

Maribel's Guide to the Basque Country™ San Sebastián-Donostia

SAN SEBASTIÁN - DONOSTIA

A compact, elegant, sophisticated, stately, Parisian looking city filled with Belle Époque architecture, called "La Bella Easo", San Sebastián is considered one of Spain's most beautiful destinations and the pearl of the Cantabrian Sea. You'll marvel at the elegance of both the spectacular turn of the century homes and the setting along the beautiful crescent shaped La Concha beach, which along with El Sardinero in Santander, is the prettiest stretch of sand in Spain. San Sebastián was made famous during the second half of the 19th century by the Spanish Royal Family who came here to take the waters. It became the official summer residence of the Spanish Court.

TOURIST INFORMATION:

The TI is located on the right side of street at the end of Zurriola Bridge going towards the bay. There you will find a friendly young staff who can answer your questions in English, provide you with maps, info on touring, maps, adventure sports, inexpensive lodging in agrotourist homes. A stop here is obligatory. Pick up the free Basque road map here.

WHEN TO VISIT:

July and August are the busiest months of the tourist season, when most Spaniards take their month long vacations, so lodging will be at a premium. Please book ASAP. The winters are very rainy. September is the ideal month. Early June is also good, as the high season rates don't start until July 1 or even July 15. The water will be warm enough for swimming (although it's a bit too nippy for timid tastes), but it does rain quite a bit-for every four days in San Sebastián, perhaps one will be a great beach day!

FESTIVALS:

The **International Jazz Festival** is held in late July. See the schedule at www.jazzaldia.com

The **Quincena Musical** is a month long classical musical and dance program that goes from first week of Aug. to first week of September. In 2003 it featured the Philharmonics of Israel, Berlin, Ballet of Monte Carlo. www.quincenamusical.com/index-c.html

Semana Grande in mid-August features fireworks, bullfights and parades.

Regattas are held on the first 2 Sundays of September.

Also in late September there's the prestigious **International Film Festival**. Stars, such as Jessica Lange, who was honored last year, stay at the venerable Hotel María Cristina. <http://www.sansebastianfestival.ya.com/2003/es/index.htm>

La Tamborrada - January 20

Participating in San Sebastian's La Tamborrada festival is easy, all you have to do is bang on a drum. For 24 hours from the first stroke after midnight on January 20, St. Sebastian's day, the city's culinary societies of the Old Quarter parade in full 19th century military regalia through the streets with a non-stop ear-splitting whacking of drums that keeps everyone awake, in honor of their patron saint. Some say this dates back to 1720, when a baker filling water barrels from a local fountain began to sing, and passing girls banged on the barrels to accompany him. Others claim the event recalls how the town's laundresses mocked invading Napoleonic troops during the 1800s Peninsular War by following them around banging on their washtubs. The procession kicks off in Plaza de la Constitución and is phenomenally noisy. The drum beating itself used to be the domain of males only, but although some groups are still holding out, there are now female participants, too. It's becoming increasingly popular: in 1967 there were fewer than a dozen teams and by last year the number had risen to over 90. Today over 8,000 "Txoko" (gastronomic society) members dress up as chefs and soldiers to re-enact this event. There's also a children's section in which several thousand youngsters get to have the time of their lives. If you'll be in S.S. at this time, find issue #65 of Saveur magazine, which has a great article about this even, "Land of the Marching Cooks" by Fodor's George Semler.

SIGHTSEEING:

Take the seaside promenade down beautiful **La Concha beach** from one end of the bay to the other, a distance of only 2 km (1.25 miles). Ride the funicular from a station behind the tennis club at the very far end of the Ondarreta beach up to **Monte Igueldo** at sunset for lovely views of the bay and mountains. There is also an amusement park for children. The Funicular runs from 11am to 10pm daily. Look for the famous Chillida sculpture, "El Peine de los Vientos" in the bay.

Visit the 19th century **Cathedral Buen Pastor** in the modern quarter of the city.

Stroll through the grounds of the **Palacio Miramar**, the former summer home of Spanish monarchy in the 19th century.

In the morning don't miss a visit to the fishermen's quarter (**puerto pesquero**), also called "el muelle" for a visit to the new little **aquarium** right at the pier, (open Tues-Thurs from 10-9 in summer, and Fri.-Sat. from 10-10 in summer-the sharks are fed at 11 and 4) 8 euros.

Also visit the **Mercado de la Brecha** in the "Parte Vieja" (Old Quarter), now underneath a two-story shopping mall where you'll rub elbows with the culinary star chefs of the Basque Country (such as Martin Berasategui, Pedro Subijana and Juan Mari Arzak) who will be choosing the freshest of fish for their famous Michelin-starred dining emporiums that day. This market, along with Bilbao's Mercado de la Ribera, rivals Barcelona's La Boquería in the amazing variety and quality of food on display.

The **Museo de San Telmo**, housed in a Dominican convent in the Old Quarter, has a Renaissance cloister and minor works by El Greco, Rubens, Ribera and Goya and rooms dedicated to the Basque impressionist Ignacio Zuloaga, but parts may be under renovation. Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm and again from 4 pm to 8 pm. Open Sundays and Holidays from 10:30 am to 2 pm.

In the evening sit at a seaside "terrazza" for cocktails and music, such as the **Bar Basque** on Miramar #5 or the newer **La Perla**.

Try the spa and thalassotherapy (seaweed) treatments at the beachside **La Perla Spa**. Its restaurant is a very well recommended place to dine overlooking the bay. They offer a spa treatment and dinner package for 69 Euros per person.

