

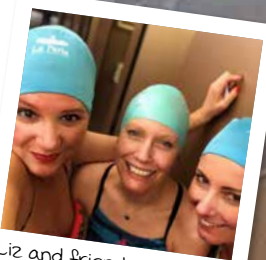
SWIMMING SAN SEBASTIÁN

Sheltered sea swims, a vast sandy beach and gastronomic delights for every budget: could San Sebastián be the perfect getaway for outdoor swimmers? **Liz Lowe** tests the water, talks to local swimmers and eats a lot of pintxos

We pushed open the door and emerged from the steam into the brightness of the day. Our feet padded onto pale sand, the pace quickened, and we fell into ocean waves. There may have been some whooping.

Back across La Concha beach stood the belle époque façade of La Perla where, just moments before, we'd admired the view in reverse from the panoramic jacuzzi.

San Sebastián is a place to really savour life. This elegant Basque Country resort, which boasts 18 Michelin stars, is a feast for both body and soul. It's also home to a friendly and inspiring community of outdoor swimmers, who were happy to share their local knowledge with us. →



Liz and Friends



The Travesía del Paseo Nuevo race



Lara Vicandi swims to Ondarreta beach



Txema Marimon loves swimming in La Concha

Swimming along the Paseo Nuevo coastal path

← Jaime Caballero is a celebrated ultra-marathon swimmer and fundraiser. His many and varied open water challenges have included swimming the lengths of Lake Geneva and Loch Ness, two-way crossings of the Strait of Gibraltar and the English Channel and swimming from Bilbao to his home town of San Sebastián (Donostia in Basque).

Jaime's usual swim spot is La Concha. "We have a fantastic bay that is like a large open water pool. Swimming the 'smile of the bay' from the Royal Nautical Club to the Tennis Club is 2,200 metres: I swim this round trip every day," he says. Named for its shell shape, the bay is sheltered, explains Jaime, so swimmers are generally unhindered by waves or currents.

La Concha is the best known of San Sebastián's beaches. Ondarreta is adjacent to it, and the two are connected at low tide. Jaime's 2,200 metre swim passes both but, for a shorter distance, the main La Concha section is only around 1000 metres. The third beach, Zurriola, is more exposed and popular with surfers.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Txema Marimon is a keen open water swimmer, an ex-water polo player and on the masters swim team at San Sebastián's CD Fortuna KE. He also organises an annual Christmas swim called Kontxapuzon (roughly translated as 'bath in La Concha').

Txema describes the practicalities of swimming in La Concha Bay: "From June to October, the bathing areas of La Concha and Ondarreta beaches are marked, so swimming there is comfortable and safe, and you can do it without the need of a tow float."

The bay can be busy and Txema says: "It is common to meet (or crash head-on!) with other swimmers who make the same route." The stretch connecting the two beaches isn't a designated bathing area, he explains, so "there you will have to raise your head a lot, just in case."

In September and October, when there are fewer boats and beach users, Txema says it's easier to swim further

out of the bay. The water temperature generally stays above 20 degrees from July through to October.

For an easier route, Txema recommends swimming approximately 400 metres from Ondarreta beach to Isla Santa Clara, which is situated in the middle of the bay and protects the beaches from the waves of the open sea. "Personally, swimming in La Concha is my favourite swim," says Txema. "There are changing rooms on the beach. And having a pintxo in one of the surrounding bars in the area is really great."

SWIMMING TO THE BAR

Another local swimmer, Lara Vicandi, suggests her favourite route of around 2500 metres. "I love to swim along La Concha Bay towards Isla Santa Clara," she says. "My favourite time is in the morning with fresh and cool air. I used to follow the signal buoys of the beach from the Royal Nautical Club stairs to Ondarreta beach, and then straight to the island, where there is a bar to make a break."

PLAN A TRIP AROUND A RACE

San Sebastián has several open water swimming races on its annual calendar, and a favourite of local swimmers is the Travesía del Paseo Nuevo. It takes place during the Semana Grande; a fiesta week of music, culture and sport

that literally goes out with a bang as the final event is an international fireworks competition.

Organised by CD Fortuna KE, the race follows a demanding 3000 metre route that begins at Zurriola beach and follows the Paseo Nuevo coastal path around the base of Monte Urgull to La Concha. Lara advises: "There are usually many waves on the stretch of the Paseo Nuevo, so keep calm and go metre by metre. You should practise swimming in these conditions before racing in them."

POST-SWIM R&R

After the swimming, La Perla Centro Talaso-Sport is the place to soothe those aching muscles. The centre offers relaxation and hydrotherapy pools, a

panoramic jacuzzi, a submerged aqua gym, an ice bath, saunas and steam rooms. And, if you haven't had your fix of salt water, you can intersperse it all with a dash into the sea.

As Jaime Caballero says: "When you finish a workout and you get into the hot springs, you feel like you're in heaven. The perfect travel agency brochure plan: swim in the sea, relax in the hot springs and to finish: some delicious pintxos."

SNACKS ON STICKS

Ah yes, the pintxos ('peen-chos'). The Basque version of tapas, pintxos are piled high on bar counters and usually pierced with a cocktail stick to hold them together. Bread-based snacks, with no waiting around? The ideal food for hungry swimmers.

Locals tend to gather for a drink and pintxos in the bars of Constitución Plaza or Fermín Calbetón Kalea, the rambunctious street at the heart of the Parte Vieja (old town). We even managed to eat breakfast on sticks one day, alongside market traders and shift workers having a morning beer.

To eat like a local, a guide from

Go Local San Sebastián's free walking tour suggests: "Ask what the speciality in that bar is and eat that. And then go to another bar and ask what their speciality is." Pintxos can be washed down with the local Txakoli wines ('cha-ko-lee'), which are refreshing with plenty of acidity. Cider is also celebrated locally, and the season runs from mid-January to the end of April. There are many options for finer dining, and we treated ourselves to the eight-course 'market menu' (85 euros) at Kokotxa, one of the more reasonably priced Michelin star restaurants.

And after all the feasting? Well, it's time to plan another swim and do the whole lot again, of course.



Above: ultra-marathon swimmer Jaime Caballero
Left: Isla Santa Clara

If you go

Getting there:
By train: Eurostar to Paris – Hendaye – San Sebastián-Donostia.
By air: Fly to Bilbao or Biarritz. Bus transfers to San Sebastián: 1 hour 20 mins from Bilbao, 55 mins from Biarritz.

Staying there:
There are AirBnB apartments, hostels and hotels in every price bracket.

CONTACTS

La Perla Centro Talaso-Sport: la-perla.net
Jaime Caballero: aimcaballero.siempreadelante.es
CD Fortuna KE (organisers of Travesía del Paseo Nuevo): cdfortunake.com
Go Local San Sebastián (free walking tours, bike rental and much more): golocalsansebastian.com
Kokotxa restaurante: restaurantekokotxa.com

EVENTS

Travesía del Paseo Nuevo (2959m), 15 August 2019: cdfortunake.com
Isla Santa Clara sea swim (3000m), 25 August 2019: atleticosansebastian.com
Concha Bay sea swim (2220m), 7 September 2019: natacionaeaso.com
Gabon Kontxapuzon (approx. 500m), 25 December 2019: cdfortunake.com

NB: a little help from Google Translate may be necessary for some of these sites, or the clubs are very helpful.