

Getting Started

Getting the most out of a visit to Spain is partly a matter of timing. You need to plan around the weather if you hope to enjoy the outdoors (walking, skiing, diving and so on) but avoid the crowded seasonal peaks. You may want to witness some of the country's extraordinary festivals. Some visitors aim for a taste of luxury and gourmet indulgence; in this case it is worth planning which castles to stay in and which avant-garde restaurants to book. Whether it's a lazy beach holiday or a strenuous cycle tour, anything is possible, and on most budgets too.

WHEN TO GO

Depending on what you're after, Spain is a year-round destination. The ideal months to visit are May, June and September (plus April and October in the south). At these times you can rely on good to excellent weather, yet avoid the sometimes extreme heat – and the main crush of Spanish and foreign tourists – of July and August, when temperatures can climb to 45°C in inland Andalucía; at this time, Madrid is unbearable and almost deserted.

There's decent weather in some parts of Spain virtually year-round. Winter (December to February) along the south and southeast Mediterranean coasts is mild, while in the height of summer (June to August) you can retreat to the northwest, to beaches or high mountains anywhere to escape excessive heat. You can be sitting outside enjoying a beer in a T-shirt in Granada in February, or rugged up against the cold while trekking the Picos de Europa mountains in July.

COSTS & MONEY

Spain is, as locals will quickly tell you, not as cheap as it once was. What you spend on accommodation (probably your single greatest expense) will depend on various factors, such as location (Madrid is pricier than Murcia), season (August along the coast is packed and expensive), the degree of comfort you require and a little dumb luck. At the budget end you'll pay €12 to €23 for a bed in a youth hostel (depending on the hostel, season and your age).

The cheapest bearable *pensión* (small private hotel)/*hostal* (budget hotel) is unlikely to cost less than €18/30, but reckon on more in the cities and resorts. Depending on where you are, you can stumble across good rooms with attached bathroom from as little as €30/45 (up to €60/80 in the more popular locations).

Eating out is still more variable. A *menú del día* (daily set menu) can cost as little as €7 to €12. Bank on spending a minimum of €20 on a full dinner (including house wine).

Most sights are fairly cheap. Keep an eye out for free days (especially on Sunday and set days for EU citizens).

See Climate Charts (p843) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT ...

- Valid travel insurance (p850)
- Your ID card and passport or visa if required (p856)
- Driving licence and car documents if driving, along with appropriate car insurance (p869)
- A concealed money belt or shoulder wallet to help save you from being a petty-theft victim (p845)

TOP TENS

Festivals & Events

Inspired by a deeply religious past and an insatiable love of spectacle, Spaniards have stuck to centuries-old traditions to this day. Just about every town and village has at least one annual fiesta. Here are some of our favourites, but there are many more (see p847).

- Carnaval (Sitges, Catalonia), February (p335)
- Las Fallas (Valencia), March (see the boxed text, p586)
- Semana Santa (Seville), Easter (see the boxed text, p701)
- Moros y Cristianos (Alcoy, Alicante), April (see the boxed text, p624)
- Fiesta de San Isidro (Madrid), May (p143)
- Corpus Christi (Toledo), May to June (p247)
- Fiesta de San Fermín (Pamplona, Navarra), May to June (see the boxed text, p482)
- Romería del Rocío (El Rocío, Andalucía), May to June (p712)
- La Tomatina (Buñol, Valencia), August (see the boxed text, p594)
- Festes de la Mercè (Barcelona), September (p312)

Spanish Cinema

A handful of silver-screen classics slipped through the general drivel produced during the long Franco era, but since the dictator's demise Spaniards have been cheekily adventurous with celluloid. See p61 for reviews.

