

# Moving to Spain Masterclass

## Section 2: Understanding the Country

Important Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only and should be used as a starting point for your research rather than as a definitive source.

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# Geography and Culture

Spain is a geographically diverse country with vibrant cities, charming small towns, and stunning coastlines. Each region has its unique appeal, and choosing the right location depends on your lifestyle, budget, and preferences.

Each of these cities offers a unique interpretation of Spanish life, from Madrid's cosmopolitan energy to Granada's timeless charm. The beauty of Spain lies in how these cities maintain their distinct character while sharing the common threads of Spanish culture – a love of good food, strong community bonds, and an appreciation for living life to the fullest.



# Madrid

Madrid rises from the central Spanish plateau as a sophisticated metropolis that never seems to sleep. Unlike Spain's coastal cities, Madrid turns its energy inward, creating an intensely urban experience centered around art, cuisine, and nightlife. Its grand boulevards and elegant squares tell the story of an imperial past, while neighborhoods like Malasaña pulse with a creative energy that feels distinctly contemporary. What sets Madrid apart is its ability to maintain its deeply Spanish soul despite being an international capital.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €1,000-1,500 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €100-150/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €54.60
- Restaurant meal: €15-25

## Weather

- Hot, dry summers (32-38°C)
- Cold winters (0-10°C)
- Low humidity
- 63 rainy days per year

## Healthcare

Madrid boasts some of Spain's most advanced medical facilities, including internationally renowned hospitals like La Paz University Hospital and Gregorio Marañón Hospital. As the capital, it offers the highest concentration of specialized medical centers and research facilities in the country. The public healthcare system is excellent, with many doctors speaking English, particularly in private facilities.

The city has numerous private international clinics catering specifically to expatriates, making it easier for non-Spanish speakers to receive care. Due to the high number of medical facilities, wait times for specialists are typically shorter here than in other Spanish cities.





## International Community

- Large expat population
- Multiple international schools
- Active expat groups and meetups
- Diverse cultural events

## Job Market

- Strong financial sector
- Growing tech industry
- International companies
- Higher salaries compared to other Spanish cities
- English teaching opportunities abundant



### Pros

- Excellent public transportation
- Central location for traveling
- Rich cultural scene
- World-class museums
- Vibrant nightlife
- High quality of life

### Cons

- Higher cost of living than other Spanish cities
- Air quality issues
- Tourism crowds
- Extreme temperature variations
- Limited beach access





# Barcelona

Barcelona stands as Spain's laboratory of innovation, where medieval Gothic streets meet Gaudí's surreal architecture and Mediterranean waves lap at the city's edge. Unlike Madrid's traditional Spanish character, Barcelona proudly showcases its distinct Catalan identity through its language, culture, and fierce independence. The city uniquely combines beach culture with cutting-edge design and technology, creating an environment where traditional markets coexist with tech startups.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €1,100-1,600 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €120-170/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €40
- Restaurant meal: €15-30

## Weather

- Mediterranean climate
- Mild winters (5-15°C)
- Warm summers (25-30°C)
- Higher humidity
- 55 rainy days per year

## Healthcare

Barcelona features a sophisticated healthcare system with a mix of public and private facilities. Notable institutions include Hospital Clínic and Hospital de Sant Pau, which combine historical architecture with cutting-edge medical technology. The city has a strong presence of international medical groups and private clinics that cater to the large expatriate community.

English-speaking medical services are widely available, and the city is known for its excellent emergency response system. Barcelona also stands out for its specialized medical tourism services and innovative medical research facilities.





