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30 Years Of Taking The Road Less Travelled



S U S T A I N A B L E

SPAIN

Featuring: Alicante **Córdoba** Empúries **Extremadura** Formentera
Girona Jaén **Madrid** Menorca **Mérida** Murcia **Valencia**
Andalucía **Basque Country** Catalonia **Galicia**

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Slow adventures
Castile la Mancha and its
windmills are one of many
locations linked via train
from Madrid, making Spain
perfect for a slow escape

Welcome



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Becoming wild
The Murcian philanthropist Ricardo Codorniu, who transformed the area that is now Sierra Espuña Regional Park in the 19th century, was known as 'The Apostle of Trees'

The green guide to SPAIN

Forget those images of fly-n-flop beaches, tourism in Spain is going distinctly – and brilliantly – green

Words **Eddi Fiegel**



Discover why Valencia could be the EU’s Green Capital in 2024
Valencia may be known for its paella and world-class architecture and design but the city is also at the forefront of some of Spain’s most innovative sustainable initiatives. Already shortlisted to become the EU’s Green Capital 2024, the city has a 150km network of cycle paths and 40 *ciclocalles* (cycle-priority streets), meaning you can get around town easily and sustainably. There’s also a citywide electric-car-share scheme, while in the hip El Cabanyal neighbourhood, on the La Malvarrosa beach, pilot projects range from smart lighting along the seafront (only used if a pedestrian is detected) to the use of lamp posts to recharge electric cars. Meanwhile, the city’s extensive amount of parkland – including the Turia Gardens (one of the largest urban parks in Spain) and the Viveros Gardens – help absorb carbon emissions. www.visitvalencia.com



Cycle or walk the Olive Oil Greenway in Andalusia
The idea of cycling or walking along a disused railway may not be new, but on this historic 55km route between Jaén and the Guadalquivir River you’ll pass through some of Andalusia’s most exceptional and least-visited landscapes. Originally built in the late 19th century for the Tren de Aceite (‘Oil Train’), which carried olive oil from the provinces of Jaén and neighbouring Córdoba to the port at Málaga, the line was closed in 1985 and lay derelict for years before being relaunched as a Vías Verdes, or ‘greenway’. You can now walk, cycle or mountain-bike your way past olive-grove-filled plains, ghost towns and abandoned quarries. Beyond the river, the Aceite path connects with the Vía Verde de la Subbética, which runs towards Puente Genil in Córdoba, creating a continuous 112km route. www.andalusia.org/en/routes-via-verde-del-aceite



Stay in an energy-efficient windmill in the Sierra Espuña Regional Park, Murcia
Wake up to the sounds of the pine-clad mountains at Hospedería Bajo El Cejo (pictured). This energy-efficient hotel has 12 rooms, split between a converted windmill and cottages originally built for local charcoal burners; they have beamed ceilings and overlook the distinctive limestone rock-faces of the Sierra Espuña Regional Park. The hotel’s owners, Rosa and Andrés, wanted to build somewhere that was sensitive to both the delicate ecosystem of the Sierra and to the planet in general; natural materials such as wood, ceramics and glass have been used wherever possible throughout the building. Winters are mild here, so you can enjoy breakfast on the terrace almost all year round – expect homemade fig and plum jams made from the owners’ fruit orchards. Dinners are also available on request, featuring dishes using local produce, accompanied by local wines. www.bajoelcejo.com



Take a train from Madrid to Castile la Mancha and Extremadura – and beyond
As Agatha Christie once observed: ‘To travel by train is to see nature and human beings, towns and churches and rivers, in fact, to see life.’ Exploring Spain by train, not only do you indeed see life in all its glories, but you’ll do so without harming the planet. There are many options. For instance, Expressions Holidays’ ‘Madrid and Heart of Spain by Rail’ trip takes you from the capital into the windmill-filled plains of Castile la Mancha – made famous by Don Quixote – and through to the lesser-visited historic towns and wild landscapes of Extremadura. Alternatively, if you’re not in a hurry, hop aboard Spain’s longest rail ride, the Torre de Oro (bookable through national operator RENFE). This train rolls from Barcelona, on the north Mediterranean, to Cádiz, on the south Atlantic coast, over a leisurely and scenic 12 hours. www.expressionsholidays.co.uk; www.renfe.com

Previous spread: Alamy; this spread: Alamy; Bajo El Cejo: Shutterstock



Cycle speedway
As the 20th century progressed, trains became an increasingly infrequent sight on the Oil Train line, and when they did run it was at an average speed of just 30km/h

