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Sample Culture Report

About this report: Cultural differences can have a significant impact on business performance, especially at the national and global levels. This report contains an example of a culture report from Spain. It provides key information about daily life, geography, government, and economic climate. Culture reports are available for all 50 states, all Canadian provinces, and over 200 countries.



Small Business Development Center
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Helping businesses start, grow, and prosper.



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Spain occupies most of the Iberian Peninsula, in Europe. It is about the same size as Thailand, or twice the size of the U.S. state of Oregon. Much of central Spain is a high plateau surrounded by low coastal plains. The famous Pyrenees Mountains are in the north. Other important mountain ranges include the Iberians, in the central part of the country, and the Sierra Nevada, in the south. The Ebro (564 miles, or 910 kilometers) is Spain's longest river.

The northern coasts enjoy a moderate climate with frequent rainfall year-round. The southern and eastern coasts have a more Mediterranean climate, with long, dry summers and mild winters. Central Spain's climate is characterized by long winters and hot summers. Spain's territory also includes the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands (a popular tourist retreat), as well as the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, both located on the northern coast of Morocco.

History

Foreign Rule, Columbus, and Reconquest

Civilization on the Iberian Peninsula dates as far back as 2000 BC, with some of the earliest settlers coming from North Africa and Western Europe. Various peoples have migrated to the area over the centuries, including Iberians, Celts, and Basques. Rome began to exercise its influence around 218 BC and controlled the entire peninsula by the first century AD. In the centuries after the Roman Empire fell, the area now known as Spain was ruled first by the Visigoths, Germanic

tribes who invaded in the fifth century, and then by the Muslim Moors, who invaded from North Africa in 711.

Christians fought the Muslim Empire for the next several centuries and gradually regained territory. Two Christian kingdoms, Castile and Aragón, emerged. The marriage of Isabel I (Queen of Castile) to Fernando II (King of Aragón) united the kingdoms in 1469. In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed under the Spanish flag to the Americas. That same year, most Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain, and the "reconquest" was completed.

The Spanish Empire

During the 16th century, Spain was one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world. Its territories in the Americas were extensive and wealthy. One of Spain's most famous rulers was Philip II (1556–98), who fought many wars in the name of the Roman Catholic Church.

Spain began to lose territory and influence in the 18th century, beginning with the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) and continuing through the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815. By 1850, Spain had lost most of its overseas possessions. It lost other territory to the United States in 1898.

End of the Monarchy and Dictatorship

Conflicts over Spain's governmental system led to civil wars and unrest during the 19th and 20th centuries. Spaniards were divided over the issue of whether the country should have a centralized government or one that recognized the country's strong regional differences. King Alfonso XIII gave up the throne in 1931 when the people called for a republic.

In 1936 a brutal civil war erupted between the Nationalists (led by General Francisco Franco) and the Republicans.

Franco's forces were victorious in 1939. Franco ruled as a dictator until his death in 1975. In 1969, Franco named Juan Carlos de Borbón y Borbón as his eventual successor. Juan Carlos became King Juan Carlos I in 1975, when he instituted a democratic constitutional monarchy and a system of autonomous regional governments.

Basque Homeland and Freedom

Spain held its first post-Franco democratic elections in 1977. The Spanish Socialist Workers Party, led by Felipe González, won elections in 1982. Spain joined the European Union (EU) in 1986. Around that time, there was hope that the Spanish government could reach an agreement with Basque separatists and dismantle the terrorist organization called ETA, or Basque Homeland and Freedom. But negotiations failed, and ETA expanded its targets to include not just Spanish security forces but also politicians and academics unsympathetic to the cause of Basque independence and even to those who were neutral toward the cause.

As ETA was killing hundreds of civilians, evidence surfaced that the Spanish Ministry of the Interior had illegally armed right-wing vigilante groups and that, in targeting ETA terrorists, the vigilantes had mistakenly killed some innocent civilians. This crisis, along with corruption scandals, led to the defeat of Felipe González's party in the 1996 elections. ETA called a cease-fire two years later, but it didn't last.

In March 2004, terrorists believed to be linked to al-Qaeda bombed Madrid train stations, killing nearly two hundred people. ETA declared a "permanent" cease-fire in March 2006 but exploded a bomb that killed two people the following December. It withdrew the cease-fire in June 2007, only to declare a new cease-fire in September 2010. In 2011, ETA complied with a call from international mediators to permanently lay down its arms.

