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Donostia San Sebastián

THE WORLD'S HAPPIEST CITY

Translated from the original German
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CAPYBARA  BOOKS



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¡VAMOS A LAS PLAYAS!

*One town, **three beaches**
and countless things to do:
Strolling, swimming, surfing,
diving, snorkelling, paddling...
or simply: Enjoying!*

Leaving aside for a moment the obvious cultural and geographical differences, the coming and going, the hustle and bustle and general buzz in Donostia's vibrant alleyways might just possibly remind you of the paintings of L.S. Lowry. This may be even more the case as far as the beach or, to be precise, the beaches are concerned (for San Sebastián has three of them) – positively swarming and teeming as they are with a myriad figures all variously going about their business.

The most famous of this trio of beaches is the Concha, which not only on account of its gently curving, shell-shaped, "conchiform" sweep is rated as one of the most beautiful city beaches in the world. Scarcely anywhere else can one enjoy such relaxed and sedate sauntering as here – at the same time indulging in extensive and intensive







Playa de la Concha: One of the most attractive city beaches in the world

people-watching. To your right, Concha Beach is bounded by a wall upon which the Real Club Náutico sits with the elegant dignity of a beached luxury yacht, whilst to the left the boundary is marked by the Pico del Loro, a small rock promontory below the Palacio Miramar. The mile or so that lies between these two limits is traversed religiously once a day, every day, by the locals. In some cases, depending on individual personal fitness, even several times a day. Not under any circumstances must one forget when performing this typical Donostiarrian ritual and arriving either at the rock in the west or the wall in the east to slap or kick the respective obstacle. Anyone who fails to do so has immediately and unwittingly outed themselves as a tourist.

SEEING AND BEING SEEN ON THE SEASHELL SHORE

But it's not only the failure to slap the rock or the possible lack of a suntan that makes it easy to detect a non-local beachwalker. Unpracticed saunterers on Concha Beach are often conspicuous simply by their lack of style. Rolled-up jeans? T-shirts sporting advertising slogans or logos? For the true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool *Donostiarra* such lapses are inconceivable, even and especially where sea meets sand, at the water's edge, where He & She step out across the sand clad with the utmost elegance in the latest His & Hers. Nowhere else is lipstick more painstakingly applied, even when the thermometer

is nudging ninety, while at the same time tummies that owe much to the excellent local cuisine are stoically pulled in. The latter move is necessary because the promenaders are incessantly eyeing one another up, with all due critical curiosity. With a population of barely 200,000, everybody knows everybody else. And thus every self-respecting *Donostiarra* scrupulously avoids at all costs being seen in the same bathing-suit on two consecutive days.

Incidentally, the same goes for the regular evening strolls along the seafront promenade, the Paseo



*Beach rituals
of locals and regulars:
High-fiving
gives away the habitué.*

de la Concha. There too the *pijos*, as the citizens of San Sebastián are occasionally somewhat cattily called by their compatriots, do their reputation as fashion-obsessed snobs proud. The ladies perfectly coiffed, with unobtrusive make-up, their heels high; the gentlemen with the regulation pullover draped over their shoulders. But the whole thing can also be viewed more benevolently: The *Donostiarras* just happen to be constantly conscious of the aristocratic past of their native city.

BAYWATCH ROYALE

On the Playa de Ondarreta, things are considerably more laid-back. Unless, that is, the tide is out. Because then it is also possible to walk round the “parrot’s beak”, which bounds the Concha on the left, on the beach route, so that the *pijos* from Concha Bay can resume and continue their perambulations right to the far end of Ondarreta Beach without interruption – and only then need to do their high-fiving when they get to the wall at the end of that beach.

Apart from that, the smallest of the three beaches is reckoned to be not only the least risky from a fashion point of view, so that it is especially families with small children who tend to prefer this particular strip of sand, which is a good third of a mile long and some hundred yards wide. In addition, this is where you will find most of the beach footballers, volley-ballers and tennis-players. They, along with all the other beach users of course, are watched over by Queen María Cristina, whom the city has to thank for its erstwhile rise to an official royal residence, from her pedestal in a small park in the background. Benignly she keeps

a watchful eye on the descendants of her former subjects, with the Palacio Miramar rising up to her right. For many years the residence of the royal guests, this edifice is graced with an extremely beautiful park-like garden, from which nowadays even the ordinary citizenry are privileged to enjoy the unique view over the double beach.

FROM WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS TO SURFERS' PARADISE

On the Playa de Ondarreta they are by now seldom sighted, mostly on days with a particularly power-



Playa de Ondarreta: The place to relax with family and friends



Playa de Zurriola: Surfers engaging in their favourite occupation

ful surf. For the most part, though, they have found a new home on the third city beach, the Playa de Zurriola. We're talking about those figures shoehorned into black neoprene suits, who when viewed from a distance look like a rare breed of penguins bobbing, pitching and tossing on the waves. Only on closer inspection do you realize that they are surfers, who have by now made Zurriola Beach one of the internationally most popular destinations.

And yet this surfers' paradise hasn't been there for very long at all. Up to a few years ago the tiny district of Sagüés, which nestles against the district of Gros with its

own beach, the Zurriola, was considered the seamy side of Donostia. In an age of less highly developed ecological awareness, the local abattoir used to merrily tip its waste and offal into the open sea. Fortunately, the establishment has long since been closed down in the interim. Since the beach, which up to that point had scarcely been used on account of the extremely rough surf was extended and consolidated in the 1990s, it has, together with the adjoining part of the city, morphed into an absolutely "in" place for the younger generation – the ultimate place to be. Instead of patrolling the beach with a pullover





*Whether for
relaxation or sport:
Donostia's beaches afford
ideal conditions for
**summer holiday-
makers.***





Actually it's prohibited: Jumping from the viewing platform at the harbour entrance

casually slung over their shoulders, local youths gather in the late afternoon to perch on the Sagüés wall, which has come up considerably in the world to be a very popular venue from which to watch the evening sun plop down into the sea – always in the company of one or two of the less surf-safe surfers.

A FERRY TO THE ISLAND BEACH

By the way: There is actually yet another, a fourth *playa*. During the swimming season a little ferry will take you from the harbour across to Santa Clara, which has its own sandy beach – as long as the island isn't being "occupied" at the time. But that's another story...





ON THE BEACH

“I found my swimming-suit, wrapped it with a comb in a towel, and went downstairs and walked up the street to the Concha. The tide was about half-way out. The beach was smooth and firm, and the sand yellow. I went into a bathing-cabin, undressed, put on my suit, and walked across the smooth sand to the sea. The sand was warm under bare feet. There were quite a few people in the water and on the beach. Out beyond where the headlands of the Concha almost met to form the harbour there was a white line of breakers and the open sea. Although the tide was going out, there were a few slow rollers. They came in like undulations in the water, gathered weight of water, and then broke smoothly on the warm sand. I waded out. The water was cold. As a roller came I dived, swam out under water, and came to the surface with all the chill gone. I swam out to the raft, pulled myself up, and lay on the hot planks.”

ERNEST HEMINGWAY, 1926