

Europe Holidays

Can San Sebastián avoid becoming a victim of its own success?

The city is attempting to find ways to encourage visitors while avoiding the excesses of mass tourism

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The Playa de la Concha © Alamy



NOVEMBER 10, 2017 Paul Richardson

On the bright autumn morning I arrived, Playa de la Concha — this year voted Europe’s best beach by users of TripAdvisor — was a perfect curve of immaculate sand and calm blue water. Along the Boulevard, the wide avenue linking the beach with the old town, sunlight filtered through the high plane trees. Beside La Bretxa market, street stalls sold locally grown fruit and vegetables bursting with rude organic health and freshness. If ever a place deserved to be

popular, I said to myself, it is San Sebastián.

And popular it has indeed become. In the offices of San Sebastián Tourism, manager Manu Narváez showed me statistics revealing the surge of tourism in “Donostia” since the Basque separatist group Eta called a permanent truce in 2011: visitor nights rose 32 per cent in the past four years. The number of short-term rental apartments, mostly in the Parte Vieja (the old town), has boomed thanks to Airbnb and similar platforms, and the Town Hall has recently granted licences for no fewer than 22 new hotels to come on stream over the next three years.

But popularity is no longer straightforward in Spain. As well as [Catalan separatism](#) and the ensuing political crisis, this year will be remembered for the rise of “*turismofobia*”, when parts of a country visited by a record 75m in 2016 began to question if the industry was getting out of hand. August saw demonstrations in Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, Barcelona and, most unexpected of all, civilised and well-to-do San Sebastián. Can the city tread the fine line between encouraging visitors and maintaining the genteel atmosphere of the place they come to see?

Out in the Parte Vieja, a warm sun was nosing into the barrio’s dark and narrow streets, drying off the early-morning drizzle. There were French, Japanese, and American voices, with a background rattle of suitcase wheels over uneven pavements — the sonic symbol, you might say, of the new tourism in Europe’s ancient cities. Looking up calle Fermín Calbetón, ground zero of social life in San Sebastián, the bar signs stood in thickets on either side of the street. The famous pintxo bars, once just another element of the Parte Vieja’s variegated life, are now plainly its *raison d’être*. One of the deleterious effects of the tourist boom, however, is a widening gulf between bars that strive to keep quality high — Ganbara, Atari, Txepetxa and La Cuchara de San Telmo are good examples — and a swathe of nondescript places, often belonging to faceless chains, where the ingredients are cheap and the cuisine unimaginative.





Tourists with a guide outside the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Chorus © Alamy

I found something faintly alarming about the garish, hyper-real food photographs displayed outside some of the bars but there was still plenty of realness here, and plenty of old-fashioned stores catering to the needs of residents. On one block I saw a chemist, a lottery outlet, a lingerie boutique, an electrical repair shop, a seed merchant — and Buenechea y Hernando, a family-run hardware store that this month celebrates 100 years of existence.

Owner Mariaje Buenechea needed no encouragement to tell me about the noisy neighbours in the Airbnb flat opposite her doorway; the drunken parties; the doorbell ringing at all hours. Yet tourism was on the whole a good thing, especially after the lean years of Eta and the economic crisis. “You can’t imagine what we’ve been through here,” said Buenechea emphatically, describing the bad old days in the barrio when the smell of tear gas hung in the air, the walls were begrimed and graffitied, and the Plaza de la Constitución a hangout of vagrants and junkies.

At the Koldo Mitxelena cultural centre beside the cathedral, I found more soul-searching. *Turismoak* was a temporary exhibition reflecting on the transformations, urban and social, brought about by the travel business. Eduardo Chibás’ lacerating documentary piece about the ravages of mass tourism in Barcelona and Gianni Berengo-Gardín’s photographs of monstrous cruise-ships in Venice both showed how bad things can get, and reminded me of the distance still separating San Sebastián from these worrying extremes. One room in the gallery was devoted to historic promotional posters and guide-books, their stylised Art Deco designs of casinos and languid women proving that tourism has been part and parcel of life in “Donostia” ever since Queen Isabel II made this a fashionable destination for the Spanish upper classes in the mid-19th century.



The spa at the Hotel Akelarre



Inside the Akelarre hotel

The grand, wedding-cake Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra, where I met for afternoon tea with Paul Liceaga, director of the local hotel association, is a living relic of that golden age. We sat in a salon overlooking the promenade, and Liceaga offered me the astonishing statistic that San Sebastián hosted more tourist overnight stays in 1907 (a total of 1,356,019) than in 2016 (1,265,546). Looked at in this light, the city's recent success as a destination is not to be regarded as a sudden explosion but as a return to form. Nevertheless, good management and innovative thinking will be needed if the city's high quality of life is not to be sacrificed.

One of the challenges, said Liceaga, is to spread the influx more evenly throughout the year by talking up low-season events such as the film festival in late September, the Behobia half-marathon in November, and the boisterous fiesta of La Tamborrada in January. San Sebastián is only ever really busy during high summer, making autumn and spring ideal for a low-key citybreak.

Meanwhile the tourist industry is thinking on its feet. This summer Mimo San Sebastián, pioneer of gastro-tourism in the city, unveiled a pintxo tour taking adventurous visitors into neighbourhoods where the crowds have yet to penetrate, such as Gros and Antiguo. Founder Jon Warren, originally from Kent, laughingly calls it his "anti-tourism" tour. The provincial government now has an office on the Boulevard to promote out-of-town attractions like Getaria (a fishing village and site of the remarkable Balenciaga Museum) and the coastal path

from Donostia to Pasaia, a lesser-known and beautiful section of the Camino de Santiago.



The Atari bar © Alamy



Hams at Casa Valles, a bar on one of Mimo's gastro-tours

Then there are those 22 new hotels. The good news is that most will be small and characterful — the largest with 120 rooms — and in total they will increase the city's 9,100 tourist beds by no more than 15 per cent. In line with the official strategy aimed at steering visitors away from the old town, most of the hotels are to be located in less-visited parts of the city. New properties will include an artists' residence in the Tabakalera cultural centre and two converted convents.

The openings have kicked off in the best possible way with a five-star boutique property, San Sebastián's first, attached to Pedro Subijana's celebrated three-Michelin-star restaurant Akelarre, in the suburban enclave of Igeldo. I drove up there for a sample stay in the modernist splendour of the hotel's low-slung, cuboid forms, designed by Marta Urtasun and Pedro Rica of cutting-edge Madrid architects Mecanismo. Oak-lined walls and floors, exteriors faced with rough grey slate, and elegantly diaphanous public spaces, make for an experience of highly geared luxe that is, so far, unique in this part of the world. There's an argument for saying this is the direction in which San Sebastián should be moving: upwards and outwards. Akelarre is firmly aimed at the top end, while diversifying geographically into a neighbourhood that, though a mere 10 minutes from the town centre, feels a world away from the tourist fray.

Through the plate-glass window of my room I drank in the glorious view, a restful expanse of sea, sky and verdant farmland. Even here there was tourism of a kind. In a field below the balcony, a French family were picking blackberries; a white-sailed yacht moved slowly across the horizon. But this exquisite new hotel and its surroundings only confirmed what the past two days had already taught me: that San Sebastián is not about to morph into a Basque Benidorm any time soon.

Details



Paul Richardson was a guest of Hotel Akelarre (akelarre.net; doubles from €300). For more on the city see sansebastianturismo.com

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