**Introduction to Spain**

If you are coming to Spain for the first time, be warned: this is a country that fast becomes an addiction. You might intend to come just for a beach holiday, or a tour of the major cities, but before you know it you'll find yourself hooked by something quite different - by the celebration of some local [fiesta](http://spainguides.com/fiestas.html) , perhaps, or the amazing nightlife in [Madrid](http://spainguides.com/madrid.html) , by the Moorish monuments of [Andalucia](http://spainguides.com/andalucia.html) , by Basque cooking, or the wild landscapes and birds of prey of Estremadura. And by then, of course, you will have noticed that there is not just one Spain but many. Indeed, Spaniards often speak of Las Españas (the Spains) and they even talk of the capital in the plural - Los Madriles , the Madrids.   
  
This regionalism is an obsession and perhaps the most significant change to the country over recent decades has been the creation of seventeen autonomías - autonomous regions - with their own governments, budgets and cultural ministries. The old days of a unified nation, governed with a firm hand from [Madrid](http://spainguides.com/madrid.html) , seem to have gone forever, as the separate kingdoms which made up the original Spanish state reassert themselves. And the differences are evident wherever you look: in language, culture and artistic traditions, in landscapes and cityscapes, and attitudes and politics.   
  
The cities - above all - are compellingly individual. [Barcelona](http://spainguides.com/barcelona.html) , for many, has the edge: for Gaudí's splendid modernista architecture, the lively promenade of Las Ramblas, designer clubs par excellence , and, not least, for Barca - the city's football team. But [Madrid](http://spainguides.com/madrid.html) , claims as many devotees. The city and its people, immortalized in the movies of Pedro Almodovar, have a vibrancy and style that is revealed in a thousand bars and summer terrazas. Not to mention three of the world's finest art museums. Then there's [Sevilla](http://spainguides.com/sevilla.html) , home of flamenco and all the clichés of southern Spain; [Valencia](http://spainguides.com/valencia.html) , the vibrant Levantine city with an arts scene and nightlife to equal any European rival; and [Bilbao](http://spainguides.com/bilbao.html) , with a new entry on Spain's cultural circuit is Frank Gehry's astonishing [Guggenheim museum](http://spainguides.com/%20http:/spainguides.com/museums.html) .   
  
Not that Spain is predominantly about buildings. For most visitors, the landscape holds just as much fascination - and variety. The evergreen estuaries of [Galicia](http://spainguides.com/%20http:/spainguides.com/galicia.html) could hardly be more different from the high, arid plains of Castile, or the gulch-like desert landscapes of [Almeria](http://spainguides.com/almeria.html). Agriculture makes its mark in the patterened hillsides of the wine- and olive-growing regions and the rice fields of the Levante. Spain is also one of the most mountainous countries in Europe, and there is superb walking and wildlife in a dozen or more sierras - above all in the Picos de Europa and Pyrenees. Spain's unique fauna boast protected species like brown bears, the Spanish lynx and Mediterranean monk seals as well as more common wild boar, white storks and birds of prey.

One of Spain's greatest draws is undeniably its [beaches](http://spainguides.com/beaches.spain.html) although with infinitely more variety than you would be led to believe from the sun-and-sand holiday brochures. Long tracts of coastline - along the [Costa del Sol](http://spainguides.com/costadelsol.html) , in particular - have been developed into many hotel and villa complexes but delightful pockets remain even on the big tourist costas. On the [Costa Brava](http://spainguides.com/costa-brava.html) , the string of coves between Palamos and Begur are often overlooked, while in the south there are superb windsurfing waters around Tarifa and some decidedly low-key resorts along the [Costa de la Luz](http://spainguides.com/costadelaluz.html) . In the north, the cooler Atlantic coastline boasts the surfing sands of Cantabria and the unspoilt coves of Galicia's estuaries. Offshore, the [Balearic islands](http://spainguides.com/balearic.html) have some superb sands and, if you're up for it, [Ibiza](http://spainguides.com/ibiza.html) also offers one of the most hedonistic backdrops to beachlife in the Mediterranean.