

Introduction

Once away from the holiday *costas*, you could only be in Spain. In the cities, narrow twisting old streets suddenly open out to views of daring modern architecture. Long a meeting point (and battleground) for myriad civilisations, the country brims over with remnants of a glorious, chaotic past.

Superb old buildings are everywhere, from Roman aqueducts and Islamic palaces to Gothic cathedrals. Almost every second village has a medieval castle. Spain has been the home of some of the world's great artists – El Greco, Velázquez, Goya, Dalí, Picasso – and has museums and galleries to match. The country vibrates with music of every kind – from the drama of flamenco to the melancholy lyricism of the Celtic music and *gaitas* (bagpipes) of the northwest.

Destination Facts

Full country name: Kingdom of Spain

Population: 40,500,000

Area: 504,784 sq km

Capital city: Madrid (pop 3,100,000)

People: Spaniards (though Catalans and Basques display a fierce independent spirit)

Languages: Castilian, Basque, Catalan, Galician

Religion: 90% Roman Catholic

Government: Parliamentary monarchy

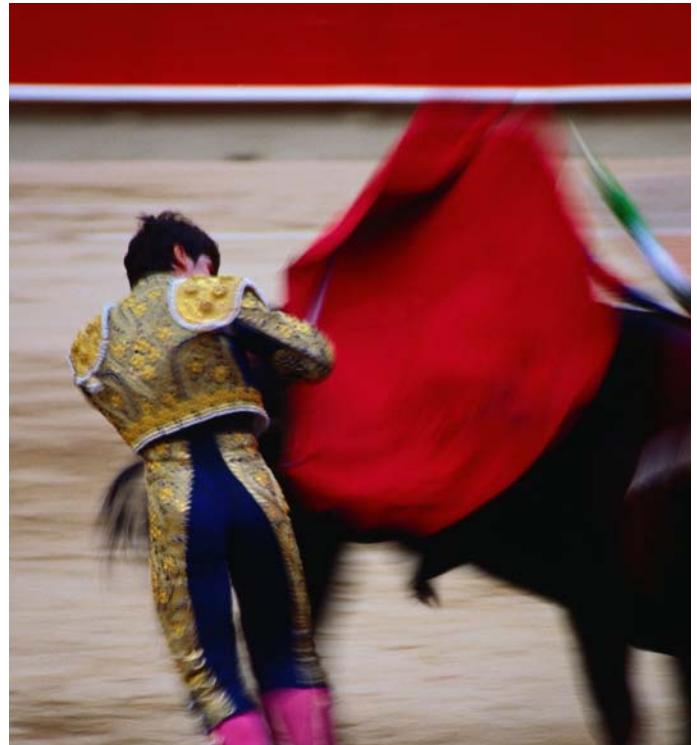
King: Juan Carlos

For more information, check out Lonely Planet's range of *Spain books* (<http://shop.lonelyplanet.com>).

Activities

Skiing is cheap and the facilities and conditions are surprisingly good. The season runs from December to May, and the most accessible resorts are in the Sierra Nevada, the Pyrenees and in the ranges north of Madrid. Spain is a trekking paradise, especially the Pyrenees and the Picos de Europa. You can also hike the Camino de Santiago, the famous pilgrims' route running from Navarra to Santiago de Compostela.

Cycling is popular but there are deterrents, like the often-mountainous terrain, crowded roads and summer heat. Take your pick of the hundreds of beaches offering fine swimming, but be prepared to tiptoe over package tourists during summer. The coast of the País Vasco (Basque Country) has good surf.



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'At school the teachers are very understanding and nice. The subjects I do are art, English, geography, history, Latin, psychology, philosophy and religion. I have a good relationship with my family – I talk to them about everything!' (Ana-Maria Blarr – Spain 2003-2004)