



A rich cultural heritage that spans widely differing regions means that Spain can offer language students a range of experiences. BETHAN NORRIS investigates some of this country's most enduring attractions.

The increasing importance of Spanish as an international language is fueling Spain's burgeoning language teaching industry and, according to schools in the country, Spain offers students an ideal balance between work and relaxation.

"Geographically, Spain's diversity is immense. Culturally, it is one of the most interesting countries in Europe. And we have one of the best climates, so it is the perfect destination to combine studies and pleasure," claims Cristina Sáinz from Gadir, Escuela Internacional de Español, in Cádiz.

Fabienne Meric, from Instituto de Idiomas Geos Marbella, believes that Spain's unique culture is a particular draw for their students. "For most students, the Spanish way of life is very different from their own culture which means it is a very enriching experience," she adds.

Bordered by France and Portugal and surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea on

one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, Spain covers a vast area and encompasses a people that have been shaped by cultural influences from a number of different sources. The whole country is divided into 17 autonomous regions, with very different local environments and traditions.

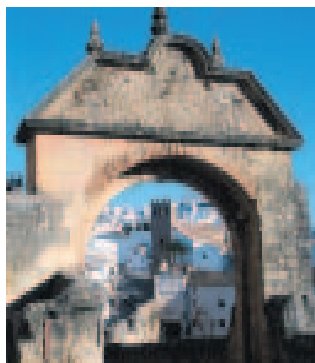


that it was occupied by the Moors of Africa for 800 years," he says. "The region has a distinctive architecture, dance, culture and cuisine that is mysterious and different from the rest of Spain."

Málaga is known for its beaches and holiday resort-style atmosphere, although Burger is quick to point out that the majority of tourists are Spanish, thereby preserving Málaga's "authentic Spanish flavour". He adds, "Being Mediterranean, the local people live life outdoors a lot. Life takes place on the beach and in the streets and continues through the night."

In the far north of the country, on the border of the Pyrenees, is the region of Catalonia where the distinctive culture of the local people is so strong that they even have their own language. Anja Finkel from Don Quijote, which has schools in eight different locations in Spain, says that students in Barcelona, the capital city of Catalonia, are taught Castilian Spanish, which is the official Spanish language, but all locals can

The southernmost tip of Spain is separated from Morocco by a thin strip of sea called the Strait of Gibraltar and the whole of the southern region – known as Andalusia – contains reminders of its proximity to the African continent. Bob Burger, from Malaga Instituto in Málaga, believes that this puts a distinctive twist on local life. "Andalusia is very different from the rest of Spain due to the fact



Felipe V Gate, Andalusia
Constructed in 1742, the Felipe V Gate, also known as Puerta Romana, is situated in Ronda, one of Andalusia's most picturesque towns, which boasts 18th century and medieval architecture

Plaza de Espana, Seville (main picture)

speak both Castilian Spanish and the local language of Catalan.

The city provides easy access to Mediterranean beaches and skiing in the Pyrenees while the most important annual event on the local calendar is the *Festa de la Mercé*, a celebration occurring at the end of September to honour Barcelona's patron saint. During this time, there are many rock and pop concerts, theatre productions on the streets and various sporting activities that everyone can get involved in.

Finkel says that many students arrive with a very general idea of Spain that revolves around a typical Mediterranean image that may be true of only a small part of the country. "[Students] do not take into consideration that [Spain] is more than just 'playa, sol, mar' – beach, sun, sea," she says. "[For example] the closest beach for Salamanca is in Portugal and [the city] is on an altitude with a typical continental climate and therefore can become very cold in winter – minus degrees! [This] is something students don't have in mind for Spain."

The town of Toro lies in the province of Zamora in central Spain and also offers something different from the typical seaside Spanish resort town. The town is situated in the heart of Spain's wine region and there are many opportunities for students to sample the local produce. Thomas Simoncini, from Tolingua Spanish School in Toro, says that the school runs trips once a week to a local winery where the wine-making process is explained. True wine buffs can also enrol on the school's two-week Spanish and wine



Alicante coastline

Spain's Costa Blanca coastline is said to be the best coastline on the Mediterranean, offering access to remote beaches as well as tourism facilities in Alicante and the surrounding towns and villages

course, where a theoretical and practical knowledge of wine can be learned together with the Spanish language.

