

BASQUE BEAUTY!

San Sebastian has Michelin-star food and a beach that rivals Rio's Copacabana

REACHING the top of a twisting trail through the forests of Monte Urgull, I suddenly saw why the city below is sometimes compared with Rio de Janeiro.

From the rocky crest, a giant statue of Christ opens his arms, blessing San Sebastian. At his feet lie golden scallops of urban beach, sandwiched between green pinnacles rising from a vast natural harbour.

This is the setting for the Basque city on the Bay of Biscay, chosen (jointly with Wrocław in Poland) to be European Capital of Culture 2016. 'Most visitors are, or quickly become, besotted by our gastronomy,' an official of the project told me. 'We would like to be famous for other things as well...'

It is hard to ignore the twinkling of Michelin stars in Spain's foodie capital — why would you? More about the grub in a moment, but I was here to taste some of the other cultural delicacies of San Sebastian, or Donostia as it is known in the Basque language.

The seaside town has been attracting cultured sophisticates ever since the Spanish royal family made it their summer base in the 19th century. Alluring art nouveau hotels and mansions soon became the rivals of fellow Basque resort Biarritz across the French border but just 20 kilometres away.

Since the Fifties the cream of Hollywood have been drawn here by the annual September film festival, which is artier and more compact than glitzy Cannes, according to the cognoscenti. And for half a century the July San Sebastian jazz fortnight has been drawing grandees of the music world.

I was lucky enough to be holed up at Hotel Maria Cristina, the gold-embossed grand old dame of



Dish of the day: San Sebastian. Inset, chef Juan Mari Arzak at his eponymous restaurant

by Martin Symington

San Sebastian's belle époque heyday. A glance out of the window on my sun-drenched first morning was enough to tell me that I needed to be outside.

The length of the city's coast is fringed by a boardwalk, starting at the surfers' Zurriola beach, then skirting the Urgull peninsula headland to La Concha bay, which must rank as one of the world's top urban beaches.

The esplanade rounds a horseshoe of golden sand more than a mile long, facing dark green Santa Clara Islet.

As I strolled along, the stirring echoes I felt of Rio's Copacabana beach amplified as I neared the rearing Monte Igueldo headland.

This furthest-flung point is the unlikely location for sculptor Eduardo Chillida's most renowned work.

Chillida (once the goalie for San Sebastian's La Liga team Real Sociedad, curiously) has created an astonishing trio of gigantic

iron sculptures embedded into wave-pounded rocks.

Peine del Viento (wind comb), as the work is named, seems to be an inspiration for Olas de Energia (waves of energy), the San Sebastian 2016 programme of musical, theatrical and other artistic events which will swell through the city during the Year of Culture.

Many events will be held in the striking new Centre for Contemporary Arts — a former cigarette factory by the Urumea river that slices through town.

THE old quarter, I found, is as walkable as the sea-fringe. A grid of narrow streets pedestrianised from noon onwards (after the vans delivering food have gone), is relieved by open spaces such as Plaza de la Constitución, where windows have seat numbers dating from when the square was used as a bullring.

There is a neo-Gothic cathedral and some fine, older churches. However, the way to observe the

town's purest religion is to eat. Pintxos — the version of tapas that Basques take to dizzy heights of delicacy — are the order of the day (and night). People romp through the old town, making beelines for their favourite pintxo bar.

They swarm several deep to sniff out whimsically named morsels of edible art: chipirones en equilibrio (squid, patterned with caramel filigree); mejillones tigres (tiger mussels crusted with egg-fried breadcrumbs, served in a sea shell); or Gildas (long, slender skewers of anchovy, olive and hot pepper).

With the cuisine so marvellously haute already, does San Sebastian need its 16 Michelin stars distributed among ten restaurants, including three-star Arzak, bastion of 'new Basque Cuisine', whose chef Juan Mari Arzak is regularly rated in the world's top handful?

This was something to ponder as I tried to walk off my gastronomic indulgence by hiking up Monte Urgull. The Rio-like



Pictures: ALAMY / 4CORNERS

panorama was as visually appetising as the most elaborate San Sebastian pintxo.

TRAVEL FACTS

KIRKER Holidays (020 7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com) has three nights at five-star Maria Cristina from £788pp including BA flights from Heathrow to Bilbao and private transfers. More cultural information at dss2016.eu/en. Travel from London Paddington to Heathrow costs from £11.90 return, heathrowexpress.com.