Spain

Location

The country of Spain is located in Western Europe and composes four-fifths of the Iberian Peninsula with a total land area of approximately 194,884 square miles. Spain is often disputed as either the second or third largest country in western Europe. The area also takes into account that Spain owns the territories of the Balearic Islands located to the east of the country in the Mediterranean Sea, the Canary Islands located in the Atlantic Ocean south of Spain and to the west of the African country of Morocco, and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast. This land area is equivalent to slightly more than twice the size of the state of Oregon located in North America. Lying at 40° North and 4° West, Spain is bordered to the north by the countries of France and Andorra, to the north and west by the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Biscay, to the west by the country of Portugal, to the south and east by the Mediterranean Sea, to the south by the United Kingdom’s owned territorial island (city) of Gibraltar, the Strait of Gibraltar which connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea, and the country of Morocco which lies on the continent of Africa.

Geography

The border between Spain and France, to the northeast, is largely separated by the physical boundary of the Pyrenees Mountains. They extend 260 miles on the border and rise to an elevation of 11,168 feet. The Cantabrian Mountains are located in the north to northwest region of Spain where they extend 300 miles and rise to an elevation of 8,794 feet. The highest mountains on mainland Spain are the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which have an elevation of 11,433 feet and are located in the south to southeast. Although with all of these mountains are located on mainland Spain, the highest peak is not located here but rather on the islands that Spain owns. The highest mountain peak of Spain is Pico de Teide, which rises 12,207 feet and is located on the Canary Islands. With these main mountain ranges
and numerous other smaller ranges, which provide Spain with an average elevation of 2,165 feet, it ranks as the second highest country in Europe after Switzerland.

The areas where the mountains are located, north, northeast, northwest, south and southwest, almost surround Spain in a circular pattern. This circular pattern gives rise to central Spain, which is a raised plateau of flat land named the Meseta. The Meseta is mostly composed of dry grassland. Fertile areas of Spain are located along the costal regions. The Meseta plateau is a fairly large area and comprises about half of the mainland.

The Ebro River is the longest river in Spain and the only one that flows into the Mediterranean Sea. All other Spanish rivers flow into the Atlantic Ocean. Only seven rivers located in Spain are navigable, which at times can pose huge obstacles. Other major rivers are the Mino, Duero, Jalón, Tagus, Guadiana, Za’ncara, and Guadalquivir.

With all of these wonderful geographical features, Spain is divided into 17 regions with 50 provinces. The regions are as follows: Andalusia, Aragon, Asturias, Balearic Islands, Basque Country, Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castile-LaMancha, Castile-Leo’n, Catalonia, Estremadura, Galicia, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia, Navarra, and Valencia.

**Climate**

The Cantabrian mountain range separates the two regions of Spain that have very differing climates. The area to the north of the mountain range observes patterns of mild winters and cool summers. To the south of the range bitter winters and dry summers with little rain are most frequently observed. Along the Mediterranean coast, a subtropical climate prevails exhibiting hot summers and wet winters. Although the mountain range seems to serve as a natural divider of climate, this is not as clear-cut as it may seem. There is an extreme difference in climate throughout the entire country. The capital city of Madrid has the most extreme climate of any other city in the mainland. Madrid is
positioned almost at the center of the landmass. Due to this central positioning, Madrid lies amidst the high plateau of the Meseta. The yearly range of temperatures for Madrid can reach up to and well beyond 104º F during the summer time and can plummet to -4º F in the winter.

The northern regions of Spain tend to exhibit a temperate Mediterranean maritime climate. This particular climate includes cold winters and warm humid summers. This area also tends to be very wet due to the fact that misty rainfall could possibly cover this area for days. This wetness attributes to the very lush green areas. The southern and eastern borders have a strictly Mediterranean climate with hot sunny summers and mild winters. The Meseta region of central Spain has cold winters and extremely hot and dry summers. The northwest region of Spain has a cold continental Mediterranean climate. It is much cooler in this area due to heavy rainfalls that make the land green and fertile.

Overall, Spain averages a median temperature of 47º F in the winter and 68ºF in the summer. The inland regions where summers are hot, winters cold, and rain sporadic, the average temperatures for summer and winter are 37ºF and 80ºF, respectively. Along the Mediterranean coast, the winter temperature average is 57ºF and the summer average is 95ºF. The average rainfall in Spain varies greatly from region to region, but for the overall country it is approximated at 24 to 40 inches per year.