Cycle revived rails, Andalucía

Spain is an expert at turning abandoned train lines into fantastic cycleways, and the historic Vía Verde del Aceite is arguably one of the best

Best for: Getting off the beaten track
Why do it? To see some of Andalusia’s least-visited but loveliest villages as well as extraordinary landscapes filled with olive groves as far as the eye can see
Route: Jaén; Martos; Luque

There are 2,900km of Vías Verdes across Spain, a vast network of disused railways repurposed for walkers and cyclists. And many are ideal for travellers seeking to get away from the hordes and the over-trampled tourist sites and discover a different side to the country. That’s exactly the case with the 55km-long Vía Verde del Aceite, which crosses a much less visited area of Andalusia. The route starts in the small but grand town of Jaén – capital of the eponymous province – and wiggles westwards through the glorious countryside of Spain’s largest olive-oil-producing region. For a shorter taster, head for the small town of Martos (about 45 minutes by bus or car from Jaén) and begin the route there. Within half an hour, you’ll be surrounded by what locals call a *mar de olivas* (sea of olives)

– mile after mile of gnarled olive trees, evenly spaced, some hundreds of years old. As the path winds round bend after bend, the view opens up to epic valleys. Rabbit holes dot the path like underground cave dwellings while the landscape transforms into a patchwork of yet more olive groves dotting the pale, parched-looking soil like a solitaire board. Even though you may not see a soul for hours, there is occasional evidence of human life. The original train line was built between 1882 and 1893 and you’ll pass many remnants of its functioning days, including old stations and platforms, and a series of spectacular, if potentially vertigo-inducing, iron viaducts over vertiginous ravines. The Aceite officially finishes at the Guadalquivir River, but continue for 10km along the contiguous Vía Verde de la Subbética to finish your journey at the delightfully geranium-filled hilltop village of Luque. Here, the old railway station is now an olive oil information centre, complete with a café and a shop selling, of course, olive oil products. ►



Explore Andalucía by ebike at an eco-friendly, cycle-friendly guesthouse
Casa Olea (*pictured*) sits in a lush valley in the Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park, between Córdoba and Granada. This converted farmhouse, complete with solar panels, a biomass boiler and strong green credentials, is a magical rural haven. It also makes a great cycling base, with plenty of road and offroad routes nearby. There are e-bikes, hybrids and road bikes available to rent from the hotel; if you’ve brought your own, there’s secure bike storage as well as outdoor taps for cleaning. And there is a large swimming pool with exceptional views of the surrounding hills, olive groves and forests – perfect for cooling down after a hot day’s cycling. British owners Claire and Tim can provide homecooked meals, heavy on locally sourced produce and wines, as well as their own extra-virgin olive oil, made at the local cooperative olive mill. www.casaolea.com



Visit the first winery in Spain to receive ZeroCO2 certification
When it comes to wine-producing regions in Spain, La Rioja may be the best known, but as many oenophiles are aware, other parts of the country produce superb wines too. Not least Catalonia’s Empordà region, which is home to some 400 wine growers. Many of them take a sustainable approach, including Eccocivi, whose bodega, in the shadow of the Gavarres mountains, a 30-minute drive from Girona, was the first in Spain to receive ZeroCO2 certification. Despite being a relatively new winery, only producing its first vintage in 2008, it has already gained international recognition with two of its wines: the white Can Noves Blanc 2018 and the red Can Noves Negre 2016 won silver and bronze medals respectively at the Decanter World Wine Awards in 2020. Take a guided tour to taste the wines, paired with cheeses and charcuterie. www.eccocivi.com