Check who's performing at the ornate **Teatro Victoria Eugenia**. (currently **closed** for renovation)

You can also check out what's doing at the controversial design (giant blocks of glass cubes) by Navarra architect and Pritzker Prize winner, Rafael Moneo, the **Kursaal performing arts center**, where opera and ballet are sometimes held. Also where the Jazz Festival is held in late July and International Film Festival is held in late September. Guided tours at 1:30 pm weekdays and on weekends at 11:30 am, 12:30 pm and 1:30 pm. www.kursaal.org

If you are a sculpture lover, take a bus or drive to suburban **Hernani** to visit the wonderful open-air sculpture museum of Eduardo Chillida (who died in 2003), the Henry Moore or Alexander Calder of Spain. The **Chillida Leku** museum is a peaceful haven on a beautifully manicured hillside. Stroll among his wonderful 40 odd monoliths (you're free to touch), visit his open, cathedral-space, 16th century farmhouse-museum where you can view his smaller pieces and drawings on the 2nd floor. You can pick up a brochure with travel info at the tourist office. The Garayar bus leaves from Calle Oquendo in San Sebastián. www.eduardo-chillida.com

Tapas (Pintxos) Hopping:

Your most essential "must do" in San Sebastián occurs in the evening at around 21h00 (9:00 pm), but before then, stop by the tourist office and pick up their Pintxos Guide. On a very empty stomach, you should head straight to the "**Parte Vieja**" (just follow the crowd), which has the largest concentration of bars in all of Europe, for the required tapas stroll, called here the "**chiquiteo**" or "**txikiteo**" in Basque. The custom is to have 1 drink and 1 pintxo in a bar, then move on to the next and do the same, and so on. Most San Sebastián's pintxos bars are self-serve. You help yourself to whatever on the counter appeals to you and tell the bartender how many you've consumed to get your check. It's the old honor system, and it works well.

"**Txikiteo**" comes from the word "**txikto**", which is a wide rimmed, short glass in which the local drink of choice, "**Txakoli**", a young, apple-tart, slightly fizzy white wine produced in the fishing village of Getaria, is served. Or have a "**zurito**", which is draft beer served in the same glass. In the narrow, lively and noisy streets of the old quarter you'll find dozens and dozens of tapas bars, one trying to outdo the other in the sophistication and presentation of the tapas served, and each one proudly displays the gastronomic awards it has won. San Sebastian and Bilbao have the most refined, gourmet tapas of anywhere in Spain. They're truly an art form, haute cuisine in miniature!

A Primer on the Art of Pintxos hopping by Burt Wolf

"The land of the Basques runs along the northeast coast of the Iberian Peninsula with three provinces in France and four in Spain. Surrounded by the Pyrenees Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, their history goes back for tens of thousands of years. In fact, the Basques have the most ancient culture in Europe and accordingly the most ancient local flavor.

The local flavor of the Basque kitchen, reflects the history of the region. The ancient Romans did a little trading with the Basques and introduced wheat, olive oil and wine making. Which was rather important since all three elements are essential to one of the great gastronomic traditions of the Basques---a tradition known as the pintxos bar.

Most pintxos bars are standing room only (no tables or chairs) street front establishments offering quick snacks, beer and wine. The pintxos bars I visited were about 15 feet wide and 30 to 40 feet deep, with a bar running from the big open front door to the back wall.

Like the Spanish tapas, a pintxo is similar to a small open sandwich or an appetizer on a toothpick; each sized to give you one or two bites. A pintxo might be a wedge of onion omelet, a purée of tuna on a small slice of crusty bread that's topped with a grilled fresh anchovy, or a mini Bayonne ham and cheese sandwich on a tiny roll. A pintxo could also be stuffed baby squid on a skewer served in its own ink or two perfectly grilled shrimp. The most famous pintxo is called a Gilda. It consists of olives, local peppers and fresh anchovies threaded onto a toothpick. The name comes from the 1946 movie in which Rita Hayworth slowly peeled off her evening gloves. It was a hot and spicy film that shocked the nation. The hot and spicy Gilda pintxo is a companion work.

Dozens of different pintxos cover the top of the bar and you help yourself to whatever you want. The variety is enormous. The bartenders pour small glasses of wine or beer and refill the pintxos plates. Pintxos-eating reflects Basque traditions in that the form offers great freedom of choice, unrestricted movement and the honor system, all essential elements in Basque culture.

Pintxos eaters travel in groups with a more or less established route. Each pintxos bar has a dozen or so specialties and the groups have agreed on which ones they like. If one member of the group has missed the opening round he or she will know where the second or third round will be taking place and can easily catch up. The ritual begins each evening at about 7 o'clock and continues for two hours. The streets of San Sebastián's old city are packed with pintxos groups moving from bar to bar.

It's your responsibility to keep track of how many pintxos you eat and to announce the total when you are ready to leave; at which point the bartender will tell you how much the group owes. In some groups each individual pays for a round, in others there's a communal purse that is replenished throughout the evening and maintained by the individual with the best math skills.

Pintxos bars take part in annual competitions and proudly display their medals. You can get a list of winners to guide you but the easiest way to spot a good pintxos bar is to look inside. If the place is full, the bartenders are busy, people are constantly going in and out, and you see things you want to eat, you've found the right place.

Three or four bars and you have had a wonderful meal at which point you can head to the town square for coffee and a pastry."

My personal favorites are the new, fantastic, "don't miss" ******Cuchara de San Telmo** at the far right end of an alley, #28 next to the church and Asador, off 31 de agosto, for fabulous foie gras. (look for the outdoor tables facing the church) Two young chefs here prepare everything made to order in the kitchen. One is Basque, the other, Alex Montiel, is from Barcelona and trained with Ferrán Adriá at El Bulli. Another not to miss pintxos bar is "**Goiz Argui**". ****El Tamboril** on Calle Pescadería #2, at the square. Look for ***Txepela**" on the same street, Pescadería 5, for anchovies with spider crab. ****Astelena**, on corner of the square, Plaza Constitución, for pintxos or a sit down meal and the most typical, the most Basque of all, ***La Cepa**, Calle 31 de agosto, with a creative new chef. Others to look for on 31 de agosto are **Ormazabel** (#22) and **Martínez** (#13) and ***La Viña**", a new wine bar at #3. There is also **Casa Vergara** on Calle Mayor #21, ***Bar Gambara**" on San Jerónimo #21, and try one of our favorites, "**Borda Berri**", Fermín Calbetón # 12, for foie gras toast. Just choose the most crowded pintxos bar you see anywhere along 31 de agosto, Fermín Calbetón, Pescadería, Aldamar, or San Jerónimo,

Note: in the Parte Vieja, street signs say Kalea in Basque rather than Calle in Spanish for street.

