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Spain Highlights

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The Most Popular Places in Spain
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(For details on the author, see end of document)

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Spain is a fascinating place to explore. In my many travels throughout the country, we have enjoyed the classical art of Velasquez, El Greco and Goya at the Prado Museum in Madrid and Salvador Dali's surrealism in Figueres. I have admired the amazing architecture of La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, the avant-garde Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the remarkable Calatrava buildings in Valencia. Along the way, I have also tasted the crisp wines of Galicia, the full-bodied reds of La Rioja, sherry in Andalusia and cava in Catalonia. Tapas, flamenco, cathedrals and bullfights are the soul of Spain. I'm happy to share my experiences with you.

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MADRID



The **Prado Museum** is one of Europe's top museums, and it is also one of Madrid's best attractions. Built in the late 18th century in Neoclassical style, it emphasizes Spanish art up to the 19th century. Goya's *El Tres de Mayo*, Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, and El Greco's *Adoracion de los Pastores* (*the Adoration of the Shepherds*) are some of the most famous pieces on display, but there are many more artists represented: Ribera, Murillo, and Zurbaran, to name a few. There is a substantial collection of Dutch and Italian masters as well. (The museum is closed on Mondays.)

The Royal Palace is also one of the most popular attractions in Madrid.

This elegant building is one of Europe's greatest palaces, in close competition with the likes of Versailles in Paris, Schonbrunn in Vienna and the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. It was built in the 1700s by King Philip V, the grandson of Louis XIV. With over 2,000 rooms - only a handful of which can be visited, of course - it is full of sumptuous interiors: luxurious tapestries, priceless porcelain, elegant furniture and more. (The palace is still used for official state receptions, so it is sometimes closed to the public.)

The **Reina Sofia Museum** occupies an 18th-century building that has been renovated in a modern, avant-garde style by architect Jean Nouvel. As a modern art museum, it houses treasures of contemporary Spanish art such as works by Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Juan Miro and many more. Since 1992, it has been the home of *Guernica*, Picasso's famed work depicting the 1937 Civil War bombing of a small Basque village by the German air force. This is a very dramatic painting and, as such, a major draw for history and modern art enthusiasts. (The museum is closed on Tuesdays.)



The **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum** displays over 600 works of art ranging from medieval to modern pieces, giving the viewer a chance to enjoy an overall understanding of the history of Western art. The collection includes world-class examples of Italian, Flemish, Renaissance, Baroque, Impressionist, and all the way to 20th-century American paintings. The Thyssen's more "human-size" display is a fine complement to the Prado's massive collection. (The museum is closed on Mondays.)



Plaza Mayor. One would not conceive of going to Madrid without a stroll around the cobble-stoned Plaza Mayor and down the narrow streets of the nearby old section of the city. Built in 1619 and once the site of public executions and bullfights, the plaza is the heart of the city. It is a quiet, pedestrian-only enclosed square with ancient arcades surrounded on all four sides by restaurants, bars and shops. Stop for a refreshment at one of the outdoor cafes and watch the world go by while listening to the melodic tunes of the street musicians.



Other places of interest:

- **Retiro Park.** A few blocks east of the Prado Museum, a 300-acre park good for strolling, picnicking or boating on the lake.
- **Botanical Gardens** with rare plants and trees, next to the Prado Museum.
- **Sorolla Museum.** The house of famous painter Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923) with a few of his luminous paintings and portraits.
- **Chapel of San Antonio de la Florida.** Francisco Goya's tomb with some of his beautiful frescoes painted on the ceiling of the cupola.
- **Alcalá de Henares,** birthplace of famous author Miguel de Cervantes, only a short train ride from Madrid.

OUTSIDE MADRID

Toledo. This charming “city-museum,” located 50 miles south of Madrid, is one of the oldest cities in Europe. It was founded by the Romans in 200 BC. In the 6th century AD the Visigoths chose it as the capital of Spain. Today, it is the flourishing economic center of the Castilla La Mancha region. Toledo is known as “the city of the three cultures” and “the capital of universal tolerance” because for centuries, the religious tolerance of the Moors allowed Christians, Muslims and Jews to co-exist in peace and mutual respect. Its buildings include almost all the architectural styles Spanish history has produced (Gothic, Arabic, Mudejar, Renaissance and Baroque). The great 16th-century painter El Greco lived there. It is an easy day trip from Madrid, and with such rich cultural heritage, it attracts lots of visitors every day.



