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SPAIN FACTFILE

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WHEN TO GO?:

Blue skies are the norm throughout most of the country (with the exceptions of the appropriately named 'Green Spain'). Andalucía enjoys sunny days even throughout the winter and, along with the Balearics, the Canary Islands bask year-round in the near perfect climate that gave them their traditional name of 'The Fortunate Isles.'

While Madrid enjoys bright blue Castilian skies all year round, temperatures in the capital can be extreme at either side of the year. Summers in the city are *hot* (temperatures commonly rise above 40°C) and due to the proximity of the Central Sierras winters, though short, can be chilly. Autumn and springtime are the perfect times to visit.

TIME: GMT+1 hour

INTERNATIONAL DIAL CODE: +0034

RED TAPE: Visa not required for EU citizens. (see www.tourspain.co.uk)

LANGUAGE: Spanish. Catalan, Basque and Galician regionally used. A smattering of Spanish (or a decent phrasebook) is a great help. It is naturally much harder to find anybody who speaks English when you get away from the coastal resorts or large towns.

SPANISH TOURIST OFFICE: 2nd floor, 79 New Cavendish Street, London W1W 6XB. Tel. 020 7486 8077. www.tourspain.co.uk

COSTS: Though the introduction of the Euro led to a rise in the cost of living across the country, Spain is still a relatively inexpensive Europe destination and it is still possible to get by fairly comfortably on the equivalent of about £30 a day. ATM cards now replace travellers' cheques as probably the most useful way of carrying funds (always carry a spare card).

HEALTH: As long as you protect yourself from the sun (and ease up on the sangria) you stand every chance of returning from a trip to Spain in health than when you left home!

EATING OUT

FOOD: A popular Spanish refrain has it that 'in southern Spain they fry; in the centre they roast; and in the north they stew.' These regional specialities are worth bearing in mind as you travel around the country but wherever you travel in this land of fresh vegetables and good meat you are never far from a decent meal.

RESTAURANTS: For casual dining, it is hard to beat the tapas restaurants that can be found in most Spanish towns. An understanding of Spanish (or a good phrasebook) certainly helps but, lacking both, simply point at what you fancy and take a chance!
PRICES: Eating out in Spain is still inexpensive by UK standards (especially at midday when a 3-course 'menu del día' with wine can cost as little as £5).
DRINKS: The reputation of Spanish wine is reaching new heights with the *bodegas* of La Rioja and Navarra in particular being constantly rated alongside the best in the world. Prices too compare favourably with northern Europe (with a beer costing £1 or a 'respectable' bottle of red or 'everyday' cava as little as £4).

GETTING AROUND:

- **RAIL** – The Spanish railway system (www.renfe.es) has improved massively over recent years. It is now among the best – and least expensive – in Europe and Seville can be reached from Madrid in a mere 2 hours.
- **BUS** – All major towns are linked by regular and reliable bus services (although these might be limited at weekends and bank-holidays).
- **TAXIS** – Madrid is reputed to be second only to Cairo in number of taxis and in most major towns taxis are plentiful and, by UK standard, cheap.
- **CAR HIRE** – All the major hire companies operate in Spain, and special offers, with Budget (www.budget.co.uk) for example, start at around £18/day.
- **MOTORHOMES** – More and more people are realising that the freedom of a motorhome can be the perfect way to enjoy the open road (especially with children). Auto Europe (www.autoeurope.com) specialise in motor-homes (from £706 / week) and sportscar hire (from £407 / 3 days).

GETTING THERE:

Almost 30 UK airports connect (many with daily flights) with Spain.

