

GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

Entry #038

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Article 1

The Foodie Feast of San Sebastian

In a semi full *pintxos* taverna in Northern Spain's San Sebastian, the bartender ignores the customers, leans over the glistening plates of bite-size lobster snacks lining the bar and beckons me in. Closer, closer, until I can almost smell the brine of lobster nets and the nearby marina on his whiskers. He points a stubby finger towards the display, "Ees plastic", he snorts.

"It's plastic." He erupts in laughter, his colleagues erupt in laughter, while my own travel companions temporarily disown me, commenting on signed celebrity posters on the wall ("Oh look! Glen Close!"). I'd taken a photo of afore-mentioned lobster, (I can't imagine the repercussions if I'd tried to *eat* it), and firmly blame a few too many glasses of *txakoli*, the local fizzing wine, and that in this part of the world, all those *pinxtos* look fairly, well, plastic-perfect.

San Sebastian is Disneyland for foodies. However, eating *pintxos*, the regional small-tapas style snacks, requires etiquette. It involves nabbing 'real estate'

(finding a piece of bar to lean on), confidence in ordering (ask for the special if all else fails) and visiting at least five bars in an eve, if not more. Stay longer, and you've missed the *pintxos* ethos, which is to be social, stay on the move and let your tastebuds flirt with every flavour under the sun.

Helping us navigate these delicious waters is Christine, a Devour Food guide, a 12-year resident and former chef. The first rule is when to go; we're happily going earlier than most at 7.30pm (real Donastians, as the locals are called in Basque, don't head out until at least 9pm) and being off-season, there's room to move (and take photos of plastic lobsters).

Would I recommend coming to the labyrinth streets of Old Town in peak-season summer August? Only if a bar full of writhing, sweating, bodies chatting enthusiastically over the bar filled with cold pintxos is your thing (formulating my own personal second rule – stay away from those cold pintxos in the germ firing line and order the hot, delicious fresh pintos).

There's also the simple fact that one stomach is only so big, and the pintxos possibilities so endless, eat only if resistance is impossible. Squid stuffed with crab meat (*txipi relleno*) at Sport Bar? Serve me two. *Anchoa con huevas de trucha* (anchovies and trout eggs) from Bar Txepetxa? Unlike Anthony Bourdain who loved this bar, I pass.

Rather than searching specific bars, we set out hunting specific dishes. Some like Bar Nestor, only serve three menu items; tomatoes in salt, olive oil and a little white wine vinegar, a steak that would satisfy the Flintstones and green peppers. But those tomatoes, grown in the sun-baked terroir, a mouthful of sunshine and dense nutrients, needs no accompaniment – the aim is to extract

the natural flavour rather than create anything artificial. The seasonal produce is the hero here – never before has a plate of tomatoes been so swoon worthy.

Pretty glad there was stomach space for those red nuggets of goodness, having passed on the blueberry jam and anchovy dish at our stop no.2 (the concept of a ‘desert anchovy’ just shouldn’t exist). Likewise, there’s small sliver of room remaining to snuffle up a tender pork rib at Borda Berri and lose my mind over a condensed milk-type cheesecake at Aste148.

Stumbling home in a good coma, set an alarm for 6am. For this city isn’t just food – it’s an outdoors paradise. Located on the Bay of Biscay, the Parisian-style architecture sits smack bang on three glorious beaches including the golden sweep of Playa La Concha and surfers-spot Zurriola. A segment of the Camino de Santiago trek winds up behind the hills, and the hike up 123m Mt Urgull is sweat-inducing, but deliciously topped off with a swim in the crystalline waters below. And then? You’ve worked up an appetite for your next meal.

Article 2

BREAKING THE WALL

The Berlin Wall was the most potent symbol of the Cold War, and its fall 30 years ago heralded a new era globally. XX visits in the lead-up to the anniversary in November, proving that a family trip and history can unite, just like East and West

My 45-year-old husband stands at the western side Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, brow furrowed, as he attempts to mine the memory of his 7 year-old self. "The Wall went here", he says, pointing at the double cobblestones in front of us that denote the former Wall's path. "And my Grandmother took me up to a viewing platform so I could look over the Wall." And what did he see? His eyes are unfocused as he looks back a half lifetime, into a world that no longer exists. "Nothing", he says. "It was so, so empty. Eastern Germany was a dead place. And I was scared, just to be that close."

Many Germans have stories like this. My husband's grandmother fled Berlin during WWII by walking to Koblenz, 530km away, alone. Then, one by one, she took her grandchildren to see the regime that built bricks between brothers, the Wall slashing the city geographically and ideologically. I probe more, asking why he believes she brought him there. "Because we were Berliners, and the wall was Berlin."

