

## NORTHERN SPAIN

## 'World Heritage Cities'

12 days

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**Day 1 Arrival in Santiago de Compostela**

Welcome to Spain! Arrival in Santiago de Compostela, one of Spain's most beautiful cities, built of golden granite and declared a national monument in its entirety. It's a wonderful place to walk with its arcades and flagstone streets.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**Day 2 Santiago de Compostela: City Tour**

Santiago de Compostela unveils its treasures as we explore this UNESCO World Heritage city, where pilgrimage traditions have shaped architecture and culture for over a thousand years.

Our walking tour begins in magnificent Obradoiro Square, where the city's most notable landmarks converge in harmonious splendour. The Archbishop's residence preserves 12th-century chambers offering glimpses into medieval ecclesiastical power, while the Town Hall (formerly Raxoy Palace) displays classical elegance. San Jerónimo College showcases Roman architectural influences, creating an ensemble representing Santiago's evolution through centuries.

The centrepiece remains Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, adorned with numerous statues of St. James depicted as a pilgrim bearing staff, broad-brimmed hat, and scallop-shell badge—symbols recognised throughout Christian Europe. We explore the Cathedral Museum and Cloister, discovering intricate details revealing the sacred art's development over centuries.

We visit the Platerías Gate, the only preserved Romanesque entrance, its sculptures narrating biblical stories in stone. The highlight involves our guided tour of the Cathedral roofs, accessed through Gelmírez Palace beside the Cathedral. We pass through the palace interior, ascend past the Cathedral gallery above the Gloria doorway, and emerge onto the cathedral roof.

From this elevated vantage point, panoramic views reveal Santiago's historic centre spreading below us, allowing appreciation of the city's careful urban planning and architectural harmony that has attracted pilgrims since medieval times.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 3 Santiago de Compostela - Leon**

Today we travel by road to León, a city where Roman foundations support Gothic magnificence and architectural treasures span millennia.

Upon arrival, we visit San Isidoro Collegiate Church, western Europe's finest Romanesque architecture example serving as the final resting place for 23 kings and queens. The church's historical significance and beautiful design reflect León's importance during medieval Iberia's Christian kingdoms.

Next, we explore León's stunning 13th-century cathedral, built in Gothic style reminiscent of French cathedrals, particularly Chartres. The cathedral's most striking feature comprises over 100 vibrant stained-glass panels filtering light through jewel-toned windows, creating an interior atmosphere of transcendent beauty unmatched in Spanish Gothic architecture.

Continuing through the old quarter, substantial portions of medieval walls remain visible alongside remnants of the original Roman fortifications. We also visit Casa de Botines, a neo-Gothic building designed by Antoni Gaudí, showcasing his unique architectural vision beyond Barcelona. This charming area provides glimpses into León's layered history, from Roman military camp through medieval Christian kingdom to modern cultural centre.

León's strategic position on pilgrimage routes to Santiago ensured its prosperity and cultural development, evident in the remarkable monuments we encounter today.

Overnight in Leon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Leon - Cave of Altamira - Bilbao

Traveling toward Bilbao, we pause at the renowned Cave of Altamira, where humanity's artistic heritage reaches back 12,000 years through vivid prehistoric paintings that astounded the archaeological world.

Discovered in the 1870s, these nearly perfectly preserved paintings of wild animals and human handprints prompted Pablo Picasso to declare: "After Altamira, everything is decadence." The caves' importance to understanding Paleolithic art cannot be overstated—these masterpieces represent some of humanity's earliest artistic expression, created when ice still covered much of Europe.

We visit the museum and precise replica showcasing these archaeological treasures, as the actual cave remains closed for conservation. The reproduction allows intimate viewing of bison, horses, and boar painted with remarkable skill using natural pigments and cave contours to create three-dimensional effects.

Continuing deeper into Basque country, we approach Bilbao, tucked within the lush coastal mountains of Euskadi. Known as "Bilbo" in Basque, locals affectionately call their city "botxo"—meaning hole or orifice—referencing its position within protective valleys. Originally scattered fishing hamlets clustering on the left bank, the settlement sought protection from Norman raiders and other Atlantic pirates.

This industrial port has transformed dramatically in recent decades, evolving from heavy manufacturing centre to cultural destination while maintaining its distinctive Basque character and fierce independence.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Bilbao: The Guggenheim

Medieval Bilbao emerges as we explore the Old Town's cobbled streets, charming corners, and intimate squares, tracing development through centuries from fishing village to industrial powerhouse to cultural destination.

The day's masterpiece awaits at the Guggenheim Museum, the 31,329-square-metre (349,000 square feet) architectural marvel anchoring Bilbao's \$1.5 billion urban redevelopment. Frank Gehry's design features a soaring 50-metre (165-foot) atrium, exceeding Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim rotunda in New York by more than half again.

