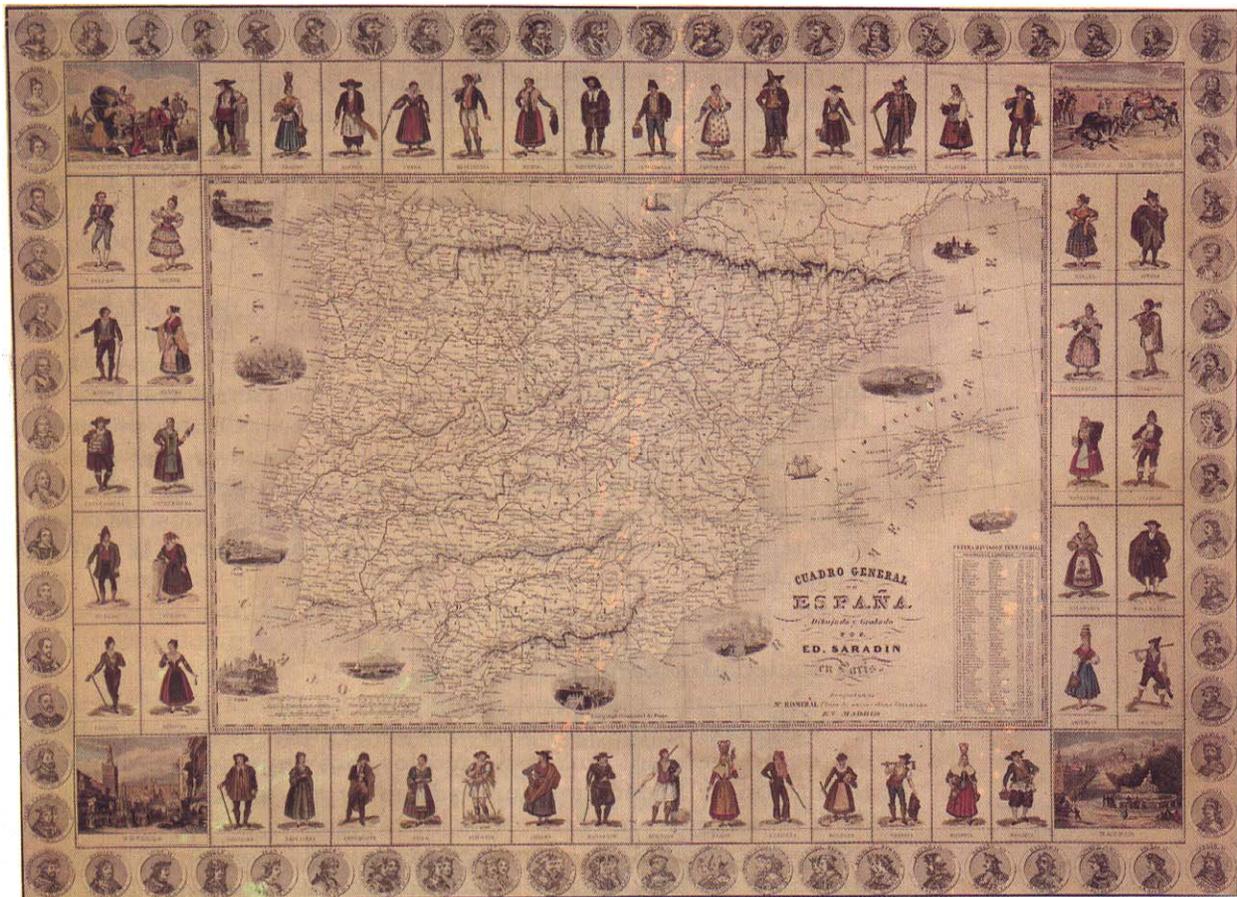


Spain Is Different: The Geography and Peoples of Spain.

The Iberian Peninsula has an enormous variety of climates and environments because of its diverse geography. For millions of years the Peninsula has been the location where a variety of peoples, cultures and languages evolved until forming the complex reality now known as Spain.

An essential key to understanding Spain, its people and their history rests in the geography of the lands in which they live. Spain is the third largest European country.



This nineteenth-century map of Spain, made in Paris, is surrounded by idealized figures of the kings, regional costumes and cityscapes. On the top left corner there is a traditional bullfight scene.

