

# 1

# The Best of Spain

*by Peter Stone*

AS YOU FLY INTO SPAIN, YOU CAN SEE, WAY BELOW YOU, A PARCHED, RUGGED, ochre-mauve landscape that matches to perfection the “rumpled lion’s skin” described long ago by the classical historian Strabo. There’s a timeless grandeur about it. You could almost imagine that nothing has changed in the 2,000 or so years since the Greek sage penned those words.

Yet, over the course of that time, a hell of a lot of water has flowed under the many bridges that dot that landscape, and changes aplenty have surely taken place. The Moors, with their 800-year rule, were the first to bequeath a genuine, lasting legacy, constructing ornate mansions, forts, and mosques, and embellishing their exotic southern cities of Córdoba and Granada with those magical, flower-lined patios and cool, twinkling fountains so beloved by today’s visitors. The Catholic monarchs who ousted them went one better, presiding over the almost superhuman construction of some of the finest religious monuments the world had ever seen—highlighted by giant cathedrals such as those in Seville and Toledo, which took centuries to finish and leave you speechless with wonder as you enter their portals. The Bourbon kings were next to try their hand, creating elegant, wide, tree-lined boulevards and sumptuous neoclassical palaces in an attempt to “Europeanize” major cities like the capital city, Madrid, while later avant-garde innovators, like Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona, turned the whole concept of architecture upside down with controversial modernist creations like the Sagrada Família—a must for fans of the surreal. Today, amid all that multifaceted grandeur, we also have a brave new world of 50-story concrete and glass tower blocks; futuristic, cutting-edge cultural centers such as Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum and Valencia’s City of Science; and 300kmph (186-mph) trains that can glide across that “rumpled lion’s skin” in a twinkling of an eye—a heady mixture of centuries straddling sights, almost daunting in the richness of their scope.

But some of the most memorable images—those that linger on long after you’ve returned home—are the smaller, more personal ones. The white villages that cling impossibly to steep Andalusian hillsides; the squat windmills on the flat central plains of La Mancha, which Cervantes’s scholar knight vainly attacked thinking they were giants; the tiny Romanesque chapels nestling peacefully amid Pyrenean woodlands—attractions large and small in a country (perhaps mini-continent is a more accurate term) that would take a small eternity to really know. The problem is where to start, which is why we’ve picked out the very best places for you to see during your stay, to save you the hassle and make your visit a bit easier.

## BEST OF THE BEST

**THE PRADO** You gotta hand it to the Spanish royalty: They knew what they were doing when it came to art. The royal collection forms the basis for the Prado Museum (p. 48), an institution that is on a par with the Hermitage, the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York thanks to the remarkable breadth and richness of its collection. At any one time, some 1,300 pieces will be on view, though the strengths of the museum are, not surprisingly, its Spanish Masters (particularly Velázquez). Beyond that are works of unparalleled genius from Hieronymus Bosch, Fra Angelico, and other world-renowned artists. Though there are many reasons to come to Madrid, if you leave without touring the Prado, you haven't done the city (or country) justice.

**THE ALHAMBRA** This fairy-tale pleasure dome, with its serene courtyards, intricate filigree decor, archways, and scented gardens overlooked by the snow-capped Sierra Nevada, was the apogee of Moorish luxury and beauty. At its center is the small dreamlike Patio de los Leones, whose slender columns surround a central fountain with 12 small lions at its base, while, high above it, the orange tree-scented Generalife Gardens are a real fantasy Arabian Nights setting come true—especially when floodlit after dark.

**SEGOVIA'S ALCAZAR** Majestically perched on a high bluff above Segovia's twin rivers Eresma and Clamores, this is the most picturesque and most photographed castle in all Spain. Its turrets and spires are said to have inspired Walt. It's in this formidable fortress that Isabella of Castilla (of Ferdinand and Isabella fame) took refuge when her brother died and, with the support of the army, marched from the fortress to the Plaza Mayor to be proclaimed queen.