Another local excursion involves visiting a traditional potter, which, according to Simoncini is "like going back in time". He says, "[The potter] is the fifth generation of his

family who works with traditional methods – no electricity – and uses local clay, producing pottery from the last century."

However, Simoncini admits that, for many students, a favourite pastime involves "sitting in one of the many wine bars or

Agent viewpoint



"In Spain, [students enjoy] the cultural sights, the beautiful sea, the open and warm mentality of the people, the big variety of different regions and the

activities they can do. Every area of Spain is popular. Many [students] prefer the lively atmosphere of Andalusia, others like the cultural variety that Madrid provides. Barcelona and Salamanca are very popular with young people and the coast – Málaga, Nerja as well as Tenerife – is a great place for students looking for a

combination of Spanish, sun and beaches."

Julia Richter, Language Courses Abroad, Germany



"Students love the main cities with their cathedrals and castles. They also like the nightlife and different cultural experience that Spain offers. Spain has a number of distinct areas and each city has its own character. Going out for tapas in the evenings is one of the favourite activities of

street cafés in the main street and main square in the afternoon, evening or at night, drinking local wine and eating tapas, chatting to locals or observing the bustling life”, and this is a common story throughout Spain.

Cristina Navarro, Director of Galileo Galilei Escuela de Español in Valencia, says that it does not take long for students to familiarise themselves with the local opportunities for entertainment. “After a few days, students know very well how to amuse themselves at night in Valencia. They either

“Last Christmas, some of our Spanish students dressed up as Santa Claus and one of our students from Japan wanted to join them. Unfortunately, there were no more fancy dress costumes of Santa Claus and the only one left was a tomato. The Spanish students told him that tomatoes are very typical in Christmas time in Spain so he dressed up and went round the campus with the other students, without knowing that it was a little lie!”

Cristina Navarro, Galileo Galilei Escuela de Español, Valencia

go to the beach area or to the old town where most of the pubs are located,” she says.

Valencia, halfway down Spain’s Mediterranean coast, has a reputation as a dynamic and lively city, and students at the school have an advantage when it comes to mingling with the local people, as the school buildings are located inside the campus of

the University Politecnic of Valencia. This means that they are “automatically involved in the university life”, according to Navarro. Language students can also live amongst Spanish students in the student residence, which has 400 rooms.

In the historic city of Salamanca in the Castilla Leon region, Finkel adds that it is easy for students to mix with local people without having to leave their building. “[We have] a café within the school building where locals also go. [Students] easily mix with Spaniards – which of course is perfect!” □



Alcazar Fortress, Toledo

The impressive Alcazar, situated on the highest point of the mountains near Toledo, served as the citadel for Romans and Moors and was used by Franco’s troops in the Spanish civil war in 1936

students. Andalusia seems to have the edge over other parts of the country. I think the combination of history, Moorish culture, the climate and the beaches all work together to make it a very desirable destination.”

Dana Garrison, IELTS, USA

“Students go to Spain because of the language, climate, [and the fact that] long-term students in Spain tend to find afternoon jobs in hotels and restaurants. There’s also the fact that it’s rather



cheap to fly from Scandinavia to Spain. [During the day] they mingle with the other students, go to the beach and visit town. [In the evenings they] visit bars and discos. Coastal towns [are most popular with our students]. Alicante is the most popular because the prices are lower than Málaga.”

Marion Andersen, Exis, Denmark

“Spain is one of the most liked destinations with our students. Andalusia, particularly Granada and



Seville, [are among] the favourites. Everybody who enjoys the vitality and cheerful way of life of the Andalusian population, and the amazing nightlife, falls in love with Andalusia. [And] Catalonia’s capital, Barcelona, is currently the ‘en vogue’ destination among German students. The no-frills airline Germanwings and Air Berlin allow for a relatively cheap journey.”

Tanja Dratwinski, Dialog-Sprachkurse International, Germany