History

The first inhabitants of Spain were considered to be Iberian and thus, they were such named throughout history. As the years progressed, so did the number of cultures that came to inhibit Spain. From 1100 to 800 B.C., Spain saw the progression of the Celts from Western Europe into their country. During these extreme early years, Spain was quite dormant when it came to turmoil. However, several different ethnic groups and cultures would soon rip this sense of calmness and unity apart.

Spain has been invaded and taken over many times in its history of existence. The first group of people to claim and conquer Spain was that of the Romans in 218 B.C. It took the Romans 200 years to
overtake this vast empire, but the large amount of time was well spent according to some Spaniards. While the Romans were invading, they were also applying their vast technology to this country. The Romans built the first roads in Spain, which were often very straight and long. They also built the first irrigation system known to Spain. This irrigation system was composed of several aqueducts, which as of today, many still stand. Once the Roman technology was in place, the Roman stronghold would remain for another 500 years.

The Visigoths were the next to invade Spain and conquer the massive Roman built empire. During the next 300 years, the Visigoths would not only rule supreme, but also they would determine that Spain’s population would obey the Christian religion. However, in 711 A.D. a numerous amount of Moors (Muslims) came from Northern Africa and conquered the country yet again. While the Muslims were in control, they rebuilt many of the aqueducts originally placed by the Romans because there was an ever-increasing shortage of food and water. This remodeling of the aqueducts would allow enough water, not only for consumption, but for the irrigation of crops as well. The crops that were to be irrigated were that of a prolific, easy to grow wheat that the Muslims introduced to the country as well as many new foods that the country had never seen before their invasion.

Although the Visigoths (Christians) were not totally ran out of the country by the Moors, they continued to band together and unite while the Moors were in power. Their numbers soon grew to be vast and the heroic El Cid lead a revolt of the Christians against the Muslim religion. In 1492, the same year that Christopher Columbus was given support by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain in order to seek the Americas; the Christians were victorious in rousting the Moors from ruling Spain.

As the Christians remained, so did the stability of the country. During the 16th Century, the Golden Age of Spain would soon come to emerge. This Golden Age was indeed extremely important due to the fact that Spain began to emerge as one of the most powerful countries in all of Europe. This
was due to the fact that Spain now had a large ownership of most of South America and sections of North America thanks to the discoveries of many explores that were Spanish in origin and/or supported by country itself.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Spain began to lose its European stronghold power and the empire soon crumbled to Napoleon Bonaparte of France. Due to this loss of power, there was once again a run of turmoil in the country that would continue for a long period of time. As the 20th Century emerged so did the Spanish Civil War. From 1936 to 1939 General Francisco Franco and his troops began to take over Spain. When the war was finally over, Franco emerged victorious and took over the country as a dictator. Franco continued to dictate the country until 1975 at his death. Upon Franco’s death, the rightful crown of the early monarchy of Spain was presented to Prince Juan Carlos. At this point in time Carlos made the decision to convert Spain democracy and the first ever elections of the country were held in 1977. Currently, Spain considers itself a monarch with a socialist government and has been a member of the European Economic Community (ECC) since 1986.

Important Dates

Important dates both listed and unlisted from the official Spanish calendar are as follows:

January 1 – New Years Day (El dia de Ano Nuevo), January 6 – Epiphany (Los Reyes Magos) a day to give gifts and honor the three Kings that visited baby Jesus, March 1 – Victory Day (El dia de Victoria), March 19 – St. Joseph Day (El dia de San Josê), Week before Easter varies year to year – Holy Week (Semana Santa) a week to celebrate the passion of Jesus Christ, Good Friday varies year to year – Viernes Santo, Easter varies year to year (Pascua), Ascension Day (La Ascension), Whitsun (El Pentecostes), June 6 – Corpus Christi (El Corpus), June 24 – King Juan Carlos Day, July 6-14 – the running of the bulls in Pamplona (San Ferrein), July 25 – St. James (El dia de Santiago), August 15 – Assumption (La Asuncion), October 12 – Virgin of Pilar (El dia de Virgen de Pilar)/Day of Hispanidad/Hispanic Day, November 1 – All Saint’s Day (El dia de todoslos Santos), December 8 – Immaculate Conception/Mother’s Day (La
Concepcion), December 25 – Christmas Day (El dia de Navidad), December 31 – New Year’s Eve

tradition of eating one grape for each stroke of the clock.