- **British Airways** (www.britishairways.com) flies to Birmingham Edinburgh, Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester with Alicante, Almeria, Arrecife, Barcelona, Bilbao, Ibiza, Gran Canaria, Madrid, Malaga, Menorca, Murcia, Palma, Santiago de Compostela, Seville, Tenerife and Valencia.
- **Iberia** (www.iberia.com) flies to Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester with Alicante, Barcelona, Bilbao, Gran Canaria, Ibiza, Lanzarote, Madrid, Malaga, Menorca, Murcia, Palma, Santiago, Seville, Tenerife and Valencia.
- **Easyjet** (www.easyjet.co.uk) flies to Belfast, Bristol, East Midlands, Gatwick, Liverpool, Luton, Newcastle and Stansted with Alicante, Almeria, Asturias, Barcelona, Bilbao, Ibiza, Madrid, Malaga, Mahon, Murcia, Palma and Valencia.
- **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) flies to Bournemouth, East Midlands, Glasgow, Liverpool, Luton, Stansted, Dublin and Shannon with Almeria, Gerona, Granada, Jerez, Murcia, Reus, Santander, Santiago de Compostela, Seville, Valencia, Valladolid, Vitoria and Zaragoza.
- Aerolíneas Argentinas, Airberlin, BMI, BMI Baby, Cityjet, Flybe, Globespan, Jet 2, Monarch, My Travel Lite, Palmair and Thomsonfly also fly direct from UK to Spain.

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIMES: 2hrs25 from London – with additional hour from north of England (3hrs30 to Canaries).

TOP SPANISH CITIES

Valencia is becoming the new jewel in the Spanish crown. With an enchanting old-town, the stunningly space-age 'City of Arts and Sciences' and countless miles of wonderful beaches (enjoying a near-perfect climate) it would be hard to find a city destination anywhere in the world with more to offer. Valencia's sea-faring traditions were given a new lease of life for the 2007 America's Cup. In addition to the estimated million spectators who will watch the competition itself, the refurbishment of the port and waterfront is expected to further boost tourism to what has been voted Spain's best city in which to live. There are now plans for a Mediterranean Grand Prix circuit to open here in 2009

Madrid and Barcelona are still the most popular city-break destinations but improving connections with the UK mean that Seville, Granada, Bilbao and even relatively unknown cities like Girona, Zaragoza, Santiago de Compostela and Valladolid are seeing more tourists than ever.

MADE TO MATCH

FAMILY HOLIDAYS: Hotel El Paso is a 10-minute walk from PortAventura theme park and Caribe Aquatic Park, on the Costa Dorada. The hotel provides a kids club (4-11 yrs) and a children's swimming pool as well as kids' menus. Guest benefits include free admission to both parks (with direct access to parks most popular rides), 'character' breakfasts and beach shuttle-service. Price for a 7-night stay start at £475 per adult / £159 for 1st child / £279 for 2nd child (including flights from Gatwick). For more information contact Cosmos Holidays (tel: 0870 264 6099 / www.cosmosholidays.co.uk).

LUXURY SEEKERS: In the light of Mallorca's new-found celebrity status, Castillo Hotel Son Vida (listed among 'Leading Hotels of the World') is keeping itself a step ahead of the competition by becoming the first hotel on the island to offer full butler service. Hotel facilities include 3 pools (one indoors), fitness centre and health club, sauna and beauty centre, children's club, tennis courts and two 18-hole golf-courses. Prices start from £507 per person for three nights B&B, based on 2 adults sharing and including return flights and private transfers. For more details contact Classic Collection Holidays (tel 08701 424222 / www.classic-collection.co.uk).

CULTURE VULTURES: Visitors will have the chance to explore much of northern Spain and to sample the cava and whites of Penedés and the reds of Lerida and La Rioja Alavesa on a 3-stop tour that takes in 'La Rioja, Pamplona and the wines of Northern Spain.' £489 includes return flights, transport and 7-nights 3-star, half-board accommodation. For more information contact Preferred Travel Services (tel: 0116 279 3929 / www.preferredts.com).

ROMANTIC BREAKS: Seville is probably the most romantic – not to say 'passionate' – city in Spain. With good flight connections with the UK, this hot-blooded city (with guaranteed year-round sunshine) is now the perfect place for a short break. 2 nights B&B at the 4-star Las Casas del Rey de Baeza (a 'Design Hotel' – www.designhotels.com) start at £249 per person, including return flight. Extra nights from £62. Contact Great Escapes (tel: 0845 330 2089 / visit www.greatescapes.co.uk) for more information.

