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## Postcard from ... San Sebastián

By Paul Richardson

### Historic hotel basks in its restored glory



The Hotel Maria Cristina's bar

**R**esidents of San Sebastián were alarmed when, on October 9 2011, builders began moving furniture out of their city's most venerable and glamorous hotel.

They needn't have worried. The Hotel Maria Cristina, first opened in 1912, was embarking on a €20m revamp from which it would emerge a year later like a sleek-looking butterfly from its somewhat faded cocoon. At a grand reopening ceremony last month, guests gathered to toast the old lady's 100 years with vintage champagne and a banquet of historic dishes from lobster thermidor to peach melba, while models showed off vintage creations by Chanel and Balenciaga.

The Basque seaside town of San Sebastián had been a royal destination since the mid-19th century but the Maria Cristina set the seal on its Europe-wide fashionability. Named for Spain's regent queen, mother of King Alfonso XIII, the hotel was designed in the prevailing belle époque style by Charles Mewes, architect of the Ritz in Paris, and built in the honey-coloured sandstone typical of the Basque country. Advertisements of the time mention 300 rooms, 250 of which (remarkably for the era) had private bathrooms.

Like all great hotels the Maria Cristina is rather more than the sum of its parts. It has no sprawling gardens, no pool, no big-name spa or chef-driven restaurant. But its situation beside the river Urumea, with views of Rafael Moneo's Kursaal building and the Cantabrian sea beyond, and within a few minutes of the Parte Vieja with its famous pintxo bars, is as nearly perfect as any hotel I can think of. The service – from staff some of whose parents worked here before them – creates something of the intimacy of a grand private household.

Today's smart hotels can only dream of the Maria Cristina's history and heritage. In 1930 it was the venue for the signing of the Pact of San Sebastián, founding document of the second republic; six years later it had changed sides, becoming the civil war HQ of Franco's forces in the city. (Check the bullet holes still to be seen in the façade.)

With the birth of the San Sebastián Film Festival in 1953, the hotel became popular with Hollywood royalty as well as the other sort. In the bar (now deeply chic, under the aegis of Spain's leading cocktail impresario Javier de las Muelas) a large portrait of Bette Davis reminds patrons that the diva

smoked her last cigarette here before being rushed to Paris where she died (in 1989). The list of cinematic worthies to have slept here includes Buñuel, Hitchcock, Scorsese, Bacall, Taylor and Loren – though not all at the same time.

Making over a grande dame requires both restraint and respect. Fortunately this restoration shows signs of both. What the eye doesn't see is that the hotel's plumbing, electrics, air conditioning, kitchens, and so on, have been brought up to date. In design terms, the Maria Cristina's previous look (dating from 1987) was an old-fashioned luxury statement in pastel pink and yellow, with overstuffed sofas and burgundy carpets. The refit – courtesy of London-based interior design firm HBA – has given the place a new elegance and sobriety but retained a certain femininity in its generous use of fabric and a soft-edged colour scheme majoring on grey, mauve, and turquoise.

Regular patrons will note that the grandest of the public rooms, though newly resplendent, remain largely unaltered. Not so the bedrooms, which are exercises in the eclectic style of modern luxury, with a touch of art deco here, a spot of baroque there, and a nod to retro in the purple velvet armchairs with carved feet and arms. Bathrooms use a restrained palette of black, white and grey. (There is an awful lot of grey – in five-star hotel-land, it's the new black.) The hotel's only design disaster, in my opinion, is the huge abstract daub above the bedhead in every room – an understandable, but ill-advised, attempt to introduce a blast of colour into the otherwise muted surroundings.

As well as a year since restoration work began, this autumn also marks a year since the Basque separatist group Eta declared a unilateral truce. As Michel Nader, the half-Lebanese manager of the Maria Cristina, suggests, the new status quo has undoubtedly boosted San Sebastián in general, as a tourist destination, and the hotel in particular.

The Maria Cristina is poised to welcome those clients who might, in the old days, have been put off by the distant possibility of a terrorist outrage in the city. "Before the truce, there was always a 'yes, but'. Now there is no more 'but,'" says Nader.

*Paul Richardson was a guest of the Hotel Maria Cristina, doubles from €226*

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