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# Introduction to Spain

First-time visitors be warned: Spain is addictive. You might book a city break, villa holiday or hiking trip, but soon you'll find yourself distracted by something quite different – swept up in the excitement of a fiesta, hooked on the local cuisine, or stunned by Barcelona's otherworldly architecture. Even in the best-known destinations – from Madrid to the *costas*, from the high Pyrenees to the Moorish cities of the south – there are genuinely surprising attractions at every turn, whether that be cool restaurants in the Basque country, the wild landscapes of the central plains, or cutting-edge galleries in the industrial north. Soon, you'll notice that there is not just one Spain but many – and indeed, Spaniards themselves often speak of *Las Españas* (the Spains).

This diversity is partly down to an almost obsessive regionalism, stemming from the creation in the late 1970s of seventeen *comunidades autónomas* (autonomous regions) with their own governments, budgets and cultural ministries, even police forces. You might think you are on holiday in Spain but your hosts are more likely to be adamant that you're actually visiting Catalunya, and will point to a whole range of differences in language, culture and artistic traditions, not to mention social attitudes and politics. Indeed, the old days of a unified nation, governed with a firm hand from Madrid, seem to have gone forever, as the separate kingdoms that made up the original Spanish state reassert themselves in an essentially federal structure.

Does any of this matter for visitors? As a rule – not really, since few tourists have the time or inclination to immerse themselves in contemporary Spanish political discourse. Far more important is to look beyond the clichés of paella, matadors, sangría and siesta if you're to get the best out of a visit to this amazingly diverse country.

Even in the most over-touristed resorts of the Costa del Sol, you'll be able to find an authentic bar or restaurant where the locals eat, and a village not far away where an age-old bullfighting tradition owes nothing to tourism. The large cities of the north,

from Barcelona to Bilbao, have reinvented themselves as essential cultural destinations (and they don't all close down for hours for a kip every afternoon). And now that the world looks to Spain for culinary inspiration – the country has some of the most acclaimed chefs and innovative restaurants in the world – it's clear that things have changed. Spain, despite some lingering economic uncertainty, sees itself very differently from a generation ago. So should you – prepare to be surprised.

## Where to go

Spain's cities are among the most vibrant in Europe. Exuberant **Barcelona**, for many, has the edge, thanks to Gaudí's extraordinary *modernista* architecture, the lively promenade of the Ramblas, five kilometres of sandy beach and one of the world's best football teams. The capital, **Madrid**, may not be as pretty, but nor is it quite so over-run with tourists. Its many devotees have seen the city immortalized in the movies of Pedro Almodóvar, and it is shot through with a contemporary style that informs everything from its major-league art museums to its carefree bars and summer terrazas. Then there's **Seville**, home of flamenco and all the clichés of southern Spain; **Valencia**, the vibrant capital of the Levante, with a thriving arts scene and nightlife; and **Bilbao**, a not-to-miss stop on



# SPAIN





## FACT FILE

- Spain's land **area** is around half a million square kilometres – about twice the size of the UK or Oregon. The **population** is over 46 million – some eighty percent of whom declare themselves nominally Catholic, though religious observance is patchy.

- Politically, Spain is a **parliamentary monarchy**; democracy was restored in 1977, after the death of General Franco, the dictator who seized power in the Civil War of 1936–39.

- Spaniards read fewer **newspapers** than almost any other Europeans – tellingly, the best-selling daily is *Marca*, devoted purely to football.

- Spanish** (Castilian) is the main official language, but sizeable numbers of Spaniards also speak variants of **Catalan** (in Catalunya, parts of Valencia and Alicante provinces, and on the Balearic Islands), **Galician** and **Basque**, all of which are also officially recognized languages.

- A minority of Spaniards attend **bullfights**; it doesn't rain much on the **plains**; and they only dance **flamenco** in the southern region of Andalucía.

- The highest **mountain** on the Spanish peninsula is Mulhacén (3483m), and the longest **river** is the Rio Tago (716km).

- Spain has 46 sites on **UNESCO's World Heritage** list – more than twice as many as the US.

- Between them, **Real Madrid** and **Barcelona** have won the Spanish league title over fifty times and the European Cup (Champions League) seventeen times and counting.

Spain's cultural circuit, due to Frank Gehry's astonishing Museo Guggenheim.

Not only are Spain's modern cities and towns lively and exciting, they are monumental – literally so. The country's history is evident everywhere, adding an architectural backdrop that varies from one region to another, dependent on their occupation by Romans, Visigoths or Moors, or on their role in the medieval Christian Reconquest or in the later Golden Age of imperial Renaissance Spain. Touring **Castilla y León**, for example, you can't avoid the stereotypical Spanish image of vast cathedrals and hundreds of *reconquista* castles, while the gorgeous medieval university city of Salamanca captivates all who visit. In northerly, mountainous **Asturias** and the **Pyrenees**, tiny, almost organically evolved, Romanesque churches dot the hillsides and villages, while in **Galicia** all roads lead to the ancient, and heartbreakingly beautiful cathedral city of Santiago de Compostela. **Andalucía** has the great mosques and Moorish palaces of Granada, Seville and Córdoba; **Castilla-La Mancha** boasts the superbly preserved medieval capital of Toledo; while the harsh landscape of **Extremadura** cradles ornate *conquistador* towns built with riches from the New World.