Much has changed, but that has not. The Wall still *is* Berlin. While much of it was woodpecker-ed away by souvenir hunters during the heady days post Reunification in 1989, (only 2km of the wall survives, in parts), the history and stories permeate the city - if you look for them. And we are; 38 years after Till's visit, we're taking our 3 and 4 year-old to experience their ancestral city. Just like Grandma Kramann.

So how to deal with Berlin's heavy history? With toddler and pre-schooler in tow? Easy, by bike. In fact, we aim to *only* explore by bike. Berlin on Bike offer private guided tours, meaning we travel at little-people pace and pause in playgrounds (Berlin has over 1800), while gaining our bearings and city-bike confidence. The fact that one child will travel on a tag-along tandem bike (a

small bike attached to an adult bike), means the adventure is already a winner with the girls.

Paul, our British guide, leads us to our first historical 'moment' almost immediately, a corner in Prenzlauer Berg which served as a flashpoint when the wall came down. The area has photos of pivotal events plastered on walls, invoking the past to life. Today's it's just us, but 30 years ago, images depict the street flooded with people and emotion. Till is captivated – as he says, “this history is so recent it's powerful.”

But it's the next stop that affects us both. Bernauer Straße's park (via a cycle through Mauerpark's now-grass former death strip) features bronze steps laid in what Paul calls, “the best lawn in Berlin”, tracking underground tunnel paths. In the sunshine, as the girls unleash energy up and down the stepping stones, the vignette seems so innocent. But one of the bronze paths represents a Stasi route; instead of leading fleeing Easterners to the West, the Stasi overtook a safe house and re-routed the tunnel to emerge in the middle of the death strip. Nasty.

We digest this while the girls sprint obliviously in circles on what is, correctly, Berlin's softest and greenest lawn. Likewise visiting the Berlin Wall Memorial, the one section offering the full visual of watchtower, no-man's land and fortified walls, the girls are entertained finding stones while we learn of human division.

This is becoming the ultimate day of 'something for everyone'. The trick is that Paul lives and breathes cycle routes. Thus he leads us on an insider's path through the 'des res' (desirable residence) streets of Prenzlauer Berg and leafy

Saturday brunching area of upper Mitte where it's so peaceful it's almost implausible we're in the inner-city of a world centre.

When the kids become wriggly, we beeline for Monbijou Park joining locals in a riverside playground, sipping frothy take-away coffees from the adjacent hipster café (parent's dream combination). And when it's time to part ways after frolicking on Berlin's *second* best grassy area (the Reichstag lawn), he leads us to a *biergarten* with private play area.

Berlin with small kids? Easy. The Museum of Natural History has the world's largest dinosaur skeleton, the DDR Museum (a fascinating treasure trove of all things Eastern German) comes complete with a former East German apartment replica inviting kids to explore the cupboards and wardrobes, the KulturBrauerei Sunday food truck market satisfies pulled pork loving parents and crepe loving kids and Prenzlauer Berg, with the most kindergartens in Berlin, is a family haven.

But even here the past is omnipresent. In delightful, sun-dappled Wasserturm Park, featuring a 19th century water tower and playground rests a plaque. In 1933 this site held the SA-Heim Wasserturm, before it was torn down in 1935 to remove trace of Nazi crimes.

I take in the serene surroundings. The former water tower machinery room where the playground rests, was one of Germany's first concentration camps. In short, we're playing on a former execution site. The autumn wind lifts and tugs my hair, while the words do something similar to my heart strings.

On the swings children's playful squeals now replace the torturous screams that witnesses recount vibrated throughout the streets. What kind of

emotional echo lingers here? Berlin can be a dark place, and travelling here with kids is to bring the light with you, offsetting grim events with the simple pleasures of sliding on slippery dips and the best of innocent love.

But this is typical Berlin, a city that walks the chiaroscuro tightrope of wanting to progress from past events, yet preserve them. For me it isn't the headlining sights - the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag or museums that personify Berlin. Rather, it's haphazard notes left for curious visitors in nooks and crannies - an inscription on a playground wall, 'stumble stones' (raised stones outside Nazi victims' houses), bronze steps in a park, that serve of reminders of how humanity should never tread again.

Just like Till, our children will remember snippets of their visit at most. But hopefully will take their children, the best way to ensure that while the physical wall has fallen, the lessons of history remain.

Article 3

The Daintree By Sea and Land

Swimming through the silver bubbles made by flippers before me is like gliding through secret conversation balloons from the neon coral below. And then suddenly, there it is – a white sand wall veering almost vertically towards the meniscus where water morphs into sky. Clawing my way onto the sandy cay, more porpoise than mermaid, I flop'n'drop to take in the rippling rings of turquoise water melding to a navy, inky blue. I'm alone (save for the snorkels of my companions), and this isn't The Galapagos, Thailand or the Maldives. It's The Great Barrier Reef, right in our own water-y backyard.

