

Understand Spain

SPAIN TODAY826

Spain is (very) slowly emerging from its dramatic economic collapse at a time when Catalonia looks to go it alone.

HISTORY828

Spain is one of history's grand epics, from ancient civilisations and not-so-ancient battles to the hard-won freedoms of contemporary Spain.

ARCHITECTURE846

From Romans and Islamic sophisticates to Renaissance, Gothic and Modernista masters, Spain's architecture is the country's often-glorious past wrought in stone.

SPAIN'S MASTER PAINTERS853

Spain's roll call of master painters is almost without parallel in Europe, from Goya and Velázquez to Dalí, Picasso and Miró – we take you into their worlds.

FLAMENCO856

The centrepiece of Spain's extraordinarily rich arts scene, flamenco lays bare the Spanish soul. We help you find your entry point into this peculiarly Spanish passion.

BULLFIGHTING.....859

The country's most controversial pastime leaves no one indifferent. We take you through its essential elements and the debate over bullfighting's uncertain future.

Spain Today

Although you may not notice it as a visitor – this is *Spain*, after all, and its streets and bars are as full as ever – Spain is experiencing a time of profound economic crisis. As if that weren't enough, Catalonia wants to secede. Amid all the gloom, however, Spaniards cling to the hope that the country may have hit rock bottom and is once again on the rise.

Best on Film

Jamón, jamón (1992) Dark comedy that brought Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem to prominence.

Todo sobre mi madre (1999) Classic Pedro Almodóvar romp through sex and death.

Mar adentro (2004) Alejandro Amenábar's study of a Galician quadriplegic.

Volver (2006) Almodóvar's lush and offbeat portrait of a Spanish family in crisis.

Alatriste (2006) War and betrayal pursue a Spanish musketeer in this 17th-century epic.

Best in Print

A Late Dinner: Discovering the Food of Spain (Paul Richardson) Erudite journey through Spain's fascinating culinary culture.

A Handbook for Travellers (Richard Ford) This 1845 classic is witty, informative and downright rude.

The Train in Spain (Christopher Howse) Amusing yet insightful reflections from a veteran Spain-watcher.

The New Spaniards (John Hooper) A journey through three decades (until 2006) of democratic Spain.

Don Quixote (Miguel de Cervantes) Spain's best-known novel remains a classic journey through inland Spain.

Economic Crisis

Six years after Spain's economic crisis took hold in late 2008, the country is still reeling. Unemployment, which had dropped as low as 6% as Spain enjoyed 16 consecutive years of growth, now sits stubbornly above 26%, which equates to six million people. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) says that it could be a further five years before that figure falls below 25%. Suicide rates are on the rise, Spain's young professionals are fleeing the country in unprecedented numbers and Oxfam recently predicted that a staggering 18 million Spaniards – 40% of the population – are at risk of social marginalisation within the next decade.

And if all of this sounds bad, it's nothing compared to the catastrophic youth unemployment rates which recently topped 57.7%. Old-timers you speak to can't remember a time this bad, with businesses closing their doors forever, including many that weathered civil war and dictatorship down through the decades. And the government's punishing austerity drive is hardly improving the mood of Spaniards.

Signs of Hope?

These things are always easier to quantify in hindsight than they are at the time, but there are small signs that Spain's economy is recovering, albeit *very* slowly. After five years of contracting, the economy has begun to grow – yes, it may be at a snail's pace, and yes, it may take another decade to return to the growth rates of the pre-crisis boom years. But economists at Spain's largest banks have predicted that the economy may grow by almost 1% in 2014.

Talk to business owners and many will tell you that an imperceptible shift occurred late in 2013. As one restaurant owner told us, 'people started going out to eat again. Maybe everyone just reached a point where they