

Countries Of The World: Spain

By National Geographic Kids, adapted by *Newsela* staff

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Link: <https://newsela.com/read/elem-country-spain/id/40400/>

Spain occupies most of the Iberian Peninsula, stretching south from the Pyrenees Mountains to the Strait of Gibraltar, which separates Spain from Africa. To the east lies the Mediterranean Sea, including Spain's Balearic Islands. Spain also rules two cities in North Africa and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic.

The interior of Spain is a high, dry plateau surrounded and crisscrossed by mountain ranges. Rivers run to the coasts, creating good farmland. Still, the interior of the country gets very hot in summer and very cold and dry in the winter. Droughts are common.

Plants and trees grow so well on the northwestern coast, in Galicia and along the Bay of Biscay, that the area is called Green Spain. Rain, trapped by the mountains farther inland, is frequent. Beech and oak trees flourish here. Numerous coves and inlets break up the coastline.

The southern and eastern coasts of Spain, from the fertile Andalusian plain up to the Pyrenees, are often swept by warm winds called sirocco winds. These winds originate in northern Africa. They keep temperatures along the Mediterranean coast milder than the interior.

Nature

A link between Europe and Africa, Spain is an important resting spot for migratory birds. Spain is also home to such mammals as the wolf, lynx, wildcat, fox, wild boar, deer, hare and wild goat. Streams and lakes shelter trout, barbel and tench fish. But many species of wildlife face threats from habitat loss and pollution.

Due to centuries of tree cutting, large forests are now found only in the north Pyrenees and the Asturias-Galicia area. Planting new trees is difficult where sheep and goats graze. Erosion and river pollution are also problems. Spain has created many national parks and refuges, but they only cover about 7 percent of the country.

One protected area is Doñana National Park. This region of marshes, streams and sand dunes is where the Guadalquivir River flows into the Atlantic. The park's diversity of life is unique in Europe. It includes the European badger, Egyptian mongoose and endangered species such as the Spanish imperial eagle and the Iberian lynx.

People And Culture

Many Spaniards share a common ethnic background: a mixture of the early inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, the Celts and later conquerors from Europe and Africa. The origins of the Basque people in the north of Spain remain unknown. Recent immigrants from North Africa and Latin America have added to the mix.

Spaniards are known for their love of life and for eating and drinking with family and friends. Traditional appetizers like tapas or pintxos, the Basque country equivalent, are popular. Regional dances and music are almost as important as soccer and religious festivals.

Government And Economy

In Spain, which is a parliamentary monarchy, the king and the elected president share the power. Although there is a national parliament, Spain is one of the most decentralized democracies in Europe. Each of its 17 regions manages its own schools, hospitals and other public services.

With vibrant, historic cities and sunny beaches, Spain attracts more tourists than any other European country except France. Services to the tourism industry drive Spain's economy, the eighth largest in the world. In 1986, Spain joined the European Community and further modernized its economy. Important industries include mining, shipbuilding and textiles.

History

Settlers have migrated to Spain from Europe, Africa and the Mediterranean since the dawn of history. The Phoenicians, who came in the 8th century B.C., called the peninsula "Span," or hidden land. By the first century B.C. the Romans had conquered Spain.

Spain became mostly Christian under the Romans, who were followed by the Vandals and the Visigoths, Germanic peoples from Europe. The Visigoth rulers fought among themselves, and in A.D. 711 Muslims from Africa invaded Spain.

Islamic culture spread across Spain as Muslim rulers introduced new crops and irrigation systems, and trading increased. Mathematics, medicine and philosophy became more advanced, peaking in the 10th century—the golden age of Islamic rule in Spain.

In 1492, Christian kingdoms in northern Spain conquered the Muslims and spread the Catholic religion. Enriched by silver from the Americas, Spain grew more powerful. It later lost land and power in the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815.

More than 500,000 people died in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. The victorious Gen. Francisco Franco ruled as a brutal dictator until his death in 1975. Soon after, Spain began to transform itself into a modern, industrial and democratic European nation.