the square.

Alternatively, for peerless city panoramas, head for the century-old funicular railway that sweeps up Mount Igueldo to a charming clifftop funfair ([www.monteigueldo.es](http://www.monteigueldo.es)).

## **SURF'S UP**

San Sebastián's vibrant surfing scene flourishes thanks to great waves and a brilliant social aspect – you can leave the beach and be in a historical bar with a great vibe in minutes. Plus, the locals are born surfers, meaning the infrastructure is well established.

Surf-mad communications director George Macpherson offers his tips: 'Zurriola beach provides consistent waves, from beginners' bumpy rides on the left by the pier to the pros further out to the right. The surf is pretty much always busy but with some paddling out you can score great waves. The best surfboard hire is [Zurriola Surf Eskola](#), right on the beach. Great rates and helpful advice.'

Dreamy La Concha has gentler waves and is also a go-to for those who like to stroll and kiss, while La Ondarreta is the smallest of San Sebastián's beaches. A popular 7km boardwalk connects the three.

## **WALK THAT WALK**

The ultimate pilgrim's route, El Camino de Santiago, at more than 800km long is certainly no walk in the park. The northern route, however, passes above San Sebastián, so visitors can have a taste of one of the Earth's great hikes.

Options range from a one-day circular to a seven-day trek to Bilbao ([www.caminoways.com](http://www.caminoways.com)) via sublime coastal trails and deep forest vales – surely a perfect way to work off all those pintxos? Getting there.

There are no direct flights from Britain. [EasyJet](#) has return flights from Stansted to Bilbao from £60. There is a direct bus from the airport to San Sebastián every hour. [www.sansebastianturismo.com](http://www.sansebastianturismo.com)