**SEVILLE'S CATHEDRAL** When its planners ambitiously proclaimed "Let us built a church so big they will think us mad," they weren't kidding! Seville's Gothic masterpiece is the greatest cathedral in Spain and third largest in all Europe after London's St. Paul's and Rome's St. Peter's—a true marvel of a monument that took nearly 3 centuries to complete and whose height positively overwhelms you as you pass through its portals. The top attraction here is the main chapel's exquisite retable (altarpiece) said to be—no surprise here—the biggest in the world. It was the work of the accomplished Flemish artist Pieter Dancart and depicts the life of Christ in a blend of intricate oak and walnut carvings and lavishly applied gold leaf whose details you could study for hours.

**THE SAGRADA FAMILIA** Barcelona's intricate and idiosyncratic **Sagrada Familia**, originally intended as an expiatory temple before assuming the mantle of a (still unfinished) cathedral, was designed by 19th-century architect Antoni Gaudí and is the supreme example of Catalán moderniste religious work. Its eight knobby towers (four by Gaudí, four by architects who picked up the torch after his death in 1926) rise above the Eixample cityscape like huge, calloused fingers cocking a snoot at convention.

## Sun, Sand & Sea

It doesn't all have to be culture in Spain, though, as around 95% of its visitors will happily tell you. They've come for just three basic things: sun, sea, and sangria. For five decades, Spain has been only too willing to feed visitors' hedonistic dreams, with the result that tourist numbers have mushroomed from 8 million a year in the late 1950s to six times that figure today.

The golden egg here (as laid by the golden goose) is the country's magnificent choice of beaches, which range from the Atlantic-washed strands of the Basque country's Costa Verde and Cádiz's Costa de la Luz, to the more popular coves and bays of the sun-soaked Mediterranean coasts, which extend from Andalusia's Costa del Sol and Alicante's Costa Blanca to Catalunya's Costa Brava and—greatest Lotus Eater's haven of them all—the Balearic Islands. Between them, this latter quartet has turned Spain into the most successful mass-market summer destination in all of Europe. And the eye boggling overabundance of buildings and amenities that extend along those southern coasts is there to prove it.

So far, the Mediterranean goose has avoided the fate of the hapless one in the famed fable, for among the aforementioned excesses, a few (relatively unspoiled) gems still stand out. Our short list of favorite sun-blessed beach resorts—in alphabetical order—is, accordingly, Cadaqués (Costa Brava), Estepona (Málaga), Mitjorn (Formentera), and Puerto Pollensa (Mallorca). Up in the cooler, cloudier, but more sophisticated north, in addition to our top choice San Sebastián (Basque Country), we recommend Baiona (Galicia), Llanés (Asturias), and Santander (Cantabria).

**BILBAO'S GUGGENHEIM** Frank Gehry's seductively curvaceous **Guggenheim Museum**, set in the once-grimy heart of old Bilbao port, is a paradigm shifting landmark. Its shimmering titanium outline somehow manages not only to slot in smoothly with its dour city surroundings but also to interact fluidly with its neighboring River Nervión.

## BEST CHURCHES

**Montserrat Monastery.** The shrine of Catalán regionalism, this awesome 9th-century Benedictine monastery stands 4,000 feet high atop a phantasmagorical formation that's said to have inspired Wagner when he was writing *Parsifal*.

**Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.** Stunningly located in the foothills of the Guadarrama Mountains north of Madrid, this chillingly austere "Castilian Colditz" boasts a dazzling library, with its unique collection of scientific books, and the long battle room lined with frescoes of Lepanto and other notable military engagements.

**Toledo Cathedral.** Spain's greatest Gothic pile, built between the 13th and 15th centuries and located in the heart of a magnificent walled city that was formerly the Visigothic capital of Spain, contains some truly marvelous artifacts including a massive silver gilt monstrance, some beautifully carved choir stalls, and an elaborate Baroque section behind the main altar known as the *transparente*, as its exotic rococo figures of saints and marble cherubs on fluffy clouds are gloriously flooded with natural light when the sun shines through a hole pierced in the dome high above.