ADVENTURE: Spend a wonderful week horse-riding from inn to inn through the white villages on the south side of Mount Mulhacén, mainland Spain's highest mountain. You reach Trevélez, the country's highest village and explore the terraces and ragged slopes of the fabled 'Mountain of the Moors.' Priced at £860 per person for 7 nights (including accommodation, most meals and transfer to and from Malaga but not flights). For more details contact In The Saddle (tel: 01299 272 997 / www.inthesaddle.co.uk)

WILD SPAIN: Western Andalucía is home to the most varied wildlife on the Iberian Peninsula. You can take boat trips from Tarifa to watch whales and dolphins (and even orca, marine turtles and sharks) and at Doñana NP (last bastion of the Spanish lynx) almost 400 species of birds have been recorded. £318 includes return flights to Malaga, car hire and 3 nights B&B. For more details on holidays in this area contact Simpson Travel (tel: 0845 811 6500 / www.simpsontravel.com).

PARTY ANIMALS: Puerto Banus, near Marbella, has a reputation as the chic partying hotspot of mainland Spain. At the 4-star Hotel Melia Marbella Dinamar – a favourite with celebrities – 7 nights B&B starts at £715 per person. (Flexi-stays are also offered for 3 nights or more). For more information contact Cosmos Holidays (tel: 0870 264 6099 / www.cosmosholidays.co.uk)

ROOMS:

As Spain has become more well-known, visitors are increasingly confident about tailoring their own holidays in rural hotels and villas rather than booking traditional hotel packages. Ease of communications via the internet is obviously a major reason for this but so too is a growing faith in the country's internal transport infrastructure. With regular coach and train connections, good taxis and inexpensive car-hire, the ease of travelling in Spain is tempting more people to take long weekends in addition to their 'main holidays.'

Nearly 700,000 British expats now live in Spain and an estimated half million more own property in the country. Many of these homes too are rented (or loaned) to friends and family.

HOTEL ARTS BARCELONA (BEST LUXURY BET)

This wonderfully chic hotel is already a Barcelona icon with suites offering stunning vistas over the Mediterranean and the city.

Marina 19-21, Barcelona, Spain

Tel: +34 93 221 1000

www.harts.es

HOTEL CASA MORISCA (BEST ROMANTIC RETREAT)

In the heart of the old Albaycin quarter this 15th century Moorish palace is blessed with a spellbinding patio and 14 wonderful (and unique) rooms – many with views of the Alhambra.

Cuesta de la Victoria 9, Granada, Spain

Tel. +34 958 221 100

www.hotelcasamorisca.com

HOSTAL ABALU (BEST VALUE FOR MONEY)

This brand-new 'superior hostel' offers fantastic value for money (at €80 a double) with its contemporary styled rooms and central location.

Pez 19, Madrid, Spain

Tel: +34 915 314 744

www.hotelabalu.com

HOTEL CORTIJO SOTO REAL (BEST RURAL RETREAT)

Ideally located to visit Seville, Jerez and Ronda as well as Doñana NP, this former palace is a 5-star luxury oasis of peace and tranquillity on a five thousand-acre private Andalusian estate. Apart from being a wonderful place to relax, it is renowned for exceptional horse-riding and partridge shooting.

Las Cabezas, Sevilla, Spain

Tel: +34 955 869 200

www.hotelcortijosotoreal.com

HOTEL FINCA C'AN QUATRE (BEST BEACH HIDEAWAY)

Amid the terraced citrus groves, just above the pretty Sóller beach, you find Finca Ca'n Quatre. The hotel organises guided excursions to the Tramuntana Mountains and trips in traditional *llaut* fishing boats.

Cami de la Villalonga, 16. Sóller, Mallorca, Spain

Tel: +34 971 638 006

www.canquatre.com

WHAT'S NEW:

1) La Rioja's oldest vineyard is spearheading a very popular move among Spanish *bodegas* to combine wine tourism with the latest in futuristic architecture. Marqués de Riscal's new 'City of Wine' (designed by Frank O. Gehry – of Guggenheim Museum fame) includes 43 luxury hotel rooms, a restaurant, a museum and a 'vinotherapy spa.' (For details www.marquesderiscal.com)

2) Cosmos Tourama (www.cosmosholidays.co.uk) is broadening its horizons in to one of Spain's lesser-known regions with its new 7-night 'Leisurely Green Galicia' tour. Rather than a traditional tour, guests can benefit the added relaxation and leisure that comes with having a fixed base during their stay.