The bar at the Hotel Europa on Calle San Martín is always filled with upper middle class locals and lawyers from the Palace of Justice across the street. Very nice selection of hot and cold pintxos plus little earthenware dishes of squid, stuffed red peppers, stuffed mussels, mushrooms with ham, anchovies. All at very reasonable prices.

La Espiga at San Marcial 48, a few blocks from the Hotel Europa, is the next best downtown bet, which quickly fills up with locals at noon.

N.B: In the Nuevo Gros section, just across the Zurriola bridge and beyond the Kursaal performing arts center, are 2 gourmet "don't miss" pintxos bars that have been featured in numerous food and wine magazines. Aloña Berri (www.alonaberri.com), at Bermingham #24, has received many gastronomic prizes for its creations. It's the bar of all bars, and some of the best tapas in town, and Bergara Bar, at General Artexe #9. These are miniature haute cuisine pintxos. Amazing. To reach these coming up from Calle San Francisco, turn right on to Calle Bermingham for Bergara, then continue on past the square, usually filled with children at play, to Aloña Berri. There's a great fish market charcuterie across the street and a branch of Solbes, a specialty gourmet shop selling the best of Basque foods and wines.

You'll quickly see that dining is truly a municipal obsession! In your daily walks you will probably pass by a "**Sociedad Gastronómica**", commonly referred to in Basque as a "txoko", the traditional gastronomic social clubs strictly for men only whose members gather to relax and to prepare amazing meals in kitchens often filled with equipment that equal those found in the finest Basque restaurants. They originated as places where men could gather to drink and play cards, but evolved into associations where members of different brotherhoods (cobblers, fishermen, lawyers) would meet. Later, groups of friends from these brotherhoods began to cook for each other. The oldest "sociedad" was formed in 1870. Now, in San Sebastián alone, there are more than 200 sociedades and over 2000 in the entire French/Spanish Basque Country. Some clubs have hundreds of members, others only 20 to 30. The clubs are also known for their fine singing, and many a fine choir, orfeón, has originated in a gastronomic society. The most famous Sociedad is "Gaztelubide", whose headquarters are in the Old Quarter. Most of the famous Basque chefs first honed their skills in these all-male eating clubs. As Food and Wine magazine has said of the city: "San Sebastián has the best food you've never heard of". And remember the old Basque saying: "To know how to eat is to know enough!" There are more Michelin starred restaurants per capita in the Bilbao-Pamplona-San Sebastián triangle than anywhere else in Europe.

Pastry shops:

Pastelería Otaegui in the Old Quarter.

Gourmet shop:

Solbes on Calle Aldamar I the Old Quarter, across from the La Brecha shopping center. Good selection of txakoli, the refreshing Basque white wine.

Cooking schools:

Luis de Iriazar in the Parte Vieja, but he has a waiting list a mile long. He's featured in the San Sebastian chapter of Anthony Bourdain's "Kitchen Confidential" book, "A Cook's Tour". The TV chef, **Karlos Arguiñano**, offers classes at his hotel in nearby Zarautz.

El Txoko del Gourmet in the Parte Vieja is new and in the same building as **Casa Nicolasa** on Aldamar. www.eltxokodelgourmet.com

Gourmet tours:

www.tenedortours.com Run by Connecticut born, former New Yorker, Gabriella Ranelli, an American married to a Basque pelota player, who has lived in San Se for 10 years. She knows all the chefs and their kitchens intimately and is a fantastic culinary resource. Gabriella also does pintxos tours of the Old Quarter. She's highly personable-a great guide. Burt Wolf used Gabriella for his PBS special on San Sebastián and the Basque Country in the Local Flavors series.

RESTAURANTS:

Restaurants traditionally close between lunch and dinner. You'll find them open for lunch at 1 to 1:30 pm at the earliest. They then close at 3:30 pm or 4 pm at the very latest, opening again for dinner at 8:30 pm, some not until 9 in the evening. Most Spaniards won't even think about going out for dinner until 10 p.m. Most restaurants will take their last orders at 11:30 pm. On the French side, the hours differ significantly and are more rigid. Lunch is served from noon to 2 pm while dinner is from 7 pm to 9 pm.

The Michelin starred temples for "foodies":

Arzak can be found at Alto de Miracruz #21, on the outskirts of the city. Juan Mari Arzak's daughter Elena now runs the kitchen. The restaurant, in a townhouse, has elegant décor but a small dining area so one must reserve far in advance. Try the menu de degustación (tasting menu) for 95 Euros per person. We thought the portions were a bit small on our last visit, but Arzak's wife, who runs the house with great aplomb, offered the gentlemen at a table next to ours a complimentary second meat course when he commented. The service was flawless (Arzak's wife takes your order) but rather rushed. You can be in and out in 1-1/2 hours. A finely tuned, well polished Relais Chateaux engine, but somewhat lacking in soul. But their sommelier will guide you to a reasonable and fabulous wine. Juan Mari and Elena come out to greet each table. Elena's creations are bold, inventive and highly deconstructed these days, as she's spent time with Ferrán Adriá, the Dalí of Spanish cuisine at El Bulli. Arzak has always been considered one of the top restaurants in Spain with 3 Michelin stars. You can reserve a table at www.paisvasco.com/arzak/. There's a tiny parking lot in the back with a valet to guide you.

