5 Fascinating Facts About Spain That Most Tourists Don't Know

1 A major centre of learning in the Muslim world.



In the 10th century, Córdoba had a huge royal library and attracted scholars from across Europe to study medicine, astronomy and philosophy.



2 A powerful message across the Alhambra.



You'll see the Arabic phrase "ولا غالب إلا الله" (Wa lā ghālib illā Allāh), meaning "There is no victor but God."



3 A city plan for a fairer society.



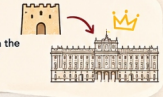
Barcelona's Eixample grid was designed in the 19th century with wide, airy streets to create a healthier and more equal city for everyone.



4 A royal palace with Islamic roots.



Madrid's Royal Palace stands on the site of a former Muslim fortress (alcázar) from the 9th century.



5 The Alhambra nearly fell to Napoleon.



In 1812, French troops tried to blow up parts of the Alhambra, but it survived thanks to quick action by a Spanish soldier, José García.

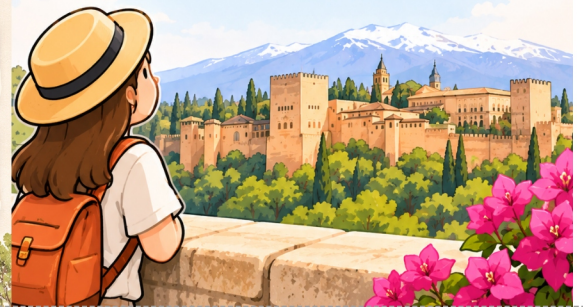


Together, these facts show how Spain's famous places preserve layers of history from different civilisations, beliefs and rulers over the centuries.



Little Field Notes: España

BARCELONA · GRANADA · CÓRDOBA · MADRID



FIELD NOTES / MADRID

Art, memory and modern urban life

16–17 NOV • PRADO / REINA SOFÍA • GRAN VÍA

Prado Museum

- Opened in 1819, the Prado is celebrated for European painting, particularly Spanish masters such as Velázquez, Goya and El Greco.
- Velázquez's Las Meninas (1656) plays with perspective, spectatorship and royal power.

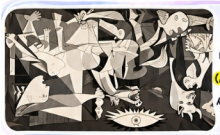




Reina Sofía Museum

- A major museum of modern and contemporary art.
- Picasso's Guernica (1937) responds to the bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War; it became a powerful anti-war image.





Gran Vía

- Developed in the early 20th century.
- This avenue showcases modernisation with eclectic buildings.



The Spanish Civil War

- From 1936 to 1939, Republicans and Nationalists fought a devastating conflict.
- Francisco Franco's dictatorship followed until his death in 1975; Spain then transitioned to parliamentary democracy.



How to connect the whole journey



Barcelona — Shows modern Catalan creativity.

Granada & Córdoba — Preserve layered histories of Islamic Iberia.

Madrid — Tells the story of royal centralisation, national art and modern political change.

Before visiting

TICKET

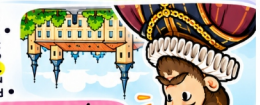
- Your itinerary lists Prado OR Reina Sofía on Monday 16 November.
- Confirm opening hours and any timed tickets; these are alterations rather than two guaranteed visits.

FIELD NOTES / MADRID

The monarchy and the capital city

15–16 NOV • PUERTA DEL SOL • PLAZA MAYOR • ROYAL PALACE

Why Madrid became the capital



- Philip II established his royal court in Madrid in 1561, making it the enduring centre of Spanish government.
- The city grew rapidly around royal institutions.

Madrid → Capital since 1561

Royal Palace



- The current palace was built in the 18th century after the old Alcázar burned in 1734.
- It is used for state ceremonies; Spain's monarch does not normally live there.

Almudena Cathedral



- Facing the palace, this cathedral was built across the 19th and 20th centuries and consecrated in 1993.
- It reflects both modern history and royal buildings.

Plaza Mayor



- A grand rectangular square formalised in the early 17th century.
- It hosted markets, celebrations, royal ceremonies and public spectacles.
- Fires led to major reconstructions.

Puerta del Sol





- A symbolic city centre, famous for the clock at the East Case de Correos and the Kilometre Zero marker for Spain's radial road network.
- The bear and strawberry tree are symbols of Madrid.

Retiro Park



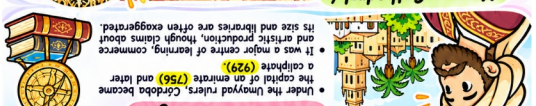
- Originating as a royal landscape in the 17th century, El Retiro became a public park.
- Together with Paseo del Prado it forms part of Madrid's UNESCO-listed "Landscape of Light".

FIELD NOTES / CÓRDOBA

A crossroads of Muslim, Jewish and Christian history

13–14 NOV • MOSQUE-CATHEDRAL • ROMAN BRIDGE • JUDERÍA

Córdoba at its height



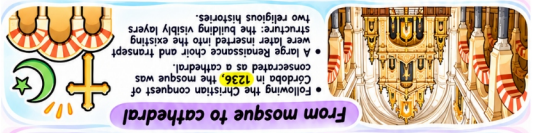
- Under the Umayyad rulers, Córdoba became the capital of an emirate (756) and later a caliphate (929).
- It was a major centre of learning, commerce and artistic production, though claims about its size and libraries are often exaggerated.

