



# A TALE *of* THREE CITIES

Nothing but the best of times in San Sebastián, Berlin and Fes

## SAN SEBASTIAN

By AOIFE O'RIORDAIN

Ask anyone with a passing knowledge of San Sebastián and they will invariably mention its annual film festival and its gastro-scene—or perhaps both. The San Sebastián Film Festival may not be the showiest, but it attracts a steady stream of A-listers and indie darlings every September. San Sebastián's gourmet scene is equally, if not more, stellar—there are more Michelin stars here per capita than anywhere else in the world.

Food is an obsession that trickles down from the gastronomic heights of the Michelin-starred Arzak, Martín Berasategui, Akelarre and Mugaritz, to the napkin-littered floors of the scores of *pintxo* bars lining its *Parte Vieja* or Old Town.

Known in the local Basque language

as *Donostia*, San Sebastián has a pleasingly old-fashioned allure. A city of just over 185,000 residents bordered by the swirling Cantabrian Sea on one side and, on the other, the velvety green slopes of the Basque country's interior, so steep the sheep seem to almost tumble down them. For its relatively modest size, San Sebastián can lay claim to grand 19th-century buildings, an historic boat-cluttered old port, and arguably one of the most picture-perfect of European city beaches in the golden sweep of its iconic La Concha.

San Sebastián's golden era arrived with the Spanish Queen Isabella II in 1845, when she came to bathe in its seawater on the advice of her doctors. Its place on the map as society's resort of choice was assured when Queen María Cristina made the Queen Anne-style Miramar Palace the summer residence of her court in 1893.

The spirit of this gilded age also endures at San Sebastián's iconic place to check in, the Hotel Maria Cristina, perched wedding-cake-like on the edge of the historic centre and the Urumea River. Built in 1912, at the height of the Belle Epoque, this *reina* was beginning to show her wrinkles until Starwood Hotels completed a multi-million-dollar facelift three years ago to mark the hotel's 100th anniversary. Guest rooms are done in muted pastels and soothing tones of dove grey and white, and the public spaces buzz.

Next year, along with Wrocław in Poland, San Sebastián will become European Capital of Culture 2016, with a year-long program of special events. The city lends itself to simple pleasures. Take the funicular to the summit of Monte Urgull for the sweeping views, loll in the waters of and La Perla Thalassotherapy Centre on the edge of

La Concha, or lounge in one of the jaunty blue-and-white-striped *cabañas* on neighbouring Ondarreta beach. Rent a bike and cycle the length of San Sebastián's 6km coastal path around the base of Monte Urgull, where the full, wind-blasting force of the sea can be felt on stormy days, often closing the route temporarily. At the base of Monte Igueldo is the haunting, lonely sight of *El Peine del Viento*, the "Wind Comb", designed by Luis Peña Ganchegui and celebrated local sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Cross the Zurriola Bridge over the Urumea to the boho neighbourhood of Gros, where a youthful crowd with wetsuits and salt-encrusted hair populates its bars after a day riding the waves.

Sooner or later, though, it's time for *pintxos*. As you saunter through the Parte Vieja, the aromas mingle. Hundreds of people hit this grid of narrow 19th-century streets every evening for the Basque version of tapas, often washed down with a glass of the local dry white wine called *txakoli*. For an initiation into the Basque way of eating, I joined a *pintxo*-hunting tour led by native Basque chef Eli Susperregui of San Sebastián Food, a guide company founded by

British expat Jon Warren offering tours, wine tastings and cookery classes.

Most locals have their favourite bars and each bar its own standout dish or three, including the local *txistorra* sausage rolls, served on a Sunday morning at La Viña on 31 Agosto Street; the cloudlike tortillas that must be ordered in advance at Bar Nestor on Pescadería Street; and the crab tartlets and small plates of sautéed, garlicky mushrooms called *perretikos* that cause a good-humoured crush at Ganbara on San Jerónimo Street. That's part of the city's allure for diners—a crowded *pintxo* bar one night; the culinary alchemy of Arzak the next—different but equally delicious ingredients of this city that loves to eat.

## BERLIN

By OLIVIA COLE

People think it's a joke that you only hear English voices in Soho House Berlin. In fact, it's possible to speak in English all over the city. Low rent and large industrial spaces mean that there are around 10,000 artists living and working here; with rents rising, artists are as likely to move to Deutschland

as they are to Hoxton and Brooklyn.

Berlin Art Week in September and Berlin Gallery Weekend in May are in the diaries of every international collector, but there's a real scene here all year. With a forest and a river and a string of distinctive urban villages, the city itself can sometimes feel as though it's eluding you but the galleries are everywhere. Your explorations should definitely start with Mitte.

In 2010, when Soho House opened here, the new *haus* was an indisputably spectacular building in an area that was perfect for creative members. Damien Hirst and his London dealers Blain Southern threw the first wild sleepover and Hirst sprayed a shark on to the concrete walls outside: perfectly in keeping with the graffiti that covered the district.