- *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999)
- *Belle Époque* (Fernando Trueba, 1992)
- *Amantes* (Vicente Aranda, 1991)
- *¡Bienvenido, Mr Marshall!* (Luis García Berlanga, 1952)
- *Flamenco* (Carlos Saura, 1995)
- *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006)
- *La Vida Secreta de las Palabras* (Isabel Coixet, 2005)
- *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929)
- *Jamón, Jamón* (José Juan Bigas Luna, 1992)
- *Mar Adentro* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2004)

The Great Outdoors

Spain's scenery is as varied as its history, food and weather, and is often the backdrop for exciting activity. Top spots include the following:

- Baqueira-Beret (p380, Catalonia) – top-class skiing in the Pyrenees
- Illes Medes (p353, Catalonia) – pretty diving near islands off the Costa Brava
- Tarifa (p733, Andalucía) – powerful wind-surfing near the Straits of Gibraltar
- Vall de la Noguera Pallaresa (p373, Catalonia) – the country's best white-water rafting
- Aneto (p431, Aragón) – hiking around the highest of the Spanish Pyrenees peaks
- Cabo de Gata (p803, Andalucía) – a wild coastal stretch for swimming and diving
- Parque Nacional Monfragüe (p818, Extremadura) – the place to watch for the *águila imperial* (imperial eagle)
- Menorca (p661, Balearic Islands) – the entire island is a Unesco Biosphere Reserve
- Parque Nacional Sierra Nevada (p785, Andalucía) – with mainland Spain's highest mountain, Mulhacén, the area offers skiing, walking and horse riding
- Camino de Santiago (p89) – a spiritual walking trail from the French border to Santiago de Compostela

Public transport is reasonably priced, although high-speed trains are pricey. See the Transport chapter (p859) for more information.

A backpacker sticking to youth hostels, lunchtime snacks and travelling slowly could scrape by on €40 to €50 a day. A more comfortable midrange budget, including a sandwich for lunch, a modest evening meal, a couple of sights and travel will be anything from €100 to €150 a day. From there, the sky's the limit. It is possible to spend hundreds on five-star lodgings and even in the occasional gourmet paradise.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Much ink has been spilled on the subject of Spain by its observers, both foreign and local. For books on Spanish history, art and architecture, see the appropriate chapters.

Between Hopes and Memories: A Spanish Journey by Michael Jacobs is an amusing and personal reflection on contemporary Spain. Jacobs sets out from Madrid and crisscrosses the country, dipping into historical, literary and cultural dimensions such as a man taste-testing a buffet of rich soups.

Jan Morris' *Spain*, a slim but succulent volume, makes for a heady and incisive introduction to the country, painted with economy and style. Although contemporary Spain rushes headlong into modernity, much of what Morris observes holds true today.

Ghosts of Spain by Giles Tremlett is a timely appraisal of contemporary Spain, a country that in many respects is in overdrive to catch up with the rest of the West but with much of its heart still firmly planted in its tumultuous past.

Written in 1845, Richard Ford's classic *A Handbook for Travellers* not only tells us how things once were in places we see now, but also has us chortling as its irascible English author is by turns witty, informative and downright rude.

There is no shortage of expats churning out émigré memoirs in Spain. One of the more amusing is *Mañana, Mañana, Viva Mallorca* by Peter Kerr, his third since he and the family left Scotland to take on an orange farm in Mallorca.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Ciudad Hoy (www.ciudadhoy.com in Spanish) Search for the Spanish city of your choice and you'll reach a comprehensive site with listings, general news, links to phone directories and more.

EuroResidentes (www.euroresidentes.com) A multilingual portal aimed at foreign residents in Spain, with everything from mortgage advice to Spanish travel blogs.

LonelyPlanet.com (www.lonelyplanet.com) Can get you started with summaries on Spain, links and travellers trading information on the Thorn Tree.

Renfe (Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles; www.renfe.es) Timetables and tickets on Spain's national rail network.

Spanish Fiestas (www.spanish-fiestas.com) General site with everything from events listings to a joke of the day in Spanish.

Turespaña (www.tourspain.es, www.spain.info) This is the Spanish tourist office's site, with lots of general information and useful links.

HOW MUCH?

