

HARBOURS *of* HISTORY, CITIES *of* CHANGE

Every one of Spain's coastal cities is a chapter in the country's complex history, showcasing influences from the Romans, Moors and Basques through architecture, food and the spirit of the people, writes **Raphael Giacardi**





LEFT An aerial view of Barcelona
BELOW Valencia's Lonja de la Seda silk exchange



Barcelona - Dove Z/Shutterstock; orange trees - Irabanto/Shutterstock

“After catastrophic floods in 1957, the diverted riverbed became Turia Gardens – a green ribbon that threads through Valencia”

Melting pot is a cliché describing how a country's soul is the product of centuries of human flow – immigration and emigration, invasions and conquests – that have shaped its traditions, art, values and the genetic makeup of its people. It's an oversimplification at the best of times – and in the case of Spain, it doesn't even come close. Because Spain is not a melting pot; it's a jigsaw puzzle, where distinct pieces sit side by side, somehow, harmoniously.

Take Barcelona, fiercely proud of its Catalan roots but shaped by centuries of Mediterranean trade and Roman, Gothic and – more recently – Modernist heritage. Or Malaga, a city where more than 700 years of Islamic rule left an imprint that's still visible. Or Bilbao, an Atlantic rather than Mediterranean port that the Moors never reached.

The forces of history have given Spain's coastal cities strong and

individual personalities. These differences, which are often overlooked by visitors, make them all the more captivating. And to understand what they are now, you must dive into their past.

BARCELONA: CATALAN PRIDE AND MEDITERRANEAN CHARM
Barcelona is the core of Spain's Mediterranean identity, where Catalan pride thrives amid a blend of Roman, medieval and modern influences. Once a Roman colony, the city later flourished as a major Mediterranean trading hub, drawing merchants and ideas from across the sea. Today it is a magnet for holidaymakers, lured by the promise of sunshine, amazing architecture and world-class cuisine.

Its streets reflect that layered past. The unique vision of 20th-century architect Antoni Gaudi is embodied in the Sagrada Familia basilica, but enter the Gothic Quarter and you'll walk roads first laid by the Romans. In the

Who SAILS THERE?

Most major lines, including Celebrity Cruises, Cunard, MSC Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line, P&O Cruises, Princess and Royal Caribbean International call at Spanish ports on Atlantic coast and Mediterranean itineraries.

Smaller luxury lines including Seabourn, Silversea and Viking provide more intimate sailings between Spain's coastal cities.

Voyages are year-round but there are more options between March and October, as many ships relocate to the Caribbean for winter.

Previous page: La Seu Cathedral - vulcano/Shutterstock. This page: map - Shikha Shah

Eixample district, meanwhile, you can stroll down straight streets imagined in the mid-19th century by the Catalan engineer Ildefons Cerda.

Modern Barcelona balances nostalgia with innovation. You'll see it in the El Born neighbourhood, where ancient buildings house avant-garde bars, or on rooftops where locals sip Cava as the sun sets over the sea.



VALENCIA: FROM ROMAN STRONGHOLD TO FUTURISTIC PROVINCIAL CAPITAL
Valencia's story begins in 138 BCE, when Roman settlers established Valentia on the banks of the Turia River. Its location – with fertile land, a natural port and easy access to inland Spain – made it a prize for successive rulers.

The Moors arrived in the 8th century, transforming Valencia into a centre of learning and agriculture, before the Christian *Reconquista* drove them out and reshaped the city yet again.

Traces of all these eras remain, from subterranean Roman ruins to the medieval gates of Torres de Serranos and Gothic Lonja de la Seda, a silk exchange built during the 15th-century golden age.

But the city is also defined by reinvention. After catastrophic floods in 1957, the diverted riverbed became Turia Gardens, a green ribbon that threads through Valencia. And the City of Arts and Sciences, begun in 1996, is a symbol of futuristic ambition.

MALAGA: MOORISH ECHOES AND MEDITERRANEAN BREEZE
Malaga's strategic location has made it a cultural crossroads since Phoenician times. The city's long period under Islamic rule – from the 8th century to the 15th – deeply influenced its identity.