Five years on, the House's distinctive green rooftop pool, picking out the trees of the Tiergarten and the green neon of the TV tower, now looks down on the low-rise sprawl of what's swiftly become one of Europe's most appealing districts. The graffiti is still there, but now luxury denim brands also advertise through the medium of painting on walls, trying to speak in the visual language Berlin knows best.

The money, of course, has followed the art. Many of the artists' studios have

CHRISTIAN SIMONPIETRI/SYGMA/CORBIS (DAVID BOWIE PORTRAIT)





moved slightly north to Wedding. You can get a great taste of this old working-class neighbourhood by visiting KM Galerie in a turn of the century apartment block. Here, locals joke about the unsubtle prescience of Adidas, who have opened a massive trainer store, clearly anticipating future development in the area, even if at the moment their only potential customers are artists eating their €5 lunches in the Café Dujardin on the corner.

Translated as the “middle”, Mitte was the central part of East Berlin, surrounded by the Berlin Wall on the north, south and west. After the Wall came down in 1989, these were the untouched buildings of East Berlin that were the setting for the city’s explosion of art and, famously, the techno music scene.

The changes in recent years are in some ways just as dramatic. This is not just a formerly dodgy area that’s become fashionable, but one of the most mythologized urban districts in history. Its history is haunting but its cultural legacy is also astonishing, from the films of Wim Wenders, like the classic *Wings of Desire*, to the music of David Bowie and U2, whose 1992 re-unification album *Achtung Baby* was recorded in the legendary Hansa

Studios nearby.

There’s also real local pleasure in gentrification, too. Mo Ghandehari, founder of the recently opened Hotel Ultra, one of the city’s many new concept stores, describes the alteration of Torstrasse with memorable Germanic succinctness: “It was such an ugly street. Five years ago, I never imagined I would have a store here,” he told me cheerfully.

Nearby neighbours include Soho House’s The Store (complete with organic café) and the Happy Shop Store (both new), mixing quirky interiors and accessories with high fashion. Ten years ago this would have been the red-light district; now, you could take a stroll and along the way do some serious damage to your credit card acquiring pieces of art or Jil Sander.

At nearby OFT vintage, a Mitte landmark and stylist’s treasure trove for 12 years, founder Marita-Karin Schwalm is known as the “queen of Berlin vintage” but is looking for a new base after her own rent was doubled. At the moment, businesses like OFT and the area’s traditional Turkish grocers keep the design stores and craft coffee shops company. Gallingly, in Berlin, London is cited as an example for what

the city would like to avoid. In June, rent controls came into place. Landlords now can’t charge new tenants more than 10 percent above the local average rent.

Traditionally, since 1989, the more eclectic development has been in the East, but parts of what would have been West Berlin are now also changing in interesting ways, too. A new reason not to confine yourself to Mitte alone (tempting as this might be) is Das Stue, one of the Mr and Mrs Smith collection of hotels. Its neighbourhood is peaceful rather than hipsterish, but it’s one of the city’s quirkiest and most luxurious openings in years.

Charlottenburg is a leafy part of West Berlin that was nonetheless affected by the Cold War. When Bonn temporarily became the capital, many of its embassies and residences fell into disrepair. Das Stue, with Patricia Urquiola interiors, was the Danish Embassy from 1947-1978. It’s now a space that’s minimalist and chic but that also has a real sense of fun from its proximity to Berlin’s famous zoo. There are jars of animal Haribo as you check in, your hotel slippers turn your feet into Animal Snap, and you can see down into the zoo from the rooms and the library (complete with trays of cakes).

For all of this playfulness, Das Stue is elegant: a calm refuge from a city that can be exhilarating but also exhausting, whether that’s because of its famous dusk-till-dawn nightlife or those endless galleries (there are more than 600). Das Stue is also minutes from one of my all-time favourite museums, the Helmut Newton Foundation. And if the galleries defeat you, you can always carry on looking at the photography in the hotel’s own collection.

## FES

By CHRISTA D’SOUZA

Were Edith Wharton to revisit Fes now, she might not notice a huge difference from when she visited in 1915. True, the boy sitting side-saddle on his donkey with his heels grazing the cobblestones as he wends his way through the medina might be talking on an iPhone; true, she might come across an illicit car stuck in an alleyway off Talaa Sghira, the medina’s main thoroughfare—but otherwise?

With its 9th-century mosques and stalls selling everything from bath plugs to dried lizards; with its long-lashed calves’ heads lolling in butchers’ shop fronts; with its proper working *fondouks* (or *caravanserais*)—inns for mule-riding travellers—and its relative (compared to Marrakech) lack of foreigners, a visit to this former capital of Morocco and UNESCO World Heritage Site really is like stepping back in time.