***Akelare**, at Paseo del Padre Orcolaga #56, on the slopes of Monte Igueldo, has 2 Michelin stars and offers beautiful terrace views of the sea in a lovely chalet. Go for lunch and request a window table. Pedro Subijana's cuisine is sublime. He and Arzak were the fathers of nueva cocina vasca. This is the overall favorite of Tenedor Tours owner and other Spanish food critics. His famous dishes: sea bass topped with gooseneck barnacles and gin and tonic ice cream are accompanied by a great wine list.

Urepel is located at Paseo de Salamanca #3, in the Parte Vieja, the Old Quarter. With 2 Michelin stars but NOT fussy/dressy. Charming. It has an excellent quality to price ratio. Closed Sundays, Tuesdays and 3 weeks in July plus 15 days at Christmas and all of Holy Week. www.sansebastianturismo.com/urepel/

Other notable gourmet dining:

Casa Nicolasa, Aldamar #4 in Old Quarter, on the second floor above the Txoko del Gourmet cooking school and next to Solbes gourmet shop. Elegantly simple, old fashioned dining room. Try any fish the chef recommends, or the filet mignon with foie gras ("solomillo de buey"). This is a personal favorite of our friend, San Sebastián born **Joseba Jiménez de Jiménez**, owner of The Harvest Vine in Seattle and a regular contributor to Food and Wine magazine. The friendly, English speaking chef, José Juan Castillo, will take good care of you. This classic restaurant is very old school and not inexpensive. Frequenting by San Sebastián's old money crowd. Closed all day Sunday and Monday evenings. Try the menú del día at 41,50 Euros per person. www.sansebastianturismo.com/nicolasa/

Kukuarri, in the NH Aránzazu Hotel, near Ondarreta beach, an insider's tip from Gabriella of Tenedor Tours, was just taken over by M. Berasategui, where he has installed one of his protégés, Iñigo Lavado. Already getting rave reviews.

Agarregi, in the Igara Tennis Club, is from another insider tip from Tenedor Tours. The two chefs are alumni of Arzak and Akelarre. Also getting lots of great press. www.geocities.com/agorregi/principal.htm

Moderately priced fine dining in the Old Quarter:

Kokotxa, at end of 31 de agosto and Campanario 11 next to Santa Maria Basilica, is yet another tip from Tenedor Tours. Here you can have a fantastic degustación menu for only 32 Euros per person as opposed to 90+ Euros at the Michelin starred restaurants. The is one to watch. www.restaurantekokotxa.com

Bodegón Alejandro, at Fermin Calbetón #4, is supervised by 3 Michelin starred chef Martín Berasategui. It's the family restaurant where he got his start. Walls are decorated with photos of traditional Basque sports. Wonderful country bread. Closed Sunday night, Mondays and Tuesdays night, except during July and August.

Juanito Kojua, Portu #14, also in the Parte Vieja, is popular with locals, immaculate, warm/homey, has nautical theme, ship's lanterns upstairs, downstairs stone walled dining room has a farmhouse décor. Very reasonable prices for gargantuan portions. Great rice pudding.

Casa Urola, Fermin Calbetón #20, in the Parte Vieja is very reasonable for the high quality, homey and hearty country Basque cuisine. Closed all day Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

Astelana on Plaza de la Constitución The dining room of the very popular pintxos bar. Considered one of the very best casual dining spots in the Old Quarter.

Restaurante Kursaal, in the Kursaal Performing Arts Center, is one of 6 restaurants supervised by star chef Berasategui. Contemporary feel, windows looking out on bay and Victoria Eugenia Theater. Creative Basque cuisine. At mid-day it offers a 2-course lunch with dessert and drink for only 18 Euros.

Casual outdoor dining at the pier:

La Rampa, located next to the Aquarium, is an informal, open-air seafood shack with tiny interior dining room, with paper tablecloths and napkins, but offering prime ingredients. Just favorably reviewed by Rafael García Santos, Spain's foremost food and wine critic. Choose the oven-baked fish dishes over the shellfish. 30.00 to 34.00 Euros per person.

Gastronomic splurges for gourmets outside the city:

Outside of the heavily industrial town of **Errentería**, down a narrow country road past fields dotted with haystacks and old stone farmhouses, at the top of a hill, impossible to find without the detailed directions from their web site, you'll find an equally famous 32 yr. old chef, Adoni Luis Aduriz, at work in a remote, informal, but state-of-the-art Basque farmhouse, who's dazzling the food critics. Gault Millau and Gourmet magazine (Jan. '03) called him "the best young chef in Europe", "revolutionizing haute cuisine, one plate at a time", and his restaurant, ******Mugaritz**, has **1 Michelin star**, but both he and his place are very low key. He's one to watch! He'll soon have his second star. He's a protégé of both M. Berasategui and Adriá of El Bulli. Recently featured in the NY Times Magazine article on revolutionary Spanish cooking.

There is a traditional a la carte menu, but you'd be missing his genius if you don't opt for the market driven tasting menu of 8 small dishes plus an amuse bouche for 75 euros. It's like nothing else you've ever experienced. Expect a warm welcome from the friendly maitre, an extraordinary sommelier, perfect service from the serene, black suited wait staff who seem to glide effortlessly across the room carrying their bamboo trays to deliver each course, a slightly Asian, minimalist décor, lots of "zen". You'll never leave uncomfortably full, just very content. And you keep your menu as a souvenir. Not busy at night. Plan on 2 1/2 to 3 hours for the tasting menu justice. Taxi fare from San Sebastián to Mugaritz is about 16 euros, one-way. www.mugaritz.com

Outside **Oiarzun** you'll find one of Spain's most highly praised traditional Basque restaurants, **Zuberoa**, in a 600 yr. old country house, run by the Arbelaitz brothers, one brother is the chef, and the other runs the house. Boasting **2 Michelin stars**, it is rated a 9.5/10 in all the culinary guides. It's beautifully decorated and has a lovely terrace for summer dining. The chef, Hilario Arbelaitz, is considered one of the top 4 Basque chefs working today. Tasting menu is 85 Euros. Closed Sunday night, Mondays 1st two weeks of January, May 26th to June 10th, the last 2 weeks October. Difficult to find, so be sure to print out the directions from their web page. www.zuberoa.com