The museum showcases American and European 20th-century art through rotating exhibitions featuring renowned artists including Kandinsky, Mondrian, Picasso, Ernst, Pollock, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and Serra. Gehry's titanium-clad exterior curves and angles create different perspectives from every viewpoint, earning acclaim as architectural sculpture itself.

This afternoon offers choices for independent exploration: remaining at the Guggenheim for extended viewing, visiting the Basque Museum celebrating regional culture, exploring the Fine Arts Museum's classical collections, enjoying a guided boat tour along the Nervión estuary revealing Bilbao's industrial heritage, or taking a bus excursion to elegant San Sebastian (approximately 1 hour 20 minutes each way). Your Tour Leader provides guidance for planning your preferred afternoon experience.

The Guggenheim's "Bilbao Effect" demonstrates architecture's power to transform cities, creating cultural magnetism that attracts global visitors while revitalising urban economies and civic pride.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Bilbao - Fly to Barcelona: City Tour

Flying to Barcelona, we meet our local guide for a panoramic exploration of this vibrant Mediterranean metropolis where Catalan culture and architectural innovation create an irresistible urban tapestry.

Our drive reveals Barcelona's diverse atmosphere and extraordinary architecture defining this dynamic city. We traverse Plaza España, the grand square surrounded by notable buildings and colourful mosaic fountains that epitomise Barcelona's artistic heritage.

Passing the 1992 Olympic Games sites recalls the transformative moment when Barcelona showcased itself globally, spurring urban renewal that continues today. From Montjuïc viewpoint, panoramic vistas encompass Barcelona's skyline, the sparkling Mediterranean, and Gaudí's iconic Sagrada Família rising like a stone forest above the urban grid.

We continue along Gran Via, among Barcelona's busiest thoroughfares lined with shops, restaurants, and historic buildings reflecting the city's commercial vitality. Our exploration culminates at Park Güell, Antoni Gaudí's UNESCO World Heritage Site where whimsical architectural elements merge with Mediterranean landscape.

Wandering through the park's colourful mosaic pathways, we encounter the famous ceramic lizard sculpture and admire Gaudí's unique architectural vision that transforms public space into artistic wonderland. The undulating benches, organic shapes, and imaginative use of broken ceramic create a fantasy environment overlooking Barcelona's urban expanse.

This introduction reveals Barcelona's character as a city where medieval foundations support modernist innovation, creating unique Catalan identity.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 Barcelona: City Tour

Barcelona's historic heart reveals itself through the atmospheric Barrio Gótico, where Roman foundations support Gothic magnificence creating one of Europe's best-preserved medieval quarters.

Wandering narrow, winding streets, we marvel at Gothic architecture reaching toward Mediterranean skies while discovering iconic landmarks including Barcelona Cathedral and the Royal Palace. These medieval structures create an intimate urban environment where history remains tangible through weathered stone and shadowed alleyways.

We then transfer to Antoni Gaudí's masterpiece, the Sagrada Família, Barcelona's most recognisable landmark and an architectural phenomenon without precedent. Our guided tour reveals this extraordinary basilica's intricate design, revolutionary engineering, and spiritual symbolism. Soaring spires twist skyward like organic growths while stained-glass windows cast rainbow patterns across forest-like columns inspired by nature's geometry.

Learning about Gaudí's visionary approach to sacred architecture, we understand how this project, begun in 1882, continues evolving through contemporary craftspeople committed to completing his extraordinary vision. The nearby Museu Picasso adds another artistic dimension, showcasing the formative works of Spain's most celebrated modern artist.

The afternoon allows independent exploration of Barcelona's numerous attractions. Art enthusiasts may visit the National Art Museum of Catalonia, containing vast collections of Catalan art from medieval to contemporary periods, or the Joan Miró Foundation celebrating one of Spain's most innovative 20th-century artists.

Alternatively, enjoy leisurely time in Parc de la Ciutadella or stroll along La Rambla, Barcelona's famous street pulsing with shops, cafes, and street performers.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Barcelona: Montserrat & Leisure Time

Montserrat beckons from Barcelona's mountainous horizon, its jagged silhouette explaining the name meaning "serrated mountain." This massive rock fortress, dotted with paths, stairs, caves, chapels, and hermitages, has inspired spiritual pilgrimage for over a millennium.

Driving through Montserrat Natural Park, we ascend to the Sanctuary positioned 725 metres (2,380 feet) above sea level. Clear days reveal breathtaking panoramas of the Pyrenees mountains creating Catalonia's spectacular backdrop.

At the Sanctuary, we visit the Royal Basilica and Chapel of Our Lady of Montserrat housing the famous 12th-century Romanesque carved wooden statue of La Moreneta (the Black Virgin). This celebrated figure serves as Catalonia's patron saint, her presence strongly felt and revered throughout the region. The remarkable statue has transformed the Royal Basilica into one of Spain's most important pilgrimage destinations, attracting devotees from across the Catholic world.