Economic Instability

The global recession in 2008 hit Spain's economy hard, causing record-high unemployment rates that peaked at more than 26 percent in 2013. The government responded to rising public debt with budget cuts and an increased retirement age, measures which were met with workers' strikes and public protests. Spain's economic troubles were compounded in 2012, when its banking system nearly collapsed, requiring an EU bailout of 41 billion euros. The economy has slowly recovered thanks to increased austerity measures implemented by the government and rising rates of tourism and exports. The recession officially ended in late 2013, but a full recovery will take time.

In June 2014, King Juan Carlos announced that he would step down and allow his son and heir, Crown Prince Felipe, to be crowned king. King Juan Carlos helped guide Spain toward democracy, but the royal family's popularity has waned somewhat in recent years, particularly in light of financial scandals involving Princess Cristina. King Felipe stripped his sister of her title as duchess in 2015.

Recent Events and Trends

• **Immigration tensions:** In the wake of heightened unrest in North Africa, increasing numbers of migrants have tried to enter Spain and other EU countries that border the Mediterranean. In 2013, roughly a hundred migrants broke down sections of the fence surrounding Melilla, one of

Spain's two territories in North Africa, to illegally enter the EU. In early 2014, fifteen migrants died while trying to swim to Ceuto, the other Spanish territory in North Africa. The EU criticized Spanish police, who fired rubber bullets at the swimmers to deter them.

• **Political impasse ends:** In October 2016, Spain ended a 10-month period of political deadlock when Mariano Rajoy was reelected as prime minister. Rajoy's conservative Popular Party now leads a minority government, as it failed to secure a parliamentary majority (68 Socialist legislators abstained from voting). The vote came after two national elections proved inconclusive. A few thousand Spaniards protested Rajoy's reelection outside of parliament before the vote, accusing his Popular Party of corruption.

• **Catalan independence:** In September 2017, Catalonia held a referendum in which 90 percent of voters supported independence from Spain. More than nine hundred people were injured after Spanish police tried to stop the vote by raiding polling stations, beating voters, and firing rubber bullets at crowds. Catalonia has long sought greater autonomy based in part on its distinct cultural identity. In the face of Spain's recent national economic woes, the number of Catalans supporting independence has increased, since Catalonia is Spain's wealthiest region and disproportionately contributes to the national income. The Spanish government responded by imposing direct rule over Catalonia from Madrid, stripping the Catalan government of its powers, and officially annulling the vote for independence.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The Spanish are a composite of Mediterranean and Nordic ancestry but are considered a homogeneous ethnic group. An increasing portion of the population is composed of immigrants, mostly from North Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe.

Spain's population density is lower than that of most European countries. Most Spaniards live near the coast. The population is growing at a much lower rate than the global average. Low birthrates stem in part from high unemployment and steep housing costs, which make it difficult for most people to buy houses to accommodate large families.

Language

Spain's official language, Castilian Spanish, is the main language of business and government and is spoken by most of the population. Other languages, official within specific regions, include Catalan (spoken by 17 percent of the population), Galician (7 percent), and Basque (2 percent).

The Basque language is the last pre-Indo-European language remaining in Europe, and little is known about its origins. Catalan, Galician, and Castilian Spanish evolved into different regional languages from the Latin spoken in the Iberian Peninsula during the time of the Roman Empire. When Spain was reconquered from the north, Castilian Spanish became the official language.

Today, Catalan is spoken mostly in the northeast corner,

down the coast to Valencia, and on the Balearic Islands. Galician is spoken in the northwest. Basque is common in the Basque provinces, in the north (near the border with France). Spanish is the language of instruction in schools throughout the country. In Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque region, both Spanish and the regional language are used in instruction. English is the most common foreign language spoken in Spain, followed by French.

Religion

Spain has no official religion but is largely a Roman Catholic nation; roughly 70 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, though of these only a small portion actively practice their faith. Catholic traditions (baptisms, weddings, funerals, and family ties) remain an integral part of society even though many people do not consider themselves religious. Personal devotion often varies by generation; younger members of the Catholic Church are typically less devoted than older members.

Freedom of religion, granted in the 1970s, lessened the restrictions on non-Catholic faiths and opened the way for Spaniards to join other churches. Six percent of the population is involved with other (mostly Christian) religious groups. Some Muslims and Jews also reside in Spain.