Location:

At its southernmost point, Spain is only 14 km away from the coast of North Africa. To the north, Spain is connected to the rest of Europe by an isthmus, formed by the Pyrenees mountains, that is 435 km wide. This land bridge has also served as a barrier because of the height of the mountains. The three remaining sides are surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

Spain covers a territory of 507,000 square kilometres, including the Balearic and Canary Islands. Spain's geography is particularly characterized by its central plain, the *meseta*, which covers some 210,000 square km and is a huge flat land mass that is also very high above sea level - some 800 metres in some places. The *meseta* has been compared to a fortress that stands at the centre of Spain and is, at times, isolated from the rest of the country by the steep mountains that surround it. This situation has complicated transportation and communication over the centuries, leading to even greater isolation of the centre from the coastal regions. The height of the mountains surrounding the *meseta* also contributes to its lack of rain water and therefore its aridity. Spain is second only to Switzerland in altitude.



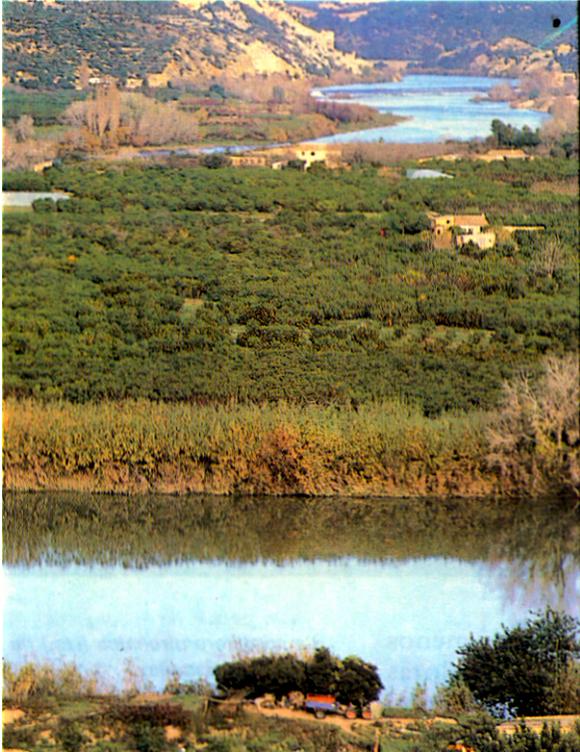
An Andalusian farm house - *cortijo*- that can be seen in the distance is surrounded by its olive groves.



Depending on the historic circumstances, the Pyrenees mountains have been alternatively a barrier to or a protection from Europe.

In the east there is the valley of the Ebro river, a large tract of land that extends from the foothills of the Pyrenees to the Iberian mountains (*Sistema Ibérico*) on the west and to the Mediterranean on the east. The Duero river flows from east to west and the Tajo, which begins near Toledo, runs to the Atlantic in Lisbon. To the south, the Guadalquivir river basin creates a similar depression between the Sierra Morena mountains and the Cordillera Bética. In the northwest, the gentle rolling lands of Galicia are separated by fjords, called *rías*.

The diversity of the climate is a consequence of the relief of the land. The *meseta* is arid and dry whereas the weather along the northern coasts is cold and damp. Along the Mediterranean, for the better part of the year it is very warm and dry. In the south-eastern region around Almería and Murcia, for example, deserts can be found.



The Ebro river is the second longest river in Spain. It originates in the Cantabrian mountains far to the west of the Peninsula and runs to the Mediterranean. The Ebro river played an important part in Spain's history as a natural border during the Muslim invasions and during the Spanish Civil War.



A wheat field in the plains of Castile. Spain was the breadbasket of the Roman Empire that survived on "bread and circuses."

The problems created by such differences have added difficulties to communication and transportation over the centuries. The isolation has led, at times, to a lack of understanding and disunity among the Spanish peoples, creating antagonisms and rivalries that continue to plague the Peninsula to this day.