El País newspaper €1

Admission to dance clubs €10-20

Cocktail €6-8

Seat at a Real Madrid or FC Barcelona match €30-120

City metro ride up to €1.20

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

HEADING SOUTH

One Month / Barcelona to Algeciras

The sun glitters on the Mediterranean as your flight glides in to **Barcelona** (p266), Spain's second-biggest city. Explore the architecture and sample the food, then embark on a coast crawl with stops in **Tarragona** (p387) for the Roman ruins, **Peñíscola** (p606) for the beach, and **Valencia** (p579) for another dose of nightlife and the 21st-century wonders of the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias. From here, flee deep into Castilla-La Mancha and halt at craggy **Cuenca** (p257). Push on to the capital, mighty **Madrid** (p108), for the hedonism and museums before continuing to **Toledo** (p239), a medieval jewel. The road sweeps through La Mancha's plains and olive groves to **Ciudad Real** (p251). Make a left for the striking village of **Almagro** (p252), in Almodóvar territory, then take the A4 for **Jaén** (p790) and its gorgeous cathedral. Nearby are the Islamic glories of **Granada** (p768) and **Córdoba** (p761). The colourful capital of the south, **Seville** (p686), also beckons. Hear the call of Africa? Drop down to **Cádiz** (p716) and proceed east to **Algeciras** (p737) for the boat to Morocco and a new adventure.

This 1767km route slices right across Spain, from the sparkling northern seaside metropolis of Barcelona, via the pulsating capital of Madrid to the fiery south of Andalucía. En route, make coastal stops in Tarragona and Valencia, and the Castilian strongholds of Cuenca, Toledo and Almagro.



ANDALUCIAN ADVENTURE

Three Weeks / Málaga to Tarifa

Capture the colour, excitement and variety of Spain's vibrant southernmost region by combining visits to its three great World Heritage cities – **Seville** (p686), **Córdoba** (p761) and **Granada** (p768) – with an exploration of some of its most beautiful countryside and a refreshing beach spell to finish your trip. If flying in or out of **Málaga** (p743), don't miss its excellent **Museo Picasso** (p745).

Andalucía is the heartland of medieval Islamic Spain and each of the main World Heritage cities is home to one of Spain's three great Islamic monuments: **Granada's Alhambra** (p771), **Córdoba's Mezquita** (p763) and **Seville's Alcázar** (p695). Modern Andalucian culture and entertainment, too, are at their most effervescent in the university cities of Seville and Granada, both hubs of the flamenco scene and bursting with bars serving some of the most delectable tapas in the region. These cities also boast an array of other treasures, from **Granada's historic Capilla Real** (p775) and old Muslim quarter, the **Albayzín** (p776) to **Seville's massive cathedral** (p690) and baroque churches. For a change of key, venture out from Granada to the otherworldly valleys of **Las Alpujarras** (p786), which also provide easy access to mainland Spain's highest mountains, the **Sierra Nevada** (p783), great for walking in summer and skiing in winter.

Having done your cultural bit, turn south from Seville for **Jerez de la Frontera** (p724), the sherry, equestrian and flamenco hub of Cádiz province, and the historic, vivacious, port city of **Cádiz** (p716), before winding down on the sandy Atlantic beaches of the Costa de la Luz between Cádiz and Spain's internationally hip southernmost town, **Tarifa** (p733).



The route from Málaga to Tarifa is 840km. Add another 170km if you must return to Málaga at the end. Three weeks allows enough time to savour the places you visit; with four weeks you can linger where you like and make your own discoveries.