General Attitudes

Spaniards, particularly those in urban areas, tend to place a high value on what others think of them. Peer and family pressure often strongly influence behavior. Personal pride and appearance—making a good impression and meeting social conventions and expectations—are considered extremely important. People commonly seek to project an impression of affluence and social position. Regional identities and devotions are strong.

The Spanish are generally sociable and helpful. Many are quite talkative and uncomfortable with silence, though silence is common between strangers in big cities. Some people enjoy giving advice, considering it their duty to correct "errors" they see in others. Outside of the workplace, Spaniards tend to interpret rules and punctuality in a relaxed way.

Personal Appearance

Style and quality of clothing are often important indicators of a person's status and respectability. Cleanliness is considered important; women and men go regularly to hairdressers, and women generally dye their hair when it starts turning gray. Much of Spanish society considers wearing gym clothes in public distasteful.

Older men usually dress conservatively, avoiding flashy or bright colors. It is more common to see younger men wearing informal styles and bright ties, with leather or woven bracelets peeking out of the sleeves of their suit jackets. Most women feel that it is important to be stylish. Women's style of dress varies with age and economic status; older women are typically more conservative in dress, and younger women tend to care more about dressing in the latest fashions.

Jewelry is common. Older, wealthier women may wear real jewels, but inexpensive jewelry is worn by women in all social classes. The vast majority of girls have their ears

pierced at birth. Tattoos and body piercings are more common among younger generations.

Spaniards usually dress up when going out in public. People with high-profile jobs tend to dress more formally than others: men wear a jacket and tie, while women might wear a variety of business styles (including pants). Children are often dressed as nicely as possible. Children in private schools usually wear uniforms; boys wear sweaters or a jacket and tie, and girls wear skirts, blouses, and sweaters or jackets. Some public schools also require uniforms.

In recent years, stylish clothing has become more affordable, and many fashionable and inexpensive brands are becoming more popular. Whereas in the past, people tended to pay for a few expensive items that they wore for several years, many Spaniards now are able to own more pieces of clothing, change styles more often, and discard cheap clothing when it is no longer fashionable.

Colorful regional costumes are sometimes worn for festivities. In Andalucía, women's regional costumes include a gypsy-style long dress with polka dots and ruffles, and men's costumes consist of a tight suit with a very short jacket and a flat hat. In Catalonia, men wear a corduroy suit with medium-length pants and a short jacket, white shirt, and bright red woolen cap; women wear a full skirt made of rich fabric, long lace gloves, and a net to cover their hair. In the Basque country, men wear a flat, black woolen cap known as a *txapela* (in Basque) or a *boina* (in Spanish) and a suit with white socks, a white shirt, and a red bandana; women wear a full skirt covered with an apron, a white shirt and tights, and their hair tied up in back.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men usually greet each other with a handshake. Good friends often add a pat on the back and, if they have not seen each other for some time, an *abrazo* (hug). People of both genders greet women with one kiss on each cheek. Similarly, when parting, women are given a slight embrace and a kiss on both cheeks.

Typical Castilian Spanish greetings include *Buenos días* (Good day), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), *Buenas noches* (Good evening), and the more casual *Hola* (Hi). Friends or young people may ask each other *¿Cómo estás?* (How are you?) or *¿Qué tal?* (How's it going?) rather than the more formal *¿Cómo está?*, which is used to show respect for older people. Other local greetings vary according to the language of the region.

Spaniards may address professionals or older persons by family name and title, such as *Señor* (Mr.), *Señora* (Mrs.), and *Señorita* (Miss). In official or formal communications, such as in government and higher education, the titles *Don* and *Doña* are used with the first name to show special respect. Close friends and young people call each other by first name.

Gestures

Spaniards stand close and frequently touch one another on the

arm while conversing. Eye contact is also important and often maintained longer than what would be comfortable in other cultures. One indicates "yes" by nodding the head up and down and "no" by moving it side to side. Spaniards often use exaggerated hand gestures and facial expressions to support what they are saying. They may also speak loudly, laugh, and smile a lot. Pointing at others is impolite, but staring at others is more common than in other countries, such as the United States. Showing emotion in public is more acceptable for women than for men. It is common for men to open doors for women.

Visiting

Spaniards enjoy visiting, often doing so for hours at a time. In some regions, socializing takes place exclusively outside the home. Where appropriate, home visits are arranged in advance, usually by telephone; arriving unannounced is impolite.

It is understood that an invitation to visit someone's home, if offered at all, may be given only as a courtesy. Since such invitations are rarely literal, ignoring them is acceptable and sometimes even expected. One may accept if the host insists. However, openly declining an invitation without a good reason is offensive.

