

# Galicia



Imagine a place that blends the vibrant green landscapes of Ireland, the dramatic coastline of Brittany and the friendly, late-night-loving attitude of Andalucía. You've just concocted a pretty clear picture of Galicia. The epitome of 'Green Spain', Galicia is blessed with wide rivers, lush valleys, abrupt seascapes and densely forested land just begging to be explored.

Galicia's spiritual, cultural and official capital is Santiago de Compostela, the destination of thousands of pilgrims who set out on the famous Camino de Santiago. This magical city is crowned with Spain's most impressive cathedral and its beauty is unparalleled. But don't make the mistake of bypassing the rest of Galicia. Enchanting cities like A Coruña, Vigo, Pontevedra, Lugo and Ourense are easy to reach. Along the coast, dramatic shorelines and enticing fishing villages make excellent sea-and-sand destinations. And for those with a healthy dose of wanderlust, Galicia's unspoilt interior is a trip back in time through country lanes and alongside medieval monasteries. Perhaps more than any other Spanish region, Galicia appeals to those travellers who long to mark their own paths.

Galicia's wild coastline is frayed up and down its length by a series of majestic *rias* (inlets or estuaries). In the south, Río Miño divides Galicia from Portugal, and in the east Galicia is separated from Spain's *meseta* (central tableland) by the western end of the Cordillera Cantábrica.

Galicia is culturally separate as well. With its own language, ties to Celtic culture, and a focus on fishing and shipbuilding, Galicia at times seems to have little in common with the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. A rich and spirited land, it rewards travellers with a unique mix of ancient history, excellent gastronomy and verdant natural beauty.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Drive along the winding roads above the Río Miño in idyllic **A Ribeira Sacra** (p598)
- Picnic under the Gothic-style arches of the beautiful **Praia As Catedrais** (p580) in the Rías Altas
- Stand atop southern Europe's highest cliffs at Serra da Capelada on Galicia's wild northwestern coast at **Serra da Capelada** (p578)
- Get lost in the beautiful arcaded streets of **Santiago de Compostela** (p564)
- Seek out remote beaches like **Area de Trece** (p582) on the rugged Costa da Morte



■ AREA: 29,574 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH  
24°C, LOW 12°C

■ POP: 2.77 MILLION



## History

Galicia's history stretches back to the Iron Age, when many *castros* (protected settlements of circular stone huts) were built. Most Galicians say these ancestors were Celts, though sceptics claim Galicia's Celtic origins are exaggerations of romantic nationalists.

The Romans united 'Gallaecia' in the first century BC, founding cities like Lucas Augusti (Lugo). The region was ruled by the Germanic Suevoi for most of the 5th and 6th centuries AD, before the Visigoths asserted themselves. Little touched by the 8th-century Muslim invasion, Galicia was under the control of the Christian kingdom of Asturias by 866.

The big event in the area's medieval history was the 'rediscovery' of the grave of Santiago

Apóstol (St James the Apostle) in 813, at what would become Santiago de Compostela. The site grew into a rallying symbol for the Christian Reconquista of Spain, and pilgrims from all over Europe began trekking to Santiago, which rivalled Rome and even Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site. For more, see the Camino de Santiago chapter (p118).

By the time the Reconquista was completed in 1492, Galicia had become an impoverished backwater in which Spain's centralist-minded Catholic Monarchs (Reyes Católicos), Isabel and Fernando, had already begun to supplant the local tongue and traditions with Castilian methods and language. The *Rexurdimento*, an awakening of Galician national consciousness, did not surface until late in the 19th century,