GREEN SPAIN

One Month / San Sebastián to Santiago de Compostela

Spain's well-drenched northern coast forms a green band from the Basque Country to Galicia, backed by the Cordillera Cantábrica. Either San Sebastián (p465), with its crescent bay and tapas bars, or Bilbao (p453), with its Guggenheim museum, make a fine introduction. Heading westwards, hug the coast of Cantabria and Asturias, making forays to inland valleys and mountains. Following Cantabria's eastern coast, bask in the quaintness of Castro Urdiales (p506), surf at Oriñón (p506) and cruise the bars of Santander (p499). Explore Santillana del Mar (p507) and its medieval core, admire Comillas' (p509) Modernista architecture and catch some waves at sprawling Playa de Merón (p510). The eastern Asturias coast is best travelled by train, stopping off at Llanes (p523) and Ribadesella (p522). Arriondas (p530), the next stop, is one gateway to the majestic Picos de Europa (p527). Straddling Cantabria and Asturias, these peaks offer unlimited hiking. Next, head for Oviedo (p512), Asturias' capital, with its pre-Romanesque architecture, and Gijón (p517), a substantial port where cider flows copiously. West of Gijón, secluded beaches await between the picturesque harbours of Cudillero (p524) and Luarca (p524). One approach to Galicia is to follow its *rias* (estuaries), a route that covers dynamic cities such as A Coruña (p550) and Vigo (p566) and low-key resorts, islands and protected areas. Between the Rías Altas (north) and Rías Baixas (west) are the untamed beaches of Costa da Morte (p558). Santiago de Compostela (p540) makes a suitable endpoint for a Green Spain trek. Those with more time could make the final approach on foot along the Camino de Santiago (p89) pilgrim route. Alternatively, discover the Green North with the Transcantábrico scenic train (see the boxed text, p871).

The sea sets the agenda for the Iberian Peninsula's emerald fringe. This sweep of coastline crosses some 600km, dotted with hundreds of beaches. Cosmopolitan Bilbao and tall peaks present bracing alternatives. All roads lead to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain's culturally distinct north-west extremity.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

EXTREME WEST

One Week / Salamanca to Seville

For many travellers, the Plateresque joys of the university town of Salamanca (p183), in western Castilla y León, are well known, but relatively few venture south into what was long one of the poorest regions of Spain. A back highway leads into the hill territory of the Peña de Francia, whose main village is pretty La Alberca (p192). You would never guess that, until recent decades, misery ruled in this quiet rural retreat. The road continues to climb and then suddenly drops through woods into Extremadura, passing into the once equally poor Las Hurdes region to reach Plasencia (p817) to the southeast. Jammed with noble buildings, churches and convents, it was for centuries the region's principle city, and makes a good base for excursions up the northeast valleys and to Monasterio de Yuste (p810). From Plasencia, a circuit takes you first to the charming hill town of Guadalupe (p827), lorded over by the monastery complex dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Country roads then lead westwards to the medieval town of Trujillo (p824), a warren of cobbled lanes, churches and the newer Renaissance-era additions that were the fruit of American gold. A short drive further west lies the ochre-coloured medieval jewel of Cáceres (p819), a town with a lively student nightlife scene, too. To the south stand some of Spain's most impressive Roman ruins in Mérida (p829). Further south again across the dry plains lies the white town of Zafra (p836). Rather than continue straight into Andalucía, make a westwards detour to the hilly town of Jerez de los Caballeros (p837) before finally heading southwest for magical Seville (p686).

This 810km route opens up the treasures of Extremadura, wedged between the Castilian university town of Salamanca and the south's sultry mistress, Seville. Along the way, discover the Roman wonders of Mérida, fine medieval cities, and the enchanting towns of La Alberca, Guadalupe and Zafra.



DEEP CASTILLA

Two Weeks / Valladolid to Madrid

Grab a low-cost Ryanair flight to Valladolid (p200) and inject yourself immediately into the Castilian heartland, far from the tourist clichés. Capital of the vast region of Castilla y León, it makes a good starting point for a meandering tour. Take the road east to Peñafiel (p230), dominated by its elongated, hilltop castle, and then on to Aranda de Duero (p229) before veering north towards the village of Quintanilla de las Viñas (p227). Take time for a detour to the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (p228), before winding up in Burgos (p221), dominated by its imposing Gothic cathedral. From here head west about 30km before turning south to Frómista (p211), with its Romanesque church, and ultimately Palencia (p209). The pretty town of Sahagún (p218) beckons west of Palencia on the road to one of the region's most charming cities, León (p212), where the Real Basílica de San Isidoro competes with the cathedral for your attention. Further west again lies Astorga (p218), known for its strange Gaudi-designed Palacio Episcopal. It is hard to resist continuing west to Ponferrada (p221) and on into Galicia. The picturesque road climbs out of the Castilian plains into pretty high country. Follow the road to Monforte de Lemos (p574) and on to the provincial capital of Ourense (p572), with its compact old centre. From Ourense take the A52 and swing southeast back into Castilla y León and stop in at Puebla de Sanabria (p209). From there it is a short ride to Zamora (p206), a quiet, fortified Romanesque haven. Due south is the splendid city of Salamanca (p183), from where the road east leads to chilly Ávila (p176) and on to the bright lights of the national capital, Madrid (p108).

