



CURRENT ISSUE
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Home >> Where >> Spain >> San Sebastián: Long Weekend

TUE 20 MAY 11:28

San Sebastián: Long Weekend

Feeling hungry? This thoroughly Spanish town, just 10 miles from the French border, Michelin stars and acclaimed kitchens dishing up full-blown theatrics and lauded local

IMAGE: AWL



Published March 10, 2014
 By Mark C O'Flaherty

Gourmand is one of the most misused words of the modern age. Assumed to be interchangeable with 'gourmet' by many who consider the latter term a little bit too retro, it's right up there on Mount Malaprop, at the same altitude as 'nonplussed'. But when it comes to a long weekend in San Sebastián, it's apt.

Because to take advantage of the most Michelin-star-saturated-stretch of coastline in the world, you don't just have to take pleasure in food, you have to gorge on it. Hunger is irrelevant. With more tasting menus than possible meal times, you'll find yourself finishing lunches just a couple of hours before the start of a *pintxo* (small snack) tour or your next selection of amuse-bouches. Bread baskets represent self-sabotage. Breakfasts must be skipped. But it's worth it: inhabiting a universe beyond the now commonplace *sous-vide* science experiments, peculiar foams and mollusc porridges, this is the most amazing food you'll ever eat.

As well as culinary alchemy, a visit to this region of northern Spain is defined by arresting design, on and off the plate. I begin my tour on a Thursday in the *Fantasia* shadows of Frank Gehry's iconic, gleaming metal architectural curlicues — not in Bilbao, but in Elciego, Rioja. The Hotel Marqués de Riscal, amid acres of Tempranillo vines, is a more compact, eloquent and animated building than its more famous Guggenheim counterpart. With space-age rooms and terraces that lead straight on to the vineyard, this is the perfect destination in which to enjoy wine tastings. The fine dining restaurant is a little odd — it looks like a brightly lit doughnut shop in the lobby of a posh Vegas casino — but its molecular tasting menu, including hake in batter 'candied at 45 degrees' and the chef's killer, creamy 'Echaurren' croquettes, all washed down with richly oaked, dark cherry Barón de Chirel, is memorable for all the right reasons. During my visit, a group of Brits have taken over the library bar to celebrate either a lottery win or a particularly extravagant 50th. Their row of red Ferraris are lined up in the car park. It seems like as good a place as any to celebrate in such style.

Two hours' drive north sits San Sebastián proper. The whole town was burnt down after a siege in 1813, but today it looks like a million art nouveau, belle époque dollars. With its palm trees, flower markets, whitewashed modernist seafront buildings and



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octogenarian men in berets drinking red wine at breakfast, this would be a gorgeous place to grow old.

You could spend a weekend roaming La Concha beach, the flashy new aluminium-clad wing of the Museo San Telmo and around Eduardo Chillida's outdoor sculptures, but for me, the food's the thing. I mix up the new-wave heavy hitter restaurants (Mugaritz) with casual *pintxo* bars, family-run chefs' favourites in nearby towns, and some of the world's most famous restaurants, each of the latter having three Michelin stars and long-standing Relais & Châteaux affiliation: Arzak, Akelarre and Martín Berasategui.

New Basque Cuisine

While the international foodie obsession with San Sebastián is relatively recent, its roots go back to 1977 when Juan Mari Arzak, founder of the eponymous restaurant, and the extravagantly moustachioed Pedro Subijana of Akelarre first developed New Basque Cuisine. Parallels with punk are easy to draw beyond the year: Arzak and Subijana shook up the world of gastronomy and injected a new energy and sense of anarchy into traditional recipes. Their cooking today might be sci-fi polished (both chefs have their own laboratories), but it's more playful and wild than ever.

Dining here is a genuine contemporary art form: the Arzaks — Juan Mari and his daughter Elena — take inspiration from sources as diverse as street graffiti and circus performers. They serve Kobe burgers on video screens displaying flickering flames. Fish dishes arrive inside bright green, crisped spheres made from fish stock and parsley. At Akelarre, Pedro Subijana devotes insane amounts of time to creating a perfect, pig-shaped, wafer-thin puff of potato to go on top of the best roast pork dish you'll ever eat, while Andoni Luis Aduriz sets out to challenge as well as thrill at Mugaritz.

I find his lobster dish with fermented rice to be confusing and weird, and send back a plate of shredded ice with 'scarlet shrimp perfume' after one mouthful. It was... impossible. But on the same evening I have the most perfect steak of all time, and a plate of brisket with emerald green jus and nasturtium that I still stare at pictures of, longingly and lovingly. I have crisped iberico ham with creme fraiche along with myriad small bites, the latter served on thorny branches. There are bowls of potatoes treated to look like tooth enamel-demolishing pebbles from a beach, games at the table between courses, edible paper embedded with gem-coloured petals, and a wooden tower of petit fours themed on the seven deadly sins. It is... incredible.

Many of the dishes you'll encounter in San Sebastián will have even the most vehement critics of social media reaching for their camera phones. It's difficult to single one out, but a rectangular plate of sour orange with 'fruit leaves' at Akelarre is among the most beautiful things I've ever seen on a table. And each dish on Martín Berasategui's Great Tasting Menu — a 'greatest hits' of the kitchen, featuring dishes from 1995 through to now — is more ravishing than the next. The glorious sensation of hot salty squid ink exploding in your mouth when you bite into Berasategui's 'squid ravioli' is trumped by the appearance of the 'warm vegetable hearts salad with seafood' — a luminescent platter of pink, orange, yellow and emerald green. It's so pretty, it's anxiety-inducing to disturb its arrangement. Which may, perhaps, be the point.

