The Speaky Club

CULTURE GUIDE FOR SPANISH LEARNERS

Spain, region by region

Customs, food, festivals, accents and the words you need to live them, with a special stop in Catalonia. For anyone who's moving to Spain, visiting, or learning Spanish and wants to understand the people behind it.

17 regions + 2 cities · Festival calendar · Catalonia special · Quiz + glossary

Speak the world.



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Before you start

One country, many ways of living it

Spain isn't one single culture. It's a patchwork of regions with their own food, festivals, accents and, in some cases, their own languages. Knowing the basics helps you understand the people you talk to, and makes your Spanish sound more natural.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Words in **bold** are Spanish (or Catalan, Basque or Galician when we say so). Say them out loud: they're the words you'll actually hear at the bar, at a festival or at a friend's table. All of them are in the glossary at the end, and there's a quiz to check what you remember.

Spain in numbers

WHAT	THE BASICS
Regions	17 **comunidades autónomas** (autonomous communities) + 2 autonomous cities in North Africa: Ceuta and Melilla.
Provinces	50 **provincias**. Each community has one or more.
Languages	**Castellano / español** everywhere. Co-official in their regions: **català / valencià**, **galego**, **euskara** and **aranés**.
Capital	Madrid.
Time zones	Two: the Canary Islands are one hour behind the rest of Spain.

USEFUL WORDS

la comunidad = region · **el pueblo** = village, or your family's hometown · **la fiesta mayor** = the town's main festival · **el / la de aquí** = a local · **¿De dónde eres?** = Where are you from? · **Soy de...** = I'm from...

Everyday Spain

Living on Spanish time

For most visitors the biggest culture shock isn't the language, it's the clock. Meals happen later, streets are full at night and lunch is the main event of the day.

MOMENT	WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
el desayuno	7:30–9:00	Light: coffee and toast, often with tomato and olive oil. A second coffee around 11:00 is normal.
el vermut / el aperitivo	12:30–14:00	Weekends especially: a vermouth or a beer with olives or crisps before lunch.
la comida	14:00–15:30	The main meal. On weekdays many restaurants offer a **menú del día**: starter, main, dessert and drink at a fixed price.
la merienda	17:30–18:30	An afternoon snack, especially for children.
la cena	21:00–22:30	Dinner is late and usually lighter than lunch. Earlier in winter, later in summer.

Unwritten rules

SITUATION	WHAT LOCALS DO
Greeting	**Dos besos**: two light kisses, one on each cheek, between women and between men and women in social settings. Men usually shake hands. At work, a handshake is safer.
Tú or usted?	**Tú** is the default with people your age and in most shops and bars. Use **usted** with older people, in formal situations or when unsure, and wait for them to switch.
After the meal	**La sobremesa**: staying at the table talking after eating. Nobody rushes you out; you ask for the bill: **¿Me cobras?** or **La cuenta, por favor.**
Paying	Groups often pay in rounds (**una ronda**) or split the bill (**pagar a medias**). **Invito yo** = it's on me.
Tipping	Not expected like in the US. Rounding up or leaving some coins for good service is a nice gesture.
The siesta	Less common than people think in big cities, but many small shops close from about 14:00 to 17:00, especially in smaller towns.
Noise and time	Conversations are loud and overlapping: it's a sign of interest, not anger. Being 10 minutes late to a social plan is normal; to work, it isn't.

AT THE BAR: A REAL CONVERSATION

Camarero: ¡Hola! ¿Qué te pongo?

Tú: Hola, ¿me pones una caña y un cortado, por favor?

Camarero: ¿Algo de comer?

Tú: Sí, una ración de patatas bravas. ¡Qué buena pinta!

Tú (later): ¿Me cobras, por favor?

¿Qué te pongo? = What can I get you? · una caña = a small draught beer · un cortado = espresso with a dash of milk · ¿Me pones...? = Can I have...? · ¡Qué buena pinta! = That looks great!

The calendar

Festivals across Spain

Every town has its own **fiesta mayor**, but some celebrations are shared by the whole country and a few are famous worldwide.

WHEN	FESTIVAL	WHERE	WHAT TO KNOW
5–6 January	**Los Reyes Magos**	All of Spain	The Three Kings bring presents. Parades (**cabalgatas**) on the 5th and **roscón de Reyes** on the 6th.
February	**Carnaval**	Cádiz, Santa Cruz de Tenerife	Costumes, street parades and, in Cádiz, satirical songs (**chirigotas**).
15–19 March	**Las Fallas**	Valencia	Giant satirical sculptures, fireworks and daily firecracker shows. Everything burns on the last night.
March / April	**Semana Santa**	All of Spain	Holy Week processions, famous in Andalusia. Dates change every year with Easter.
Spring	**La Feria de Abril**	Seville	A week of **casetas** (marquees), flamenco dresses, **sevillanas** and horses, usually two weeks after Easter.
23 April	**Sant Jordi**	Catalonia	Books and roses in the street. More in the Catalonia section.
23 June	**San Juan / Sant Joan**	Mediterranean coast, Galicia	Bonfires, fireworks and beach parties on one of the shortest nights of the year.
6–14 July	**San Fermín**	Pamplona	The running of the bulls, white clothes and a red scarf.
Late August	**La Tomatina**	Buñol (Valencia)	A giant tomato fight in the street, on the last Wednesday of August.
12 October	**Fiesta Nacional / El Pilar**	All of Spain, big in Zaragoza	Spain's national day and Zaragoza's patron saint festival.
31 December	**Nochevieja**	All of Spain	Eat **las doce uvas**: one grape for each chime of the clock at midnight.

HOLIDAY WORDS

un festivo = a public holiday. Each community has its own list, so a day off in Madrid may be a working day in Barcelona. When a holiday falls on a Tuesday or Thursday, many people take **un puente** (a bridge) to make a long weekend.

Region by region

The communities at a glance

One thing to eat, one thing to see and one word to take home from each region.

Andalucía south

Flamenco, the Alhambra, and **gazpacho** and **salmorejo**, cold tomato soups for hot summers. In Granada, bars traditionally give you a free tapa with each drink.

Word: ¡quillo! (hey, mate)

Aragón north-east

Zaragoza and the Basílica del Pilar; the Pyrenees in the north. Try **ternasco** (roast lamb).

Word: maño / maña (someone from Zaragoza)

Asturias north coast

Green mountains, the Picos de Europa and **sidra**, poured from high above the glass (**escanciar**). Try **fabada**, a rich bean stew.

Word: guaje (kid)

Islas Baleares Mediterranean

Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera. Catalan is co-official. Try **ensaïmada** (spiral pastry) and **sobrassada** (soft paprika sausage).

Word: bon dia (Catalan: good morning)

Canarias Atlantic, off Africa

One hour behind mainland Spain. Try **papas arrugadas con mojo**: wrinkly salted potatoes with a spicy sauce.

Word: la guagua (the bus)

Cantabria north coast

The prehistoric cave paintings of Altamira and famous anchovies from Santoña.

Word: el sobao (buttery sponge cake)

Castilla-La Mancha centre

The land of Don Quijote, windmills and **queso manchego**. Toledo, the "city of three cultures".

Word: un molino (a windmill)

Castilla y León north-centre

The largest region: Salamanca, Segovia, Burgos, León. Try **cochinillo** (roast suckling pig) in Segovia.

Word: la meseta (the central plateau)

Cataluña north-east

Barcelona, Catalan and a very strong local culture. See the special section on page 7.

Word: nen / nena (kid, also used between friends)

Comunidad de Madrid centre

The capital: the Prado and Reina Sofía, terraces and nightlife. Try a **bocadillo de calamares**.

Word: ¡mola! (it's cool!) · castizo (born-and-bred madrileño)

Comunidad Valenciana east coast

The birthplace of paella (the original has chicken, rabbit and beans, not seafood) and of **horchata**. Its co-official language is called **valencià**.

Word: ¡xe! / ¡che! (hey!)

Extremadura west

Roman Mérida and the oak pastures (**la dehesa**) where the best **jamón ibérico de bellota** comes from.

Word: la dehesa

Galicia north-west

Rain, green hills, bagpipes (**la gaita**) and the end of the Camino de Santiago. Try **pulpo a la gallega**. Language: **galego**.

Word: grazas (Galician: thank you)

La Rioja north

Spain's most famous wine region. Logroño's **calle Laurel** is a street of tapas bars.

Word: un crianza (an aged red wine)

Región de Murcia south-east

Known as Europe's orchard (**la huerta**): vegetables, lemons and rice dishes.

Word: la huerta

Navarra north

Pamplona and San Fermín. Basque is also spoken in the north of the region.

Word: el encierro (the bull run)

País Vasco / Euskadi north

Pintxos: small bites lined up on the bar. Great food culture and the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Language: **euskara**.

Word: kaixo (hello) · eskerrik asko (thank you)

Ceuta y Melilla North Africa

Two autonomous cities on the African coast, with Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu communities living side by side.

Word: la ciudad autónoma

Listen closely

The accents of Spain

You'll hear very different Spanish depending on where you are. None of these accents is more "correct" than another. Here's what to listen for, so they don't take you by surprise.

WHERE	WHAT YOU'LL NOTICE	EXAMPLE
Madrid and the centre	The "standard" accent of most textbooks. *z* and *c* sound like English *th*; the final *d* sometimes sounds like a *th* or a *z*.	Madrid → «Madriz»
Andalucía	Drops the *s* at the end of syllables, softens many consonants and speaks fast. In some areas *s* and *z* sound the same.	¿Cómo estás? → «¿Cómo ehtá?»
Canarias	Sounds close to Caribbean Spanish: *z* and *c* sound like *s*, and people use **ustedes** instead of **vosotros**.	«¿Ustedes quieren café?»
Cataluña	When speaking Spanish, many people use a clear, open *l* and pronounce the final *d* almost like a *t*.	Madrid → «Madrit»
Galicia	A soft, sing-song melody and diminutives in *-iño / -iña*.	«un poquiño»
País Vasco	A strong, rolled *r* and a firm, clipped rhythm.	—

OUR TIP

Don't try to copy every accent. Learn one well, the one of the place where you live or that you hear the most, and simply get used to hearing the others. Series set in different regions are perfect for this.

Same thing, different word

MEANING	MOST OF SPAIN	REGIONAL
bus	el autobús	la guagua (Canarias)
sandwich	el bocadillo, el bocata	el entrepà (Catalan)
small beer	una caña	un zurito (País Vasco, very small)
hey, mate	tío / tía	quillo (Andalucía), nen (Cataluña)
kid	el niño, el crío	el guaje (Asturias), el chiquillo (Andalucía)

Special stop

Catalonia / Catalunya

Catalonia is one of the regions with the strongest identity in Spain: its own language, its own national day and traditions you won't see anywhere else. If you live in or visit Barcelona, this part is for you.

THE BASICS	
Capital	Barcelona. The four provinces are Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona.
Languages	**Català** and **castellano** are both official, and most people speak both. In the Val d'Aran, **aranés** (Occitan) is official too.
National day	**La Diada**, 11 September.
Symbols	The flag is **la senyera** (four red stripes on yellow). The anthem is **Els Segadors**.
A key idea	**Seny i rauxa**: common sense and spontaneous passion, two sides of the Catalan character.

Your first words in Catalan

Nobody expects you to speak Catalan, but a few words are always appreciated. Most people will then switch to Spanish to help you.

CATALAN	SPANISH	ENGLISH
Bon dia	Buenos días	Good morning
Bona tarda · Bona nit	Buenas tardes · Buenas noches	Good afternoon · Good night
Si us plau	Por favor	Please
Gràcies · Merci	Gracias	Thank you
De res	De nada	You're welcome
Adéu · Fins després	Adiós · Hasta luego	Bye · See you later
Com estàs?	¿Cómo estás?	How are you?
Parles català? Una mica.	¿Hablas catalán? Un poco.	Do you speak Catalan? A little.
Quant val?	¿Cuánto cuesta?	How much is it?

RESPECT TIP

Catalan is **a language, not a dialect** of Spanish. Calling it a dialect is one of the fastest ways to start an awkward conversation.

Catalonia · traditions

A year of Catalan traditions

WHEN	WHAT	WHAT HAPPENS
23 April	**Sant Jordi**	Catalonia's Valentine's Day. Streets fill with stalls of books and roses; people give **una rosa** and **un llibre** (a book) to the people they love. It's also World Book Day.
Night of 23 June	**Sant Joan**	**La revetlla**: bonfires, fireworks and beach parties until sunrise. Eat **coca de Sant Joan** (sweet flat bread with candied fruit and pine nuts) and drink cava.
11 September	**La Diada**	Catalonia's national day: flags on balconies, demonstrations and cultural events.
Around 24 September	**La Mercè**	Barcelona's **fiesta mayor**: free concerts, human towers, giants and fire runs all over the city.
1 November	**La Castanyada**	Roasted chestnuts (**castanyes**), sweet potatoes and **panellets**, small almond cakes covered in pine nuts.
Christmas	**El Caganer · El Tió**	A little figure hidden in the nativity scene, doing exactly what his name says, and a smiling log that children feed for weeks and then hit with sticks while singing so it "gives" presents.