Our tour includes entrance to an fascinating audiovisual exhibition titled "Montserrat Portes Endins" (Montserrat from Within), providing historical context for this sacred site's development. We also enjoy tastings of four locally produced liqueurs, experiencing traditional Benedictine monastery craftsmanship that continues centuries-old traditions.

Returning to Barcelona with leisure time, we appreciate the contrast between mountain spirituality and urban sophistication. Whether exploring additional museums, strolling through neighbourhoods, or simply enjoying Mediterranean cafe culture, Barcelona offers endless possibilities for personal discovery.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Barcelona - Train to Madrid: Royal Palace

Spain's high-speed rail network whisks us to Madrid in approximately three hours, showcasing the comfortable efficiency connecting Iberia's major cities.

This afternoon, we explore the magnificent Royal Palace, official residence of Spanish royalty though now used exclusively for state ceremonies. Known in Spanish as Palacio Real, this monumental building arose during the 18th and 19th centuries after fire destroyed the former medieval Alcázar in 1794.

Our tour reveals the palace's principal staircase, throne room, gala dining room, silver museum, and principal courtyard—all decorated according to Charles III's lavish tastes. The extraordinary rooms showcase Spanish royal collections accumulated over centuries, including tapestries, paintings, furniture, and decorative arts representing European craftsmanship's finest achievements.

The palace's grandiose scale reflects Spanish imperial ambitions during the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties, when wealth from American colonies funded magnificent architectural projects. Over 3,400 rooms spread across 135,000 square metres make this among Europe's largest royal residences.

Madrid's energy as Spain's political and cultural capital becomes immediately apparent through broad boulevards, grand squares, and the vibrant street life that continues well into evening hours following Spanish custom.

\* Please note that the palace is periodically closed without notice due to official functions. We apologize if this activity is not possible.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 Madrid & The Prado

Madrid reveals its imperial grandeur through a panoramic tour culminating at the world-renowned Prado Museum, where Spanish artistic genius spans five centuries.

Our route to the museum passes Plaza España and the Cervantes Monument, honouring Spain's greatest literary figure whose Don Quixote captured the Spanish spirit of impossible dreams pursued with noble determination.

Originally opened in 1819, the Prado houses the finest works collected by Spanish royalty alongside Spanish paintings gathered from diverse sources over two centuries. This represents one of the world's most important art repositories, including vast collections of Italian masterpieces reflecting Spain's historical connections to the Italian peninsula.

For our purposes, however, we concentrate on Spanish masters whose works define national artistic identity: Velázquez's court portraits revealing imperial Spain's complexity, Goya's paintings spanning from royal commissions to haunting war scenes, Ribera's dramatic chiaroscuro, El Greco's mystical elongated figures, and Zurbarán's contemplative religious scenes.

After our guided tour, we stroll up Gran Vía into Madrid's old quarter, experiencing the capital's vibrant street life firsthand. Free time for lunch and independent exploration follows, with your Tour Leader providing recommendations for shopping, historical sites, and galleries.

Consider visiting the nearby Reina Sofía for important modern art collections, including Picasso's masterpiece "Guernica," or the Museo Naval, among the world's most significant naval museums, documenting Spanish maritime history from the Armada through contemporary times.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

Toledo beckons from its rocky promontory surrounded by the Tagus River's protective embrace, where Arab, Jewish, Christian, Roman, and Visigothic elements blend into Spain's most culturally complex city.

Perched dramatically above the meandering river, Toledo's unique position fostered the remarkable cultural synthesis palpable throughout its ancient streets. Narrow alleyways wind between houses, synagogues, churches, and mosques, each architectural style contributing to the city's extraordinary historical tapestry reflecting over two millennia of continuous habitation.

We visit the stunning Cathedral, a Gothic architecture masterpiece whose soaring spaces and intricate stonework demonstrate medieval Christian ambition. The Santa María la Blanca Synagogue showcases Moorish design influences from Granada, illustrating Toledo's position as medieval Spain's multicultural crossroads where different faiths coexisted and cross-pollinated.

Toledo's crown jewel awaits in the Church of Santo Tomé, housing El Greco's breathtaking masterpiece "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz." This painting represents Spanish Renaissance art's pinnacle, demonstrating how the Greek-born artist synthesised Byzantine traditions with Spanish mysticism to create uniquely powerful religious imagery.

Wandering Toledo's labyrinthine streets, we uncover secrets spanning from Roman foundations through Visigothic capitals to Moorish innovations and Christian reconquest. The city's architecture, art, and atmosphere testify to civilisations that shaped its identity through conquest, coexistence, and cultural exchange.

After a break for lunch, free time allows exploration of Toledo's shops, markets, and hidden corners before returning to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Departure

Departure from Madrid.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast