

The Concha Bay

The harmonious geography of the most photographed inlet on the Bay of Biscay has been the epicentre of activity in Donostia since the time of its origins.

Experienced fishermen, intrepid sailors and impetuous traders populated the city way before its rare beauty first started to seduce more leisure-seeking visitors, well-off aristocrats and eminent royalty. Donostia became fashionable thanks to the Queen Regent Maria Christina who, following the death of King Alphonse XII in 1885 chose San Sebastián as her summer residence. The sovereign

first came to the city because doctors had advised her to bathe in the sea to help cure her skin problems. Bathing in public was considered to be in bad taste at the time, and so-called *wave baths* were able to be taken thanks to the discretion offered by mobile changing huts, customarily horse-drawn, although in the case of royalty their ostentatious hut was transported on two rails that split the beach in two.

The tour around the bay, where Donostia's main attractions are concentrated, follows parallel to the iconic railings. Designed by Juan



Rafael Alday as a protective element, over time these railings would be transformed into the city's emblem. We start off at El Real Club Náutico building – the Royal Yacht Club - and then pass the city hall and Alderdi Eder Gardens. We continue between characteristic tamarisks towards the Hotel Londres e Inglaterra and come to the clocks – two towers that preside over the sands in the centre of the promenade. These two obelisks, in addition to the modernist street-lamps flanking the ramps granting access to the beach, were designed

along with the rest of the promenade in 1910. The clock and barometer that crown it were added later. Barely 200 metres away, we reach the two buildings that complete the architectural heritage attached to this promenade - La Perla and La Casa Real de Baños. This former spa now houses a thalassotherapy centre, restaurant, discotheque and sports club. It may be far removed from the glamour of La Belle Époque, but the Concha Bay nonetheless remains a key area of recreation for both tourists and Donostiaras alike.

La Parte Vieja – The Old Part

Famous for its *pintxo* bars and long-established restaurants, a city came into being in its streets that even today looks towards them in the pursuit of life's pleasures.

The Old Part is the nerve centre of the Donostia we now know. Thick walls guarded the old city – a fortress protected by La Mota Castle high up on Mt Urgull. The best-known and saddest chapter in the history of San Sebastián within the walls took place on 31st August

1813, when Anglo-Portuguese troops razed every house to the ground during the Peninsula War against Napoleon's army. The breach they opened in the wall through which they gained access to the inside was nothing compared to the decision by local leaders to definitively demolish the walls that contained the city. This took place in 1863 and enabled the planned *ensanche* or enlargement area to be defined that would go on to shape the Donostia we know nowadays. La Alameda del Boulevard was



designed as a meeting point between both cities – old and new. Some remains of the walls can still be seen beneath its foundations, in the underground car park, while other vestiges of the old walls are on display in the basement of the Bretxa shopping centre.

Plaza de la Constitución is the square at the heart of the Old Part. The building crowned by the city's coat of arms that presides over it housed the city hall of Donostia until the mid-20th century. It is still owned by the local authorities and is the place where the city's flag is hoisted during the San

Sebastián festivities. Something that comes as a particular surprise to visitors on the other buildings around the square is the numbers displayed on the balconies. This dates back to a past when the place was used for bullfights and each balcony comprised a box overlooking the bullring. The square has not lost its character as the centre of *Donostiarra* life and the main festivities throughout the year take place there: *Tamborrada*, *San Juan*, *Sagardo Eguna* and *Santo Tomás*, among others. The locals take over this spot with an urge to celebrate on many days of the year.



Regattas and rural sports

The Basque people have often made their free time an extension of their work. Rural sports, bets between farmhouses and regattas featuring *traineras* (rowing boats used for racing) are the best examples of this.

Vessels from all along the Cantabrian coast gather in Donostia on the first two Sundays in September to compete in the season's most prestigious rowing competition. This is a mass meeting that fills the Concha Bay with colour and revelry in the finest natural amphitheatre for fans of the different *traineras*. This singular race has its origins in whaling, when these fast-moving boats propelled by three pairs of arms would battle to be the first to reach a recently-sighted cetacean. Those who managed to stick their harpoon in the whale first were the ones who reserved the right to continue hunting it. This tradition has become a sporting event in which there is no lack of betting, this taking place around Portaletas on the city's



quayside. To best enjoy the trial, the visitor needs to be up-to-date with the colours that distinguish the crew and fans of each vessel: purple, pink, green, blue and yellow...

There is an impressive range of traditional sports in the rural milieu, although not all of them enjoy the popularity of stone lifting, log chopping and **Basque pelota**. To attend a match of the latter, which is played either with the bare hand or a basket, the best option is to head on Thursday and Saturday afternoons to the Galarreta *frontón* (pelota court)

on the city's outskirts between Donostia and Hernani, very close to the Chillida Leku Museum. Top-class matches take place there.

Rural sports trials are uncommon in San Sebastián. The best time to see them is during *Semana Grande*, in the month of August, when there are demonstrations of log chopping (*aizkolaritza*) and stone lifters (*harrijasotzaile*). The most popular is *Igeldoko Harria*, which involves lifting a rough stone of 131 kilos in weight as many times as possible within five minutes. These trials take place in Plaza de la Trinidad, in *La Parte Vieja*.