Guests are expected to stay at least one to two hours, often longer. It is polite for guests to bring a bottle of wine, flowers, or a special dessert (often cake or ice cream), particularly if they are invited to dinner or if someone is ill. Hosts usually serve coffee or refreshments. Light snacks (cheese, chips, olives, etc.) are common before the main meal. On formal occasions, hosts might give gifts to guests, who open them immediately in the hosts' presence.

Eating

People eat at least three meals a day: *el desayuno* (breakfast), *la comida* (lunch), and *la cena* (dinner). Lunch, the most substantial meal, is eaten at about 2 p.m., while dinner is usually at 9 or 10 p.m. Some Spaniards also enjoy a *merienda* (a small snack) between 5 and 6 p.m. The *merienda* usually consists of a *bocadillo* (sandwich) or sweet bread served with coffee or hot milk. Schedules make it hard for families to eat together, but many still try to gather for lunch on weekends.

Spaniards eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. The knife (or bread in less formal situations) is used to push food onto the fork. Accepting a second serving is one of the best ways to show appreciation to the cook. In nice restaurants and in formal settings, one places the knife and fork side by side on the plate upon finishing the meal; leaving them crossed or on opposite sides of the plate indicates one wishes to eat more.

During the meal, it is polite to keep one's hands (but not elbows) above the table. If a person enters a home or room when others are eating, he or she will be invited to join in eating. The invitation usually is extended out of courtesy, and the person generally refuses politely, saying *Que aproveche* (Enjoy your meal). It is considered bad manners for adults to eat while walking down the street, though this is becoming more accepted due to the fast pace of modern life.

In bars or restaurants, many people enjoy *tapas*, a variety

of small, shared dishes (such as olives, toast with ham and cheese, or rice with seafood). One summons the server by raising a hand. The bill, which is paid to the server, usually includes a service charge, although it is also customary to leave a small tip. In smaller restaurants, customers leave their change, often amounting to less than one euro. In larger or more expensive restaurants, a tip of 5–10 percent of the bill is more common but not mandatory. Tips are expected more often in the south than in the north; northern restaurants are somewhat less formal. Compliments or friendly remarks to waiters or other workers are generally appreciated.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The family is important in Spain. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins commonly maintain close relations with the nuclear family. It is now uncommon for young couples to live with one of the spouses' parents, but parents often live nearby, especially in small towns, and help with childcare. The average family has two children.

Parents and Children

In the past, children (especially boys) were not expected to help with housework. Today, most children of both genders help their families with household chores. They usually live with their parents until they finish schooling, get a job, or—in some cases—marry. This is both a cultural preference and the result of high unemployment and a shortage of affordable housing. Parents are viewed as primarily responsible for their children's performance, but schools and social environments are also regarded as important factors in children's success.

When parents get older, most live on pensions and do not need the financial support of their children. When they are unable to take care of themselves, their children either care for them or take them to live in a home for the elderly. The state provides homes free of charge for poor elderly people. There are also expensive private homes for wealthier elderly Spaniards. A sizable number of grandparents take care of their grandchildren on a daily basis.

Gender Roles

In the past, men were expected to be strong and conform to cultural ideas of masculinity, while women were expected to be understanding and feminine. Such attitudes are still prevalent in rural societies. Traditionally, the father was the head of the home, though this is changing.

Many women living in urban areas work outside the home, and young couples usually share responsibility for housework and raising their children. Mothers are allowed sixteen weeks of paid parental leave; six of the weeks must be taken by the mother right after the birth. Fathers are allowed about two weeks, but most do not take parental leave.

Older women in Spain are more likely to have a traditional housewife role; younger women are more likely to have a better education and access to the job market, which enables them to be more independent. More than half of Spanish college students are women.

Many women are employed, but women still earn less than

men for equivalent work. While the number of women in intermediate-level positions has increased in recent years, only a few women hold executive positions in Spain's largest private companies. Government policies ensure that top positions in Spain's central government are held by a nearly equal number of men and women.

Housing

Housing in Spanish cities does not vary much, with most people living in brick or stone apartment buildings at least five or six storeys high. These buildings, which are usually bunched close together, often look out over public patios or swimming pools. Apartments tend to be small—no more than two or three bedrooms. The living room tends to be the home's focal point, the place where friends are entertained.