This winding 1307km route through the heartland of old Spain strings together a series of medieval cities, from haughty Burgos to bright León, from far-flung Zamora to partly walled highland Ávila. Crossing the Castilian plains, you'll discover the treasures of hidden monasteries and medieval villages.



TAILORED TRIPS

PASSING THROUGH PARADORES

Spain's chain of *paradores* (luxurious, state-owned hotels) offers the chance to reside in grand mansions, former convents and formidable castles. Just south of Madrid in Chinchón, *Parador Nacional* (p173) is set in a 17th-century former monastery. To the south, among the best in Andalucía are *Parador de Granada* (p780) within the Alhambra complex, the castle location of *Parador de Jaén* (p792) on Santa Catalina Hill and the 16th-century Renaissance mansion of *Parador Condestable Dávalos* (p795) in Úbeda. A cluster of fine *paradores* is scattered west of Madrid. In Extremadura, the most tempting include the 15th-century *Parador Zubarán* (p829) in Guadalupe; the 16th-century *Parador de Trujillo* (p827) in a former convent; and *Parador de Cáceres* (p822), a 14th-century townhouse. To the north, León's *Hostal de San Marcos* (p216) is one of the finest *paradores* in the land, housed in the Monasterio de San Marcos. Equally fine is the luxury 15th-century *Parador Hostal dos Reis Católicos* (p546), a former pilgrims' hospice in Santiago de Compostela, northwest Galicia. East in Olite, Navarra, *Príncipe de Viana* (p488) is another gem, occupying a wing of a 15th-century palace. In Catalonia, the hilltop castle-monastery complex of *Parador Ducs de Cardona* (p382), in Cardona, stands out.



KIDS' SPAIN

Spain's generous diet of beaches, fiestas, castles and double-decker city tours keep under-fourteens content much of the time. Unique local attractions provide the icing on the cake. Barcelona has a great aquarium and other amusements at Port Vell (p291). Around Catalonia, kids will enjoy the weird rock pillars and breathtaking cable car of Montserrat (p336), and Spain's biggest amusement/adventure park, Port Aventura (p392).

Down the Mediterranean coast, activate those little brain cells at Valencia's marvellously entertaining and educational Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias (p581), which includes Europe's largest aquarium. Then let the adrenaline rip at Benidorm's Terra Mitica, Aqualandia and Mundomar (p615).

Entering Andalucía, stop for a Wild West shoot-out at Mini Hollywood (p803). Estepona's wildlife park Selwo Aventura (p754) stands out among the Costa del Sol's many kid-friendly attractions. In Gibraltar (p739) youngsters love the cable car, the apes, the dolphin-spotting trips and the tunnels in the upper rock. Next stop: Jerez de la Frontera (p724) for its zoo and the prancing horses of the Real Escuela Andaluz del Arte Ecuestre. Isla Mágica (p699), in Seville, thrills the white-knuckle brigade.

Up in Madrid check out Faunia (p142) and the Parque del Buen Retiro (p133), with its boat rides and street performers, then wind up with a splash at Warner Brothers Movie World (p169).



GOTHIC SPAIN

Across Spain, the majesty of Gothic construction can be admired. Start in **Barcelona** (p266), which boasts one of the most extensive Gothic city cores in Europe. Its splendours include the Església de Santa Maria del Mar, the Reials Drassanes (medieval shipyards) and Saló del Tinell. From the Catalan capital you can make a grand sweep west to admire some of the country's landmark Gothic monuments. **Burgos** (p221) is home to a soaring Gothic cathedral much influenced by the French style and, further west still, **León** (p212) hosts another grand Gothic cathedral. Near Madrid, **Segovia** (p194) and **Ávila** (p176) also line up with fine Gothic cathedrals. Ávila's was the earliest raised in the country. There's more in lesser-known centres, such as pretty **Sigüenza** (p263). In Andalucía, there are more such delights in store, such as the grand cathedral in **Seville** (p686) and Capilla Real in **Granada** (p768). They weren't just building cathedrals in those days. The Castilian countryside in particular is littered with castles of all shapes and sizes. Some, like the all-brick castle of **Coca** (p200), are all the more extraordinary for their mix of Gothic and Mudéjar styles. That mix continues in many monuments in medieval **Toledo** (p239), south of Madrid, where stands yet another Gothic pearl, in the form of the cathedral.



