

Spain



Map



Background

- **Land and Climate:** Spain occupies most of the Iberian Peninsula in Europe. Covering 504,782 sq km, it is nearly as large as Nevada and Utah combined. Much of central Spain is a high plateau surrounded by low coastal plains. The famous Pyrenees Mountains are in the north. Other important mountain ranges include the Iberians in the central part of the country and the Sierra Nevada in the south. The Ebro 910 km is Spain's longest river. The northern coasts enjoy a moderate climate with frequent rainfall year-round. The southern and eastern coasts have a more Mediterranean climate, with long, dry summers and mild winters. Central Spain's climate is characterized by long winters and hot summers. Spain's territory also includes the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands (a

popular tourist retreat), as well as the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, both located on the northern coast of Morocco.

People

- **Population:** The population of Spain is around 40.4 million and is growing annually at 0.12 percent. The Spanish are a composite of Mediterranean and Nordic ancestry but are considered a homogeneous ethnic group. A small portion of the population is composed of immigrants from Latin American nations, other European countries, Africa, and Asia. More than three-fourths of the population lives in urban areas. Most Spaniards live near the coast. Low birthrates stem in part from high unemployment and steep housing costs, which make it impossible for most people to buy houses large enough for more than two children.
- **Language and Greeting:** Spain has four official languages. Castilian Spanish is the main language of business and government. The other official languages include Catalan (spoken by 17 percent of the population), Galician (7 percent), and Basque (2 percent). Catalan is spoken mostly in the northeast corner, down the coast to Valencia, and on the Balearic Islands; Galician is spoken in the northwest; and Basque is common in the Basque Provinces in the north (near the border with France). Spanish is the language of instruction throughout the country, except in Catalonia and the Basque region. English is the most common foreign language, followed by French.
- **Religion:** Spain is largely a Roman Catholic nation; 94 percent of the people are baptized members. Catholic traditions (baptisms, weddings, funerals, and family ties) remain an integral part of society even though many people do not consider themselves religious. Personal devotion often varies by generation. Freedom of religion, granted in the 1970s, opened the way for Spaniards to join other churches. Six percent of the population is involved with other (mostly Christian) religious groups. Some Muslims and Jews also reside in Spain.
- **General Attitude:** Spaniards place a high value on what others think of them. Peer and family pressure strongly influence individual behavior. Personal pride and appearance—making a good impression and meeting social conventions and expectations—are extremely important. People seek to project an impression of affluence and social position. Personal honor is highly valued: keeping one's word and commitments is an expression of that honor. The Spanish are generally sociable and helpful. Many are quite talkative and uncomfortable with silence. They enjoy giving advice, considering it their duty to correct “errors” they see in others.
- **Personal Appearance:** Style and quality of clothing are important indicators of a person's status and respectability. Men usually dress conservatively, avoiding flashy or bright colors. Women like to be stylish, and children are dressed as nicely as possible. Spaniards tend to dress up when going out in public. Colorful regional costumes are sometimes worn for festivities.

Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** Spanish cuisine is typically Mediterranean. Fresh vegetables, meat, eggs, chicken, and fish are common foods. Like many other Europeans, Spaniards go grocery shopping every day. Most fried foods are cooked in olive oil. Breakfast is generally a light meal of coffee or hot chocolate, bread and jam, or sometimes *churros* (a batter made of flour, salt, and water, deep-fried, and sprinkled with sugar). Lunch is a three-course meal including soup, salad, or vegetables for the first course, meat or fish for the main dish, and fresh fruit or yogurt for dessert. Soup and a *tortilla española* (omelette with potatoes and onions) are common for dinner. Fresh bread, purchased daily from the *panadería* (bread shop), is eaten with every meal. Spaniards eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. The knife (or bread in less formal situations) is used to push food onto the fork. Accepting a second serving is one of the best ways to show appreciation to the cook. Upon finishing the meal, one places the knife and fork side by side on the plate; leaving them crossed or on opposite sides of the plate indicates that one wishes to eat more.
- **Recreation:** Soccer (*fútbol*) is the most popular spectator sport in Spain. Fans often crowd homes and local bars to watch important matches. Bull fighting (*corrida de toros*), a popular attraction, is usually considered more an art than a sport. Since only larger schools can support team sports, those interested in participating in sports (soccer, tennis, basketball, swimming, etc.) often join private clubs. Hunting, skiing, and fishing are favorite activities in some areas.
- **Holidays:** National holidays include New Year's Day; the Day of the Three Kings (6 Jan.), when Christmas gifts are opened; Holy Week and Easter; Labor Day (1 May); National Day (12 Oct.); All Saints' Day (1 Nov.); Constitution Day (6 Dec.); Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.); and Christmas. Each city and region has its own special *fiesta* (festival), usually in honor of a patron saint. Most are held in the summer. People eagerly await these *fiestas*, planning them well in advance. Activities include processions, fireworks, bullfights, amusement attractions, dances, and the wearing of regional costumes.
- **Commerce and Currency:** Businesses are traditionally open six days a week from 9a.m to 1.30p.m and from 5to 8p.m. Banks are open from 9a.mto 2pm. The midday break traditionally allowed families to be together for the main meal and take a siesta. However this practice is disappearing in the urban areas. Businesses now stay open all day or some have shorter break periods. The official currency used in Spain is the Euro. The exchange rate is 1 US dollar to 0.787 Euro.

Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** Efficient air and rail service are available throughout the country. Spain has several airlines. Trains connect most cities; a high-speed train (AVE, short for *alta velocidad*, or “high speed”) connects Madrid and Sevilla. Private bus companies serve rural areas. Buses are also common in large cities, but most Spaniards prefer to use private vehicles. Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Valencia have

subway systems. The telecommunications system is modern. Half of the adult population uses mobile phones regularly. Dozens of radio and television stations serve the country.

- **Health:** The Spanish enjoy a good system of medical care that is coordinated by the government; private doctors are also available. Spaniards generally enjoy good health, although increasing levels of smoking and drug and alcohol abuse in youth may affect life expectancy in the future. About 40 percent of Spaniards between the ages of 17 and 24 are smokers. Spain has one of Europe's highest rates of AIDS.