3) Activity holidays such as riding, dancing, cycling and trekking are all becoming more popular as visitors demand more from their Spanish experiences. Simpson Travel (www.simpsontravel.com) now offer tailored 1-week multi-interest Andalusian holidays, based near the Costa de la Luz. Activities to choose from include walking, bird-watching, surfing, wind-surfing, horse-riding, cookery (specifically tapas) and visits to Doñana NP, Seville, Jerez and Cadiz. Prices start at £895 per person (including flights).

4) Leading seat only operator, Avro (www.avro.co.uk) is spreading its wings with a number of new flights (many daily) to new Spanish gateways including: Gatwick-Granada, Manchester-Gibraltar and Birmingham-Mahon, from £99 return.

SAMPLE PACKAGES in ANDALUCIA

BUDGET

TRAVELLERS' WAY offers 3 nights in Seville at the 4-star Hotel San Gil from £252 per person B&B, including return flights with Ryanair from either Stansted or Liverpool. (www.travellersway.co.uk)

MID-RANGE

Escorted touring specialist, COSMOS TOURAMA feature 'Highlights of Andalucia' - an eight-day tour of the region to discover the real Spain. The tour includes Malaga, Granada and the Alhambra Palace, a wine bodega visit to Montilla, Cordoba, Seville and Gibraltar. From £545 per person including return flights, seven nights B&B accommodation and some meals. Special departures are available during Seville Holy Week & April Fair. (www.cosmostourama.co.uk)

LUXURY

CLASSIC COLLECTION HOLIDAYS offer 7 nights on the Costa del Sol, at the 5-star Marbella Club Hotel (Golf Resort & Spa). This luxurious accommodation is set in sub-tropical gardens and offers state-of-the-art facilities, superb cuisine, an 18-hole golf course and horse-riding. From £949 per person this December. Price based on 2 adults sharing a twin/double room on a B&B basis and includes return flights (BA from Gatwick). Flights and packages are also available from no less than 19 other UK airports. (www.classic-collection.co.uk)

RECOMMENDED HOTELS in ANDALUCIA

ALQUERÍA DE LOS LENTOS (BEST FOR ACTIVE HOLIDAYS)

Wonderfully located at the edge of the Alpujarras, and halfway between Granada and the Costa Tropical, this lovely old mill has been exquisitely renovated.
Camino de los Molinos. Nigüelas. Granada
www.loslentoshotel.com

HACIENDA SAN JOSÉ (BEST FOR FAMILIES)

Spacious suites, great service and unforgettable cooking. There is also a swimming pool, tennis-courts and, nearby, golf courses, stables and beaches.
Urb. Entrerriños. Mijas. Malaga.
Tel: +0034 952 119 494

HOTEL UN PATIO EN SANTA CRUZ (BEST FOR CULTURE-VULTURES)

Real Sevillian spirit, with rooms around a marble patio and wonderful views of the Giralda from the rooftop terrace.
C/ Doncellas, 15. Seville.
www.patiosantacruz.com

HOTEL AC CORDOBA (BEST FOR SINGLES)

Right across the AVE station, a haven of sharp design and impeccable service.
Avda de la Libertad. Cordoba.
www.ac-hotels.com

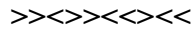
HOTEL SAN GABRIEL (BEST FOR COUPLES)

An aristocratic mansion, with charming rooms that have been praised by Bob Hopkins, Isabella Rosellini...and Led Zeppelin!

C/ Marqués de Moctezuma, 19. Ronda. Malaga.

www.hotelsangabriel.com

Read on: Lonely Planet's *Spain* or *Andalucía* guidebooks can help in the planning stages though as with all guidebooks pick the most recent edition (prices in particular have changed fast in recent years). *As I Walked out one Midsummer Morning* and *A Rose for Winter*, by Laurie Lee, offer delightful evocations of simple Andalusian country life from the earlier half of the last century. Gerald Brenan's *South from Granada* is also a celebration of a rural Andalucía that can still occasionally be found in remote mountain *pueblos*. Chris Stewart described life today in one sleepy corner of the country in *Driving Over Lemons*. James A Michener's *Iberia* is still recommended reading as is Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.



THE END