The Alcazaba fortress, Gibralfaro Castle and the old town's layout all bear the marks of this era. Even the city's name and neighbourhoods – Alhaurin, Guadalhorce – reflect its Arabic past.

The city's transformation continued after the Reconquista and into the modern age but it has retained its unique identity. The legacy of the Moors lives on, not just in stone but in the flavours of the raisins, almonds and spiced dishes still found in its markets.

The Picasso Museum nods to Malaga's most famous son, while contemporary art galleries and renovated port areas speak of a city that continues to evolve. ►



Cadiz Cathedral - GrantTuttle/Shutterstock; museum - Rudy Mareel/Shutterstock

CADIZ: CITY OF SHIPS AND SHIFTING TIDES

Founded by the Phoenicians more than 3,000 years ago, Cadiz is one of Europe's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Guarding the Atlantic approaches to the Mediterranean, it became a vital naval base and a key link in the Spanish Empire's trade with the Americas.

Its past is visible in the sea walls, watchtowers and fortifications built to guard its wealth and ward off pirates. Cadiz also left its mark on the wider world: in the 18th century it was the origin of Spain's first liberal constitution, which became a model for those of Mexico, Norway and Portugal.

Amble around the old town's winding streets and you'll find Baroque churches and Neoclassical houses built during the city's boom years. Spanish lawyer Paula Lamle says, "While meandering around the old town's restaurants, make sure you try red tuna tartare. Tuna is a local speciality – and the quality is insane."

You could also visit the boho beaches of Zahara de los Atunes and Caños de Meca, an hour's drive south of the city. "Caños de Meca has a hippie vibe," adds Paula.

Despite its age, Cadiz feels alive – particularly during Carnival each February, when the whole city turns into a stage for satire and celebration during a costumed parade.



FROM FAR LEFT Cadiz Cathedral; Louise Bourgeois' 'The Spider' outside Guggenheim Bilbao

BILBAO: BASQUE RESILIENCE AND REINVENTION

Bilbao is unapologetically Basque. Set in the green hills of northern Spain, far from the Mediterranean, it has always stood apart – linguistically, culturally and politically.

Its early wealth came from shipbuilding and industry, and although its factories have mostly gone, the city's identity still draws strength from that era. Basque traditions and the language, Euskara, have survived centuries of suppression, and are proudly evident.

Today, Bilbao is also a model of urban reinvention. Guggenheim Bilbao, a gleaming titanium structure by architect Frank Gehry, sparked the city's transformation when it opened in 1997. Around it, former industrial zones have become parks, galleries and riverfront promenades.

But the heart of Bilbao is still Casco Viejo – the old town – where bars serve *pintxos* (savory bites) and the streets echo with the Basque spirit of quiet defiance and deep-rooted pride.

Get on board

P&O Cruises' 14-night Mediterranean – Spain & France itinerary aboard *Arvia*, return from Southampton via La Coruna, Malaga, Alicante, La Seyne-sur-Mer, Barcelona and Cadiz, departs on 14 September 2025, from £1,149. pocruises.com

Seabourn's 10-day Spain & Moroccan Gems itinerary aboard *Seabourn Ovation*, return from Barcelona via Malaga, Casablanca, Cartagena and Valencia, departs on 19 October 2025, from £6,199. seabourn.com ■

Why YOU SHOULD GO

1 For the food Each region offers specialities, from Bilbao's *pintxos* to Valencia's *horchata* (tigernut milk). Take a market tour or cooking class to learn more about Spain's culinary heritage.

2 For the culture Art spills on to streets through innovative urban projects and historic architecture. Discover more on an architect-led walking tour.

3 For the festivals Time your visit for an event such as Cadiz's Carnival (February), Valencia's Las Fallas (March) or Barcelona's Merce Festival (September).

4 For the lifestyle The Spanish art of living well isn't just marketing, it's evident in morning market visits, long lunches and evening *paseos* (walks) when entire cities promenade.

Have you cruised around Spain? Then share your experiences with us by emailing hello@worldofcruising.co.uk