The first reason for visiting **Segovia** is its monumental mile-long Roman aqueduct running through the heart of the city. Built some 2,000 years ago, it continued to be in use until the 1970s. The second reason is the castle perched on top of a rock, looking



like the prow of a ship and visible for miles from the flat lands below. This 11th-century structure was renovated in the 19th century after a fire, so it is in pristine shape today. It is arguably one of the most photographed castles in Europe. The third reason is the magnificent Gothic cathedral, complete with a cloister and surrounded by the palaces, churches and mansions of Segovia's old quarter.

Avila is located about 60 miles north of Madrid. At 3,500 feet above sea level, it is a cool alternative to Madrid on hot summer days. This medieval city is famous for its massive two-mile-long fortifications encircling the old city and its equally impressive 89 guard towers and entrance gates. It is also known as the birth place of the great Santa Teresa de Jesús. The presence of the 16th-century mystic is felt everywhere around the old city: statuary, museums and the convent she founded. With its Romanesque churches, gothic palaces and an imposing 12th-century cathedral, Avila is an ideal place for walking tours.

La Granja de San Ildefonso, just outside Segovia, boasts an exquisite palace surrounded by extensive formal gardens with an amazing collection of fountains. Built by the grandson of Louis XIV in the grandiose Versailles style, it was used by the Spanish court as a summer retreat to escape Madrid's hot summers. It is much smaller than its French counterpart, but it is absolutely magnificent and often referred to as “the Versailles of Spain.”

El Escorial. The Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 30 miles from Madrid, is a grandiose complex of imposing but austere buildings and palaces. It is a strong statement for Spain as a major world power in the 16th century, the time of the Conquistadors. Architecturally, it exudes power rather than elegance but it is well worth a visit. The visit includes the Hapsburgs palace, the kings and princes mausoleum, the chapter houses and the basilica.





The Valley of the Fallen. This massive, stark monument was built in the 1950s to commemorate the victims who died during the Spanish Civil War. It is located 5 miles from El Escorial. The basilica, carved inside a granite mountain, is topped by an enormous 500-foot-high cross. The austere building holds Francisco Franco's tomb.

BARCELONA

La Sagrada Familia (“Expiatory Church of the Holy Family”), a massive, privately-funded Roman Catholic church still under construction. It is the crowning achievement of renowned Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926). The building's scale and idiosyncratic architecture have made it one of Spain's top tourist attractions. The architecture is unlike anything ever built anywhere. The older section looks like it was carved out of a massive rock. The statuary in the newer section is reminiscent of the characters in a Star Wars movie. The inside shows a clear Gothic influence. The grandiose design and the magnitude of the project are absolutely mind-boggling. It is a masterpiece of creativity and imagination.

Casa Batlló and Casa Milà, also known as La Pedrera (Catalan word for “Quarry”): Two fanciful buildings designed by Antoni Gaudí in the Modernista (Art Nouveau) style at the turn of the 20th century. They are both located on one of Barcelona's widest boulevards, the Passeig de Gràcia. They are particularly remarkable because of Gaudí's avoidance of straight lines and his use of colorful ceramic tiles and curving wrought iron. The non-traditional architectural features of Casa Batlló's arched roof mimic the back of a dragon. The dozen or so surrealistic chimneys on top of La Pedrera resemble warriors in a science fiction movie.

Park Güell, a public park created by Antoni Gaudí. This complex displays the architect's flamboyant creativity at its best: a mosaic dragon fountain at the main entrance, a long bench in the form of a sea serpent covered with multicolored tiles snaking around the main terrace (with panoramic vistas over the entire city) and a



covered area with a forest of columns reminiscent of the ancient temples of upper Egypt.



Las Ramblas, a large mile-long pedestrian boulevard in downtown Barcelona that connects Placa de Catalunya and the Christopher Columbus monument by the harbor. Strolling the shaded tree-lined avenue is a favorite for both tourists and locals. Cafes, flower stands, artists, the vibrant Boqueria market nearby and the many whimsical street performers bring a festive atmosphere to this busy and sometimes crowded place.

Palau de la Música Catalana (Palace of Catalan Music) a concert hall in the Modernista style created by architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner, which opened in 1908. The design and architecture of this building are incredibly ornate (Baroque in many ways). During the day, it is entirely lit by natural light coming from the outside. This is achieved by walls that are made of stained-glass windows set in magnificent arches and the ceiling, an enormous skylight also made of stained glass (like an oversized Tiffany lamp shade) with hues of gold and blue that suggest the sun and the sky overhead. A “brilliantly” colorful piece of architecture!