In same area, right down the road from Zuberoa you will also find **Matteo** with **1 Michelin star**, which serves creative food and ample portions with gentler prices than Zuberoa. Closed Sunday nights, Mondays and during the Christmas holiday season. www.restaurantematteo.com

In Lasarte, where the racetrack is located, there is another 3 star Michelin temple, **Martín Berasategui**. You'll find this to be a very relaxed, comfortable and friendly space in the country. It's a little hard to find so ask for specific driving directions. The restaurant looks like a nice, modern suburban villa. You must reserve at least one week in advance. On Sundays it's filled with families. During summer almost always closed on Saturdays due to weddings. Not stuffy or formal. Take the wine advice of Iñaki, the sommelier. Several menus are offered for different budgets. The full degustación menu costs 88 Euros. The only caveat is that the chef may very well not be there, as he's very busy tending to his every-growing restaurant empire: Grupo Berasategui, which supervises the kitchens of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Kursaal center in S.S., the restaurant of the NH Aránzazu Hotel in S.S. and El Amparo in Madrid and his parent's home restaurant, where he got started in the San Sebastián's Old Quarter, Bodegón Alejandro. www.martinberasategui.com

Outside the grim, industrial village of Hernani, you have another country hideaway in a pretty Basque Caserío, **Restaurante Fagollaga**. Just follow the signs to the Goizueta highway. The restaurant is on that road, has a beautiful glass enclosed terrace and has one Michelin star. Of all the gourmet temples in this area, this one is the most reasonably priced, with a fixed menu for only 29,80 Euros. It also has a very good pastry chef. Offering fine service with ample portions. Closed Saturdays at noon, Sunday nights, Monday and all of Holy Week. The NY Times Magazine just named 30 yr. old chef Isaac Salaberria one of the top 2 young creative chefs in Spain, along with Andoni Aduriz of Mugaritz. www.fagollaga.com

LODGING:

Budget:

2 star Hostal Alemana, a small, immaculate, quiet family run hotel ("hostal" in name only), very well located in the heart of downtown on Calle San Martin, across from the Hotel Europa and just two blocks from La Concha beach. It's on the top floors of a fin de siecle townhouse, has simple, but pleasant-for-the-price rooms, complete with trouser press and mini-bars, and a very nice, sunny breakfast room that serves a buffet breakfast included in the rate. The family rooms are large and worth the extra euros even if you are just 2. It's a featured hotel in Alistair Sawday's "Special Places to Stay in Spain" -21 rooms with private bath. www.hostalalemana.com

A B&B often featured in travel magazines and in the "hotels of charm" guide is the 2-star **Hotel Galeria**. Although it's located in the posh residential neighborhood of "La Diplomática on Infanta Cristina 1, and a good long 15-20 minute walk from the center of the city, it's near pretty Ondarreta beach, an attractive area. Housed in a 19th century French style building, this hotel has charm if you enjoy antique filled small "artsy" type hotels. Each room is named for a painter and the upper floor rooms have bay views. Rooms are on the small side but the baths are nice. 23 rooms with satellite TV, mini-bar and hair dryer. www.hotellagaleria.com

Pensión Aida", Izueta 9 is in the Gros section, across the Urriola bridge, past the Kursaal Performing Arts center. Not near La Concha, but only 4 blocks from the surfers' beach of Zurriola. San Sebastián is so imminently walkable that for **45 Euros** for a double, it doesn't matter that much. This new little place was just selected in El País as one of the top value budget hotels in Spain. Good quality materials used in the construction and nice wood beamed ceilings, bare white walls and wood floors. It's only a short walk to the train station. www.pensionesconencanto.com

Upper budget to moderate:

3 star Hotel Niza, Zubieta, 56, is in a 1920's building facing the beach and bay, owned by the Chillida family. Eduardo Chillida, who died last year, was Spain's most important sculptor, a contemporary of Henry Moore. Chillida's famous work, the "peine del viento" can be found on an island in the bay, while in the village of Hernani, just south of San Sebastián, is a new museum housing his works, the Museo Chillida Eku (www.eduardo-chillida.com). The Niza has a Belle Epoque style elevator, 41 comfortable rooms with bare wood floors, unadorned walls and small, but nicely renovated baths. Some rooms have wonderful bay views. An excellent value. Not fancy, but very friendly with a great downstairs bar, attractive formal parlor for relaxing and reading, and nice desk staff. www.adegi.es/hotelniza

3 star Hotel Europa, San Martín, 52, one block inland from La Concha beach, is in a pretty neoclassical building, A member of the Husa hotels, the Europa is very comfortable, with a lively bar downstairs serving excellent pintxos and small earthen casseroles, always crowded with locals. The hotel has 65 rooms with all the requisite bells and whistles including bathrobes. It's also a member of Estancias de España, a collection of small and charming hotels, kind of poor man's Paradors. www.hotel-europa.com

4 star Costa Vasca, on Avenida Pío Baroja, is resort-like hotel sitting above Ondarreta beach, offering **parking**, tennis courts, gardens and a **pool**. A 15-minute walk to downtown, but a shuttle service is provided. Well run member of the Aránzazu chain, along with the Hotel Ercilla in Bilbao. Good discount Internet rates. Perfect for a family. 200 rooms.

Upper moderate:

4 star Abba de Londres y de Inglaterra, a white wedding cake looking, Belle Epoque building, decorated in a rather bold Victorian style (bright colors), with an enviable location facing the water. The public rooms have been recently freshened, and it has a nice downstairs bar. Facing the bay, the hotels offers great views of La Concha beach. A fine choice and much better value than the venerable María Cristina. The VIP suites are the best. There are 140 rooms with 14 VIP suites. www.hlondres.com

Luxury:

5 star "María Cristina", a beautiful Belle Epoque structure on the Urumea River, commissioned by King Alfonso XIII, it opened in 1912. This is a Grande Dame of hotels with old world charm where the celebrities stay during the International Film Festival, however, the location and views of the Abba are more appealing. Now a Westin Hotel, member of the Starwood group. Fine dining in the Easo restaurant. Even with it's Persian rugs, Carrera marble and charm of days long ago, the Westin needs to renovate it thoroughly. The public rooms are showing their age and a ventilation system is lacking in the public rooms. Stay here only if redeeming Starwood points or using Bancotel or Halcón Viajes / Viajes Ecuador coupons. www.westin.com

BEACHES:

It rains quite a bit in San Sebastián so for every four days there, perhaps one will be a great beach day. But when the sun comes out, everyone heads to the beach (go early!). There are three beaches; you will most likely want to spend your time at the gorgeous, golden crescent shaped "La Concha" (in front of the De Londres y de Inglaterra hotel) or its western extension, the smaller and more crowded "Ondarreta" (below the Hotel Costa Vasca), where you can rent a beach chair and while away the hours contemplating the scene. The third beach, "Zurriola", in the Nuevo Gros, area is for surfers. These are public beaches and rather conservative, as most northern Spanish beaches are (not so much topless bathing as there is in the Med); everyone is welcome, and they're kept very clean.

SHOPPING:

The most upscale shopping can be found in and around **AVENIDA DE LA LIBERTAD**. For a coffee/pastry break, head straight to the new Luis Lezama outpost (owner of La Taberna del Alabardero in Madrid, Marbella, Sevilla and D.C.), the **Café Iruaritz Donosti** on Avenida de la Libertad, 40. For traditional Basque handicrafts; ceramics, linens, look for **Alboka** in the Old Quarter (Parte Vieja) on the square on Plaza de la Constitución. For pricier items head for **Saski-Naski**, also in the Old Quarter at Fermín Calbetón, 45, where you'll find prettier, more refined Basque handicrafts, sweaters and linens. You'll also find a branch of **Kukuxumusu** of Pamplona, Running of the Bulls memorabilia, in the Old Quarter on Calle Mayor.

COASTAL EXCURSIONS:

West of San Sebastián:

The beach at **Zarautz**, a kind of mini-San Sebastián, is a scenic drive away along the coast between **Getaria** (birthplace of Juan Sebastián Elcano who circumnavigated the globe, finishing Magellan's trip) and the fishing village of **Zumaia**, where in the afternoon you can visit the **Zuloaga Museum**, open Wednesday through Sunday, 4 pm to 8 pm. There is also a new **Museum / Shop of Artisanal Basque Products** in Laia. The Zumaia tourist office offers guided tours (in Spanish only) at 5 p.m., Friday through Saturday.

There's a "txakoli" festival in Guetaria (where it's produced) on the first Sunday of August, I believe, if you find yourself in the vicinity at that time. There's also a small fashion museum displaying the costumes, ball gowns, and couture creations of the Guetaria native Parisian fashion designer, Cristóbal Balenciaga, next door to the txakoli wine shop on the main highway. A larger, permanent shrine to Balenciaga is to be built in the near future. **Elkano**, on the main drag west of town, offers fabulous seafood dining. The Rodaballo (monkfish) here is superb, as is the Bogavante (lobster). All of the fish are grilled on the outside parrilla. They also have a fine wine list. This is one of the best and most comfortable seafood restaurants along the entire coast.

East of San Sebastián:

If you have the time, on the drive between San Sebastián and Hondarribia, pay a visit to the picturesque fishing village of Pasajes de San Juan, now known as **Pasai Donibane** in Basque. You can even reach it by car ferry from Pasajes San Pedro. It consists of one long street that actually passes under the upper floor of some of the houses and it's typically Basque and atmospheric (Victor Hugo lived there for a while). There's a charming place to eat, **Casa Cámara**, at the entrance to the port, next to the water. At the center of the restaurant you'll find the fish tanks. They keep the lobster and spider crab (txangurro) pots under the floor and raise them up to the diners to make their selections. Hake cheeks (kokotxas), monkfish and seafood bisque are specialties-reasonable prices. It's a classic. Closed Sunday nights and Mondays. **Txulotxo, San Juan, 71**, with excellent port views, offers Txangurro al horno, baked spider crab and impeccably grilled fish. Closed Tuesdays.

If you have a car and it's a sunny day, for great panoramic views on the way from Hondarribia-Fuenterrabía to Pasai, take the **Jáizkibel** mountain road, the G1 3440, past the Sanctuary of Guadalupe. Make a stop and you'll be rewarded with scenic views of the coast and the Pyrenees. If it's a foggy day don't attempt to take the Jáizkibel pass, as you'll barely be able to see the road, let alone any views.

STAYING IN HONDARRIBIA:

Hondarribia is widely considered one of the most picturesque coastal villages in all of Spain with its charming and colorful La Marina quarter, the much photographed fishermen's homes of Calle San Pedro with their green, blue and red shutters and geranium bedecked balconies. The historic walled medieval quarter overlooks the city and is filled with palaces and the Castle/Parador Carlos V. The wide beach winds along the river to the coast. It makes an excellent and inexpensive small town base where you can spend several days exploring the Pays Basque, the lush valleys of Navarra and inland Gipuzkoa. Whether you decide to stay in grand style at the Castle Parador or opt for something simple, but comfortable, in one of the 6 agrotourist homes, you'll be rewarded with lovely views, fantastic food, a lively fishing quarter for tapas in the evening, nice shopping and a friendly populace. You can buy food and wine for a picnic at **Solbes**, the gourmet food purveyor across from the TI, or at **Altzaga** (great breads) on Calle San Pedro in La Marina. Have an inexpensive breakfast (yummy "tostadas" and "ladrillos") at **Cafeteria Kai-Alde**, on the main drag near the port.

