SPANISH GOLD

Beyond its golden beaches, Spain is a treasure trove of art, architecture and design, thanks to a captivating history and vibrant contemporary cultural scene

Passionate, regal and unequivocally diverse, few countries have left more of a mark on the world than Spain. The European nation dominates the Iberian Peninsula, spilling out onto both the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea – home of the Spanish Balearic and Canary Islands. In Spain, heritage dances on the warm breeze, from the sun-bleached plains of Andalusia to its cities of Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and Seville.

Spain is a powerhouse when it comes to art, culture and design. Travellers will find world-famous museums, enchanting surrealist structures and the vestiges of some of the world's greatest ruling empires among the many attractions – many of which offer unique, bespoke experiences for visitors.

THE ART OF LIVING

Spain has given birth to some of the most trail-blazing creatives in history, and paying homage to one of its greatest sons is the Picasso Museum, located in the Andalusian city of Malaga. Over 200 of Pablo Picasso's works are exhibited at the terracotta-hued Palacio de Buenavista, with private guides and art historians on hand for personalised tours. Visits to the sprawling museum culminate at the terrace, offering views over the gold-tinted city to the Mediterranean Sea.

A similarly captivating experience can be found at the 200-year-old Prado, standing tall amongst the leafy boulevards of Spain's regal capital Madrid. Before opening its doors to swathes of tourists, the Prado allows just a handful of guests to wander its empty halls, allowing them to gaze upon works such as *Las Meninas* by Velázquez, *The Third of May 1808* by Goya and *The Three Graces* by Rubens, along with a multitude of Spanish artists.

For art lovers, no visit to Spain is complete without paying homage to the father of surrealism, Salvador Dalí. In his Catalonian hometown of Figueres, travellers will find his final piece of fantastical extravagance, the Theatre-Museum. Ruby red and flanked by cypress trees, the museum houses 1,500 fascinating pieces. A luxury vehicle is on hand to whisk you to the museum from the myriad plush hotels in the region, where an official guide offers tailor-made tours. In summertime, the hauntingly beautiful museum is available to view by moonlight.

The Guggenheim museum in the Basque city of Bilbao is another must-see. Moored in the estuary like a ship that never sails, its flowing, twisting steel and titanium structure is the distinctive work of architect Frank O. Gehry. Admire art by Jeff Koons, Louis Bourgeois, Chillida and Richard Serra before heading to the mountains of Rioja to explore another Gehry masterpiece, the Marqués De Riscal winery (pictured, left).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dalí's Theatre-Museum; horsemanship on display; the Prado's Statue of Velázquez; Alcázar de Segovia; shopping in Madrid.

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TIMELESS BEAUTY

Dating back to antiquity, Greeks, Romans, Moors and Iberians have all laid claim to Spain's evocative landscape, its rich Islamic history most palpable in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain above Granada. Here, the rose-tinted Alhambra Palace sprawls across the citadel, once the centre of the mighty Moorish empire and today a complex of centuries-old palaces, gardens and forts. Inside, there are myriad impressive sights including like the Patio de los Leones and lion fountain, and enfilades of intricate, stucco arches and Arabesque mosaics and courtyards, their once bold colours now faded by the Spanish sun. As you wander alone or with your guide, take in the Nasrid palaces and 13th-century Alcazaba fortress, or climb to the Torre de la Vela for picturesque views over leafy Granada.

Further north, another fairy-tale-like setting can be found just outside of Madrid in the enchanting provincial town of Segovia. Perched atop a rocky outcrop at the confluence of two rivers, the mighty Alcázar de Segovia is an imposing landmark with its turrets and soaring stone walls. Intimate guided tours are available for the castle, a fortress for the kings of Castile and a maze of medieval tapestries and antique furnishings. There's even the chance to visit at night to gaze up at the starry sky from the Homenaje Tower – once the astronomy-loving king's observatory. For acolytes of culture and design, there's nowhere quite like Spain, a country which will stir your soul, capture your heart and never let go. *spain.info/gcc*