

A foodie mountain biking ride to San Sebastián

Between the best sandwich of all time, baked cheesecake and solomillo, our writer manages to squeeze in some fantastic single-track riding along the Atlantic coast to San Sebastián

- [The ride in pictures](#)

Benjamin Haworth
The Guardian, Saturday 19 April 2014
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Tucking in to fantastic pintos in San Sebastián, with an appetite sharpened by mountain biking. All photographs: Benjamin Haworth

I am in the [Basque country](#), eating the best food I've ever had. I'm not yet in fabled foodie heaven of [San Sebastián](#), but sitting, sweating and exhausted, on a lawn chair halfway up a mountain at a pokey food shack, eating what is essentially an omelette sandwich. It is amazing.

Only mountain biking can bring such intense delusions. When you've been through as many ups and downs – literally and metaphorically – as you can be put through on an off-road bike route, you can find yourself totally spent. Nothing tastes better than some well-earned [food and drink](#).

The day begins in mellow fashion in the lovely harbour at Hondarribia, right on the French border east of San Sebastián. My biking buddy Ed and I fuel our bodies with caffeine, breakfasting mainly on powerful but strangely sweet *cortados* (a kind of mini-cappuccino) in one of many pretty cafes. Our heart rates sufficiently jumpy, we head off to meet Doug, our guide. Doug runs [Basque MTB](#), which typically offers week-long riding holidays here or in the Pyrenees, tailored to individual

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interests.

We're trying one of his one-day rides, and our goal is San Sebastián, 35km along the coast. Doesn't sound too far, and a coastal path is bound to be pretty flat, eh? No chance: a steep, though blissfully brief road climb starts us off, then we zip and flow along a smooth roller coaster of a path.

Pungent aromas from trailside flowers and bushes waft over us as Doug churns up the air ahead. The surf crashes away down below us. The sea is dotted with little fishing boats. We're instantly immersed in the sights, sounds and aromas of the coast.



The rugged coastline east of San Sebastián

The route Doug is taking us on is a version of the Camino del Norte – more usually trodden by hikers. Doug has tweaked it for mountain bikes, following the approximate route but adding some great cycle trails and avoiding some of the worst climbs. Mountain biking is unparalleled in its ability to take you through a landscape. To cover this distance on foot would probably take a couple of days; to do the trip on roads wouldn't be anywhere near as immersive. We ride through bamboo copses and lush meadows, passing wind-sculpted bedrock, craggy clifftops, medieval military roads and more. It's almost draining in its beauty.

At the 20km mark, all this cycling is taking its toll. We reach the top of a particularly stiff peak and Doug points at something in the distance. It is a cafe. According to Doug it will probably be open. And they will give us food and drink in exchange for money.

From nowhere we suddenly find a well of energy and high-tail it down a sinuous sliver of a path. I think there are gorgeous ocean vistas on either side and ancient watchtowers dotted along the ridgeline. I don't really notice. I'm gunning for the food dealer.

It's here I enjoy the aforementioned omelette sandwich. I shall never forget it. The cafe, called [Cantina de Jaizkibel](#), sits above the fishing town of Pasai Donibane. As we wolf down our food, local families are enjoying lunch. Tray after tray of amazing dishes – lamb, ribs and steaks – pass before us.

Duly refuelled we continue our ride, on more fun trails along beautiful coast – though now with a more downhill trend. The trail spits us out in Pasai Donibane, where we board a tiny ferry for a two-minute journey over the Oyarzun river, with the Atlantic beating at the mouth of the estuary.

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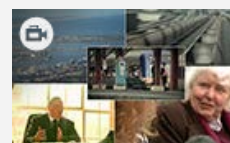
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Bar Irrintz

A lengthy climb through juicy woodland takes us to the final stretch. Suddenly, San Sebastián appears. One second we are hacking through swoopy forest, and the next we are on the beach at Gros, just east of the city, having a *caña* (beer) with the surfers at Cervecería Monpas (Paseo de José Miguel Barandiarán), flabbergasted that such a wild landscape can sit so close to a big old place like San Sebastián.

We celebrate our mini adventure by visiting some of the [city's famous pintxo bars](#). This is the typical way Doug ends guided rides. He knows his way around the fabulous bars just as well as he knows the trails. No one bats an eyelid as we lean the bikes up against walls or tables. We wander from place to place, down winding alleyways, feasting on different small plates of deliciousness at each one.

And although the omelette sandwich will live long in my memory, what we eat in San Sebastián is even more mind-blowing. We feast on blue cheese and anchovy creations in the family cubby-hole of Bar Irrintz (Calle Pescadería 12); enjoy the drama of lobster with dry-iced rosewater at modern Bar Zeruko (Pescadería 10); move on to baked cheesecake from Bar La Viña (Calle 31 de Agosto 3), with a snifter of raisin-y Pedro Ximenez wine; and sup real ale at Never Stop (Reyes Catolicos 6). But the *solomillo* (sirlon steak) at super-busy Gandarías (31 de Agosto 23) ... now that probably is the best meal I've ever had.

• *The trip was provided by Basque MTB (basquemtb.com). One-day rides cost €50pp, or €60 with pintxo tour, excluding food and drink. It's also available as part of a week's holiday, from €695. [Easyjet](#) flies from Manchester and Stansted to Bilbao and from Gatwick to Biarritz*

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GayTravelAdvice

20 April 2014 6:37pm

3

San Sebastina is an incredible city to have Tapas..one of the best places in Spain. Also La Concha Beach has a great promenade to walk along the beach and enjoy the view... Agur from San Sebastian
www.gaytraveladvice.com

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lostinmodertion

20 April 2014 10:01pm

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KaalKaczmareK

20 April 2014 11:08pm

9

ban hipsters!

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defusenik

21 April 2014 6:16am

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vickstar70

21 April 2014 9:00am

Beard bitching has also hit 'peak'.

Report



1



Juvijim

21 April 2014 9:53am

I think those two belong in a certain cartoon strip in Private Eye.....

Report



3

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



alfiea

21 April 2014 6:01pm

Bloody hell, the Guardian really has excelled itself this time! My mountain biking has always been about the riding not the boutique food. Just how many readers are going to follow this - some might do the ride, others might hit the eateries, one in a million will do both

Report



2



porcini ▶ alfiea

22 April 2014 10:17am

So the heck what? If travel journalism stuck only to Things That Very Many Readers Are Likely To Do, it would be thoroughly dull. Surely the fact that "some might do the ride, others might hit the eateries" is a vindication of an article with broad appeal.

Report



5



John Glynn

22 April 2014 9:08am

They 2 chappies in the photo, look like they need a good wash not tapas young man

Report



1



Nicholas88

22 April 2014 12:05pm

Do you think a professional football would be a good mountain bike rider after stealing somebody's DNA it's a mountain bike holiday live the experience just go out their and do it like the nike logo where

1

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The sickle-shaped Playa de La Concha sweeps elegantly from the old harbour of San Sebastian, overlooked by the majestic statue of the Holy Heart. It was...

Posted by mackenziemason 12 Mar 2013

San Sebastian: [San Sebastian](#)

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There is a small cave near the top of Monte Urgull which is just large enough for a bar. As well as having beautiful views (covering all of San Sebastian...

Posted by jumpingbeans 28 Nov 2012

San Sebastian: [San Sebastian beach](#)

San Sebastian nestles in a shell-shaped bay where the 'Comb of the Wind', the jaw-dropping iron sculptures of Eduardo Chillida, cast huge, bold shapes...

Posted by PWestwell 29 Apr 2012

San Sebastian, with the lush green hills of the Basque country all around, has the most glorious beach. It has fine golden sand, a shallow slope into

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