Agroturismos: great for budgeters or those who want to "cheap sleep and eat well"

I highly recommend the friendly and warm **Iketxe**, a house that the owner built entirely from scratch. It has only 5 rooms, but they're spacious, filled with handmade country furniture, pleasantly decorated with kiln rugs on polished wood floors, private baths, with hair dryers. Room 3 downstairs has its own large private terrace, while room 1 has an enclosed sitting area. The outgoing Patxi speaks no English but his wife, Fátima, does speak some English and is fluent in French. They have two small boys and two cute dogs, which stay outside. Phone: 943 64 43 91 email: iketxe5@terra.es

If the Iketxe is full consider the immaculate **Maidanea** (phone: 943 64 08 55), or the 17th century **Artoz Enea** (phone: 943 64 23 19). Ask for the largest and nicest room, #4, with a balcony. All of the homes are located in the close-in countryside, only 2 minutes from the center of Hondarribia as the crow flies, but 7 minutes down very narrow, country roads that you'll share with farm tractors and people out for a walk. Best to ask the owners either to send you a very detailed little map, or have them meet you at the Hondarribia airport to guide you to the properties. Do not attempt to find them at night. You may be able to pick up directions to all the agrotourist homes and a guide at the Hondarribia Tourist Office. See pictures of all 3 at www.nekatur.net.

All of the homes are featured in Alistair Sawday's "Special Places to Stay/Spain" guide. The **Txenduneabe Azpi** is a new agrotourist home that opened in the summer of 2003. It has only 2 bedrooms that share a bath. Perfect for a party of four.

In the Old Quarter:

The castle/fortress **Parador de Carlos V** dates from the 10th century; 8 ft. thick walls. Ferdinand and Isabella and their son Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor once resided here. One of the most atmospheric castle Paradors in the system, filled with antiques, suits of armor, tapestries. Reserve a room with view of bay below. 36 rooms. **No restaurant.** www.parador.es

The 15th century archbishop's mansion, the 3-star **El Obispo**, has 17 rooms with décor done by the designers of Artespaña. Rooms have TV, mini-bar and pretty views of the estuary. The best room is #202 in yellow with a black wrought-iron headboard and two French carved wooden chairs. Room 204 is also very nice. Cheerful breakfast room and also a 14-person dining room only open in summer. It seems lighter, airier, less dark and gloomy than its neighbor, the Pampinot because it is set on an open square. It's used by Cobblestone Tours for its architectural tour "Barcelona to Bilbao". Owners are friendly, prices moderate, and they respond to emails quickly. Owner: Victor Alza Lekuona. Breakfast is extra. www.hotelobispo.com

Another palatial mansion, the 3 star **Pampinot**, which housed Maria Teresa before her wedding to Louis XIV. It has an austere stone façade but the reception is a spacious area with massive stone floor and exposed stonewalls with 2 huge altarpieces. There's also a little bar tucked into what was once the fireplace and a dramatic staircase leads up to the 8 bedrooms, 4 on each level, each decorated differently. But it may be too dark and heavily ornate for your taste. Owner: Olga Alvarez. Breakfast is extra. www.hotelpampinot.com

Family apartments:

The **Hotel Jauregui**, a member of the Husa chain, down in the port, on Calle Zuloaga, has apartments on the top floor of the hotel that can be rented by the day or week. www.hoteljauregui.com Nothing fancy but good for families on a budget.

Dining:

Hermanidad de Pescadores, on the main street directly across from the wharf, "La Lonja", is a rustic, bustling, convivial place for impeccable seafood. You'll dine at communal wooden tables, but you'll need to reserve ahead of time, particularly on weekends when the French arrive in droves via the ferry from Hendaye. Try the "merluza en salsa verde" (hake in green sauce), the house specialty. Don't opt for the menu del día. Inexpensive, fun and informal.

Mamutzar in the medieval quarter serves a very good value menu del día for lunch.

For fine dining, a **Michelin star** treat, choose the family run **Alameda***, across from the road leading up to the Old Quarter and the Parador. Considered by gastronomic critics as one of the finest spots in all the Basque Country. The owner / chef, Gorka Txapartegui, is one of the country's rising stars. Closed Sunday nights and Mondays plus the first weeks of January and October.

For a more formal and traditional haute cuisine meal in an elegant setting try **Ramón Roteta**. The restaurant is housed in a pretty villa with a lovely terrace for alfresco dining and can be found on the main road leading into town. Tables boast beautiful china and crystal. The food is refined, and the chef creates fine desserts, particularly homemade ice creams. Closed Sunday nights and Tuesdays except during the summer. Closed the last 2 weeks in February and all of November.

For something in between, choose restaurante **Sebastián**, on the Calle Mayor in the Old Quarter. It's on the way to the Parador, on your right past the town hall. This restaurante is in a former tobacco shop and has a cozy downstairs dining room with open beams and a fireplace with walls covered with paintings by local artists. The chef is from Andalucía, not Basque. Closed Sunday nights and Tuesdays, and during November.

Pintxos:

There are two great pintxo bars located in the fishing quarter. The first, **Gran Sol** is located along the pedestrian Calle San Pedro, which is one short block behind the main street. The bar, run by two young men, has won numerous gastronomic awards for their creative pintxos. Go early because the pintxos disappear quickly and kitchen closes before 11 pm. The second bar, found on Calle Zuloaga, the main street, is **Yola Berri**, a local hangout with long wooden tables and benches, and a bar covered with pintxos from 11 a.m. on. It's across the street from the Hotel Jauregui at San Pedro, 22. The hotel has its own fine pintxo bar, the **Enbate**, which is very handy for late night dining, as the kitchen doesn't close until 11:30 pm.

Internet access:

The **English Corner** is on Calle Zuloaga, about half way down the main street of the village.

Daily fish action at the pier occurs at around 5 pm daily. Ferries from the pier to the neighboring beaches of Hendaye, across the river, departs every 30 minutes and cost 2,50 Euros round trip.