**Santiago de Compostela Cathedral.** For over 800 years, pilgrims have been trekking to this Christian mecca from all corners of Europe, awed by its Baroque facade as well as the Botafumeiro incense burner inside that is swung to and from a high transept during important services. (Its trajectory is low and very quick, so don't get in its way.)

**Córdoba's Mezquita.** In the 8th century, Córdoba, with a population of half a million, was the powerful capital of one of the Arab world's most wealthy caliphates (kingdoms). Today its huge *mezquita* (mosque), is a remarkable blend of Arabic and Christian features where red-and-white-striped Mudéjar archways, and lines of jasper and marble pillars shelter a central Catholic church erected by empire builder Charles V.

## BEST NON-ECCLESIASTICAL SIGHTS

**Madrid's Palacio Real.** Constructed by 18th-century Bourbon rulers, it's no longer the permanent royal residence. Instead, the public gets to enjoy its Tiepolo ceiling frescoes, lavish chandeliers, and priceless Flemish tapestries as they pass from one ornate salon to another.

**Aranjuez's Palacio Real.** Half an hour's train ride south of the capital, Aranjuez's French-influenced neoclassical palace is less lavish inside than its Madrid counterpart but compensates by having a truly magnificent expanse of riverside gardens containing the delightful *Casita del Labrador*, a sort of Spanish Petit Trianon aimed at complementing the palace's would-be Versailles.

**Barcelona's moderniste buildings.** With their innovative use of concrete (which they bent and twisted), wrought iron, and mosaics, the late 19th-century modernistas, led by Antonin Gaudí, reshaped the face of Barcelona and literally shifted the course of Western architecture. What once had been all about symmetry, in the tradition of the ancient Greeks and Romans, now took its inspiration from nature in all its glorious chaos. See all their ornate, exuberant work in the Eixample district of the city, in particular.

**Valencia's City of Science.** A cutting-edge, 21st-century construction of steel, glass, and white granite, the City of Science is the most ambitious and stylish entertainment center in the land, offering every kind of diversion from concerts to a water world inhabited by Beluga whales and performing seals.

**Salamanca's university.** The intellectual center of Spain for nearly 6 centuries, the Universidad de Salamanca trained a number of saints, a conquistador or two, and most of the great literary figures from Cervantes to Unamuno. Its golden sandstone buildings occupy roughly a quarter of the Old City of Salamanca, and the portions of the institution open to the public hint tantalizingly at other unseen treasures. Test your powers of observation by seeking out the tiny frog on the sculpted facade of the Escuelas Mayores, and don't miss the Cielo de Salamanca, the magical remnants of a 15th-century ceiling mural that blends astrology and astronomy.

## BEST MUSEUMS

**Seville's Bellas Artes.** The Andalusian capital's Bellas Artes Museum is to the city what the Prado is to Madrid, though on a more limited level. Here you'll find another repository of great Spanish art, located in a magnificent former 17th-century convent and concentrating mainly on religious works by artistic giants of the country's Golden Age.

**Barcelona's Picasso Museum.** This fascinating overview of the Malagüeno artist's works is located in a quintet of converted mansions in the medieval Born district. It mainly covers paintings from his formative youth—in particular, his Blue period—and it's fascinating to compare the pure naturalism of his early creations with the later, mold breaking Cubist images, some of which—including his own controversial take on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*—are also on display.

**Figueras's Teatro-Museu Dalí.** Undoubtedly the most eccentric museum on the peninsula, Dalí's extravaganza considerably livens up the otherwise nondescript northern Catalán town of Figueras (where the artist was born). Exhibits range from sculptures, gouaches, and paintings, including the bizarre mauve-purple *Happy Horse*, to a furniture assembly—including a sofa with large red cushions—arranged to look like Mae West's face.

## BEST TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

**Watching a bullfight.** The best places to see this visceral semi-pagan activity are at Las Ventas in Madrid or La Real Maestranza in Seville, where you'll find the largest two *plazas de toros* (bullrings) in Spain. Many find the sequence of the bloody ritual—the *banderilleros*, the *picadores*, the *torero* executing the final kill—cruel, brutal, and downright anachronistic. Others are moved by its timeless symbolism, vivid color, and artistic beauty.

