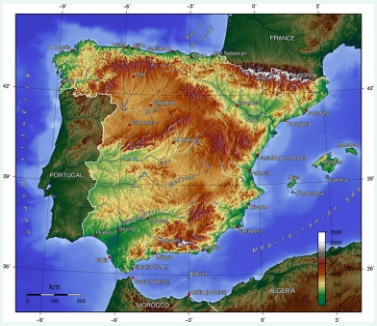
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Spain has an area of 504,030 km², making it the second largest country in Western Europe (behind France). Mainland Spain is dominated by high plateaus and mountain ranges, such as the Sierra Nevada. Running from these heights are several major rivers such as the Tagus, the Ebro and the Duero. Alluvial plains are found along the coast. The climate is extremely diverse, ranging from a moderate Continental climate in the inland areas (around the capital city, Madrid), to a hotter Mediterranean climate along the southern and eastern coasts. In 2007 Spain's population reached 45 million people.



There are many strands which contribute to Spain's cultural identity. During the late Roman period Christianity spread widely in the area. In the early eighth century most of the Iberian peninsula was conquered by Muslims from north Africa. Christian rulers continued to flourish in the north and by the eleventh century they had reconquered half the country. By the mid-thirteenth century only Granada in the far south remained as a semi-independent Muslim state. In 1492 this statelet surrendered, ending the last remnant of a 781-year Muslim presence in the area.



Left: The plains of the central plateau in the region of La Mancha.

Right: The green landscape of northern Spain in the Pyrenees Mountains.



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1492 was also the year in which Christopher Columbus (from Genoa, Italy, but in the service of the Spanish crown) landed in America. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain went on to colonise vast areas of central and south America, becoming immensely rich in the process. The sixteenth century was also the period of the Reformation in Europe. Spain remained firmly Roman Catholic.

A further element in Spain's cultural mix is the existence of a variety of languages. In most of the country Castilian (Spanish) is dominant, but in the west (including Majorca) Catalan is spoken, while Basque is spoken in the north and Galician (which is close to Portugese) in the north west. At the same time, one effect of Spain's empire is that by the early twenty-first century approximately 500 million people in the world speak Spanish, making it the fourth most spoken world language.

In the late twentieth century immigration into the country grew rapidly. Many immigrants were Spanish speakers from Latin America, but there was also a significant number from Africa and many north Europeans who retired there because of the country's sunny climate. In 2006, 761,000 UK citizens were believed to live permanently in Spain.





Photographs.
Top Right: The Muslim Alhambra palace/fortress in Granada.
Above Left: The city of Toledo in central Spain.
Right: The village of Alquézar in Aragon, northern Spain.

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Valencia

Valencia is the name of both a city and a region in eastern Spain. The city of Valencia is the third largest city in Spain and in 2007 had a population of 818,941. Valencia has a very changeable Mediterranean climate, with warm dry summers, mild humid winters and storms in autumn and spring. The traditional language of the area is Valencian, a dialect of Catalan.



Valencia Cathedral



The City of Arts and Sciences, opened 2005

The city of Valencia is the site of Spain's largest port and was until recently an important location for metal, chemical, textile, shipbuilding and brewing factories. The major exports are agricultural products (most famously, oranges), ceramic tiles, marble products and cars. The late twentieth century saw a rapid development of tourist facilities in the city.



Valencia is famous for its food - the dish known as paella (right) is from here - and for the festival of Las Fallas, which celebrates Saint Joseph's Day (19 March). The festivities include parades and the burning of large figures, a bit like Guy Fawkes, which are often given faces that satirize political figures or 'celebrities'. There is also a huge explosive display during daylight which is called the mascletà (left), in which the main aim is to make smoke and deafening explosions.



The province of Alicante is in the south of the Valencian region. The coast here is very dry and hot and tourism has boomed in this area. It is often referred to as the Costa Blanca, a name invented by British European Airways in 1957 to encourage tourism. The famous resort of Benidorm is located here. In 1950 the population of Benidorm was 2,726, in 2005 it had risen to 67,492. What was once a quiet fishing village is now, like many similar towns and villages on the Mediterranean coast, a place of multi-storey hotels and bars.

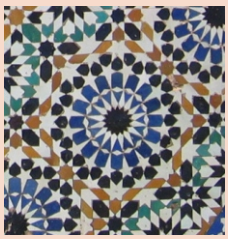


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Four Tiles



Tiles - or azulejos - are found everywhere in both Spain and Portugal. The word azulejo comes from the colloquial Arabic *al-zulaij,* meaning 'polished stone'. In many Muslim countries zellige work, as it is usually called, is the main form of decoration on mosques and domestic buildings (right). In accordance with general Islamic teaching these tiled areas feature geometric patterns, rather than representations of people or animals.