THE HEART OF THE CIDER COUNTRY:

The vast majority of the rustic Basque cider houses, or *sidrerías*, called **sargardotegiak** in Basque, are located in Gipúzkoa, and open starting in Dec., but the actual cider season starts in Jan. The apples are harvested in August, their juice is left to ferment from September to November. Between January and March before the cider is bottled, the ritual tasting of the cider is carried out. Cider has been consumed in the Basque Country since at least the 12th century and an emblem of its culture. These cider houses are quite rustic and most located down narrow country roads, difficult to find. All cider house menus are the same: tortilla de bacalao (cod omelette), sometimes a cod with green pepper dish (bacalao con pimientos verdes), a massive chuletón, or T-bone of veal or ox, Idiazábel cheese, walnuts and honey and quince paste for dessert, all the hard cider you can drink for a fixed price, about 25-30 euros per person. A few cider houses also serve a la carte fish dishes.

Cider is ordered by the bottle in a restaurant, not by the glass, but in the cider houses the custom is to stand while eating (there are no chairs), the plates of food are placed on long wooden communal tables, and when the gigantic wooden barrels of cider lining the walls are unplugged, and someone yells "mojón" in Spanish, or "txotx" in Basque, diners rush with glass in hand to the barrels, the cider gushes out in an arc stream and everyone queues up to fill his glass, but always holding it at knee level to create froth and release its bouquet. The more height on the pour, the better, since it gives the drink some fizz, and it should be drunk in very small amounts and downed immediately. Then diners go back to the tables to continue their eating until the next "mojón", or unplugging of the barrel. It's a very dress down affair because you'll be splashed again and again- it's quite messy. Also one should wear sturdy shoes. There are also a couple of cider houses in Alava, in and around Vitoria, including the "Soka Tira" in Vitoria itself. There are around 45 cider houses in the Basque Country. The largest concentration can be found in the town of **Astigarraga**, outside of San Sebastián.

If you don't make it to the cider country, but want to try a typical cider house meal in San Sebastián, then try the **Sidrerería Donostiarra** on Calle Embeltran, 5, open year around, and featured in Burt Wolf's "Local Flavors" show on San Sebastián.

Outside of the grimy industrial town of Usurbil, southwest of San Sebastián in the Barrio Txoko Alde, there's a famed traditional Basque cider house with rough-hewn walls and long wooden tables called **Illumbe**, recently featured in the Williams Sonoma magazine. The chef, José Angel Aguinaga is the cider maker and chef. There is nothing better than one of his huge chuletóns, or T-bone steaks.

EXCURSION INTO THE BASQUE HEARTLAND:

A drive south from San Sebastián on the NI will take you inland into the Goierri, a region surrounded by the Aralar Mountains. Continue to follow the NI south to the attractive and very Basque town of **Zerain**, which lies midway between Donostia and Vitoria, passing by heavy industrial areas to **Tolosa**, the red bean town where the wicker baskets, "chisteras", used for pelota and jai alai, are produced, and **Idiazábal** (the ewe's cheese town) for a gastronomic tour.

Tolosa has one of the best asadores/sidrerías found anywhere in the Basque Country, a true red meat temple, called **Casa Julián**. This 50-year-old carnivore's delight is housed in a reconverted garage on Santa Clara, 6, at the bridge, serves huge grilled veal chops. Their menu is very limited, as is typical in all cider houses: jamón ibérico, asparagus from Navarra, Tudela lettuce hearts, Lodosa red piquillo peppers, a veal chop, and for dessert, Idiazábal cheese, Tolosa almond biscuits ("tejas") and ice cream. It has a great selection of Rioja wines and excellent Cuban cigars. The current chef-owner is the son of the original Julián. It's rated highly in all the Spanish gastronomic guides and has a counterpart in Old Madrid, **Julián de Tolosa** on Cava Baja. Tolosa's famous market day is **Saturday**. It's the largest in the Basque Country. Closed Sundays.

Just across the bridge on the other side of the river at Avenida Zumalacárregui, 7, you'll find another great asador, **Casa Nicolás**. Less rustic than Casa Julián, it delivers a fantastic meal in slightly more upscale surroundings. The chef, Pedro Ruiz, will take your order and deliver you a fabulous, but not inexpensive, meal. Plan on spending at least 40 euros per person for this superb but simple meal. We didn't see a menu. Typical of the style, the chef rattled off what dishes he was preparing that day. We chose the lomo de bacalao (cod loin) to start, then a chuleta de buey (ox chop) and a homemade dessert of rice pudding, plus a bottle of red Rioja, Viña Izadi.

And please don't think about leaving Tolosa without seeking out Spain's best and most famous confectionary shop, **Gorrotxategi**, at Plaza Zarra, 3. There used to be a number of pastry and confectionery shops in this town, but they began closing down one after the other, unable to compete with the cheaper industrial products. José María Gorrotxategi, who's very much interested in Basque lore, began buying all the sweet-making equipment in those shops. One of them, **Xaxu**, had been operating in the same building since the 17th century. José María bought the building and 12 years ago installed and opened the very interesting Gorrotxategi Pastry Museum with a display of over 400 traditional confectionery utensils.

Ordizia is a small medieval village a few minutes south of Tolosa with an old quarter filled with lovely homes and a famous Wednesday market in the large covered square that dates back to 1512. It is also very pro-Basque independence. You'll find great dining here as well at restaurant **Martínez**, Santa María, 10, whose young chef, Xabier Martínez, is taking his mother's classic asador in more contemporary and creative directions. There is a great 3-course menu for only 8,50 Euros and a tasting menu for only 19,50 Euros. Excellent value for such high quality.

Returning to San Sebastián from the tiny village of **Zerain**, population 250, retrace your steps on the NI north, then taking the road to Beasain, up the scenic GI 2635 to Azpeitia, then on the GI 631 to Zestoa to the E5/A8/E70 superhighway.