## International Community

- Very large expat population
- Multiple international schools
- Active digital nomad scene
- Multicultural environment

## Job Market

- Strong tourism sector
- Growing tech startup scene
- International business hub
- Digital nomad friendly
- Competitive job market



### Pros

- Beach lifestyle
- Beautiful architecture
- International atmosphere
- Excellent food scene
- Good public transport
- Active outdoor lifestyle

### Cons

- Tourist overcrowding
- Higher living costs
- Housing shortage
- Pickpocketing concerns
- Language barrier (Catalan/Spanish)



# Valencia

Valencia captures the essence of Mediterranean living while being more approachable than its larger siblings. The city's claim to fame is its brilliant balance – it offers the cultural richness of a major city without the frenetic pace of Madrid or Barcelona. What makes Valencia special is the Turia Gardens, a converted riverbed that creates a green ribbon through the city, alongside ultra-modern architecture like the City of Arts and Sciences. It's also the birthplace of paella, and its food culture remains unmatched.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €700-1,000 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €80-120/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €35
- Restaurant meal: €12-20

## Weather

- Mediterranean climate
- Mild winters (10-20°C)
- Hot summers (25-35°C)
- 300+ days of sunshine
- 44 rainy days per year



## Healthcare

Valencia provides high-quality healthcare through both public and private sectors, with La Fe Hospital being one of the largest and most advanced medical centers in Spain. The city offers good value for private healthcare insurance compared to Madrid and Barcelona, while maintaining high standards.

While English-speaking medical services are available, they're less common than in larger cities. Valencia's healthcare system is particularly noted for its efficient primary care network and strong preventive medicine programs.



## International Community

- Growing expat population
- Several international schools
- Welcoming to foreigners
- Strong Spanish immersion

## Job Market

- Growing tech sector
- Tourism opportunities
- Lower salaries than Madrid/Barcelona
- Fewer international companies
- Teaching opportunities available



### Pros

- Lower cost of living
- Beach access
- Great quality of life
- Less touristy
- Rich culture and history
- Famous local cuisine

### Cons

- Fewer job opportunities
- Less English spoken
- Smaller international community
- Limited international flights
- Slower pace of life



# Málaga

Málaga has transformed itself from a mere gateway to the Costa del Sol into a cultural powerhouse in its own right. What makes it special is its remarkable reinvention – historic streets now house cutting-edge museums (including the Pompidou Centre's only Spanish outpost), while maintaining the relaxed beach city vibe. Unlike many coastal cities that shut down in winter, Málaga remains vibrant year-round, thanks to Europe's warmest winters.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €800-1,100 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €90-130/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €39.95
- Restaurant meal: €12-20

## Weather

- Mediterranean climate
- Mild winters (12-20°C)
- Warm summers (25-35°C)
- 300+ days of sunshine
- 50 rainy days per year



## Healthcare

Málaga has significantly improved its healthcare infrastructure in recent years, particularly with the modern Málaga Regional University Hospital. The city's healthcare system effectively serves both its local population and large expatriate community, with many private clinics offering services in multiple languages.

The Costa del Sol Hospital in nearby Marbella provides additional support for the region. The warm climate and lifestyle have made Málaga a popular destination for medical tourism, particularly for rehabilitation and recovery services.





## International Community

- Good public healthcare
- Private clinics available
- International medical facilities
- English-speaking medical services

## Job Market

- Strong tourism sector
- Growing tech hub
- Seasonal work opportunities
- Remote work friendly
- Limited corporate jobs



### Pros

- Excellent weather
- Lower living costs
- Beach lifestyle
- Good transport links
- Rich cultural heritage
- Active outdoor lifestyle

### Cons

- Seasonal tourism impact
- Fewer career opportunities
- Summer heat
- Some areas very touristy
- Limited international connections



# Seville

Seville embodies the soul of southern Spain, where the influences of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian cultures have created something entirely unique. Unlike the modernized northern cities, Seville maintains an almost theatrical dedication to tradition – whether in its Holy Week processions, flamenco culture, or traditional tapas bars. What sets it apart is how it seems to move to its own rhythm, especially during the long, languorous summer evenings when life moves outdoors and time slows down.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €650-900 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €80-120/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €35
- Restaurant meal: €12-18

## Weather

- Hot, dry summers (35-45°C)
- Mild winters (5-18°C)
- Limited rainfall
- 52 rainy days per year

## Healthcare

Seville maintains a strong public healthcare system centered around the Virgen del Rocío University Hospital, one of the largest in Spain. While the city offers excellent medical care, English-speaking services are less common than in more expatriate-heavy cities. The public system provides comprehensive coverage, but wait times can be longer than in Madrid or Barcelona.

Private healthcare options are growing, though they're not as numerous as in coastal cities with larger international communities.





## International Community

- Smaller expat community
- Few international schools
- Strong Spanish immersion
- Active student population

## Job Market

- Tourism-focused
- Teaching opportunities
- Limited international companies
- Lower average salaries
- Growing startup scene



### Pros

- Rich cultural heritage
- Lower cost of living
- Authentic Spanish experience
- Famous local cuisine
- Beautiful architecture
- Strong community feel

### Cons

- Extreme summer heat
- Fewer job opportunities
- Limited English usage
- Smaller international community
- Slower pace of life





# Granada

Granada offers something entirely different – a city where time seems to have stood still in the best possible way. Unlike Spain's other major cities, Granada still offers free tapas with every drink, and the Moorish influence remains palpable. What makes it truly special is the Alhambra palace complex overlooking the city, while the Sierra Nevada mountains provide a dramatic backdrop and easy access to both skiing and Mediterranean beaches within an hour's drive.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €600-800 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €70-100/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €42
- Restaurant meal: €10-18 (often includes free tapas)

## Weather

- Hot summers (25-35°C)
- Cold winters (0-15°C)
- Snow possible due to altitude
- Mountain climate influence
- 45 rainy days per year

## Healthcare

Granada features a healthcare system that benefits from its strong university presence, with the University Hospital of Granada being a major teaching and research center. The city offers good quality medical care at lower costs than larger Spanish cities. While the public system is excellent, English-speaking medical services are primarily found in private clinics.

The city is also known for its specialized rehabilitation centers, taking advantage of its unique location between mountains and coast.



## International Community

- Growing expat community
- Student-heavy international population
- Several language schools
- Strong cultural immersion
- Active study abroad presence

## Job Market

- Tourism sector opportunities
- Teaching positions available
- University employment
- Limited international companies
- Lower average salaries
- Seasonal work in skiing/tourism



### Pros

- Lower cost of living
- Free tapas culture
- Rich historical heritage
- Access to skiing and beaches
- Strong university presence
- Authentic Spanish experience

### Cons

- Fewer job opportunities
- Limited international connections
- Language barrier
- Extreme temperature variations
- Smaller city amenities





# San Sebastián

San Sebastián stands apart as Spain's culinary capital, with more Michelin stars per capita than almost any city in the world. Its elegant Belle Époque architecture and stunning La Concha beach create a sophisticated atmosphere that feels more French Riviera than typical Spain. What makes it unique is its ability to combine high culture with deeply rooted Basque traditions, all while maintaining a remarkably high quality of life.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €900-1,300 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €100-150/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €40
- Restaurant meal: €15-40 (higher due to gastronomic culture)

## Weather

- Mild summers (20-25°C)
- Cool winters (5-12°C)
- Higher rainfall
- 192 rainy days per year
- High humidity

## Healthcare

San Sebastián provides exceptional healthcare services despite its smaller size, with the Donostia University Hospital serving as the main public facility. The city's healthcare system benefits from the Basque Country's strong economic position, resulting in well-funded facilities and shorter wait times than many other regions.

Private healthcare is readily available, and the city has developed a reputation for excellence in specialized medical treatments, particularly in oncology and gastroenterology.



## International Community

- Moderate expat population
- International tourists
- Several international schools
- Strong Basque culture
- Growing digital nomad scene

## Job Market

- Strong hospitality sector
- Tourism opportunities
- Technology companies
- Higher average salaries
- Seasonal tourism work
- Competitive job market



### Pros

- World-class gastronomy
- Beautiful beaches
- High quality of life
- Clean and safe
- Rich cultural heritage
- Active outdoor lifestyle

### Cons

- High cost of living
- Significant rainfall
- Language barrier (Spanish/Basque)
- Tourist crowds in summer
- Housing shortage





# Bilbao

Bilbao represents one of Europe's most successful urban reinventions, transforming from an industrial port into a cultural destination. What sets it apart is its ambitious architecture, exemplified by the Guggenheim Museum, combined with a deep respect for Basque traditions. Unlike the sun-soaked cities of the south, Bilbao's green surroundings and cooler climate create a distinctly different Spanish experience.

## Cost of Living

- Average rent (city center): €800-1,100 for 1-bedroom
- Utilities: €90-130/month
- Monthly public transport pass: €40
- Restaurant meal: €12-25

## Weather

- Mild summers (20-25°C)
- Cool winters (5-12°C)
- Frequent rainfall
- 128 rainy days per year
- Green climate

## Healthcare

Bilbao offers comprehensive healthcare through its modern public system, centered around the Cruces University Hospital and Basurto University Hospital. The city's strong economic base has enabled significant investment in healthcare infrastructure, resulting in high-quality facilities and services.

While English-speaking medical services are available, they're more commonly found in private clinics. The Basque healthcare system is often rated as one of the most efficient in Spain, with shorter wait times and high patient satisfaction rates.



## International Community

- Growing expat population
- International business community
- Several international schools
- Strong Basque identity
- Active cultural exchange

## Job Market

- Strong industrial sector
- Growing tech scene
- International business presence
- Higher than average salaries
- Port and logistics jobs
- Professional opportunities



### Pros

- Modern infrastructure
- Rich cultural scene
- Strong economy
- Excellent public transport
- High quality of life
- Less touristy than other major cities

### Cons

- Significant rainfall
- Higher cost of living
- Language barrier (Spanish/Basque)
- Less Mediterranean feel
- Limited beach options



# Other Popular Destinations



Each of these destinations offers unique advantages for expats and retirees, from the affordable, expat-friendly communities of the Costa Blanca to the sophisticated lifestyle of the Costa del Sol and the island living of the Balearics. The choice often depends on personal preferences regarding climate, budget, desired level of integration with local culture, and lifestyle priorities.

# Costa Blanca

**The Costa Blanca ("White Coast") stretches along Spain's eastern Mediterranean coastline, offering a perfect blend of modern amenities and traditional Spanish charm. This region has become particularly popular with expats due to its exceptional climate, with over 300 days of sunshine annually and mild winters that rarely drop below 16°C (61°F).**

## Alicante

The provincial capital serves as the gateway to the Costa Blanca, combining historical charm with modern living. The city center features the iconic Santa Bárbara Castle perched atop Mount Benacantil, overlooking a bustling marina and pristine urban beaches. Alicante offers a more authentic Spanish experience compared to other Costa Blanca destinations, with a significant local population balancing the expat community. The presence of an international airport, excellent healthcare facilities, and strong transport links makes it particularly attractive for year-round residents. The cost of living remains reasonable, with one-bedroom apartments in the city center averaging €600-800 monthly.

## Torrevieja

Known for its distinctly international flavor, Torrevieja has evolved from a small fishing village into a multicultural haven. The city is famous for its pink and green salt lakes, which create a unique microclimate believed to be beneficial for those with respiratory conditions. Property prices here are among the most affordable on the Costa Blanca, making it particularly attractive for retirees. The large expat community (particularly British and Scandinavian) means English is widely spoken, though this can make authentic Spanish immersion more challenging. The city offers extensive healthcare facilities, including the modern Torrevieja Hospital, and numerous golf courses and leisure facilities.

## Benidorm

Often called the "Manhattan of Spain" for its dramatic skyline, Benidorm represents the most developed face of the Costa Blanca. Despite its reputation as a tourist destination, many expats choose Benidorm for its year-round amenities, excellent infrastructure, and entertainment options. The city boasts some of the best-maintained beaches in Spain, extensive shopping facilities, and a climate that remains pleasant even in winter. While summer months can be crowded, the off-season reveals a more relaxed pace of life. The large expat community means extensive English-language services are available, from medical care to legal services.

# Costa del Sol

**The Costa del Sol ("Sun Coast") in southern Spain has earned its reputation as one of Europe's premier expatriate destinations, combining sophisticated living with traditional Andalusian charm.**

## Marbella

The jewel of the Costa del Sol, Marbella represents sophisticated Mediterranean living at its finest. The city successfully balances its luxury reputation with authentic Spanish charm, particularly in its Old Town (Casco Antiguo). The Golden Mile, stretching from Marbella to Puerto Banús, showcases some of Spain's most prestigious real estate and hotels. For expats, Marbella offers high-end healthcare facilities, international schools, and a robust infrastructure. While living costs are higher than in other Costa del Sol locations, the quality of life, security, and year-round pleasant climate justify the premium for many residents. The city has become particularly popular with digital nomads and entrepreneurs, thanks to its growing coworking spaces and business networking opportunities.

## Fuengirola

More affordable than Marbella but equally well-equipped, Fuengirola has transformed from a fishing village into a modern coastal city while maintaining its Spanish character. The city offers excellent beaches, a renovated marina, and a historic castle. The large expat community (particularly British and Scandinavian) has led to the development of numerous international services, schools, and medical facilities. Property prices remain reasonable compared to other Costa del Sol destinations, and the excellent public transport links, including direct train service to Málaga Airport, make it particularly convenient for international residents.

## Estepona

Often described as the Costa del Sol's garden city, Estepona has managed to preserve its traditional Andalusian character while developing modern amenities. The old town's flower-filled streets and squares provide a more authentic Spanish experience than some of its neighbors. The city has seen significant investment in recent years, including a new hospital and the development of the marina area, but property prices remain more moderate than in Marbella. The expat community here tends to be more integrated with the local population, making it ideal for those seeking a more genuine Spanish lifestyle while maintaining access to international amenities.



# The Balearic Islands

**The Balearic archipelago offers a sophisticated island lifestyle with excellent connectivity to mainland Europe and modern infrastructure.**

## Mallorca

The largest of the Balearic Islands has evolved far beyond its package holiday image to become one of Spain's most desirable expat destinations. Palma, the capital, offers sophisticated city living with historical architecture, cutting-edge restaurants, and excellent shopping. The island's diverse landscape includes the dramatic Tramuntana mountains, picturesque villages like Deià and Valldemossa, and countless beautiful beaches. International residents particularly appreciate the excellent healthcare facilities, international schools, and Palma's international airport. While property prices are high, especially in prime areas, the quality of life and year-round amenities justify the investment for many. The island has also become a hub for digital nomads, with numerous coworking spaces and a growing tech community.

## Ibiza

While famous for its summer party scene, Ibiza offers a surprisingly diverse lifestyle for permanent residents. The island has distinct seasons, with a more relaxed and authentic atmosphere during the winter months. The UNESCO-protected Old Town of Ibiza City provides cultural richness, while inland villages offer tranquil living. The island has attracted a creative and entrepreneurial expat community, leading to a flourishing wellness and digital nomad scene. International schools, private healthcare facilities, and improved winter connectivity make year-round living increasingly viable. Property prices are premium, particularly in desirable areas, but the unique lifestyle and natural beauty continue to attract international residents.

## Menorca

The most preserved of the Balearic Islands, Menorca offers a quieter, more authentic island experience. The island's UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status has protected it from overdevelopment, resulting in pristine beaches and unspoiled landscapes. The twin cities of Mahón and Ciutadella provide historical charm and modern amenities, while coastal villages offer a more relaxed pace of life. The expat community is smaller and more integrated than on the other islands, making it ideal for those seeking genuine cultural immersion. While summer tourism peaks, the island maintains its authentic character year-round. Healthcare facilities are good, though some specialists may require travel to Mallorca. The property market offers better value than Mallorca or Ibiza, though options may be more limited.

# Local Customs, Traditions, and Etiquette



Spain has a rich cultural heritage, and understanding local customs will help you integrate smoothly.

✓ **Siesta Culture** – In many parts of Spain, especially smaller towns, businesses close in the afternoon for a “siesta” (nap/rest period). Adjusting to this schedule is essential.

✓ **Meal Times** – Spaniards eat later than in many other countries. Lunch is typically between 2-4 PM, and dinner starts around 9-10 PM.

✓ **Socializing** – Spaniards are warm and expressive. It's common to greet with two kisses (one on each cheek) or a handshake in professional settings.