Population

Although no two sources will completely agree on Spain’s exact population numbers, it seems to be consistent to say that it is approximately 40 million people. The population density is approximately 202 people per square mile, but this is constantly changing. Over one-half (68%) of Spain’s population lies within the age range of 15-64. The elderly, 65 and over, are the next largest percentage of the population at 17%. Infants, children, and preteenagers/teenagers, ages 0-14 compose the last 14 to 15% of the population.

Currency

The official currency of Spain, until January 2002, was that of the Peseta. In 2002, Spain joined with many other countries in Europe that would denounce their individual country currencies for a unified currency of Europe, the euro. As of 2001, approximately 175 pesetas equaled one U.S. dollar, 120 pesetas equaled one Canadian dollar, and 166 pesetas equaled one euro. Since the euro is a relatively new currency in selected countries of Europe, the exchange rate is constantly fluctuating. Therefore, it would be a wise suggestion to consult your local bank for the correct, current daily exchange rate.

Education

Education for ages 6-16 is mandatory in Spain. From ages 6-12 years old, children attend what is known as a primary school. Secondary school is for the ages of 12-16. After secondary schooling is completed, students have the choice of either going to a vocational training program or taking an exam in order to be admitted into a one year course to qualify for admittance to a university. If one proceeds to a university, one may earn a “basic” degree after three years of study. If one chooses to remain for an additional two to three years, a “higher” degree may be obtained.
Approximately 70% of the schools located in Spain are that of public institutions. The remaining 30% of schools are mostly private in nature and ran by the Catholic church. A typical Spanish school day begins around 9am and then comes to a halt around noon. At noon, students stop for lunch and a traditional siesta (short resting period). In late afternoon, 2-3pm, students return to school and conclude their school day around 4-6pm.

Language
The main language in Spain is, of course Spanish, but it is a Castilian dialect of Spanish. Approximately 74% of the Spanish spoken in the country itself is Castilian. However, there are three other prominent languages found in Spain. In the northwest region, the Galicia people speak Galician, which is similar to that of the Portuguese language. The area located at the western end of the Pyrenees Mountains is known as the Basque Country. The language spoken there is that of Basque and it is not like any other known language. The Basque language is very complicated and extremely difficult to master. In the region of Catalonia, located at the eastern end of the Pyrenees Mountains, the people speak Catalan. Catalan is considered by many to be a mixture/blend of Spanish, French, and Italian. Although there are different dialects found all over the country, Spanish is still considered to be one of the romantic languages of the world.

Religion
The official religion of Spain is Roman Catholic with approximately 95% of the population declaring this religion. The Roman Catholic religion influences almost every thing in the Spanish culture. In fact, almost every town in Spain has a festival in order to honor its specific patron saint. Also, the largest cathedral in the world, Santa Maria in Seville, is a reflection of the enormous percentage as well. Other religions that are practiced in Spain are that of Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. The Jewish and Muslim religions can also be found in Spain, but only in extreme minute numbers.
Agriculture

In earlier years, agriculture was a main staple in the Spanish workforce. However, currently the number of Spaniards in the agriculture workforce is around 10%. Only 5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) annually stems from agriculture. Due to the great diversity of both the land and climate, Spain’s agriculture is varied as well.

On the plateau of the Meseta, where it is dry and there is a limited amount of rainfall, wheat and corn are the two main grain crops. Herds of sheep and goats also roam this grassland as well. In the wetter northern climates, such items as apples, pears, plums, peaches, melons, and figs are grown. The dryer climate of the south yields such agriculture products as pomegranates, avocados, and citrus fruits. Due to average higher temperatures and lack of steady rainfall across the entire mainland of Spain, dairy products are few and far between and largely imported. However, in the northwest with the cooler climate and larger rainfalls, there are numerous lush pastures, which yield a few dairy farms.

In Valencia, the people specialize in the production of oranges and rice due to the fact they can obtain plenty of water for irrigation. In the Canary Islands, terrace farms of bananas and tomatoes can be found. These products are mainly grown for exportation alone. In the south and Balearic Islands, the specialty crop of almonds can be found. Olives are grown abundantly throughout the entire country of Spain. This leads to the large production of both olives and olive oil. Spain is considered to be the largest producer of both of these products, which are also largely exported as well. Grapes, raised for the production of wine, are another main crop grown throughout Spain. Spanish wine is considered to be quite tasty and the special regional varieties of Sherry and Rioja are considered to be some of the best wines produced in Europe. Along with numerous amounts of wine, Spaniards also produce their version of Champagne, which is known as cava.
Another famous Spanish product is that of sausage and ham. The ham is specially cured which in turn produces a strong flavor and a chewy texture. Seafood and fish are also other popular meats of Spanish agriculture. Several of the country’s coastal regions are large fishing ports. The fishing industry in Spain has traditionally always been significant. The fishing fleets of this country are some of the largest in the world and contribute a great deal of business.