Other places of interest:

- **Picasso Museum**, with some of his early works
- **Catalan Art Museum.** A world-class collection of works by Catalonian artists
- **Church of Santa Maria del Mar.** A Gothic church in the Ribera district

- **Joan Miro Foundation.** Abstract art and sculpture
- **Plaza de Espana** with its ornate fountain
- **Montjuic Park** with panoramic views over the city
- **Barrio Gotico** (Gothic Quarter) with the cathedral
- **Poble Espanyol** (Spanish Village), recreating architectural styles around Spain
- **Tibidabo.** An amusement park on top of a hill
- **Barceloneta's** beaches, restaurants and night life



OUTSIDE BARCELONA



- **Girona** with one of Europe's best-preserved Jewish quarters
- **Figueres** with its surrealist Dali Museum
- **Montserrat.** An impressive basilica and shrine to a 12th-century black virgin.

About 40 miles from Barcelona and at 4,000 feet elevation, the Monasterio de Montserrat is nestled in a scenic setting of jagged mountains. The place has been Catalonia's most important pilgrimage site for centuries. Montserrat is a Benedictine monastery dating back to 880 AD. It was mostly destroyed by Napoleon's army but was subsequently rebuilt and today is a fine example of Romanesque architecture in pristine condition. It is also known as the sanctuary of the Virgin of Montserrat, the Moreneta, a black madonna and the patron saint of Catalonia. The live-in monks run a boys' school focusing on the study of music - hence the famous Montserrat Escolania choir. The site also boasts an interesting museum with works by El Greco, Picasso, Dalí and a few Impressionists (Renoir, Monet, Degas and Pissarro).

- **Sitges.** One of the most picturesque villages on the Catalan coast with beautiful beaches
- **Tarragona.** Roman architecture: amphitheater, aqueduct and an old town
- **The Penedes wine country** with world-famous "cava" wineries Codorniu and Freixenet. The Codorniu winery, located in Sant Sadurní d'Anoia - in the Penedes region just south of Barcelona - was founded in the middle of the 16th century. It is one of the world's largest producers of sparkling wine (called "cava" in Spain) made by the traditional "méthode champenoise" originally developed in the Champagne region of France. In addition to tasting the wine, a visit to Codorniu offers the added bonus of seeing its stunning Modernista-style building designed by Catalan architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch.



CORDOBA

Cordoba is a medium-sized city on the Guadalquivir River in Andalusia (southern Spain). It was founded in Roman times and later became the capital of the Caliphate of Córdoba, which governed almost all of the Iberian peninsula. It has been estimated that in the latter half of the tenth century Cordoba, with up to 500,000 inhabitants, was then the most populated city in Europe and possibly in the world. It was known as an advanced cultural and economic center. In 1236 it was captured from the Moors by King Ferdinand III during the Spanish *Reconquista*.



La Mezquita is a Roman Catholic cathedral originally built as a mosque on the site of what previously had been a Visigothic Christian church. In 784, Emir Abd ar-Rahman I started rebuilding the earlier Visigothic church as a mosque, a process which continued for two centuries. After the capture of Cordoba in 1236, the mosque was turned into a church, with a Gothic cathedral inserted into the center of the large Moorish building. Under Charles V, a Renaissance nave was added in the middle of the structure. Artisans and architects continued to add to the existing structure until the late 18th century. Today, you can really feel the centuries of history as you walk beneath the giant arches of various styles, formed by hundreds of columns of jasper, onyx, marble and granite.



Near the Mezquita on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, is the **Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos** ("Palace of the Christian Monarchs"). The fortress served as one of the primary residences of Queen Isabella of Castile and her husband King Ferdinand II of Aragon in the 15th century. The two monarchs also used the Alcázar for one of the first permanent tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition and as a headquarters for their campaign against the Nasrid dynasty in Granada, the last remaining Moorish kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula. In 1492, the monarchs met Christopher Columbus in the Alcázar before his first voyage to the Americas. Napoleon Bonaparte used the Alcázar as a garrison in 1810, after which it was turned into a prison.

The Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter of Córdoba, was built in the Mudejar style in 1315. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the building was devoted to various functions including a hospital, a chapel for shoemakers and a nursery school, but it retains its original character. It was declared a National Monument in 1885.