**Listening to flamenco in an Andalusian *tablao*.** More Spanish passion, but this time without physical pain and suffering (except perhaps that inflicted on the eardrums of the uninitiated by the high-pitched wails of the *cantaor*). Accompanied by hand clapping and the sultry strains of the guitar while a colorfully clad, raven-haired beauty stomps the floor, this mournful yet captivating blend of Arabic-Gypsy-Asian sounds and movements is the other great Hispanic draw, often, alas, commercialized beyond belief. Though Madrid has the most elegant *salas de fiestas*, Andalusia is its spiritual home.

**Running with the bulls in Pamplona.** During the packed-to-capacity fiestas known as the San Fermín, bulls run through the streets accompanied by either a brave or the wine-inebriated public in a wild ritual that’s without equal for devil-may-care recklessness, excitement, and atmosphere anywhere else in Spain. Even the bullfight-haters love this one.

**Exploring Gypsy Granada.** Gypsies have made their homes in Sacromonte, the hillside *barrio* above Granada, for hundreds of years. A few still live in quite pleasant caves carved out of the rock—an experience you can have yourself by booking one of the apartments of Las Cuevas El Abanico (p. 154). The Museo Cuevas de Sacromonte (p. 165) serves as an educational and social center of newfound Roma (Gypsy) pride. The neighborhood also developed its own distinctive flamenco idiom, called *zambra*, still performed nightly in many *salas de fiestas* (nightclubs).

**Following the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.** Probably the oldest tourist itinerary in Europe, the foot slog from the easterly Pyrenees to westerly Galicia takes in some of the most fascinating architecture and scenery in Spain. It began in the Middle Ages when pilgrims headed for St. James’s shrine in Santiago de Compostela’s cathedral and—after a period of decline—is all the rage again with ecologically aware and religiously minded visitors who make their leisurely way along the same route, usually walking but sometimes on horseback or bicycle.

## BEST OF THE “OTHER” SPAIN

**Cooking your own meal with locals in a Guipuzcoan *txoko* or taking a Barcelona cooking class.** Ever since Ferran Adrià shook things up on the culinary scene to such an extent that the *New York Times* referred to him as the best chef in the world, people have been looking at Catalán cuisine with different eyes. Better than the French? Why not? Barcelona offers you the chance to join this illustrious circle with sophisticated courses on creating Adrià-style dishes (p. 296). If you’re a male foodie, head to San Sebastián where you might be able to wrangle an invitation to a *txoko*, basically a social event where guys gather in a clubhouse to cook together and share recipes (p. 363).

**Visiting private courtyards in Córdoba.** The citizens of Córdoba are so proud of their flower-strewn private patios that many of them admit visitors during the annual Córdoba Patio Festival during the first two weeks of May. It’s as much a social occasion as a competition, and if you’re friendly and respectful, you might find yourself being offered a glass of wine, given a cutting from a prized philodendron, or invited to join a songfest. Best of all, life as usual continues: Family members eat their meals, sweep the floor, greet their friends, or just sit in the shade of a lemon tree and read the newspaper.

**Catching a match with fans of Real Madrid.** A Madrid friend once told us that the only time she ever saw her grandfather cry was when Real Madrid lost a championship for the second year in a row. Few passions so seize Spaniards as their loyalty to local football (soccer) clubs. In Madrid, try to get tickets to Real Madrid’s

home field, Estadio Santiago Bernabéu. But if the scalpers want too many euros, take heart. You can have an equally great communal experience watching the match on cable in a smoky bar (p. 65).

**Learning flamenco in Seville.** Learning to dance or play flamenco is a little like learning a language—nothing works like full immersion, and that’s what you can get at the Taller Flamenco in Seville’s Macarena barrio (p. 143). Classes embrace all the sub-disciplines of choreography, dance technique, flamenco guitar, flamenco singing, *compás* and *palmas* (clapping), and percussion. To fully live the flamenco life, share an apartment with other students in the Macarena district.