The best way to get a sense of the ancient city before entering is from the terrace of the Sofitel Fès Palais Jamaï hotel on Bab Guissa (currently being renovated by the folks behind La Mamounia in Marrakech). Only by seeing it from above, tumbling out in front of you like a bunch of Lego bricks, do you get a sense of its sprawling, utterly confusing enormity. Once in, be brave and get lost (according to Paul Bowles, who based his 1955 thriller *The Spider’s House* here, that’s the only way to see Fes) and be pleasantly surprised by the lack of wooden snakes being waggled in your face or boys with monkeys on chains. This is a proper working medina whose entire *raison d’être* is not yet to hassle gullible tourists.

Key spots if you only have a few days? The 11th-century working tannery at Chouara from whose gigantic vats emanate a smell I can only describe as buttery sick. Helpful locals will give you mint leaves to stuff up your nose to mitigate the stench, but if you plan to eat, keep this till last, perhaps. Madrasa Bou Inania, the 14th-century

school, is a must for its incredible mosaic work and cedar-wood cupolas; as are the Karaouine Mosque and University—the oldest operating teaching institution in the world, though non-Muslims are not allowed in and must peek from outside. For fresh camel burgers (more succulent than beef, apparently) and ridiculously tasty almond milkshakes, head for Café Clock, a vertiginous hangout-cum-eatery opened by Mike Richardson, an ex-*maitre d’* of The Wolseley and The Ivy. (Richardson also has a miniature riad/restaurant, The Scorpion House, an hour away in Moulay Idriss Zerhoun, near the ancient ruins of Volubilis, which makes a great 24-hour trip if you have time.) On the street-food front, I urge you to try the *loubia*, a traditional fava-bean soup, with freshly baked rounds of the flatbread known as *khobz*, at Thami’s. (If Thami himself is around, get him to show you the secret theatre in the back, a kind of take on

destination, and there are plenty of super-luxe riads behind studded cedar-wood doors to repair to. Riad Fès, a Relais & Châteaux, is perhaps the most luxurious of all of them, but the medina’s first ever riad, La Maison Bleue (opened by the charming Mehdi el Abbadi in 1993) and the Art Deco suites at the newish, painstakingly restored Palais Amani are worth considering, too. If you are thinking of going in June, though, better book now, as this is the month when the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music takes place and world musos descend in their droves (the highlight, this year, was lying on a carpet under the stars, surrounded by cypress and oleander trees, listening to Sufi musicians perform).

Meanwhile if, like me, you suffer from riad claustrophobia, you might want to check out the sleek new Hotel Sahrai, a 10-minute drive from the medina in

## ONCE IN, BE BRAVE AND GET LOST. ACCORDING TO PAUL BOWLES, WHO BASED HIS 1955 THRILLER “THE SPIDER’S HOUSE” HERE, THAT’S THE ONLY WAY TO SEE FES

El Morocco with its red pillars and giraffe-print walls.)

If it’s posh Moroccan fare you are after, you cannot afford to skip L’Amandier restaurant, atop the hotel Palais Faraj, whose shaky waiter service and fanned napkins are more than made up for by the spectacular panoramic view of the medina at night. And the food. Two standout dishes: the pigeon *pastilla*, a traditional wedding dish sprinkled with icing sugar and tasting like a sublime savoury strudel, and *jou hara*, a Middle Eastern *millefeuille*, kind of sandwiched together with *crème anglaise* and fresh fruit.

For a more modern Marrakech-style experience, head for the roof of La Mezzanine, overlooking the Jnan Sbil Gardens, order a couple of bottles of gris rosé (Morocco’s very acceptable answer to Whispering Angel) and watch the swallows ducking and diving into the terracotta-pink sunset. The perfect antidote to a hot dusty day in the medina.

Where to stay? The hotel industry has got wise to the hotness of this as-yet-unruined

the blocky, purpose-built Ville Nouvelle. With its massive wrap-around pool, burnt-orange leather bed headrests and Givenchy spa, it can be your guilty secret. Yes, it overlooks Carrefour, but for some reason this does not jar. Sixty years ago, Paul Bowles told of locals who’d never seen a car. Well, scroll forward to now, and there are medina-dwellers who visit the newly built shopping mall just to go up and down the escalator.

Marrakech? Meh. As any loyal Fassi will tell you, it’s like Disney compared to the ancient and totally magical city of Fes. □ *Abercrombie & Kent offers a three-night package to Fes, from £599 per person. The price includes direct flights from London to Fes, B&B accommodation at Riad Fes based on two people sharing a Deluxe Room, hotel transfers and a half-day tour of the medina with a local guide. For info and reservations, call 01242 855 127 or visit [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk). For further information, go to Visit Morocco: [www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com). For details of the Fes Festival 2016, see [www.fesfestival.com](http://www.fesfestival.com)*