Valencia was permanently taken back from Muslim control in 1238. Large numbers of Muslims remained in the area until they were finally expelled in 1609. Tile making in Valencia began to grow in importance during this period, using craftsmen and techniques that had their roots in the Muslim period. There was, however, no longer any restriction on showing images of the human body and there developed a tradition of creating large pictorial scenes from many individually designed tiles. The photograph on the left, for example, shows a large tile picture of the crucifixion from Valencia.

From the fifteenth century Valencia exported its tiles to places as far-flung as Egypt, Syria and Turkey. The biggest customer, however, was Italy, including the Vatican. Ever since then tile making has been a major industry in the city. In the nineteenth century machine production-line methods largely replaced the older hand-made techniques. During the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s production declined, but since the mid-twentieth century the industry's fortunes have revived. The examples in the box are from this period and represent the continuing vitality of this centuries-old industry.

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First Communion Cards



In the sacrament of Holy Communion Christians share a symbolic meal of bread and wine. The first such meal took place on the night before Jesus died, when he shared a meal with his disciples. Holy Communion helps Christians to look back to the time when Jesus lived on the earth, to be in Jesus' presence now and to look forward to living with Jesus in heaven. Holy Communion has a number of names the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper and, particularly in the Roman Catholic church, the Mass.

Holy Communion has always been viewed as special. In both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches children first had to be taught about Christian beliefs before being allowed to join in. There is a movement in some churches today to allow anyone of any age to freely take part in communion, as long as they have been baptised. This has always been the practice in the Orthodox church, where babies and children are given communion.

In most churches children are baptised when they are babies. Through baptism people become members of the church. Confirmation takes place when the children have grown up enough to accept their membership of the church. The ceremony is led by the local bishop, who places his hands on the head of each child and blesses them. In the Roman Catholic church children participate in Holy Communion before they have been confirmed. Girls are often dressed in white and wear a veil when they participate in these ceremonies.



These cards were produced to announce and commemorate the occasion when boys and girls were confirmed and participated in their first Holy Communion. Most of them were produced for children living in Tabernes Blanques, a small community to the north of Valencia, which is rapidly becoming a suburb of the city. A photograph of the Roman Catholic parish church of the Holy Trinity (Iglesia Parroquial de la Santisima Trinidad) can be seen on the left.

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Two Scapulas



Christians are expected to live as the disciples of Jesus and to reflect God's love in the world. In order to help them do this they attend church each week. However, this discipleship is not meant to stop once they leave church and return to their ordinary life in the world. Many Christians wear a cross around their neck to remind themselves of their commitments. Scapulas have a similar purpose and belong to the Roman Catholic tradition, which is dominant in Spain.

A scapular (from Latin *scapula*, shoulder) is an apron-length of cloth suspended both front and back from the shoulders of monks and nuns. It symbolises the wearer's readiness to serve God. In the Middle Ages a tradition developed of ordinary Christians wearing a much smaller version of the monastic scapula, often tucked under their clothes, for a similar purpose. In the Roman Catholic church scapulas are blessed by priests and are generally thought to give certain blessings to those who wear them.

There are different kinds of scapula, each of which has a different image. The most famous of them is the Scapular of our Lady of Mount Carmel (called 'Carmen' in Spanish). This scapula originated in the thirteenth century after an Englishman, Simon Stock, had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she told him that those who died 'clothed in this habit would never suffer eternal fire'.



The Scapula of Our Lady of Mount Carmel should always be brown and be made of wool. These two examples, therefore, are somewhat unorthodox! The larger one is actually Italian. It probably dates from the nineteenth century and was intended for wearing on grand festivals. The smaller one is more typical, although it is made from blue wool. A photograph of a 'correct' brown Scapula of Our Lady of Mount Carmel can be seen on the left.

In Spain the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on July 16 is special for fishing communities. In many places statues of the Virgin are taken in boats out to sea and her protection of fishermen is prayed for.



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Festival Medal



This medal serves a similar purpose to the two scapulas. The image on it shows the death of the Virgin Mary. This event is called the Dormition (from the Latin for 'falling asleep'). Both the Roman Catholic church and the Orthodox church teach that the Virgin Mary did not die like every other human being, but that her body was carried straight up to heaven. Both churches celebrate this event on 15 August. The whole idea is rejected by Protestant Christians as having no basis in the bible.



This medal is unusual for a Roman Catholic festival in that in the Roman Catholic church it is the Assumption (the ascent into heaven) that is celebrated, not the Dormition. In the Roman Catholic tradition the Virgin Mary is more usually shown upright as she is taken into the clouds (left).

Funeral Cards

Cards like these are produced to inform people about the death and funeral of someone.



Pestle and Mortar

This pestle and mortar is designed for crushing small amounts of herbs and spices. It was probably made for sale to tourists.



Wine Flask

Another item from the tourist trade, this time from the island of Minorca.