WATER WORLDS

One of only two European countries to possess Atlantic and Mediterranean coast (the other being France), Spain's extraordinarily varied coastline offers a little of everything. Swimming is clearly an option all over, but some of the most beautiful beaches and water are to be found in the **Balearic Islands** (p627), especially on **Menorca** (p661) and **Formentera** (p656). One of the best ways to get around the Balearic Islands is by sailing; and speaking of sailing, **Valencia City** (p579) was chosen to stage the 2007 America's Cup. Divers like to explore the depths around the **Illes Medes** (p353), a protected archipelago of islets off Catalonia's Costa Brava. Another popular beach spot that attracts divers is the start of **Cabo de Gata** (p803). Windsurfers, on the other hand, consider **Tarifa** (p733) to be their mecca. Surfers without sails make for the north coast, especially spots like **Zarautz** (p464). Reports suggest that the mysteriously disappeared left in **Mundaka** (p463) is back. Wild and woolly spots abound along the Atlantic coast. Among the most intriguing water-borne excursions in Galicia is a trip to the **Illas Cíes** (p569). There's more than just sea water, however. Those who like white-water adrenalin should head for **Ribadesella** (p522) or **Llavorsí** (p373) to climb aboard for a bumpy ride.



Snapshot

Not since the death of that other queen of flamenco, Lola Flores (1923–95) had Spain been so completely brought to a halt as by the passing away of Rocío Jurado in June 2006. Considered one of the purest voices of all time in Spain, Jurado's death, after a long battle with cancer, caused a national commotion, with hours of nonstop coverage for days before, during and after her funeral. Some 125,000 people from across the country paid their last respects in her home town of Chipiona, in Andalucía.

Tragedy struck almost one month later with the derailment of a rush-hour metro in Valencia, in which 41 commuters died just a day before Pope Benedict XVI's planned visit to the city for the fifth World Meeting of Families. In Galicia, bushfires (many deliberately lit) destroyed more woodland in two weeks in August than in all 2005.

These shocks occurred as Spain's political scene heated up over the 'peace process' promoted by the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to end decades of violence by the Basque separatists organisation, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA; Basques and Freedom). After an ETA unilateral ceasefire in March 2006, Zapatero announced in June that his government would seek a dialogue. Massive demonstrations against such talks were promoted by the centre-right opposition Partido Popular (PP), whose leader Mariano Rajoy accused the government of 'betraying Spain'. Months later a cloud hung over the process as ETA street violence reignited and some ETA members called for a return to armed struggle.

In spite of PP hysterics, Zapatero has broad support for his peace efforts (including from the EU). The PP have maintained a campaign of total opposition to virtually all government policy since losing national elections to the Socialists in 2004. It (and the Church) led vitriolic campaigns against the 2005 law allowing same-sex marriages (p53) and education reform in 2006 that, among other things, abolished compulsory religion (read: Catholicism) classes. In September 2006, the PP only grudgingly supported the government's decision to contribute 1100 troops to a UN peace-keeping mission in southern Lebanon.

Annoyance for the right has come also with simpler divorce laws (allowing consensual divorce out of court), the opening of debate on easing abortion restrictions (it's legal but the decision ultimately rests with doctors) and measures that will oblige companies to have women in a minimum 40% of top positions in the boardroom in coming years. The government has also proposed a law making it possible for transsexuals to change their name and sex on official registers without court orders and gender operations.