What you'll see at any fiesta

TRADITION	WHAT IT IS
Els castells	Human towers up to ten levels high, built by teams (**colles**). A child climbs to the top and raises a hand. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2010.
Gegants i capgrossos	Giant figures and "big heads" that dance through the streets. Every town has its own.
El correfoc	A "fire run": people dressed as devils dance with fireworks through the streets. Wear old clothes and cover your head.
La sardana	A circle dance where people hold hands. Anyone can join in.

Eat, drink and visit

DISH	WHAT IT IS
Pa amb tomàquet	Bread rubbed with ripe tomato, olive oil and salt. The base of almost every Catalan meal.
Calçots	Sweet spring onions grilled on a fire and dipped in **salsa romesco**. A **calçotada** is a party around them, from winter to early spring. Bibs provided.
Escalivada	Roasted peppers, aubergine and onion with olive oil.
Botifarra amb mongetes	Catalan sausage with white beans.
Crema catalana	Custard with a crunchy caramelised sugar top. Traditional on 19 March, Sant Josep.
Cava	Sparkling wine, mostly from the Penedès.
Fer el vermut	Having a vermouth with olives and crisps before Sunday lunch. A ritual more than a drink.

Places worth the trip

PLACE	WHY GO
Barcelona	Gaudí's Sagrada Família and Park Güell, the Gothic Quarter, the modernista Eixample and the beach.
Montserrat	A monastery among saw-toothed mountains, an hour from Barcelona.
Girona and Figueres	A medieval old town and the Dalí Theatre-Museum.
Costa Brava	Coves, fishing villages and clear water on the north coast.
Tarragona	One of the most important Roman sites in Spain.
The Pyrenees	Hiking in summer, skiing in winter, and the Val d'Aran, where **aranés** is spoken.

FOOTBALL

Barcelona has two big clubs: **el Barça** (FC Barcelona) and **l'Espanyol**. Barça's motto, **Més que un club**, means "more than a club". Choose your side carefully at dinner.

Your turn

Quiz

PART 1 · ANSWER IN SPANISH IF YOU CAN

1. What time is lunch in most Spanish homes?

2. What do you give on Sant Jordi?

3. How do you say "thank you" in Catalan?

4. In which city do bars give a free tapa with each drink?

5. How many grapes do you eat on New Year's Eve?

6. What are *els castells*?

7. Tú or usted with a friend's grandmother?

8. What is *la sobremesa*?

PART 2 · MATCH THE WORD TO THE REGION

9. la guagua _____
10. los pintxos _____
11. las Fallas _____
12. el pulpo a la gallega _____

a) País Vasco
b) Valencia
c) Canarias
d) Galicia

PART 3 · WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

13. You want to order a small beer at the bar: _____
14. You want to pay for everyone's drinks: _____
15. Someone in Barcelona says *Bon dia*. You answer: _____

ANSWERS

1. Between 14:00 and 15:30 · 2. A rose and a book · 3. Gràcies (or merci) · 4. Granada · 5. Twelve, *las doce uvas* · 6. Human towers · 7. Usted, until she tells you to use tú · 8. Staying at the table talking after the meal · 9 c · 10 a · 11 b · 12 d · 13. ¿Me pones una caña, por favor? · 14. Invito yo · 15. Bon dia (or Buenos días)

Glossary

The words in this guide

WORD	ENGLISH
la comunidad	region
el pueblo	village, hometown
la fiesta mayor	main town festival
el desayuno	breakfast
la comida	lunch (also: food)
la merienda	afternoon snack
la cena	dinner
el menú del día	set lunch menu
la sobremesa	after-meal chat
una ronda	a round (of drinks)
pagar a medias	to split the bill
invito yo	it's on me
una caña	a small draught beer
un cortado	espresso with a dash of milk

WORD	ENGLISH
¿Qué te pongo?	What can I get you?
¿Me pones...?	Can I have...?
¿Me cobras?	Can I pay?
un festivo	public holiday
un puente	long weekend
la cabalgata	parade
el encierro	bull run
la caseta	marquee at a fair
dos besos	two cheek kisses
la senyera	Catalan flag
els castells	human towers
el correfoc	fire run
la revetlla	Midsummer's Eve party
la guagua	bus (Canarias)

Speak the world.

Let's get speaky.

Culture is easier with someone who lives it. At The Speaky Club we teach Spanish and Catalan online, one-to-one, with all materials included: the language people really use at the bar, at the fiesta and at the table. Start with a 25-minute trial class for 6 €.

Book a class · cal.com/thespeakyclub



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