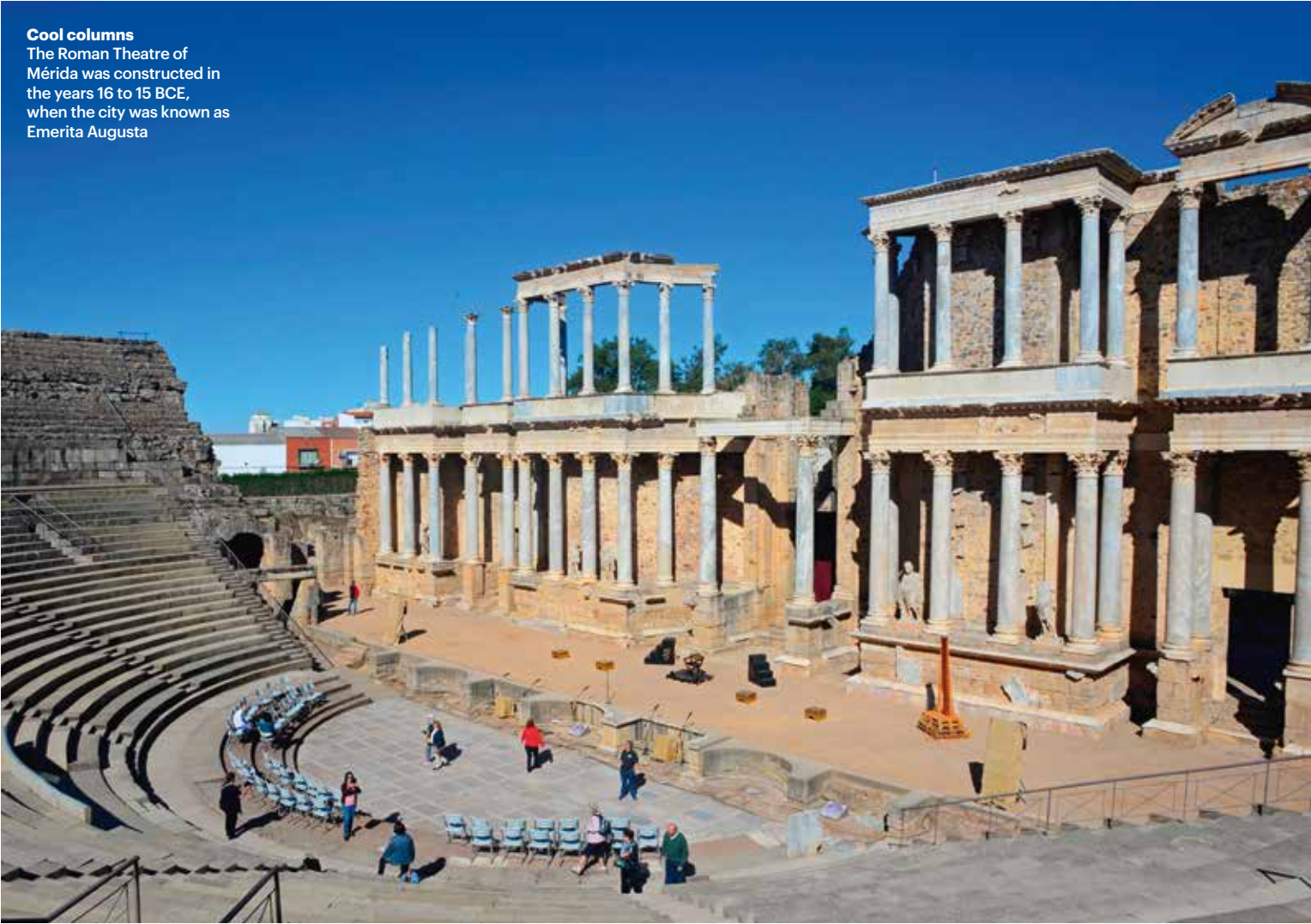


Stay at a solar-powered farmhouse in Andalucía’s Subbética hills
If you’re planning to explore Andalucía’s greenways, or if you just want to escape to a lovely rural retreat, the eco-friendly apartments of Los Castillarejos, on the edge of the hilltop village of Luque, provide the perfect antidote to city life. In what was originally an old farmhouse, laying amid a large estate filled with olive, oak, almond and hazelnut trees, there are 14 simple but contemporary apartments. These sleep up to six people and all feature kitchenettes, furniture crafted from local wood and huge picture windows looking out to the hills, mountains and olive groves of the Subbética. The heating and hot water are solar-powered, while the boiler is powered by mulched olive pips. If you’re feeling weary after a day’s activity, look no further than the large salt-water infinity pool. www.loscastillarejos.com/en



Go stargazing at an award-winning Aragónese retreat
Landlocked Aragón, in Spain’s north-east, is perhaps one of the country’s least well-known areas. Little surprise, then, that there’s a real sense of getting away from it all at Torre del Visco. This luxe boutique hotel with an award-winning farm-to-table restaurant sits in the Matarranya area of eastern Aragón. The building dates back to the 15th century, probably once belonging to the Spanish Knights Templar of the Order of Calatrava. It’s built on a hillside in the midst of a 200-acre estate that encompasses certified organic farmland, olive groves, rose gardens, forests and a lake. It has no TVs and is blissfully far from the built-up world. So much so that, thanks to the absence of light pollution and the local climate’s frequently clear weather, it is the first Relais & Châteaux hotel in Spain to be awarded UNESCO-backed Hotel Starlight certification. www.torredelvisco.com

