



SPAIN:

General info & travel tips

Social life and etiquette

Spain is a fantastically welcoming, vibrant country, characterized by its love for life. With a population of over 44 million it's a very diverse place too, with regional identities as characteristic as their local landscapes and the Basques, Galicians, and Catalans all adding their own languages and cultures to the mix. No matter where you decide to visit though, many of the clichés of Spanish life, such as the siesta, busy bars, and restaurants open late into the night, and towns celebrating lively festivals, still pretty much ring true.

One of the most important aspects of Spanish life is family; no celebration would be complete without an extended gathering, although this is more common away from the busy cities where modern life takes its toll. Even so, the elderly are respected, and it's not uncommon to have older relatives being cared for in the family home. Likewise, children are absolutely adored and included in everything.

Food plays an important part in Spanish family life. Spanish eating times are later than anywhere else in Europe:

Lunch (la comida) is the biggest meal of the day and usually last from 2 to 4 pm. It's common for shops and whole villages to come to a standstill for the afternoon meal and siesta, especially in more out-of-the-way places.

Evening meals, which often start as late as 10 pm, are usually preceded by a leisurely stroll, or paseo, when you may take in an aperitif in a bar or two. If you try local bars earlier than the Spanish popular eating times you might not find or feel any local atmosphere.

Friends are more likely to meet in restaurants for meals, but if you are invited to someone's house for dinner, you should take a small gift for any children, along with chocolates, a bottle of wine, or some flowers (though avoid dahlias, chrysanthemums and flowers in odd numbers as these would only be given at funerals). Also bear in mind that drinking too much isn't common, and despite the fact that there seems to be a bar on every corner, they are more for coffee and socializing than heavy boozing.

The Spanish are among the biggest smokers in Europe, with an estimated thirty percent of the population smoking regularly. Attitudes are changing however and the law now bans smoking in all public places, including shops, public transport, bars, and restaurants.

Greetings

If you're meeting someone for the first time, you should shake their hand. If you become friends, you may well move on to hugging (men) or kisses on each cheek (women), starting with the left. Men are also more likely to kiss women hello and goodbye than to shake their hand.

To say hello, use Buenos días before lunch and Buenos tardes after that. Bear in mind that in Spain the sense of time is somewhat elastic, so unless you're meeting for business (when being late is very bad form) don't be offended if you are left waiting for a good ten or twenty minutes.

Tippling is common in Spain, although not always expected and not obligatory, it is a genuine way of showing gratitude for good service. Locals are small tippers and fifty cents on a bar table or 5-10% in a restaurant is usually enough. If you feel you have been well taken care of and that you received a good service then you are more than welcome to offer a tip.

Dress code in Spain

Spanish men and women are almost invariably well groomed and style and fashion are important, although they often dress casually.

Compared to Italy and a few other Catholic countries, the dress code is more relaxed, and in the summer you will see people with bare arms and shorts sightseeing in churches. Some churches do have pictorial signs of banned dress (e.g. swimwear, barefoot, flip flops) but generally what is acceptable as street clothes are also ok in churches.

If you are planning to indulge in any topless sunbathing, consider local feelings first, and try to stick to beaches where people are already doing it.