One of the most divisive issues in Spanish politics is the relation between the State and the 17 regions (Autonomous Communities). Under pressure from Catalonia, Zapatero opened the Pandora's box of reform of the regional statutes. Catalonia's new *Estatut*, approved in June 2006, increased that region's powers (including revenue raising) but fell short of what independence-minded Catalans had demanded. References to Catalonia's 'nationhood' in the preamble were watered down, but the PP orchestrated a strident campaign against the *Estatut*, dubbing it the first step towards the 'disintegration' of the Spanish State.

The PP again squealed in opposition to Andalucía's draft statute and what it called 'anti-Spain' references to the constitutional recognition of Andalucía's 'national reality' (whatever that is!). The central government is working on watering down the draft.

FAST FACTS

Population: 44.1 million
 Area: 505,000 sq km
 GDP: €840 billion
 GDP per head: €20,020
 GDP growth: 3.4%
 Inflation: 3.9%
 Unemployment rate: 9.1%
 Average life expectancy: 79 years
 Highest point in peninsular Spain: Mulhacén at 3479m
 Biggest paella: made in Valencia in 1992 in a pan 20m in diameter; it was eaten by 100,000 people

'Europe's first commercial high temperature solar energy plant opened in 2006 in Sanlúcar'

The PP isn't keen on another pending Zapatero measure, his planned Law on Historical Memory. This is a tricky one. Initially conceived to publicly recognise the wrong done to many people jailed or killed under the Franco dictatorship, its realisation has been complicated by the need to treat victims of the left wing, too. One of the aims is to reveal the names and burial locations of up to 90,000 Republicans executed and buried in mass graves during and after the civil war.

The many Spaniards without Republican convictions love their royal family and were happy to hear that one of the few things the government and PP do agree on is the need to reform the constitution to allow Crown Prince Felipe's daughter, Leonor (born 2005), to succeed him on the throne.

Spain struggles to deal with massive illegal immigration (see p58). Waves of *clandestinos* (illegal immigrants) risk their lives on flimsy coastal vessels to reach Spain's Canary Islands from Mauritania and especially Senegal. While this 'deluge' grabs the headlines, most illegals arrive by land and air.

On the economic front, Spain continues to thunder along with high growth rates (an estimated 3.6% in 2006), but warning signs are acute (see p51). National and family debt is growing and much of the growth is fuelled by unreliable long-term sources such as tourism and construction. The latter is especially impressive – for all the wrong reasons. From 1987 to 2005, the amount of urbanised land grew by an astonishing 40%. Regions like Valencia and Murcia continue to turn what little is left of their coastline into one dense, horrible cement ribbon, but the government knows that much of Spain's short-term economic success (and falling unemployment) comes from just this building. Spain is also one of the world's worst offenders in terms of increasing industrial pollution.

Spain is no stranger to swindles and some 300,000 Spaniards lost much of their life savings when two 20-year-old pyramid stamp investment companies collapsed in mid-2006. In a country accustomed to corruption (see the boxed, p752) and savings scandals, the stamp sting could prove to be one of the biggest yet.

While fears abound that southern Spain is turning into a desert, all that sunlight brings a ray of hope. Europe's first commercial high temperature solar energy plant opened in 2006 in Sanlúcar, and local companies hope to make Spain the world leader in this source of energy. The country may need this boost, as coastal tourism could have a limited future. A 2006 report from the Ministry of the Environment claimed Spanish beaches would be eaten back an average of 15m by 2050 because of climate change.

The Authors



DAMIEN SIMONIS

Coordinating Author, Barcelona, Catalonia, Cantabria & Asturias, Balearic Islands

The spark was lit on a trip to Barcelona during a jaunt in southern France. It was Damien's first taste of Spain and he found something irresistible about the place – the way the people moved, talked and enjoyed themselves. All those bars and eateries, the colourful markets... Some years later, he returned, living in Toledo and Madrid before settling in Barcelona. Damien has ranged across the country, from the Picos de Europa to Sierra Nevada, drunk cider in Asturias and gin in the Balearic Islands and still feels he has barely penetrated the first layer. He wrote *Barcelona* for Lonely Planet and has contributed to other guides on Spain.