The Great Barrier Reef isn't dead. Although it is the canary in the coalmine sending SOS signals about climate change, other parts are thriving and healthy. After all, it extends the distance from Seattle to the Mexican border, over 2300km long. That's a lot of room to snorkel.

Mark Olsen, CEO of Tropical North Queensland said, "when you come here, you will have an 'a-ha' moment, an experience or moment in time that makes you realise Tropical North Queensland is one of the most wondrous places in the world". He had his moment on country with an indigenous guide introducing him to his ancestors' land. For me, a sentinel atop my sandy castle, I sigh a little 'a-ha' (tricky with snorkel), as this feeling of freedom will be ingrained upon my memory like sand on the soles of my feet.

Many describe the reef underworld as a subaquatic garden or city with coral taking on the forms of satellite dishes, vase-like structures sprouting bouquets from beige to flamingo pink, or honeycombed apartment blocks with hiding inhabitants. But it's the characters that make me wonder if I've stumbled into a disco or private party that's, well, getting a little loose.

There are Maori Wrasse wearing Versace-coloured bright jackets swimming confidently through the crowd (and it's a veritable mosh-pit teeming with fish), Cardinalfish cluster in clique, the soft coral are swaying as through to Barry Manilow after a few too many drinks and little Yellow Devilfish peep shyly from rock corners. There's even a Parrotfish vomiting (sand) on the dance floor, albeit in this case the sea bed and a southern belle with fins rippling like chiffon on a breezy Tennessee lawn who turns on her heel and struts away, unimpressed.

The reef is accessible from many points, but Cape Tribulation is by far the pick. It's a short, exciting 25 minute speed boat ride to Undine and Mackay reefs (from Cairns it can take two hours to the outer reef of Agincourt); while some operators can carry 400 plus passengers, on Ocean Safari is an intimate 25. The bonus is off-grid Cape Tribulation itself, where the Daintree Rainforest's mangroves roots reach out to caress coral, joining two World Heritage listed sites. The clincher - when we arrive - we're the only ones there.

This is common throughout Tropical North Queensland (extending from Mission Beach to the Torres Strait islands and taking in Cairns, Port Douglas and the Cape York Peninsula), whether being fringed by reef, enveloped in the Daintree Rainforest (described by Sir David Attenborough as "the most extraordinary place on earth") or kicking red dirt in the outback. Having experienced the area by water, it's now time to venture further on land - by mountain bike.

You haven't mountain biked before? Don't worry, neither have I. But Bike N Hike Adventure Tours offer four programs. If a complete biking novice, ascend gently 500 metres up through the Daintree

on an e-bike. Or ditch the electric bike and take a mountain bike on a flat trip to hidden lagoons (a favourite with kids). If a die-hard mountain biker, you'll already know that is is an area of 'sweet dirt' (a combination of gripping sand and clay) and will sign up to do the world cup course at Smithfield.

But for me, I'm lured by the combination of forest, the swimming spot of Hartley Falls halfway, and the chance to learn a few new tricks.

Trick one – keep your hand off the right brake. Owner Steve demonstrates how to ride the bike on our blue (intermediate) trail, sitting back far off the saddle on descents, aggressively tackling the ascents, and balancing on the balls of feet with pedals level so as not to snag rocks. Or tree logs. Or roots, or creek bed boulders, all of which we come across.

Unintentionally testing Steve's advice, I can confirm that suddenly clutching the right brake will indeed see you cartwheel off the bike. Looking at the obstacle you don't want to hit will ensure you probably do. And with two crashes under my belt, I'm informed I only need to reach five until being a qualified mountain biker.

Our group ranges from a 70-year-old road racer to an eight-year-old dynamo called Lani, a guide's daughter. There are three guides connected by radio so that the group can split according to their own pace and there's time to pause and philosophise on how to tackle a slope if needed (I do.) Oh, AND, I'm on a top of the range, \$9000 e-bike, so a beginner like me can keep up with the technically better riders, who pant their way up the slopes.

This track is the only way to access Hartley's Falls, and we swap the bike to hike the last 200 metres, gasping as the foliage parts like a cabaret curtain to reveal rumbling waters (another 'a-ha' moment). Sweat-soaked, branches in hair, we leap via a rope swing into the cooling waters. Was the ride worth it? Definitely.

It's a water nymph's dream and once again, it's deliciously all ours. But there is another billabong slightly downstream featuring a mini waterfall acting as a masseuse on sore shoulders, and flat rocks for lazing on. This is a traditional fertility and birthing site for the owners of the rainforest, the Kuku Yalanji. We're on country and there's a special energy in the air, an emotional echo that lingers even if elders aren't present

Some will return to Port Douglas for frothy white lattes and tropical-chic restaurants serving the best locavore produce. But this taste just makes me want to go up, up, further into Tropical North Queensland, to where Australia ends and the next adventure begins.