Trade

Main trading partners of Spain are that of Germany, France, Italy, United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States of America. Spain’s main imports are that of petroleum products and mineral fuels, machinery, and electrical equipment. Exports consist of automobiles, fruits and vegetable products, iron, and steel goods. One of Spain’s largest exports, considered by many to be one of the most profitable as well, is that of olives and olive oil. Spain is a continually emerging industrial country. Due to this emergence, there is a constant fluctuation of trade and trading partners as well as imports and exports.

Food

In order to fully understand Spanish cuisine, one must first understand that eating a meal is indeed considered to be an event. The Spanish spend a long time eating large meals mostly in the presence of family. The main strongholds in a Spanish meal are that of bread, wine, sangria, and tapas. Bread and wine are served with every traditional Spanish lunch and dinner. Sangria is typically a mixture of red wine, fruit, and water. However, one must beware that each family, restaurant, and bar has their own “secret recipe” for mixing this alcoholic drink and some recipes can be quite potent. Tapas are what one would consider to be mini appetizers/appetizers or hors d’ oeuvres.

Lunch is considered to be the most important meal of the day and does not usually occur until around 1 or 2pm in the afternoon. Dinner, traditionally, is not consumed until later at night, usually around 8 or 9pm. Since lunch is the most important meal of the day and many Spaniards return to work
after their lunch and siesta break, hunger tends to set in after work. Rather than to go home after work, many Spaniards will head to what are known as tapa bars. Tapa bars are traditional bars with long counter tops. These counter tops are always filled to the brim with tapas in the evening. One very famous and numerous tapa that the Spanish enjoy is that of tortilla espanola. This is a potato and egg omelet that is often fried. Another preferred tapa is that of ensaladilla rusa which is a potato, egg, and tuna salad. Spaniards visit the tapa bars after work for a light snack and drink and then return home later in the evening in order to dine on dinner with the family.

**Landmarks/Sights to See**

Spain is a country that offers numerous sights to see and tour throughout the entire country. The capital of Madrid is one city that one should not miss when visiting Spain. Madrid offers something for everyone both young and old. The Palacio Real (Royal Palace) in Madrid was built by Philip V in the 18th century and houses 2,800 rooms. Today, the Palace is a museum that is open to the public and can be toured. Two of the most famous art museums in the world can also be found in Madrid. Such famous painters as El Greco, Diego Valaquez, Francisco de Goya, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, and Salvador Dali are all Spaniards. Their works, among many other artists’ works, can be found at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and the Prado. The Reina Sofia houses contemporary art and the Prado houses classic art.

Bull fighting is another popular pastime enjoyed by the Spaniards. Palace de Torros, a large bull-fighting ring in Madrid, is a spectacular sight to visit as well. Beware, bullfights are not for everyone and it is a good idea to fully research the Spanish art of bull fighting before attending a grueling match. In Barcelona one is overwhelmed with the architecture of Gaudi. His most famous works are that of the casa Battllo and the Temple Expiatiari de la Sagrada Familia (Church of the Holy Family). Both are exceptional pieces of architecture that one should not miss. Barcelona was also home to the summer Olympics, which make it quite renowned to some people. Many of the Olympic venues remain and most are open to the public for exploration. Also while in Barcelona, try attending a popular Spanish
tradition of a flamenco dance show. This dance of the Andalusia region combines song, guitar, heel stomping and castanets for a show that one will soon not forget.

Although there are numerous more sights and landmarks throughout the country of Spain, the above mentioned are just a few of the more popular attractions. A suggestion to travelers is to research available materials on Spain and make a plan of what you want to see and experience while one is visiting. This country is seeded rich in culture and tradition that in turn produces numerous sites and historical places. It is almost impossible to see and partake in everything that Spain has to offer unless one has an extremely large amount of time on their hands. However, it is assured that no matter what one chooses to experience in Spain, one will rarely ever be disappointed with this traditional yet modern country.

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References


Factbook: Spain. Available: 
http://www.cia.gov/cia/publication/factbook/geos/sp.html#intro


**Note: I also contributed some of my personal knowledge from visiting this country, but I didn’t know how to cite my self.**