Other places of interest:

- **Old City Patios.** Private Andalusian courtyards decorated with flowers.
- **Calahorra Tower** with its Museum of Three Cultures (Jewish, Christian and Muslim)



GRANADA

The **Alhambra** is an expansive Moorish palace and fortress with unique architecture and beautiful gardens. This complex is a cluster of four different sites perched side by side on top of a hill: the **Nasrid Palace**, an exquisite combination of rooms and courtyards - the famous Courtyard of the Lions is one of them - where the Muslim rulers lived; the beautifully manicured **Generalife Gardens**, planted in the 1930s; the **Palace of Charles V**, Spain's most impressive Renaissance building; and the **Alcazaba**, an empty fortress with panoramic views over Granada. The Alhambra is one of the most visited tourist destinations in Europe. The culture and historical events reflected by this place makes for an incredible touring experience.

The **Albaicín** is Granada's ancient Moorish quarter reminiscent of a long-gone, mysterious world. Of particular interest is the Plaza de San Nicolas with breathtaking views of the Alhambra fortress on the hill facing it.

Granada's **Cathedral** is the second largest in Spain after Seville. It was started in the 16th century, and the massive structure displays a combination of Renaissance and Baroque styles. The main chapel contains two kneeling effigies of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella who finished the reconquest of Spain from the Moors in 1492.

Originally a Moorish silk market, the **Alcaceiria** is a network of narrow lanes laid out like an Arab bazaar. The atmosphere takes you back centuries. Today, it is still a market of sorts, although the shoppers are mainly tourists.

The lavish **Royal Chapel** is a mausoleum to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Catholic Monarchs who ruled at the time of the voyages of Christopher Columbus. It also holds the remains of their daughter Queen Juana (Joan the Mad), her husband Philip the Handsome and the Infante Miguel, their oldest grandson. The Chapel's lacy Plateresque Gothic style is richly ornate and one of the best examples of this style in Spain. The carved marble faces of the two monarchs are considered to be a good likeness of Ferdinand and Isabella. The high altar is one of the finest Renaissance works in all of Spain.





SEVILLE

Seville, located on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, is the artistic, cultural, and financial capital of southern Spain. Its known history goes back to Roman times, and since it was controlled by the Moors from 712 to 1248 AD, it was heavily influenced by Arabic culture. It was taken by the Catholic King Ferdinand III during the *Reconquista*.

The 15th-century **Cathedral of Seville** was built on the former site of the city's mosque. It is the largest Gothic cathedral in the world and is lavishly decorated with gold and silver from the New World. The famous *Giralda*, originally a minaret, was converted into a bell tower. The cathedral is also known for housing the remains of Christopher Columbus on a grand raised platform, although in recent years there has been some evidence presented that his remains may be still at the cathedral of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. In any event, the cathedral and the memorial to Columbus are quite impressive.

The **Alcázar of Seville** (Spanish "Alcázares Reales de Sevilla") is a royal palace across from the cathedral. Construction started in 1181 under the Moors and continued for over 500 years. Its peaceful gardens are a blend of Moorish, Andalusian, and Christian traditions. The palace is one of the best remaining examples of mudéjar architecture, and the upper levels are still used by the royal family as their official Seville residence.

The **Barrio de Santa Cruz**, the former Jewish quarter of the medieval city, which is characterized by narrow, winding streets and whitewashed houses.

Other places of interest:

- **Plaza de España** and **María Luisa Park**, both built for the 1929 Exposición Ibero-Americana international fair. The ceramic tile decorations illustrating provinces of Spain are exquisite.
- **Basilica de la Macarena** with its Weeping Virgin and floats used during the "Semana Santa" (Holy Week). If you can't attend the religious processions performed every spring in Seville, this at least gives a feel for the pageantry of those grandiose celebrations.
- The **Torre de Oro** (golden tower)
- **Casa de Pilatos**, a magnificent Mudéjar-style palace dating back to the 16th century.
- **La Isla Mágica** (Magic Island) theme park
- **Museo Palacio de la Condesa de Lebrija**, a stunningly beautiful 18th-century aristocratic mansion furnished with Phoenician, Greek, and Roman artifacts
- **La Maestranza** bull ring, one of the most famous in Spain
- **Salvador church** is the second largest church of Seville after the Cathedral
- **Museum of Fine Arts** where lesser-known but still top-notch art by Zurbarán, Murillo and others is on display
- Various other museums including a very informative **Flamenco Museum**.