In and around major cities, a number of houses, even mansions, can be found. Many of these have been in the same family for generations. In most areas of Spain, siblings legally have equal claims to land owned by the family, and problems often arise when siblings try to decide whether to keep or sell the family home.

Rural dwellings vary widely from region to region, although there are two basic patterns. In Castilla-León, Aragón, and the south of Spain, people tend to live in built-up neighborhoods and commute to the land they work on. In the north, along the Atlantic coast and in parts of Cataluña, people typically live in farmhouses and work close to home.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Teenagers usually begin dating in groups around age 14 and as couples at age 18; this age varies according to social class and regional factors. Rather than call on a girl at her home, a boy often meets a girl at a prearranged site. Popular meeting places for teenagers include shopping malls, movie theaters, fast-food restaurants, cafés, and nightclubs that feature an alcohol-free period for teens in the early evening.

Engagement

Traditionally, parents had to approve a potential spouse, but this is becoming less common. The idea of a formal engagement is becoming less important. Couples normally are engaged for a long time while they work and save money to pay for an apartment.

Marriage in Society

Young people today feel less pressure to get married than their parents or grandparents did. The total number of weddings is decreasing, and many couples live together and only get married when they decide to start a family. The average age of marriage is 33 for men and 31 for women. Common-law marriages are not unusual; unmarried couples who can prove that they have lived together for at least two years (or less if they have children together) have rights and obligations similar to those of married couples. Same-sex marriages are legal.

Weddings

Civil wedding ceremonies are now more common than religious ceremonies, which (except among the growing Muslim population) generally follow Catholic customs. Both types of ceremonies are equally acceptable, but parents who

are more religious prefer that their children have religious ceremonies.

Weddings are often preceded by bachelor or bachelorette parties, where the groom- or bride-to-be dresses up and goes out with friends. At the wedding, the bride typically wears a white dress, and the groom wears a tuxedo or wedding suit. Weddings are followed by a banquet and a dance, which often lasts into the early morning hours. The couple cuts the wedding cake together with a large knife or sword, which the couple keeps as a remembrance of their wedding. Presents of cash are often given to help compensate for wedding expenses, which were traditionally paid by the bride's parents but are now more often paid by the couple themselves. Spanish newlyweds often spend a week in an exotic place for a honeymoon.

Divorce

Divorce rates are relatively high (over 60 percent), particularly in urban areas and among young couples. Divorce no longer carries a stigma.

Life Cycle

Birth

Parents today tend to have children much later in life than did previous generations. The average age of a first-time mother is around 30. Friends and relatives buy gifts for the baby before he or she is born, but events like baby showers are not common. Most births take place in hospitals, with epidural anesthesia.

In many cases, Christian parents name their children after ancestors or Catholic saints. Spanish children have two family names; the father's surname is typically followed by the mother's surname (although parents can now choose the surnames' order).

Around half of all Spanish children, including those born to families who rarely attend church, are baptized in their first year; this number is decreasing. Parents may choose godparents for their child, typically picking their siblings, close friends, or cousins. The baptismal ceremony and the meal that traditionally follows often provide the opportunity for a family reunion.

Milestones

At eight or nine years old, many Catholic Spanish children take their First Communion. Girls are dressed in white, like brides; boys' dress varies, with a sailor suit being traditional in some areas. The religious event is followed by a large family meal, which usually takes place in a restaurant. Family members give presents to the child.

Though according to Spanish law adulthood (and driving privileges) begins at 18, children usually remain dependent on their parents at that age and socially are not considered adults until they move out of their parents' home (in many cases, when they get married).

Death

When someone dies, the funeral ceremony typically takes place the next day, and burial usually occurs within two days. Family members and close friends traditionally wear black *luto* (mourning) clothes. Elderly widows or widowers in rural areas may observe *luto* for the rest of their lives, but this is becoming less common.

Families decide whether to have a civil or religious funeral ceremony. In either case, a friend or a family member usually pays tribute to the deceased. Burial and cremation are both common. On the anniversary of a death, it is not uncommon for Catholics to hold a religious ceremony to honor the deceased.

Diet

Spanish cuisine is typically Mediterranean. Like many other Europeans, Spaniards go grocery shopping every day, and fresh vegetables, meat, eggs, chicken, and fish are common foods. Most fried foods are cooked in olive oil. Each region also has its own specialties, including seafood, ham and pork sausages, lamb stew, roasted meats, *gazpacho* (cold vegetable soup), *paella* (rice with fish, seafood, and/or meat), *arròs negre* (rice with calamari ink), and *cocido* (Castilian soup).