The Coordinating Author's Favourite Trip

Sometimes the best thing is a trip away from all the mayhem into the backblocks of Spain. Setting off from Madrid (p108), I make for the medieval town I once called home, Toledo (p239). From there I strike west, meeting up with the A5 motorway that leads into Extremadura. After stopping in the delicious town of Guadalupe (p827), I head further west to the equally well-preserved Trujillo (p824), home town of the conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Further west again is Cáceres (p819), the prettiest medieval city in this wild western region. From there, the road leads to Plasencia (p817), a good departure point for the lush Valle del Jerte (p812), before returning to the capital via Sierra de Gredos (p181) and Ávila (p176).



SUSAN FORSYTH

Andalucia

Susan, originally from Melbourne, Australia, has spent the last decade based in southern Spain, and travelling, researching and writing in Spain, Mexico and Central America, mostly sharing assignments with her husband, travel writer and ace editor John Noble. The Hispanicisation of her life continues apace with her two children, now fluent Spanish speakers and totally immersed in the life of a whitewashed Andalucian hill village. Spanish culture, lifestyle and language continue to fascinate and challenge her: she marvels at Spain's architectural and artistic heritage, loves its varied landscapes and finds many similarities with Australia, including the ocean beaches and arid interior.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



ANTHONY HAM

Madrid, Castilla y León

On his first night in Madrid in 2001, Anthony watched spellbound as the Puerta del Sol thronged with energy and people, and Plaza Mayor came alive with street musicians and the languages of the world. In that moment, Anthony fell irretrievably in love with the city. Less than a year later, he arrived in Madrid on a one-way ticket, not speaking a word of Spanish or knowing a single person in the city. Just a few years later, Anthony speaks Spanish, is married to Marina, a *madrileña*, and has just finished renovating an apartment overlooking his favourite plaza in Madrid. When he's not writing for Lonely Planet, Anthony writes on Madrid for newspapers and magazines around the world.



DES HANNIGAN

Aragón, Basque Country, Navarra & La Rioja

Des lives on the Atlantic coast of Cornwall and feels an affinity with the Basque Country, especially the fishing harbours of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa, where Basque fishermen ask him about the genealogy of Cornish fishermen who work Biscay. (The Cornish reciprocate, oddly enough.) Being an Irish-Scot living in Cornwall, Des also feels a strong affinity with nonviolent Basque politics and Basque culture. He has wandered in and out of Spain for many years and has worked on three guidebooks to Andalucía, so that roaming La Rioja and Navarra and Aragón's southlands felt like familiar heat-seeking, while the foothills and mountains of the Pyrenees are also home-from-home for a devotee of high ground.



JOHN NOBLE

Galicia, Andalucía

In the mid-1990s John, originally from England's Ribbles Valley, and his wife, Susan Forsyth, decided to try life in an Andalucian mountain village and they are still there, along with their children Isabella and Jack. A writer specialising in Spain and Latin America, John has travelled throughout Spain and loves its fascinatingly historic cities; wild, empty back country; isolated villages and castles; rugged coasts; and its music, art, tapas, wine and football. He has written large parts of every edition of this guide, and is coordinating author of Lonely Planet's *Andalucia*.



JOSEPHINE QUINTERO

Castilla-La Mancha

Josephine started travelling with a backpack and guitar in the late 1960s. Further travels took her to Kuwait, where she was held hostage during the Iraq invasion. Josephine moved to the relaxed shores of Andalucía, Spain, shortly thereafter from where she has explored most of the country. She loves Castilla-La Mancha for its dramatic landscape and because it is a beautiful yet largely undiscovered region where you still need to speak Spanish to order a beer.



MILES RODDIS

Andorra, Valencia, Murcia, Extremadura

Over a decade ago Miles and his wife, Ingrid, bought a tatty old flat in the Barrio del Carmen, Valencia's oldest and most vibrant quarter. Now renovated, this shoebox-sized apartment is their principal home, the place to which they retreat to recover, unwind and write up.

Miles has written or contributed to more than 25 Lonely Planet titles, including *Best of Valencia*, *Valencia & the Costa Blanca* and four editions of the book in your hands.

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