While a tasting menu is easy enough to navigate — as long as you have £200 to spare, of course — the town's *pintxo* bars, where every other tiny plate is a visual pun, can be trickier. San Sebastián Food, based at the palatial landmark of the Hotel Maria Cristina, is one part tour company, and one part swank deli specialising in local produce. I spend an evening with one of their tour guides, Eli Susperregui, touring the bars of the old town, learning what *pintxos* to order, what wine to drink with them (light, slightly sparkling Txakoli) and how to discard my screwed up napkins on the floor like a local.

We have egg yolks, worked into flavoured egg-shaped jelly, along with chorizo and cheese, and all manner of things with dry ice, at Bar Zeruko; mini Kobe burgers at A Fuego Negro, run by two former hip-hop DJs; and plates of grilled mushrooms with golden, runny egg yolks at Ganbara, which has a secret dining room downstairs, a counter full of gigantic foraged fungi, and a clientele of wonderful women in leopard-print raincoats worthy of an Almodóvar movie. Fuelled by G&Ts served Basque-style in fishbowl glasses with tons of ice, Eli and I have quite the adventure in the boisterous laneways around the cathedral.

Seafood supreme

Leaving San Sebastián more than sated, I spend my last night in Spain in Getaria — a photogenic little surfers' town, 30 minutes' drive west. It is, famously, the hometown of fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga, and it's well known for an architecturally remarkable museum dedicated to his work, with a conspicuous lack of Balenciaga clothing inside it. But for most Basque foodies, Getaria is all about The Best Seafood Restaurant in the World. Every time I meet a chef, I ask them to recommend a restaurant I may not have heard of. Every single one of them replied: Elkano. After several plates of hake throats (each cooked a different way), a variety of fish livers and enough turbot to feed four (at £56 a kilo), I have to agree. The morning catch at Elkano is all cooked on the same huge grill, out front, on the street. The guy who prepares the food, Asier, fished the nearby shores for 11 years and has cooked here for another 10, while the owner Aitor has had a lifelong, evangelical obsession with all things seafood related. So don't expect beer batter and Sarson's.

As anyone who has endured it knows, Bilbao airport is a culinary wasteland. Instead of facing an anticlimactic flight-side tray of fast food, I drive through a cloud and halfway up a mountain for a last long lunch at Asador Etxebarri, in a stone farmhouse flanked by snow-topped peaks, next to a tiny town church square so pretty the whole thing looks like an olive oil advert with risible amounts of digital post production.

The *burrata* cheese at Etxebarri is made from milk from their own buffalos, and the baby eels they serve from November to March inspire food blogger hysteria — as well they might, at £78 for a small bowl. Just about everything at Etxebarri is cooked using its famous grill, from prawns to beef chops and the disarmingly ugly, messy, utterly delicious goose barnacles. I leave a further £200 lighter, but feel like I've had yet another meal of a lifetime. It's worth it. And having put on 5lb over four days, I've certainly had my money's worth.

Tradition: The Basque beret — or *txapela* — is an omnipresent piece of male headgear which has been worn in the region for centuries. It's crafted with a leather trim and is significantly larger than the French beret. Buy one at Leclercq, in the old town. sombrosleclercq.com

Did you know? They used to hold bullfights in the centre of the old town, in the Plaza de la Constitución — now a piazza full of al fresco bars. The numbers above the windows in the square mark the old balcony boxes where the audience once sat.

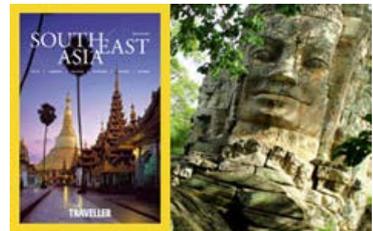
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Getting there

EasyJet flies from Stansted and Manchester to Bilbao, while Vueling flies from Heathrow. easyjet.com vueling.com
Average flight time: 1h50m.

Alternatively, catch the ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao. brittany-ferries.co.uk

Getting around

Walking around the city centre is easy, but a car is useful if you're heading out of town.

When to go

Average summer temperatures are around 22C, and winters are usually mild.

Need to know

Currency: Euro (€). £1 = €1.20.

International dial code: 00 34.

Time difference: GMT +1.

Places mentioned

A Fuego Negro. afuegonegro.com

Asador Etxebarri. asadoretxebarri.com

Akelarre. akelarre.net Arzak. arzak.es

Bar Zeruko. barzeruko.com

Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. cristobalbalenciagamuseoa.com

Ganbara. ganbarajatetxea.com

Hotel Marqués de Riscal. hotel-marquesderiscal.com

Restaurante Martín Berasategui. martinberasategui.com

Elkano. restauranteelkano.com

More info

Bilbao & Basque Region (Footprint Travel Guides). RRP: £6.99.

How to do it

Flights with EasyJet from £64 return; Hotel Marqués de Riscal from £263 per night; Astoria7 hotel from £57 a night; four days' car hire from £26 with holidayautos.com

San Sebastián Food offer pintxo tours from £78 and three- and five-day master classes from £329 per person.

sansebastianfood.com

Published in the April 2014 issue of National Geographic Traveller (UK)



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National Geographic Traveller (UK) is published by Absolute Publishing Ltd, 197-199 City Road, London EC1V 1JN. www.absolutepublishing.com
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Company no: 3393234 VAT: 701391176. Registered Office: 30 City Road, London EC1Y 2AB
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