Spanish Society:

Various peoples and civilizations came to and lived in the Iberian Peninsula. The process of forming and uniting Spain was long and problematic. The people from the centre of the land were essentially Hispanic (*hispanos*) and were interested in obtaining and then maintaining the unity of the Peninsula. The peoples from the coastal regions were more outward looking, more involved in international trade, and were more autonomous. For this reason there has always been a certain amount of opposition to the centralism of the *meseta* that has come to be represented in modern times by the capital city, Madrid.

Madrid only became the capital of Spain in the sixteenth century but the centralism of the country was questioned in the nineteenth century, first by the fighters in the Carlista wars who wanted to return to medieval municipal autonomy represented by local law codes, the *fueiros*. Catalan, Basque and Galician nationalism also grew at this time and, in the twentieth century, was converted into a political philosophy of separatism that has plagued the country with violence and tragedy, in some instances, and instability in others. This was one of the many reasons behind the Spanish Civil War (1936 - 1939). During the dictatorship of Franco (1939 - 1975), all legitimate aspirations to political autonomy were banned and persecuted.



At the open air market of Valencia one can buy all sorts of kitchen utensils - both new and used. The flat double handled frying pan is a *paellera* used for making Spain's national dish, the paella.

The Constitution of 1978 assured some forms of regional autonomy. The Spanish state is formed by 17 Autonomous Communities (*Autonomías*) which correspond to large cities, a province or group of provinces, or regions: Andalucía, Aragón, Asturias, the Balearic Islands, the Basque region, the Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, Cataluña, Extremadura, Galicia, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia, Navarra, and Valencia. There are 54 provinces.

Spain has approximately 41 million inhabitants with a density of 81 people per square km. The population is unevenly distributed between the huge cities of Madrid and Barcelona (approximately five million inhabitants each), the more populous coastal regions and the often nearly unpopulated central parts. Birth rates are very low, lower than ever in Spanish history, which is a serious concern for the government because the population is not replacing itself and is ageing, as in the rest of Western Europe. Spain has always been a country of emigration, now immigration is seen as a possible solution but there are social and economic problems that need to be considered.

Since the 1960's, industrial and economic development has been intense, despite the lack of energy resources because Spain must import all its oil and has but a limited amount of hydroelectricity and coal. Despite its lagging behind Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spain is now one of the ten most industrialized countries in the world. The most important economic sector in Spain used to be agriculture but now it employs some 6.5% of the working population (and an unknown number of illegal immigrants who work in the fields on a seasonal basis for little pay and no job security). Today the service sector is the largest economic sector with 65% of the workers. Tourism is the most profitable industry in Spain as well over 27 million foreign tourists visit every year.

The social structure and demographics of modern Spain are similar to that of the rest of Western Europe because of the great transformations that have occurred in the last forty years. Industry has gone a long way to resolve the conflicts between the centre and the coasts, between urban and rural centres, because factories have been set up all over the country, thereby changing the traditional agricultural nature of some parts of the country. This has led to some social crises as people try to adapt to new circumstances.

Economic growth and the entrance of Spain in the European Economic Community, later called the European Union, have produced great changes in Spain. Spaniards, who were once isolated among themselves and from the rest of Europe behind the walls formed by the Pyrenees, now are a proud part of Europe. As with most of the European countries, Spain exchanged its currency in 2002 and now uses the common Euro instead of *pesetas*.

Language and Culture:

Spain has four languages, three of which correspond to historic regions that strived for centuries to maintain their linguistic differences: Galicia, the Basque lands and Cataluña. Castilian is the national, official language which over time came to predominate over existing languages and, especially over those regional languages that have disappeared such as Navarrese, Aragonese, Leonese etc. The Basque language (called *euskara*) is of unknown roots and is the only language in Spain not based on Latin. Galician, Catalan and Castilian are all Latin based or Romance languages. Basque, Catalan and Galician are the official languages of their respective *Autonomías* and are used in all regional government offices and publications, as well as the language of instruction in schools and universities in their respective regions.

Castilian came to predominate as it was the language of the most influential region - Castile - during the Reconquest in the Middle Ages and, during the Renaissance, of the colonization of America. Castilian was, and therefore continues to be the common language of all Hispanic peoples all over the world, including the 18 Spanish speaking republics in America and of Equatorial Guinea in Africa. There is a huge and growing Spanish speaking population in the United States and in Canada.