Alamy; Marquez Juan Manuel



Cool columns
The Roman Theatre of Mérida was constructed in the years 16 to 15 BCE, when the city was known as Emerita Augusta

Ride right to the heart of Central Spain

Exploring by train means lower carbon emissions and enthralling views from the window, especially if you take an offbeat journey from the capital

Best for: The UNESCO-listed sites of Merida, Cáceres and Toledo
Why do it? You’ll see some of Spain’s most exceptional art and architecture in comfort and with lower CO2 emissions
Route: Madrid; Almagro; Merida; Cáceres; Toledo; Madrid

Travelling by train offers a winning combination of eco-friendliness and enjoyment. Especially a journey such as Expressions Holidays’ ‘Madrid and Heart of Spain by Rail’ trip, which explores lesser-visited regions and starts in the capital, considered one of the world’s most sustainable cities – Madrid has more than 3,800 green areas, and a tree-planting initiative is underway to create a vast ring of forest around the city.

Explore Madrid’s Retiro Park and more before boarding the train, which heads south across the parched-looking plains to arrive at the small city of Almagro, declared an official Historic-Artistic Site. Look out for its colonnaded Plaza

Mayor and the 17th-century Corral de Comedia open-air theatre, which is still in operation. From Almagro, continue to the UNESCO-listed town of Merida, home to some of the best-preserved Roman ruins in Spain, including the Temple of Diana, a 60-arch, 800-metre-long bridge and the towering Los Milagros Aqueduct. Next is the magnificent medieval town of Cáceres, with its well-preserved palaces, watchtowers, plazas and narrow, winding streets, dotted with storks’ nests. Don’t miss the renowned sweet pastries made at the Convent of San Pablo. The final leg of the journey ends in the hilltop town of Toledo. Often described as the ‘City of Three Cultures’, you can still see remarkable remnants of Christian, Islamic and Jewish heritage here, from the Gothic cathedral and Cristo de la Luz Mosque to the narrow lanes of Toledo’s well-preserved Jewish Quarter. ▶

SUSTAINABLE SPAIN



Explore Menorca’s coastal trails on a sustainable walking holiday

There’s more to Menorca than beautiful beaches, and a walking trip along the coastal Camí de Cavalls is an excellent way to explore the island. Pura Aventura’s ‘Menorca Coastal Trails Inn to Inn Walking Holiday’ takes in the most impressive stages of this historic footpath. It includes visits to Megalithic standing stones, wooded gorges, wetlands and lagoons, dramatic lighthouses and an artisan cheese farm in capital Mahón. You’ll also have time to enjoy the island’s lesser-visited but gorgeous northern coast. With luggage transfers, meals at small local restaurants, stays at non-chain hotels and a mix of self-guided walks and city tours with local guides included, you’ll be supporting the local economy. Pura Aventura also measures the carbon footprint of your return trip, before growing enough trees in Central America to absorb twice the carbon. www.pura-aventura.com



Find eco-hotels and sub-marine sustainability on Formentera

Formentera may be the smallest of Spain’s Balearic islands but not only does it have some of the most breathtaking beaches and countryside, it is more than holding its own when it comes to sustainability initiatives. The Save Posidonia Project aims to protect the 76 million square metres of underwater meadows filled with *Posidonia oceanica*, a marine plant that helps oxygenate and clean the ecosystem surrounding the island. Meanwhile, Etosoto is a small, beachside boutique eco-hotel and organic farm project on the edge of vineyards, wheat fields and olive groves to the east of the island. Here, you can start the day with a naturopath-designed organic breakfast before luxuriating in the natural landscape. The hotel also offers slow-food masterclasses, sessions in growing your own organic produce, naturopathy and fasting, yoga and walking activities. www.saveposidoniaproject.org; www.etosoto.com



Explore the green schemes of Madrid, one of the world’s most sustainable cities

Spain’s cities have been quick to embrace sustainability, with many of them introducing new measures to reach green targets over the coming years. Madrid in particular has gained international attention, thanks in part to the fact that it has a very high ratio of trees per person as well as huge number of green spaces. For instance, Monte de El Pardo Park, just a few miles north of the city centre, is home to one of the largest Mediterranean forests in Europe and covers an area about 50 times the size of New York’s Central Park. Since 2018 the city has introduced a designated pollution-reducing low-emissions area – Madrid Central – where certain roads are only open to pedestrians, cyclists or public transport. And the local BiciMAD ebike share scheme is extensive, with 2,500 electric bikes distributed across 208 stations. www.esmadrid.com/en/parks-gardens-madrid; www.bicimad.com



Explore the Costa Brava from one of Spain’s pioneering ‘green’ hotels

With an enviable location on one of the Costa Brava’s loveliest beaches, less than an hour’s drive from Girona, you might never guess that Hostal Spa Empúries was the first hotel in Europe to gain the internationally recognised LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certification. Sustainable materials, including chemical-free paints, have been used throughout both the renovated original building, which dates to the early 20th century, and the sleek, minimalist extensions, and much of the produce served at the renowned restaurant is sourced from the hotel’s own organic kitchen garden. With vast picture windows looking out to the beach, you could easily spend days just gazing at the view but there’s also a luxurious spa. If you’re feeling more active, you can pick up the Camino de Ronda coastal path just outside the hotel. www.hostalempuries.com



UNESCO-listed land
The Menorca Biosphere Reserve is notable for the diversity of its ecosystems, which range from caves and wetlands to lagoons, dunes, islets and impressive stretches of coast, such as the rocks at Cala Pregonda

Walk in the hoofprints of history, Menorca

Trace the Cami de Cavalls trail right around the circumference of the Balearic isle for a very different take on Mediterranean Spain

Best for: Spectacular coastal scenery and Menorcan culture
Why do it? This historic trail encircles the entire island taking in its best beaches and most inaccessible coves as well as wetlands and historic towns
Route: Mahón; S’Albufera des Grau Natural Park; Cala Pregonda

As with so much in life, the oldest things are sometimes the best. Menorca’s Cami de Cavalls, or ‘Horses’ Trail’, dates back to at least the 14th century, when it was used by mounted knights to patrol the shore, looking out for potential marauders and invaders. Centuries on, it is still one of the best ways to get a really good look at this UNESCO-listed Biosphere Reserve island. The 185km trail is split into 20 sections. For a good taster, use the appealing capital of Mahón, in the south-east, as a starting point to do stages one and two, following the distinctive red-white trail markers anti-clockwise. Savour the salty

sea air, eyes feasting on the extraordinary coastal views, and before too long you’ll reach the fishing village of Es Grau and signs for the S’Albufera des Grau Natural Park, the largest wetland in the Balearics. This diverse area of marshes, dunes, islets and salt-water lagoons is home to turtles, Balearic lizards and over 100 different bird species, including various birds of prey. Wind your way though the park to the black-and-white-striped lighthouse of Cape Favaritx, the end of stage two, which looms large above the barren boulders and cliffs like a giant barber’s pole. If you can, do the following sections too, continuing to the salt flats of Mongofre (encountered on stage three), the basilica at Cap des Port de Fornells (stage four), the dunes at Binimel là beach (stage five) and the rust-red sand of Cala Pregonda (stage six), one of Menorca’s loveliest beaches. ►

Alamy/Shutterstock



Wonder walls
Constructed between the 9th and 14th centuries, Girona's city walls remain largely intact and offer great views



Slumber amid the canopy in a treehouse in Galicia

If you’ve ever dreamed of sleeping in a treehouse (and who hasn’t?), Cabañitas del Bosque could be that dream come true. These eco-friendly, pet-friendly architect-designed cabins teeter across three locations amid the greenery of Galicia, just half an hour’s drive west of Santiago de Compostela. Each one is super-stylish and made from recycled wood, to blend into their natural surroundings. There are huge picture windows for taking in the views of chestnuts and cork oaks, rivers and lush hillsides. Wake up to the sound of birdsong and order a country breakfast of homemade bread, honey, tomatoes, freshly squeezed orange juice and other goodies to be delivered to your door in a wicker basket. Dinners, heavy on locally sourced produce, can be provided on request. The cabins have little kitchens; some also have Jacuzzis on the terrace. www.cabanitasdelbosque.com



Support a local olive oil co-operative in Andalucía’s Sierra Norte

The story of the Sierra Norte is written in its hills. This UNESCO-listed Global Geopark, 80km north of Seville, is a land of slate slopes, oak trees and olive groves, sheep-grazed pastures, pig-snuffled woods and sleepy whitewashed villages. The local produce here, including olive oil, meats and cheeses, is still made according to traditions dating back centuries. But while the Sierra Norte looks like it’s stuck in the past, increasingly both the older and younger generations are finding ways to modernise and promote their unique wares. For instance, since 2009 the local co-operative in the village of Cazalla de la Sierra has been producing not only traditional virgin olive oil but also ‘ecological’ virgin olive oil, made using the area’s distinctive yellowish, almond-flavoured olive by eco-friendly agricultural methods, and certified by the Andalusian Committee for Organic Agriculture. www.cazallaoliva.es



Prepare to be surprised by Benidorm’s eco-credentials

It might seem unlikely, but the Spanish high-rise resort that’s become a byword for the brashest kind of beach holiday is gaining a reputation for embracing sustainability. The first certified Smart Tourist Destination in the world, Benidorm has employed an extensive range of green initiatives, from smart waste management systems and innovative glass recycling schemes to an extensive network of cycle paths and accessible beach points, where there is infrastructure to help wheel-chair users access the sea. Benidorm is also a gateway to the Sierra Helada Natural Park, a refreshing marine and terrestrial park just beyond the town centre, encompassing pine woods, dive sites, caves, coves and 300m-high cliffs. Explore by kayak or follow one of the walking trails for views to the Sierra Aitana mountains and the glittering Mediterranean below. visitbenidorm.es



Live life in the slow lane at a luxury hacienda near Salamanca

Being ‘green’ doesn’t mean roughing it – as the Hacienda Zorita Wine Hotel & Organic Farm proves. This luxurious country hotel on the edge of the historic university town of Salamanca, in Castile and León, is set in a former convent on a vast estate that dates back to the 14th century – Christopher Columbus stayed here for a while in 1487. Now, the Hacienda has lavish gardens as well as an organic farm producing its own ewe’s cheese, Ibérico ham, olive oils, fruits and vegetables, all of which are served in the gourmet restaurant. The Hacienda also has its own vineyard – you can do tastings in the huge, ancient cellars – and a spa offering treatments using olive and wine-based products. Most of the rooms are in the old Casa Grande, all characterful and comfortable, with views over the Tormes River. www.haciendazorita.com/en



Biking beauty
The town of Monells is built inside an ancient castle, of which only the walls remain

Eat and drink in sustainable style, Catalonia

The spectacular city of Girona and the ancient denomination of Empordá make a tasty area for a food and wine road trip by electric car

Best for: Gothic architecture, medieval villages, slow food and organic wineries

Why do it? After the splendour of Girona, you’ll drive through green fields and vineyards as well as visiting amazingly well preserved medieval villages and organic wineries

Route: Girona; Monells; La Bisbal; Empúries

With its medieval Old Town of labyrinthine lanes, a magnificent cathedral (with the widest Gothic knave in the world) and one of the best-preserved Jewish quarters in Europe, Girona is a handsome city. It’s even gained new cult status, having been used as a location in *Game of Thrones*. But it’s also a great start-point for a delicious journey into Catalonia.

Girona has long been a favourite with foodies and oenophiles. Its streets are home to exceptional restaurants – including the three-Michelin-starred El Celler de Can Roca – and wine bars serving top-notch local wines. To taste more of the latter, hire an electric car from Girona’s

main train station and head east into the lush countryside of Empordá, where vines were first planted by the Romans. Stop for a tour at Eccocivi, Spain’s first ZeroCO2 certified winery, before heading further southeast, past waving wheat and barley fields, to the medieval village of Monells, regularly cited as one of the loveliest villages in Catalonia. Amble through its ancient, ivy-covered stone houses and vaulted arcades and luxuriate over a long lunch or coffee in the grand town square.

Next, hop south to the pottery-making town of La Bisbal. Browse the shops on the main street for glazed ceramics, from plates and tiles to vases and planters – the perfect local-sourced gift. From there, head north-east to the coast at Empúries to admire the spectacular sea views from the Camino de Ronda coastal footpath, before heading back to Girona. ▶

SUSTAINABLE SPAIN

Massive majesty
The Cathedral of Saint Mary of Girona has the widest Gothic nave in the world, with a width of 23 metres, which is the second-widest of any church after St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican





Help reduce traffic by touring Murcia's vineyards aboard the Wine Bus

Each year, large numbers of tourists head to Murcia's Costa Cálida, attracted by its beaches and warm climate. But less well known are the region's wine-making traditions, which date back to Phoenician times. With three different denominations of origin – Bullas, Jumilla and Yecla – Murcia is home to swathes of vineyards. And, as part of the region's commitment to sustainability, the region is also home to the Wine Bus service. Running on set Saturdays in spring, the Wine Bus offers guided coach tours that visit each of the three DOPs; these include vineyard tours, wine tastings and food pairings, as well as a chance to enjoy the region's scenic countryside, dotted with almond trees, olive groves, pretty villages and 15th-century castles. The idea is to minimise the number of cars on the road while promoting the area's excellent wines. www.murciaturistica.es



Explore the wild Basque Country from a wind-powered hotel

The remote, rural Urune Hotel, set on a hillside in the Urdai-bai Biosphere Reserve, about half an hour's drive east of Bilbao, is firmly committed to preserving the environment. Converted from an 18th-century farmhouse, but with a contemporary feel, the hotel features numerous eco and energy-efficient initiatives, including a wind turbine and photovoltaic panels for generating sustainable energy, taps with flow reducers, light detectors in communal areas, a wood-burning fireplace to heat the lounge, refillable pump dispensers for toiletries in the rooms and water supplied in jugs rather than plastic bottles. Only natural pesticides and chemical-free products are used for cleaning and gardening. It has also already won awards from the Basque Government for its excellent accessibility for people with disabilities. www.urunehotela.com



Walk the Costa Brava's Camí de Ronda coastal footpath

Get intimately acquainted with Catalonia's Costa Brava – or 'Wild Coast' – by walking along the Camí de Ronda. This coast-hugging path originally stretched over 200km from Portbou, near the French border, to Blanes, just north of Barcelona. It was used as a patrol route in the 19th and early 20th century by the Guardia Civil on the lookout for smugglers. Now it's a wonderful route for hikers, tracing the region's rugged shore via pine-cloaked cliffs, teal-toned horseshoe bays, furtive coves and whitewashed fishing villages that are replete with lovely little spots where you can savour grilled sardines on sea-view terraces. You can pick up the path at numerous places along the coast; a popular option is the 43km route from Sant Feliu de Guíxols to the pretty medieval village of Begur, via the outstanding lookout of Cap Gros. www.camideronda.com



Stay in a cool or cosy 500-year old cave in Guadix, Andalusia

Supporting local, independent businesses is key to sustainable tourism. Which is fun and easy to do in Guadix. For centuries the locals of this small town, about 45 minutes' drive north-east of Granada, have dug homes out of the rocks and clay in a bid to escape the intense Andalusian heat. Then, as now, this was an environmentally-friendly solution to the local climate – the cave houses stay cool in the blistering summer months yet are cosy during the Sierra Nevada's often snowy winters, with extra warmth supplied by wood-burning fires. There are around 2,500 dwellings, some dating back 500-odd years, most of which are still permanently inhabited. More than 60 are now small hotels, with others being run as restaurants or holiday rentals. Booking in for a night or more is a great way to support the town. www.andalucia.com/guadix/accommodation/cave-houses.htm

Previous spread: Alamy; this spread: Alamy



Sustainable sierra
By the end of the 19th century, the Sierra Espuña was in a bad ecological state, but in 1889 forest engineer Ricardo Codorniu began a huge reforestation programme, saving the landscape

Take a walk on the wild side, Murcia

The Sierra Espuña Natural Park is Murcia's finest ecotourism destination and a dramatic place for exploring on foot

Best for: Wonderful mountain scenery and birdwatching
Why do it? Walking the Senda de Caracol route, you'll pass woodlands and extraordinary rockfaces as well as some of the region's highest mountain peaks. Walking through the park is one of six ecotourism experiences recently launched in Sierra Espuña
Route: Alhama de Murcia; Prado Mayor; Morrón de Alhama

Summer 2022 saw six new ecotourism experiences launched in Murcia's Sierra Espuña Natural Park, covering such themes as 'Adventure', 'Among Birds', 'On Wheels', 'Flavour Routes', 'Panoramic Moments' and, simply, 'Paths'. The last is arguably the best, because this is a great place for a walk. There are 65km of trails weaving across the park. One of the top picks is the 15km-long loop of the Senda de Caracol, or the 'Snail Trail'. It begins in the tranquil Leyva Valley basin, amid tall Aleppo pines and the park's distinctive pale grey cliff-faces, before climbing a zigzagging path to the top of the plateau. Up here, some 1,500m

above sea level, the views across the plunging ravines of Gebas, the mighty rock walls and the surrounding reservoirs are breathtaking. For an even higher lookout, you can detour up a fork to the peak of the Morrón de Alhama, from where the views are even better. The return continues through the rocky highlands, down through the scrub and back to the lush forests below – keep an eye out for the endemic Espuña squirrel. En route, you might also see some of the park's idiosyncratic 'snow pits' – small, stone igloo-like constructions built in the 16th century to keep food and medicines cool in the frequently intense Murcian heat. ►



Vital statistics

Capital: Madrid

Population: 47.35 million

Languages: Spanish; plus a number of regional dialects that are spoken across the country, with Catalan, Galician and Basque among the most prominent.