Mosque-Cathedral / Mezquita-Catedral



- The first mosque was begun under al-Rahman I in the late 8th century and enlarged by successors.
- Look for the extraordinary double-tiered red-and-white arches and the richly ornamented mihrab area.

From mosque to cathedral



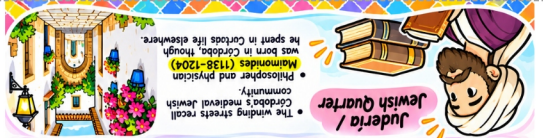
- Following the Christian conquest of Córdoba in 1236, the mosque was consecrated as a cathedral.
- A large Renaissance choir and transept were later inserted into the existing structure, the building visibly layers two religious histories.

Roman Bridge



- The crossing traces its origins to Roman Córdoba, but the bridge has been rebuilt and modified repeatedly.
- It frames the old city and offers views toward the Mosque-Cathedral.

Judería / Jewish Quarter



- The winding streets recall Córdoba's medieval Jewish community.
- Philosopher and physician Maimonides (1138–1204) was born in Córdoba, though he spent in Cortado life elsewhere.

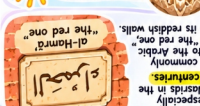
FIELD NOTES / ALHAMBRA

Palaces, poetry, water and power

12 NOV • 09:30 BOOKING • ARRIVE EARLY

Not one building

- The Alhambra is a fortified palace-city developed especially under the Nasrids in the 13th–15th centuries.
- Its name is commonly connected to the Arabic al-Ḥamrā', "the red one," referring to its reddish walls.





Nasrid Palaces

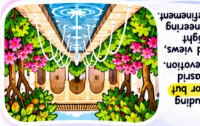


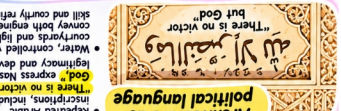
- Look for intricate stucco, geometric tilework and Arabic inscriptions.
- The Court of the Lions is famous for its fountain and delicate arcades.
- The Court of the Myrtles (Alberca) reflects the vaulting.
- Water, controlled views, courtyards and light convey both engineering skill and courtly refinement.



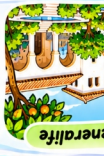
Architecture as political language

- Repeated Arabic inscriptions, including "There is no victor but God," express Nasrid legitimacy and devotion.





Generalife



- A garden estate and retreat associated with Nasrid rulers.
- Its channels, fountains and planted conveyors show how precious water was managed and monitored.

Alcazaba



- The oldest fortified section includes towers and defensive walls.
- Its elevated position explains why Granada's rulers could monitor approaches to the city.

After 1492



- Christian monarchs occupied and altered the complex.
- Charles V later commissioned a Renaissance palace within the Alhambra precinct.

FIELD NOTES / BARCELONA

Roman roots, Catalan identity and Park Güell

8–9 NOV • GOTHIC QUARTER • PARK GÜELL

- Barcelona developed from the Roman settlement of Barcino, founded around the end of the 1st century BCE.
- Medieval streets grew around the Roman core.
- Some picturesque "Gothic" features were restored or added in the 19th–20th centuries.

Gothic Quarter / Barri Gòtic

- The historic heart of Barcelona, where Roman, medieval and later layers of the city meet.
- A maze of charming lanes, squares and historic buildings.

Barcelona Cathedral

- Largely constructed from the 13th to 15th centuries.
- Its imposing main façade is much later.
- Dedicated to the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia, Barcelona's co-patron saint.

Catalonia is distinct

- Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia.
- Catalan is a language in its own right, not a dialect of Spanish.
- Local architecture, festivals and civic identity reflect this regional history.

Park Güell

- Commissioned by industrialist Eusebi Güell in 1900 as a planned residential development.
- It never became the intended housing estate.
- Today its terraces, mosaics and sinuous forms embody Gaudí's landscape-minded design.

Your visit: free area only

Your itinerary specifies the free-access area, not the ticketed Monumental Zone.

Do not assume you can see the famous mosaic dragon staircase or main terrace up close without the appropriate ticket.

FIELD NOTES / BARCELONA

Gaudí and the city of imagination

9 NOV • SAGRADA FAMÍLIA • PASSEIG DE GRÀCIA

Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926)

- Catalan architect and leading figure of Catalan Modernisme.
- A movement combining craftsmanship, symbolism and inventive forms.
- Nature was his design laboratory: look for branching columns, curves and organic surfaces.

inspiration: NATURE!

Sagrada Família

- Construction began in 1882; Gaudí took over in 1883 and devoted his later life to it.
- The Nativity façade celebrates life and creation.
- The Passion façade depicts suffering and death.
- Inside, columns resemble a forest and stained glass shifts the atmosphere with the light.

Casa Batlló – exterior

- Gaudí transformed an existing house in 1904–06.
- Notice the skeletal balconies, rippling façade and scaly roof.
- Often interpreted through the legend of Saint George and the dragon, patron saint of Catalonia.

Casa Milà / La Pedrera – exterior

- Built 1906–12.
- This apartment building resembles a wave-carved stone cliff.
- Its wrought-iron balconies and sculptural rooftop chimneys made ordinary domestic architecture radically experimental.

Look closely!

Gaudí was not merely decorating buildings: he experimented with: