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Weekend

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Dirty Harry

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By Harry Wallop

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La Concha bay in San Sebastian



On the famous Playa de la Concha in San Sebastian one could be forgiven for thinking summer was in full swing. The paddleboarders were out, not a wetsuit between them, joggers too in barely-there Lycra, and numerous swimmers, chief among them a group of stout, elderly ladies in petalled swimming hats who took to the sea like it was a warm bath. Yet snow still dusted the Pyrenean foothills, which rise up behind the city, and there was no doubting a lingering April chill despite the cloudless sky.

Some 30 minutes' walk from La Concha, across San Sebastian's landmark Zurriola bridge with its green and white columns like art deco bowling pins, past Playa de la Zurriola, the Avenida Ategorrieta feels distinctly suburban. The wide, residential artery is bordered by fancy houses and villas, and at No 61 stands the hotel Villa Soro.

"A sleeping beauty," says Andrés Soldevila of his family's new project which, with Sant Francesc and Can Ferrereta in Mallorca, brings his boutique-hotel empire to three. Beauty? I'm not sure. Handsome, even quirky, might better describe the late-19th-century mansion, commissioned by the wealthy Londaiz family and designed by the then architect of the moment Luis Elizalde, who clearly had a penchant for the high Victorian style. Down the road at the Palacio Miramar overlooking La Concha, the Spanish royals were at it too, building their summer retreat in much the same vein as Villa Soro with sharply pitched gables, grandly arched entrances and mock-Tudor timbering. And when fashionable Queen Maria Cristina commissioned Pierre Ducasse to lay out the gardens at Miramar, the Londaiz family did the same at Villa Soro.

A grandiose expression of status is what Villa Soro was all about; on the inside too, where a mighty oak staircase rises from the entrance hall, a stained-glass ceiling shows the Londaiz coat of arms and a stairway chapel with more stained glass — this time de-

Tuck into San Sebastian

A smart new hotel makes the foodie Basque city an even more tempting weekend break, says **Pamela Goodman**

...picting the Holy Family — casts a kind of beatific beneficence on arriving visitors. Mercifully, the ostentation of the Londaiz family has been tempered by the sophistication of the Soldevila family in their refashioning of the building's previous hotel interiors. The bedrooms, 25 in total — divided between the main villa and a converted coach house — employ subtlety and restraint in their use of colour and Spanish linens. Numbers 12 and 13 with a terrace and balcony respectively

22, with its huge window and rafted ceiling, gets my vote. Downstairs the monochrome living room is the star of the show, where I sit tremulously guarding a glass of rioja for fear of upsetting the colour scheme. On the wall, firmly rooting this hotel in northern Spain, are a lithograph and a woodcut by Eduardo Chillida, the celebrated Basque artist whose iron sculpture, *El Peine del Viento*, anchored to the rocks at the entrance to La Concha's bay, is an icon of local culture.

While Chillida remains one of the biggest pulls — the open-air museum dedicated to his work, Chillida Leku (museo-chillidaleku.com), run by the celebrated gallerists Hauser & Wirth, is a 15-minute drive away — it is his fellow Basque installation artist Cristina Iglesias who is the talk of the town for her complex new geological sculpture, *Hondalea* (*Marine Abyss*), in a restored lighthouse on the island of Santa Clara in La Concha bay.

If not art, then surely food is San Sebastian's magnetic attraction. "We are in the Disneyland of restaurants," says Andrés over a plate of croquetas at Villa Soro. He has wisely decided to offer only the lightest of menus to his guests, knowing that most will eat elsewhere. Arzak, which has three of San Sebastian's 19 Michelin stars, is a 15-minute walk away, should you manage, unlike me, to secure a table. I squeezed instead into Rekondo, another stalwart of the culinary scene famous the world over for its wine cellar, redesigned during lockdown by the chef Iñaki Arrieta to better show off its 100,000 bottles (rekondo.com).

But the old town of San Sebastian remains its beating gourmet heart. Hitting the pintxo trail is a local ritual — the kind of Basque equivalent to a pub crawl but with better food and no beer. Pintxos, frequently a slice of baguette with any variety of topping secured with a cocktail stick, have now evolved to include other, more sophisticated tapas-style snacks, washed down with wine, txakoli (a bubbly local wine) or cider. Many of the bars have a speciality: La Cuchara de San Telmo is famous for its suckling pig and foie gras; Goiz Argi for prawn skewers; Casa Urola for artichokes; Borda Berri for ribs and pig's ears; Ganbara for croquetas; and La Viña for melt-in-the-mouth cheesecake. I did them all, one after the other, until I felt like a stout, elderly lady, ready for a swim.



Pamela Goodman was a guest of Villa Soro, which has B&B doubles from £125 (hotelvilla-soro.com). Fly to Bilbao

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