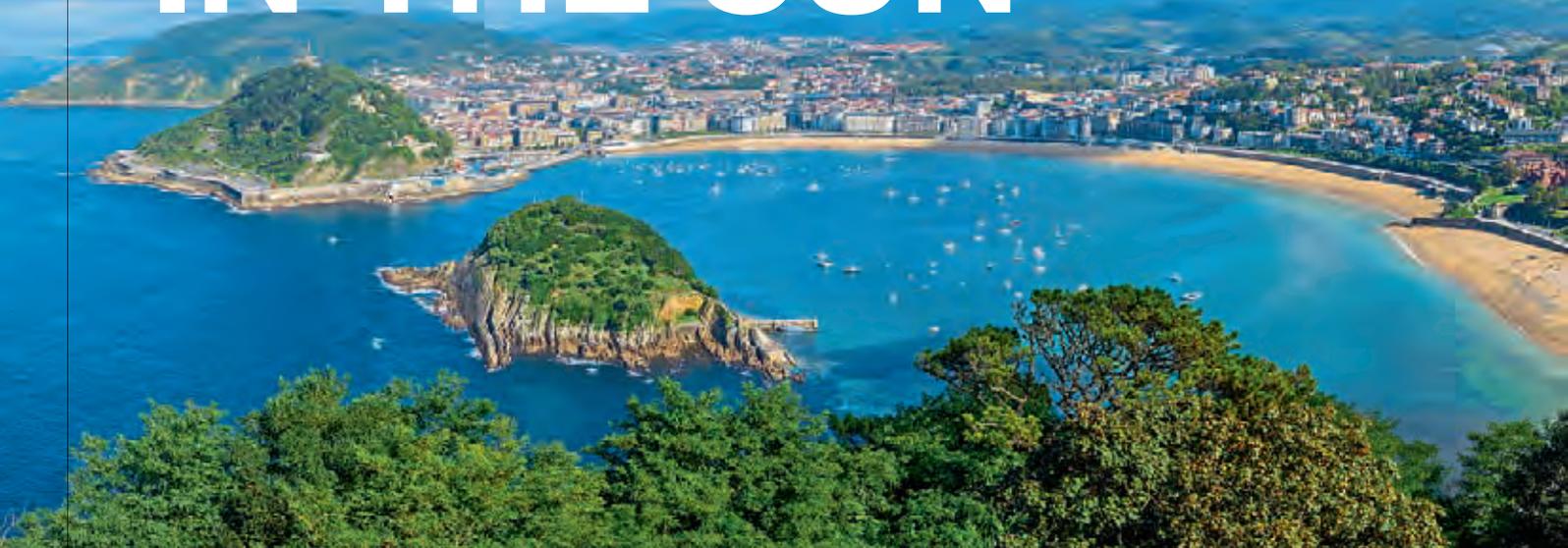


A CELEBRATION IN THE SUN



Margaret Toye is well travelled, having visited countries far and wide both pre- and post-injury. Here, she describes what makes San Sebastián a great accessible destination.

MARGARET TOYE – SIA MEMBER

San Sebastián in northern Spain is one of the most wheelchair-friendly cities I have visited, so I would like to recommend it to all *FORWARD* readers. After my riding accident six years ago, I wondered if my travelling days were over. My family has always loved exploring different countries. We lived abroad for 25 years in countries as diverse as Argentina and Ethiopia. My son was born in Turkey and my daughter in the Philippines.

During my six months rehabilitation in the Salisbury SCI Centre, I listened with dread to the weekly talks on topics such as bowel and bladder management, but pricked my ears to the ones about travelling.

The main difference when travelling in a wheelchair is that everything has to be planned in advance. For example, to go to San Sebastián we were flying from Bristol to Bilbao, then hiring a car. I have found the airlines very helpful dealing with the wheelchair and helping me transfer into an airline seat. Two men actually lifted me into my seat and I did not have any problems with this. Although the booking is made online, I always ring the airline to confirm details – the weight, height etc., of my wheelchair.



Margaret with her Cyclone Batec wheelchair attachment

The drive from Bilbao to San Sebastián is just over an hour and there are lovely views of the rugged coastline. I can get into most cars using a long wooden transfer board. We carry this everywhere, which sometimes gets queries from security but it really is a vital piece of equipment. I also use it for transferring in and out of a hotel bed.

San Sebastián has the most wonderful long promenade with views over the bay and running along the pure white beaches on one side, and a park on the other not too close to the road. There are plenty of stopping places and cafes or ice-cream stalls to rest in and admire the stunning views of turquoise seas. It's impressive that there are disabled facilities with toilets and changing rooms at each end of the promenade.

It's become famous as a "foodie" centre – wonderful fresh produce and wines from La Rioja and imaginative Basque cuisine. There are seven Michelin star restaurants there as well. Because we were celebrating my 'big' birthday, my son and daughter took me to Mirador de Ulia. My daughter speaks fluent Spanish and was assured when she booked the restaurant that wheelchair users were catered for. Therefore, when we arrived and saw the steep flight of stairs up to the restaurant we were a little daunted. My daughter went to enquire and returned with three good-looking waiters who said: "No problem", and just lifted the wheelchair with me in it straight up the steps. The food was delicious and the presentation was so artistic. Everyone was very hospitable and the view over San Sebastián was impressive. I did not mind having birthday photos taken even in my wheelchair!



We also went to the Old Town, home to another gem of San Sebastián – the pintxo bars. The pintxo are bitesize regional specialties like tapas but bigger. They are piled up across the bar and the idea is to choose the ones you fancy. I found them very filling so two was enough for me – everyone else seemed to manage about six. Crowded bars are sometimes difficult in a wheelchair, so we went to a restaurant called La Fabrica for dinner to have Basque specialties. Again, everyone

was very accommodating with the wheelchair and the food and wine were excellent.

The Old Town is quite tricky because it is cobbled. I recently bought a front wheel attachment for my wheelchair called a Cyclone Batec. It fits on and off very easily, is accepted by the airlines as my main form of transport and means I can keep up with my husband's fast walking. For example, it was really slow-going when we visited Cuba as we had to go over the largely cobbled streets. However, everyone was so friendly and helpful and we managed to explore Havana, particularly using the hop-on, hop-off bus.

The newer part of San Sebastián is easy to get around, with plenty of drop curbs and zebra crossings. Outdoor cafes also make life easier and it was a pleasure to sit in the sunshine drinking sangria at one of the many cafes surrounding the Plaza de la Trinidad. I am very content to sit and watch passers-by and general street activity.

We use Bookings.com to reserve hotel rooms but always try to ring the hotel to confirm wheelchair suitability, e.g. lifts, accessible doors and suitable bathrooms. For example, in Morocco the entrance to the bathroom was too narrow. This was no problem though to the owner of the Riad, who took the door off its hinges so the wheelchair could fit through.

In San Sebastián we stayed at Casa Nicolasa, a simple guesthouse but with clean large rooms and fully-equipped disabled bathroom. The big advantage was that it was situated right in the centre of the town, opposite the market, which was packed with lovely fresh produce from the countryside. It is also five minutes from the promenades along the beaches.

I was very lucky to celebrate my birthday with all the family in such a beautiful place. It's almost worth having another 'big' birthday...



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Did you know...

- Spanish is the second most spoken language in the world.
- According to a 2013 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, on average the Spanish spend 16 hours a day on leisure, eating, drinking, and sleeping.
- There are 44 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Spain.
- More than 50% of the world's olive oil is produced in Spain.
- Flight time from the UK to Spain is approximately two-and-a-half hours.

About San Sebastián:

- The coastal city is one of the most famous tourist destinations in Spain.
- It's situated 12 miles from the French border, in the Bay of Biscay in Spain's mountainous Basque country.
- San Sebastián is known for its beaches – Playa de la Concha and Playa de Ondarreta.



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