OUTSIDE SEVILLE

The name of **Jerez de la Frontera** comes from the Arabic name *Xerez* or *Xeres*, and *Frontera* refers to its location on the frontier between the Moorish and Christian regions of Spain during the *Reconquista*, during which the Christians took Spain back from the Moors. "Sherry" - the name of the famous fortified wine that originated here - is an adaptation of the city's Arabic name, which is pronounced *Sherish*.

In addition to being known as the capital of sherry, Jerez is famous as the home of the **Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art**, a riding school comparable to the world-famous Spanish Riding School in Vienna. In May, the whole city celebrates the *Feria del Caballo* (Horse Fair).





Cadiz is an ancient port dating back to the Phoenicians and the Romans. In Christopher Columbus' days, it was a major staging point for treasure-hunting adventures to the New World. This bustling city on the Atlantic has an important port and a quaint old section with narrow streets lined with whitewashed, sun-bleached, Moorish-styled houses. The cathedral holds the tomb of native son composer Manuel de Falla.

Italica is the site of one of Spain's most impressive Roman ruins. This ancient place, a few miles outside Seville, used to be a thriving city of great military importance. Emperors Hadrian and Trajan were born there. A 20,000-spectator amphitheater, mosaic floors, thermal baths and a theater can be seen there today.

Merida (75 miles north of Seville, at the center of the Extremadura region) has Spain's largest and most amazing grouping of Roman structures: a well-preserved Teatro Romano, built in 25 B.C. (still used for theatrical performances today), an amphitheater, arches of an aqueduct, houses with exquisite mosaic floors and a impressive museum of Roman artifacts, the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano (designed by famous Spanish

architect Rafael Moneo). Merida also boasts a Moorish citadel and an 18th-century convent, now used as a luxury Parador hotel.

Ronda is one of the many pretty "white villages" of Andalusia. Perched on top of a rocky promontory, its beauty is enhanced by the dramatic location on either side of a 350-ft deep gorge spanned by a massive stone bridge built in the 18th century. The old section offers many beautifully decorated mansions with shaded patios as well as baths and minarets from the Moorish past. The new town holds the oldest bullring in Spain, built in the 1700s, complete with a small but informative bullfight museum. Located roughly half-way between Malaga and Seville, it is a very popular destination for visitors.



MALAGA

The Costa del Sol is best known for its sandy beaches and flashy resort towns lining the Mediterranean coast all the way to Gibraltar. But **Malaga**, in the middle of it, offers several sites of significant cultural interest: a beautiful, ornate cathedral, an ancient castle (the Alcazaba) and a Roman amphitheater. Plus, Pablo Picasso was born there in 1881. His house, located in the historical center can be visited and a tour of the Picasso Museum reveals a fine collection of works by the prolific artist.

VALENCIA

Valencia, Spain's third largest city, is the home of the famous Lladro porcelain factory, the birthplace of paella, horchata, Impressionist painter Joaquin Sorolla and famous architect Santiago Calatrava.

Valencia's crowning tourist attraction is the 90-acre City of Arts and Sciences Park designed by Santiago Calatrava. This ultra-modern complex includes a museum, a planetarium, a promenade and a recently finished performing arts center, plus the Oceanografic, a futuristic marine park created by another Spanish architect, Felix Candela - all within easy walking distance of one another.

The museum's outer structure is reminiscent of a giant whale or some prehistoric mastodon's skeleton resting on its side. Next to it, sitting in the middle of a man-made pond, is the planetarium with its glass dome glowing in the sun and mirrored in the perfectly still turquoise water. On the other side of the bridge, you can hardly miss the voluminous shape of the performing arts center. Some people have commented that it looks like the head of some insect from outer space.





Valencia is also known for its boisterous and colorful spring festival called Las Fallas, the biggest bonfire anywhere in the world. La Tomatina, a tomato-throwing festival in nearby Buñol, is another fun and messy celebration at the end of August.

This vibrant, “wild” and modern Mediterranean city also boasts an old town: A 13th-century cathedral with a massive octagonal bell tower, EI Miguelete, and what some believe to be the Holy Grail on the inside; the Torres de Serranos, two 14th-century towers that protected the entrance to the city; la Lonja de la Seda (Silk Exchange), a hall from the 15th century with Flamboyant Gothic architecture displaying grotesque sculptures and gargoyles on its façade. Other churches and museums can be seen in the old quarter, some of the most unusual being the Museo de Ceramica; the Museo Fallero showing “ninots” (figures made of papier-mache) from past Fallas Festivals; and the Museo San Pio V, a fine arts museum considered one of the best in Spain, with works by Velazquez, El Greco, Goya and Sorolla. South of the city is the Albufera Nature Park, with one of the largest fresh-water lakes in Spain.



GREEN SPAIN

There are lots of possibilities for visits and excursions in Northern Spain. When it comes to gourmet dining, the **Basque Country** is second to none. The Basques are famous for their Culinary Societies and their sophisticated cuisine (the Basque country - spreading in both France and Spain - has close to 20 Michelin-starred restaurants).



If you are interested in modern architecture you can enjoy the Guggenheim Museum in **Bilbao** and the avant-garde building of the Marques de Riscal Winery, in the Alava region, both designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehri. To these amazing structures add the large abstract sculptures of Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002) at the Chillida-Leku outdoor museum near Bilbao.

San Sebastian an elegant resort, with some of the most beautiful beaches in Spain. This city became famous when royalty and the rich and famous started vacationing there to escape the summer heat of Madrid. As the culinary capital of the Basque Country, it is

famous for its fine cuisine. Some of the nation’s leading chefs are from San Sebastian or practice their craft there. It boasts several Michelin-starred restaurants.

Other places of interest:

- **La Rioja**, just south of the Basque Country. La Rioja is to Spain as the Bordeaux wine region is to France.
- **Cantabria and Asturias** with breathtaking high mountain scenery in the Picos de Europa
- **Galicia** and the ancient pilgrimage city of Santiago de Compostela



So, there you have it - my take on where to go in Spain for fun and exciting travel experiences! Obviously, it would take more than a few pages to paint a complete picture of Spain’s heritage and culture. I haven’t touched on the subject of cuisine, for example. The Basque country alone has over a dozen Michelin-starred restaurants (two 3-star and one 2-star) and Catalonia has over two dozen (four 3-star and two 2-star). My goal is simply to give you our first-hand impressions of Spain, not to write a travel book - there are plenty of those. I hope these brief musings will encourage you to start planning your next Iberian expedition.

Don't forget to check our website for more travel articles: www.circatours.com (scroll to the bottom of the home page and click on the "Our Trip Stories" link).



Hello, my name is **Pierre Mainguené**. I am the author of the *Spain Highlights*.

I am the co-founder and president of Circa Tours. I was born and raised in Brittany, France. So, as a native European, I love everything about the "old country," especially France and Spain: the history (and there is lots of it), the arts (lots of that too), the lifestyle, the cuisine (in the case of Spain: Catalonia and the Basque Country), the wine (it's everywhere) and the endless diversity of local cultures.

In the many trips I have taken to Spain, I have traveled to nearly every corner of the country, and I continue my journey of discovery every year. I am a Travel-Institute certified Spain Specialist (and I am also recognized by the Tourist Office of Portugal as a certified Portugal Specialist).

My goal is to create the best possible trip for you. I am always ready to listen to your ideas (however creative), and I will always enjoy sharing my experiences with you.

That's me, by the way, in front of a Joaquin Sorolla painting in Madrid.

And, allow me to toot my own horn, while I'm at it. The following are comments made by a few of our clients:

- "Pierre. Thank you for your services. I really enjoyed dealing with you. You are so knowledgeable, pleasant and professional. I certainly will recommend you to friends." J. L., Colorado
- "It was not a good trip - it was a GREAT trip! Truly everything was fabulous, ran smoothly, and worked well. The guides were excellent, the itinerary perfect. We enjoyed Spain very much and will ask you for assistance on our next journey to southern Europe!" J.K., California
- "Circa Tours did a good job. They worked very closely with us in putting the program together. We were very pleased with how efficient everything ran. The information we received from Circa Tours was done up very well, which allowed us to just pull the appropriate paperwork and be on our way. The tours were very well done. The guides we had with the local travel providers did a very good job of explaining the areas we toured. Pierre at Circa Tours made sure we saw a bit of everything." D.T., Florida
- "We are all home, safe and sound - very tired, but in a hazy daze of love for France. Thank you and Carolyn SO much for arranging such an amazing trip for all of us. Throughout the trip, my sisters, mom and myself could be heard saying such things as, "THANK YOU, PIERRE"...or, "thank goodness for Pierre!!!" Martine was an excellent guide, by the way...very good, nice, thorough and professional. We wouldn't have been able to do HALF of what we did (and certainly not with nearly as much carefree enjoyment) with out her. Thank you and Carolyn for all of you expertise and care in helping us and doing all of the hard work for us! Thank you! Thank you!!!" K.B., Iowa