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A Short History Of San Sebastian

By Colin Aldridge

Tourist information – San Sebastian

This city, also known as Donostia, lies along a white sandy bay between the Urgull and Igeldo hills. Fishermen's houses, a smart suburb and modern districts make it one of the most attractive cities on the Cantabrian coast. The Museum of San Telmo, the Peine de los Vientos (Comb of the Winds) and the Kursaal are examples of how the city brings together modern and traditional features. Meanwhile, the province of Guipuzcoa, of which San Sebastián is the capital, blends sea and mountains, offering the traveller landscape, sports and cuisine, as well as interesting monuments. Basque cuisine has a recognised international prestige.

The town centre streets of San Sebastian unfold overlooking the La Concha Bay. Monte Igeldo marks one end of it – a wonderful vantage point for enjoying views over the city. At its feet is Torrepea Point, where the "Peine de los Vientos" ("Comb of the Winds"), a sculpture by the famous Basque artist Eduardo Chillida, is installed. Here Ondarreta beach begins, framed by a garden area and by the Pico del Loro. This was the place chosen by Queen Maria Cristina (18th C.) to build the Miramar Palace, her summer residence. A lovely promenade with elegant railings and street lamps runs along La Concha Beach, on whose sands is the Perla del Océano Bathing Area, a former royal bathing hut. Still looking at the sea, you arrive at the old Casino, nowadays the City Hall. In this area, between the sea and the River Urumea, is the old town and the way to Monte Urgull, the marina and the fishermen's district. The summit of Urgull is dominated by La Mota Castle and a representation of the Sacred Heart. One path takes you upwards while another skirts the hill and takes you along the breakwater.

In the oldest part of San Sebastián, the churches of San Vicente and Santa María del Coro await you, the former Gothic and the latter Renaissance-Baroque. An old Dominican convent is nowadays the San Telmo Museum, whose archaeological and ethnographic collections, together with its paintings, are worth a leisurely visit. These busy streets lead you to the porticoed Plaza de la Constitución. Among its many balconies – numbered and painted white, betraying its origin as a bullring – stands the old Neoclassical City Hall, converted into the Municipal Library.

La Alameda del Boulevard leads into the Romantic city, which emerged after the old walls were demolished. One the banks of the Urumea you can make out the Victoria Eugenia Theatre and the

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María Cristina Hotel, built in Neoplateresque style. Spread through this rationalist street pattern, you can also visit the Plaza de Guipúzcoa, with its gardens, the Provincial Government building, the Koldo Mitxeleria Cultural Centre and the Post and Telegraph Office. Also, San Sebastian Cathedral, el Buen Pastor, built in Neogothic style. Once again on the bank there are aristocratic houses from the beginning of the 20th century, leading to the María Cristina bridge, the most monumental of those crossing the river. Four lamps by the sculptor Mariano Benlliure light the way to the railway station, designed by Eiffel. On this side of the river are the modern districts of Eguía and Gros. On Gros Beach is the modern Kursaal structure, designed by the architect Rafael Moneo.

San Sebastián is a cosmopolitan city with a strong Basque character, which is clear in its cultural events. The "tamborrada" or "Semana Grande", with its fishing boat regatta, tells us something of the tradition; while its prestigious film and jazz festivals say a great deal about its international vocation. All these are occasions when it is well worth enjoying the city, although you will need to book

accommodation in advance.

One of the best ways of touring its districts and approaching its culture is through the cuisine. Basque cookery has international prestige thanks to its raw materials and the skill of its cooks, who have both traditional and imaginative repertoires. It must be said that some of the most renowned restaurants in Spain are in San Sebastián. Recipes made with vegetables, fish and shellfish must always be accompanied by chacolí from Guetaria/Guetariako Txakolina, with its own Denomination of Origin.

The province of Guipúzcoa satisfies the tastes of any traveller, offering a long coastline of excellent beaches and fishing villages, while inland there are natural areas where you can find important historic towns. Going along the coast from France towards Vizcaya you will have the chance to visit the historic centre of Hondarribia/Fuenterrabia, declared a Historic–Artistic Monument, and to stay in its Parador de Turismo. Other towns that combine interesting monuments with extensive beaches are Zarautz, Getaria, Deba and Mutriku.

Rivers and valleys lead you inland. Following the course of the Oria, the historic towns of Tolosa, Ordizia and Lazkao preserve important legacies of monuments. The Urola valley has the old town and spa of Cestona/Zestoa, the medieval streets of Azpeitia and the Sanctuary of San Ignacio de Loyola, a Baroque site that is the centre of Basque religious life. Bergara, one of the most smartest towns in Guipúzcoa, and the lovely houses of Elgeta unfold along the Deba valley.

In addition to this wealth of monuments, this Basque province has a natural heritage which is perfect for practising many low environmental impact sports. The Aitzkorri, Aralar, Aiako–Harria and Pagoeta natural parks also show us the quality of their ecosystems.

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Truly Travel Spain: Essential Destinations

By Frank Johnson

Barcelona

There is no superior starting place for your travel to Spain than the grand and enchanting streets of Barcelona. There is never a dull moment in this city that literally never sleeps, especially in the summer months. Barcelona is studded with the unmistakable modernism of Antoni Gaudi, who single-handedly landed the city on the architectural map. A stroll down the grand avenue Passeig de Gracia will take you directly in front of both Casa Batllo and Casa Mila, which are incredible feats of art and design and fully accessible to the public. Make reservations to have cocktails and watch the sun set on the Alice In Wonderland-like rooftop of Casa Mila (only available for the summer season). Wind your way through the narrow passages of the Gothic Quarter, the oldest part of town, until you find the overwhelming and unmistakable Gothic Cathedral (just remember to watch your pockets!).

Just an hour north of Barcelona in the town of Figueres is Northern Spain's most interesting and unique museum. The Dali museum is so extraordinary because it was designed and constructed by the artist himself and the collection of his works is unsurpassed anywhere else in the world. The coastline north of Barcelona, extending to the French border, is known as the Costa Brava and is one of the Mediterranean's most exclusive and beautiful vacation destinations. Additionally, Catalonia's countryside is spotted with superb Spanish wine vineyards and olive groves. Once you fall in love with Barcelona, it will be extremely difficult to leave; however, there are a few other gems in the north to explore in order to have really traveled Spain.

San Sebastian (Donostia)

A blend of cosmopolitan chic and sophisticated resort town, San Sebastian offers all the luxuries of a big city while providing the Atlantic coastline with its most popular beach getaway. San Sebastian, the heart and soul of the Basque region, is widely known for its world-class restaurants and irresistible tapas bars; its location just south of the French border has added a unique flare to the culture and cuisine found nowhere else in Spain. Just a short bus ride inland takes you to Bilbao, home of Frank O. Gehry's spectacular architectural triumph, the Guggenheim Museum. This is one stop that must be made when you travel Spain!

Pamplona

The captivating words of Hemmingway and the dangerous art of bull running are inescapable symbols of this historic township. Another cultural staple of the Basque region, Pamplona should be a stop on as you travel Spain in July when La Fiesta de San Fermin (The Running of the Bulls) takes place over 14 days. The population of 250,000 explodes to over 1 million, so reserve a place to stay early or simply do what the locals do: eat, drink and dance in the streets until the sun comes up and the bulls begin to run!

Months would be needed to travel Spain's diverse cultures and distinct regions. With more limited time, these fascinating destinations provide an intimate window into the authentic Spanish way of life.

For more information on travel to Spain and other destinations in Europe, and discount airfare to Spain,

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