

Andalucía

HIGHLIGHTS

- Poking your nose into the beautiful green valleys and endlessly varied karstic mountainscapes of the **Parque Natural de Cazorla** (p262) and **Sierra de Grazalema** (p288)
- Zigzagging along medieval stone paths between the blisteringly white villages of the **Alpujarras** (p267)
- Playing peek-a-boo with the clouds while scrambling through mainland Spain's highest range on the **Sierra Nevada Traverse** (p278)
- Dancing along dramatic desert cliffs above moonstone-blue Mediterranean waters on the **Cabo de Gato Coast** walk (p284)

Area: 87,000 sq km

Average summer high: 36°C

Population: 7.9 million

Andalucía is all the clichés of Spain rolled into one sensory overload. It's searing light, sultry flamenco nights and blood-soaked bull-fighting afternoons. It's Islamic art and holiday excess on the Costas. It's everything that you ever hoped Spain would be and much that you didn't expect. And of the unexpected, the most delightful surprise is the region's natural attractions – large tracts of beautiful, rugged mountain country, gorgeous green river valleys, abundant wildlife and long stretches of dramatic coast that are a far cry from torrid Torremolinos. Half of Andalucía is hills or mountains, including mainland Spain's highest peak, Mulhacén (3479m), and for now the trails and back paths of this steamy southern region remain blissfully uncluttered with other hikers.

Northerners might imagine Andalucía is too hot for much walking; in fact, for about half the year the climate is ideal. But in some areas trail-marking is still relatively sparse, so there is ample opportunity to use your navigational skills. Walking for pleasure took off much later in Andalucía than in northern Spain, and you'll rarely encounter anything like a crowd on any walk. Remember the walk times we give do not include stops, so allow extra time to look at maps, chew olives, peer through your binoculars at eagles and flamingos, snooze under oak trees and gaze at all those gorgeous Andalucían panoramas.



HISTORY

In AD 711 the Muslim general Tariq ibn Ziyad landed at Gibraltar with 10,000 men. Somewhere on the Río Guadalete in western Andalucía, his forces decimated the Visigoth army, and within a few years the Muslims had overrun most of the Iberian Peninsula.

The Andalusian cities Córdoba (756–1031), Seville (1040–1248), then Granada (1248–1492) took turns as the leading city of Muslim Spain or, as it was called, Al-Andalus (from which Andalucía is derived). At its peak in the 10th century Córdoba was the biggest, most cultured city in Western Europe. Andalucía's Islamic heritage is one of its most fascinating aspects. This is not only a matter of great buildings, such as Granada's Alhambra and Córdoba's Mezquita, but also of gardens, food, music and more. Many of the villages you walk through preserve their labyrinthine Muslim street layout, and the irrigation and terracing of much of the Andalusian countryside have similar roots.

Andalusia fell to the Christian *Reconquista* in stages between 1214 and 1492. The Muslims soon faced a variety of repressive measures, which sparked revolts in Andalucía in 1500 and 1568. They were finally expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614.

Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas in 1492 brought great wealth to the ports of Seville and, later, Cádiz, but the Andalusian countryside sank into a profound decline, with noble landowners turning formerly productive food-growing land over to sheep. By the late 19th century rural Andalucía – especially the west – was a hotbed of anarchist unrest, and during the Spanish Civil War Andalucía split along class lines, with savage atrocities committed by both sides. The hungry years after the war were particularly hungry here, and between 1950 and 1970 1.5 million Andalusians left to find work in industrial northern Spain and other European countries.

Since the 1960s a coastal tourism boom, a series of community works schemes, better welfare provisions, massive EU subsidies for agriculture and tourism-driven construction have made a big difference. Andalucía today is increasingly prosperous,

its major cities are bright, cosmopolitan places, its villages full of life and its people the most flamboyant in Spain.

ENVIRONMENT

In basic geographic terms, Andalucía consists of two east–west mountain chains separated by the valley of the Río Guadalquivir, plus a coastal plain. Of the two mountain chains, the low Sierra Morena rolls along Andalucía's northern borders, while the higher Cordillera Bética is a mass of rugged ranges that broadens out from the southwest to the east; it includes mainland Spain's highest peak, Mulhacén (3479m), in the Sierra Nevada southeast of Granada, and the collection of ranges that make up the Parque Natural de Cazorla in northeast Andalucía, where several peaks top 2000m. Much of the Cordillera Bética is limestone, the erosion of which over the millennia has produced some wonderful karstic rock formations.

With more than 80 protected areas, covering some 15,000 sq km (well over half of all the environmentally protected land in Spain), Andalucía has huge appeal for nature lovers. Its vast range of plants (around 5000 species, some 150 of them unique) is largely due to the fact that the last Ice Age was relatively temperate at this southerly latitude, allowing plants which were killed off further north to survive. The mountains harbour much of the variety.

Among animals, the ibex numbers perhaps 30,000 in Andalucía and you may see it on several walks. In the Parque Natural de Cazorla, chances are high of spotting fallow deer, and reasonable for red deer, wild boar and mouflon, a wild sheep.

Andalusia is a magnet for bird-lovers, with 13 resident raptor species and several summer visitors from Africa. The Sierra de Grazalema has a large population of griffon vultures. Andalucía is also a haven for water birds, mainly thanks to extensive wetlands along the Atlantic coast. The beautiful greater flamingo can be seen in large numbers in several places including on the Cabo de Gata Coast walk.

CLIMATE

Andalusia is the most southerly and, overall, warmest part of peninsula Spain. On the coast it's temperate in winter and