The Spanish **landscape**, too, holds just as much fascination and variety as the country's urban centres. The evergreen estuaries of Galicia could hardly be more different from the high, arid plains of Castile, or the gulch-like desert landscapes of Almería. In particular, Spain has some of the finest **mountains** in Europe, with superb walking – from short hikes to week-long treks – in a dozen or more protected ranges or *sierras* – especially the Picos de Europa and the Pyrenees. There are still brown bears and lynx in the wild, not to mention boar, storks and eagles, while a near-five-thousand-kilometre coastline means great opportunities for fishing, whale-watching and dolphin-spotting.

**Agriculture**, meanwhile, makes its mark in the patterned hillsides of the wine- and olive-growing regions, the baking wheat plantations and cattle



## SPANISH TIME

Spanish time is notionally one hour ahead of the UK – but conceptually Spain might as well be on a different planet. Nowhere else in Europe keeps such late hours. Spaniards may not take a traditional midday **siesta** as much as they used to, but their diurnal rhythms remain committedly nocturnal. They'll saunter out around 8pm or 9pm in the evening for a **paseo**, to greet friends and maybe have a drink and tapas, and if they're eating out, they'll normally start at 10pm or 11pm, often later in Madrid, where it's not unusual for someone to phone around midnight to see if you're going out for the evening.

Like everything else, practices differ somewhat by region. Madrid – its inhabitants nicknamed **los gatos** or "the cats" for their nocturnal lifestyle – is famed for staying up the latest, with Andalucía a close second. In the north, particularly in Catalunya, they keep more northern European hours. And, of course, **summer nights** never seem to really end.

ranches of the central plains, the *meseta*, and the rice fields of the eastern provinces of Valencia and Murcia, known as the Levante. These areas, although short on historic monuments and attractions, produce some of Spain's most famous exports, and with the country now at the heart of the contemporary European foodie movement, there's an entire holiday to be constructed out of simply exploring Spain's rich **regional cuisine** – touring the Rioja and other celebrated wine regions, snacking your way around Extremadura and Andalucía in search of the world's best *jamón serrano* (cured mountain ham), or tucking into a paella in its spiritual home of Valencia.

And finally, there are the **beaches** – one of Spain's greatest attractions, and where modern tourism to the country began in the 1960s. Here, too, there's a lot more variety than the stereotypical images might suggest. Long tracts of coastline – along the **Costa del Sol** in Andalucía in particular – have certainly been massively and depressingly over-developed, but



# Author picks

Our hard-travelling authors have visited every corner of Spain – from the *rías* of Galicia to the white towns of Andalucía – to bring you some unique travel experiences. These are some of their own, personal favourites.

**Fiestas and *ferias*** Get boozy at Sanlúcar de Barrameda's sherry festival (p.228), play with fire at Valencia's Las Fallas (p.804), or join the celebrations at Seville's Feria de Abril (p.228).

**Seafood heaven** Fill up on aromatic Valencian paella (p.797) or feast on L'Escala anchovies (p.727). Adventurous eaters can try *percebes*, prestigious little crustaceans from Galicia (p.549), or *ortiguillas*, deep-fried sea anemones from the Cádiz area (p.292).

**Classic journeys** The legendary Camino de Santiago route (p.554) is a life must-do. For train thrills the Catalan Cremallera (p.754) is a blast.

**Delightful towns** Not famous, no fanfares, but thoroughly lovely – Beget in Catalunya (p.747), El Burgo de Osma in Castilla y León (p.403) and Andalucía's Zahara de la Sierra (p.261).

**Amazing views** The jagged remains of Las Médulas are eerily captivating (p.442), while the views from the walls of Ávila (p.151) and Barcelona from the cross-harbour cable car (p.676) are unforgettable.

**Hip and hot nightlife** Join the gin craze in Barcelona (p.696), let your hair down at *Ibiza Rocks* in Ibiza (p.863), or hit *Coco's* fashionable dancefloors in Madrid (p.116).

**Fine sands** In a land of long sandy stretches and limpid, turquoise waters the competition for best beach is tough. Top of the table are: Conil in Andalucía (p.292), Águilas in Murcia (p.845) and Ibiza's Cala D'Hort (p.862).

**Stunning architecture** Gaudí's Parc Güell (p.679), Chillida in San Sebastián (p.453) and the vertical garden in Madrid's CaixaForum (p.86) are all eye-popping city masterpieces.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

**LEFT** JAMÓN, ANDALUCÍA **RIGHT** FROM **TOP** PEINE DEL VIENTO SCULPTURE; CAMINO DE SANTIAGO; EL BURGO DE OSMA, CASTILLA Y LEÓN