A language that once existed in Spain is Judeo-Spanish, called *sefardí* or *ladino*. *Sefardí* came from the Hebrew name *Sefarad* (meaning Spain) and was used by the Jewish population in Spain in the Middle Ages. It is a combination of Hebrew and Castilian words and now is sometimes written using the Latin alphabet because, originally, it was essentially only a spoken language. Despite the fifteenth-century expulsion of the Jews from Spain, this language has been maintained wherever Jewish immigration from Spain occurred, such as North Africa, Turkey, etc. Today it is spoken by more than a million people, most of whom live in Israel (where newspapers published in *ladino* exist) and in religious communities all over the world.

One cultural and traditional manifestation that is characteristic of any civilization is the celebration of feasts and festivals. These need not be only traditional or customary but can also be innovative, such as the post-modernism of Barcelona, and the *movida* (movement) of Madrid of the 1980s and 1990s. Dance is usually part of any festivity and there are many different styles of dance in Spain besides the well known *flamenco* (from Andalucía, it is a combination of dance and music that is characterized by the “deep song” or *cante jondo*). There is the *jota*, originally from Aragón, that is a dance of ancient origins and is danced all over Spain; the *sar-dana*, a circle dance accompanied by a *cobla*, a peculiar kind of orchestra and is typical of Cataluña; and the *muñeira*, a Galician dance that is accompanied by a bagpipe, or *gaita gallega*, and a drum.

Crafts are also an example of tradition. Spain is characterized by its ceramics; its iron works, especially the famous forged steel from Toledo; its leathers and carpets from Andalucía; and its laces and embroideries.

Of course, foods reveal distinctive characteristics and, in Spain, the typical dishes vary according to the region and to the time of year. The most famous dish is *paella*, whose recipe again reflects local tastes and availability of ingredients but is basically a rice dish that might

include shell fish, chicken or even rabbit and is flavoured by saffron. Fish, such as cod or shellfish, is a staple of most Spanish meals as is roast lamb and suckling pig. Spanish ham, *jamón serrano*, although expensive, is very popular along with different kinds of preserved meats, such as *chorizo* and *morcilla*, cheeses of all sorts, and desserts made with almonds, especially the hard and soft *turrón* traditionally served at Christmas.

One vital element in Spanish cooking is olive oil which is produced in great quantities and is of such an excellent quality that it is exported all over the world. It is in fact, along with Spanish wine, one of the country's greatest exports and dates back to Roman times when the olive trees and grapevines were brought to the Peninsula. Grapes are grown all over the country and the wine produced from them varies according to the soil and the climate: there are sweet wines from the south, sherry wines (*finos*) grown around Seville, sparkling *cava* wines (like champagne) from the Catalan region and the many varieties of red and white wines that are grown in the valleys and river basins of the country. The best known region for wine is La Rioja but Valdepeñas, Duero and Penedés wines are also very good.

The tough, sombre nature of some Spanish country sides and climates often contrasts with the lively aspects of the many *fiestas* and the joy of the inhabitants at these times. There are around four thousand annual local *fiestas* in Spain, most of which are religious or agricultural in origin. Holy Week (*Semana Santa*), the week before Easter, is celebrated all over the country but Seville is the most famous place for this four day celebration. Another famous *fiesta* is the *fallas* which takes place in March in Valencia and is characterized by spectacular fireworks, along with the giant puppets representing local politicians or other important people that are torched in effigy. The Seville *feria* used to be an agricultural fair featuring livestock, especially horses, but now it is a great excuse for parades and street dances that take place in the week after Easter. The *Sanfermines* in Pamplona are the well-known bull runs through that city's streets for a week in July. Carnival celebrations are also popular all over the country. An interesting celebration is that of *moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians) where the participants pretend to replay the medieval battles between the opposing forces.

Bullfights are popular entertainment in Spain despite the controversy this sport continues to create. They are a curious combination of sport, dance, spectacle and ceremony that reflect on the constant conflict between man and beast. Soccer, called *fútbol*, is the national sport.

Topics for discussion:

1. Comment on how the physical characteristics of Spain affect society and the economy.
2. Explain the relationship between geography, climate, relief and tourism and Spain's current and future economy.
3. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of a country that has a central, as opposed to a regional, federated or autonomous form of government.

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