Breakfast is generally a light meal of coffee or hot chocolate, bread and jam, or sometimes *churros* (a batter made of flour, salt, and water, deep-fried and sprinkled with sugar). Croissants and toast served with mashed tomatoes are also eaten for breakfast; these are especially common at restaurants, cafés, and bars. Lunch is a three-course meal including soup, salad, or vegetables for the first course, meat or fish for the main dish, and fresh fruit or yogurt for dessert. Smaller meals, such as soup and a *tortilla española* (omelet with potatoes and onions), are common for dinner. Fresh bread, purchased daily from the *panadería* (bread shop), is eaten with every meal. Adults enjoy coffee, wine, and mineral water, while children drink mineral water or soft drinks.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer (*fútbol*) is the most popular spectator sport in Spain. Fans often crowd homes and local bars to watch important matches. Other popular spectator sports include basketball and car or motorcycle racing.

Men are more likely than women to play soccer. Both men and women enjoy swimming, biking, and hiking. Hunting, skiing, and fishing are favorite activities in some areas. Pádel, a tennis-like sport made famous by former president José María Aznar, is played by four people with small, light racquets and tennis balls on a small court (similar to a racquetball court).

Bullfighting (*corrida de toros*) is usually considered more an art than a sport, though it remains popular among older generations in central and southern Spain. Bullfighting is less popular elsewhere in Spain, and some regions have even outlawed its practice.

Children in some regions play sports at primary school and compete in leagues against teams from other schools. Soccer is the most popular children's sport, followed by basketball. Only larger secondary schools can support team sports, so students interested in participating in sports (soccer, tennis, basketball, swimming, etc.) often do so outside of school. Children play traditional ball games, tops, cards, and tic-tac-toe, as well as video games.

Leisure

Going to movies and surfing the internet are popular pastimes. Spaniards like to watch the news, soccer games, and

soap operas on television. *Telebasura* (literally, "trash TV"), television programming that focuses on celebrity gossip, is increasing in popularity. People also enjoy listening to the radio, reading, and cooking.

Spaniards often spend time renovating and decorating their homes and gardening. Another common activity is taking walks, particularly along the seashore, in parks, or on main streets, with people often stopping to greet acquaintances. Bingo parlors and lotteries are popular. Elderly men usually have more leisure time than elderly women; they like to play dominoes, cards, or other games in bars.

Vacation

Spaniards typically vacation during spring break and for three to four weeks in July or August. Many people travel abroad for at least part of the time. Those living in central Spain may go to the beaches or mountains to escape the heat. People living in large cities often spend weekends and holidays at a summer home in the countryside or in their extended family's village, where their parents or grandparents live.

The Arts

Music and dance play an important role in the lives of Spaniards. Some common instruments in Spanish music include guitars, *castañuelas* (castanets), tambourines, and *gaitas* (bagpipes). Each region has its own folk dance, music, and dress. Probably originating with the Roma (Gypsies) in southern Spain, flamenco dance is world famous. Many Spaniards enjoy contemporary music and dance as well.

The Spanish appreciate the performing arts and are proud of their international achievements. World-famous opera tenors Plácido Domingo and José Carreras are Spaniards. The visual arts boast such world-renowned painters as Velázquez, Goya, Picasso, and Dalí.

Spain is also rich in folktales and legends, one of which is the story of Don Juan. For hundreds of years, the story has been represented in poetry, plays, movies, and music. The Spanish love Cervantes's novel *Don Quixote* and the films of directors such as Pedro Almodovar.

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), the Day of the Three Kings (6 January), Holy Week and Easter, Labor Day (1 May), National Day (12 October), All Saints' Day (1 November), Constitution Day (6 December), the feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December), and Christmas (25 December).

Easter Celebrations

Carnaval, a week full of parties, costumes, and parades, is celebrated in February or March and is more popular in southern Spain and the Canary Islands. During the Holy Week leading up to Easter, people dressed in robes and pointed hoods parade in groups called *cofradías* (Catholic religious societies) while carrying heavy *pasos* (large, elaborate floats adorned with religious images and sculptures).

On Easter Sunday, practicing Catholics attend church services, usually while wearing new clothes. In some regions, people eat *mona*, an elaborate chocolate cake or sculpture featuring eggs, chickens, rabbits, or popular figures such as

soccer players.

Christmas Season

Many Spanish families display a nativity scene and a Christmas tree during the Christmas season. On Christmas Eve, Spanish families get together and have a special dinner; traditional dishes vary according to the region. Practicing Catholics go to the *Misa del Gallo* (Rooster's Mass) at midnight. Families also have a big lunch together on Christmas Day. Most families open presents at Christmas so that children can play with their gifts during their school holidays.

The Day of the Three Kings (6 January) is one of the most popular Christmastime celebrations. On the night of the 5th, children put out milk and cookies for the Three Kings and leave their shoes near the window or under the Christmas tree. In urban areas, families then watch a large parade featuring the Three Kings, which takes place after sunset; in some regions, paper lamps are carried to the parade. Children return home or wake up the next morning to find their shoes filled with presents from the Three Kings. On the morning of the Day of the Three Kings, families gather to have a special breakfast that includes *roscón de reyes* (kings' cake)—a round pastry filled with whipped cream or custard (often vanilla). A small trinket and a bean are hidden inside the filling; according to tradition, the person who gets the bean has to pay for the cake, and the one who finds the trinket is called the king of the day.

New Year's Eve

On New Year's Eve, most Spaniards have a dinner with friends and relatives that lasts until late in the evening. They wait for midnight and watch New Year's television programming to see the clock in Puerta del Sol (a major plaza in Madrid) strike 12; with each stroke, each person eats a grape. After eating 12 grapes, people make a toast with champagne and wish each other a happy New Year. Dancing afterward may last all night.

Other Holidays

Each city and region has its own special *fiesta* (festival), usually in honor of a patron saint. Most are held in the summer. People eagerly await these *fiestas*, planning them well in advance. Activities include processions, fireworks, bullfights, amusement-park attractions, theater, music, traditional dances, and the wearing of regional costumes.

In Valencia, for example, *Las Fallas* (the fires) is a traditional festival celebrating Saint Joseph, whose day takes place in March. This festival consists of burning elaborate and expensive cardboard, wood, or paper-mâché sculptures and watching firework displays.

Saint George's Day (23 April) is popular in Catalonia. On this day, people buy their loved ones books and red roses from vendors in the streets.

In July, people in Pamplona celebrate the festival of San Fermin with a seven-day festival followed by the famous Running of the Bulls. Participants run with the bulls from the corral through the city streets to the bullfighting arena and wear white clothing with red handkerchiefs tied around their necks and red belts.

In the Valencia region, the people of Buñol hold the festival of La Tomatina, which takes place at the end of

August. Participants hold the biggest tomato fight in the world.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

Spain is a parliamentary monarchy. Spain's king is head of state, but the president is head of government. The president is usually the leader of the majority party or coalition. Spain's bicameral legislature (General Courts, or *Las Cortes Generales*) consists of a 266-seat Senate and a 350-seat Congress of Deputies, the latter having the greater power. Elections are scheduled every four years but can be held earlier.

The judiciary system in Spain is governed by the General Council of Judicial Power. The country's highest court is the Supreme Court of Justice. Another important court, the Constitutional Court, monitors compliance with the constitution.

Spain is divided into 17 semi-autonomous communities (regions). Each region has its own rights, elected officials, and justice system. Regional governments will also eventually have full responsibility for social programs like health care and education. The constitution recognizes the Catalan, Galician, and Basque nationalities as having distinct heritages.

Political Landscape

The primary political parties are the center-right Popular Party and the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers Party. Spain is a diverse country, and different regions have varying levels of self-government. Some regions, like Catalonia, have peacefully gained greater autonomy, although many Catalans continue to call for full independence because they consider themselves to be culturally distinct from Spaniards. In contrast, ETA separatists in the northern Basque region often resorted to violence in their efforts to secede from Spain; they finally disbanded in 2012.

The 2008 economic recession damaged Spain's economy, and like many European countries, Spain resorted to austerity measures to get out of debt. The slash in public funding, coupled with alarmingly high unemployment rates, led to mass public protests against the government. A movement called *Indignados* (the indignant ones) has called for political transparency, accountability, and more jobs. The Catholic Church and labor unions also influence Spanish politics.

Government and the People

The voting age is 18. Voter turnout in parliamentary elections usually runs between 65 and 80 percent. Spain is considered one of the freest countries in the world, although freedom of the press has slightly declined in recent years. Corruption has also become increasingly obvious in the highest circles; members of the royal family, including Princess Cristina, face investigations into corruption charges.

Economy

Major industries in Spain include textiles and apparel, food, metals, chemicals, automobiles, and machine tools. Although

industry is vital to the economy, the services sector now employs over two-thirds of the labor force. Tourism is increasingly important to economic development, especially in coastal regions. Tourists enjoy visiting Spain for its climate; it is a popular destination for many other Europeans.

Agriculture employs less than 5 percent of the labor force, but the country is a world leader in the production of wine and olive oil. Farm and ranch products include grains, citrus fruits, wine grapes, vegetables, and animals. The country's natural resources include coal, iron ore, uranium, mercury, gypsum, zinc, copper, and potash. Trade and investment in Latin America are also expanding Spain's economy.

Economic conditions improved substantially after Spain joined the European Union (EU) in 1986. Government austerity measures adopted since 1996 enabled Spain to qualify for the European Monetary Union, which was launched in January 1999. In 2002, the nation's currency switched from the *peseta* to the euro (EUR). Economic growth brought down Spain's unemployment rate—which was still one of the highest in the EU—so most families had a decent income.

However, the economy as a whole slowed as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis; housing sales and construction declined, and the unemployment rate rose to more than a quarter of the population by 2013. Spaniards under the age of 25 were particularly hard hit. A group of four Spanish banks received a bailout loan in late 2012 worth US\$28 billion in order to reduce the strain on Spain's banking industry. Spain's economy began to recover in 2013 and has continued to improve, though unemployment remains over 20 percent.

Transportation and Communications

Efficient air and rail service are available throughout the country. Spain has several airlines. Trains connect most cities; a high-speed train (AVE, short for *alta velocidad*, or "high speed") connects several of Spain's major cities. Private bus companies serve rural areas. Buses are also common in large cities, but most Spaniards prefer to use private vehicles. Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Valencia have subway systems.

The telecommunications system is modern. Most Spaniards use cellular phones regularly. There are public and commercial national TV networks, more than a dozen regional stations (backed by regional governments), and other local stations. Most newspapers are owned by large media groups. The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, which is generally respected.

Education

Structure and Access

School is compulsory for students between the ages of six and sixteen, the legal age for starting work. In most areas, children begin public or private preschool at age three. The school system includes primary school (ages 6–12) and secondary school (ages 12–18). Public schools are essentially free, though parents usually must pay for books, meals, and extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, dancing, and art.

Most students go to public schools, but private schools,

many operated by the Roman Catholic Church or by private organizations, are also common. Private schooling is more common among middle- and higher-income families. *Escuelas concertadas*, private schools that are partly financed by autonomous regional governments, are very popular because their tuition fees are lower than in strictly private schools. Literacy is nearly universal.

School Life

Students take classes in mathematics, history, natural sciences, social sciences, citizenship, and physical education. Castilian Spanish is taught everywhere in Spain, and students are also instructed in their region's official languages (Catalan in Catalonia, Basque in the Basque country, and Galician in Galicia). English is compulsory at all levels of education, and many schools teach a bilingual Spanish-English curriculum. In secondary school, students choose which other foreign languages, such as French and German, they will study.

Schools are generally well equipped with computers, internet access, science labs, and libraries. Students in secondary school typically spend a few hours a day doing homework. Cheating is not uncommon but has consequences (such as a failing grade) if discovered by a teacher.

Higher Education

Most students attend school until they are 18. Secondary schools offer either a general education, which prepares students for university studies, or vocational training at a school of professional education. Vocational training is becoming a more popular option; students must take a test to attend, but nearly all applicants are admitted.

To be admitted to a university, students must pass an entrance exam. Their score determines not only whether they will gain admission to the school but also which programs they might pursue—those in higher demand (such as medicine, media studies, and engineering) require higher scores. Most Spanish universities are public, and tuition costs are generally low. Universities can be found in all major Spanish cities.

Health

The Spanish enjoy a good system of medical care that is coordinated by the government; private doctors are also available. Spaniards generally enjoy good health, although increasing levels of smoking and drug and alcohol abuse in youth may affect life expectancy in the future. About one-fourth of adult Spaniards are smokers. Spain has a higher than average rate of AIDS compared to other European countries.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

Capital	Madrid
Population	48,958,159 (rank=28)
Area (sq. mi.)	195,124 (rank=51)
Area (sq. km.)	505,370
Human Development Index	27 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	15 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$36,500
Adult Literacy	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant Mortality	3 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	81 (male); 86 (female)
Currency	Euro

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