Time: GMT+1 (GMT Oct–Mar)

International dialling code: +34

Visas: Not required by British nationals for stays of up to 90 days.

Money: Euro (€), currently €1.15 to the UK£.



When to go

Spain is well known for its warm, sunny climate and beach life, meaning summer is invariably its busiest period, especially on the islands.

However, it can get decidedly cool in the mountainous areas even at this time, and come winter you'll need snow tyres if you're travelling in the Pyrenees.

November–February: Low season sees some of the islands shut down, as flights cease and many hotels close for the winter season. It's trickier to visit them at this time, but the milder winter temperatures and zero crowds can make it rewarding to do so. In central Spain, temperatures have cooled to 13°C or less. Many Spanish cities light up for the festive season, and jazz festivals are common in November. January brings Kings Day (6 Jan) and street parades, while carnivals take over Madrid, Cádiz, Santiago de Compostela and many Spanish cities in February. December to April also ushers in

ski season among the snow-bound resorts of the Pyrenees and Sierra Nevada.

March–May: The shoulder months see things warm up before the tourists arrive en masse. The Semana Santa (Holy Week) – starting six days before Easter Sunday – is especially atmospheric, with numerous religious parades taking to the streets. Temperatures in the centre, south and on the islands edge up to the 20s (°C), though in the mountains to the north you'll still see plenty of snow; by May, that has largely disappeared and you'll find the Pyrenees hillsides ripe with wildflowers, making it a great time for hiking.

June–August: Peak season sees the islands and coast fill with visitors and locals seeking to escape the hot streets of the cities. By June, the Camino de Santiago trail is



packed; and come July, temperatures can be pretty fierce in the interior (regularly topping 30°C). Hotels and flights are at their most expensive in July and August. **September–October:** The autumn shoulder months are a wonderful time to visit, as the crowds thin dramatically. The warm temperatures continue throughout September, making it a great time to hit the trails and explore the parks of the region. In the vineyards of La Rioja and other areas, it is harvest season and a lively time to drop by.



Health & safety

At the time of writing, travellers were **no longer required to show proof of vaccination** for COVID-19 or a negative test. This can change, so check the FCDO (gov.uk) site before travel. In summer, the fierce heat requires regular **hydration** and the application of **high-factor UV protection**.



Getting there

There are myriad flights to all areas of Spain from the UK, with London flying direct to around **18 cities**, the majority of which range around the southern coast and the Balearic archipelago. Bear in mind that flights to some islands can often be seasonal, only operating during the peak summer season. A rather more environmentally friendly way of arriving is by train, with **connections from Paris** typically running via the Basque Country or through Barcelona.



Cost of travel

On the whole, the price of food and accommodation, particularly further inland, is **cheaper than in the UK**, and **better value** than in the resort areas of, say, the Costa del Sol – around 30% cheaper. Fuel is about the same price as in the UK.



Food & drink

Sustainable dining in Spain is everywhere. The country's warm, sunny climate leads to a **bounty of produce**, which is made the most of in establishments ranging from the **pintxos dining clubs** of the Basque Country to tiny village eateries. The recent edition of the *Spain & Portugal* Michelin guide anointed six more Green Star restaurants in Spain alone. But you don't have to pay big money to find field-to-fork dining; visits to organic **olive-oil makers**, **local producers** and **wineries** offer up a taste of the real Spain for little expense. **W**

WANDERLUST RECOMMENDS

Cádiz's three-Michelin-starred restaurant Aponiente (aponiente.com), located in a 19th-century tidal mill, received the Flor de Caña Sustainable Restaurant Award for 2022. Head chef Ángel León's use of responsible and sustainable seafood has made this a bastion of green dining in Spain.



The land of slow pleasures (clockwise from this) The coastal trails of Menorca boast more than pretty beaches – you'll also find Megalithic sites; Murcia's 14m-high Christ of Monteaigudo sits atop a medieval castle; drift the riverside houses of Girona's Jewish quarter; the Roman ruins of UNESCO-listed Mérida make up one of Spain's largest archaeological sites

Illustration: Scott Jessop. Images: Alamy, AWL Images



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