✓ **Festivals and Holidays** – Spain is famous for its vibrant celebrations, such as La Tomatina, Semana Santa, and Feria de Abril in Seville.

✓ **Tipping** – Tipping is not mandatory but appreciated. Rounding up or leaving small change is common in restaurants and cafes.

✓ **Family and Community-Oriented** – Family plays a significant role in Spanish culture, and relationships are highly valued.

💡 Tip: Embracing the local culture will help you feel more at home and gain the respect of locals.



# Language Basics

## ✓ Greetings & Essentials:

- Hello – Hola
- Good morning – Buenos días
- Good afternoon – Buenas tardes
- Good evening – Buenas noches
- Please – Por favor
- Thank you – Gracias
- Excuse me – Perdón
- How much does it cost? – ¿Cuánto cuesta?

## ✓ Useful Phrases:

- I don't speak Spanish – No hablo español
- Do you speak English? – ¿Habla inglés?
- Where is the nearest metro/bus stop? – ¿Dónde está la parada de metro/autobús más cercana?
- Can you help me? – ¿Puede ayudarme?



### Common Phrases for Daily Interactions

While many Spaniards speak English, especially in major cities, learning basic Spanish will greatly enhance your experience.

💡 Tip: Spaniards appreciate any effort to speak Spanish. Using simple phrases will improve your interactions and show respect for the culture.



## Tips for Learning the Language

- ✓ Take Spanish Classes – Enroll in a local language school or use online platforms like Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, or Babbel.
- ✓ Practice with Locals – Engaging in everyday conversations, even with mistakes, will accelerate learning.
- ✓ Use Language Exchange Programs – Apps like Tandem and HelloTalk connect you with native Spanish speakers.
- ✓ Watch Spanish TV & Movies – Watching Spanish-language shows with subtitles will help with comprehension.
- ✓ Be Patient – Language acquisition takes time, but consistency is key.

# Legal and Political Overview

## Government Structure and Regulations

Spain is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system. The government consists of:

- The Monarch – The head of state, currently King Felipe VI.
- The Prime Minister – The head of government, elected by the Spanish Parliament.
- Autonomous Communities – Spain is divided into 17 autonomous regions with their own local governments and policies.
- Local Governments (Ayuntamientos) – Responsible for municipal services such as public transport and local regulations.

💡 Tip: Understanding Spain's government structure will help you navigate legal matters, taxation, and residency rules.



# Key Laws That Affect Expats

✓ **Visa & Residency Requirements** – Non-EU citizens need a visa or residence permit to stay longer than 90 days. Depending on the country you are coming from you may have less than 90 days. Every country has specific rules that are different and must be followed. Spain offers options such as the Non-Lucrative Visa, Golden Visa, and Digital Nomad Visa.

✓ **Tax Residency Rules** – If you live in Spain for more than 183 days per year, or you become a tax resident you must declare worldwide income. The 183-day rule is not a hard rule, you can spend less time and still be a tax resident, your 'ties to the country' also play a strong role in where any government considers you a tax resident.

✓ **Driving Laws** – Many expats can drive with their foreign license for up to 6 months, after which an exchange or Spanish license is required.

✓ Employment & Business Regulations – Expats need proper work authorization to be legally employed or start a business in Spain.

✓ Healthcare Access – Spain has a public healthcare system, but private insurance is recommended for full coverage. You will need to have private insurance when applying for your visa and keep the insurance for at least one year.

✓ Property Ownership Laws – Expats (and all foreigners) can buy property in Spain, but tax implications vary based on residency status. Foreigners can also get a mortgage in Spain.

💡 Tip: Consulting with a local lawyer or relocation expert will ensure you stay compliant with Spain's legal requirements. Watch the video in the Fast Track to Spain to get more information about residency and mortgage information.

# Conclusion and Next Steps

Spain is a diverse and welcoming country, but understanding its regions, culture, language, and legal framework is crucial for a smooth transition. By familiarizing yourself with these aspects, you'll be better prepared to integrate into Spanish society and make the most of your new life abroad.

✉ Next Step: Now that you understand the fundamentals of Spain, let's move on to Section 3: Immigration and Visas to explore the best residency options for you!

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