Travel to Spain

A Practical Guide



C. Richard Penalta, Esq. and Alexander Penalta, Esq.

Travel to Spain: A Practical Guide

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A Note Before You Go

Spain rewards the prepared traveler. This guide was written for Americans planning a first trip to Spain, or a return visit done better than the last one. It covers the practical questions that matter: when to go, what it costs, how to get in, how to get around, what to eat and when to eat it, how to stay safe, and how to string it all together into one or two weeks that feel unhurried.

The travel information in this guide is current as of September 2026. Entry and authorization rules for Europe have been in flux, so the chapter on entry requirements explains the situation as it stands and tells you exactly where to check for updates before you book. When in doubt, verify with the official source cited, not with a travel blog.

Now, to Spain.

Chapter 1: Why Spain

Spain is the rare destination that delivers on every kind of trip at once. In a single two-week visit you can stand inside a 13th-century Gothic cathedral in the morning, eat lunch in a market hall that smells of smoked paprika, ride a 190-mile-per-hour train across a high desert plateau, and be swimming in the Mediterranean by late afternoon. Few countries compress that much variety into such manageable distances.

The numbers tell part of the story. Spain is the second most visited country on earth, drawing tens of millions of international visitors a year, and Americans are among the most enthusiastic return visitors. The infrastructure shows it: world-class high-speed rail, modern airports, an enormous range of hotels from family-run pensiones to design hotels, and a restaurant culture that treats a Tuesday lunch with the seriousness other countries reserve for anniversaries.

But the deeper reason to go is the daily rhythm of Spanish life. Spain runs on its own clock, and surrendering to it is half the pleasure. Lunch is the main event, eaten at two in the afternoon. Dinner starts when Americans are thinking about dessert, around nine or ten at night. The evening paseo, the after-dinner stroll through the old town, is a social institution. Squares fill with families at midnight. A bar can be standing room only at one in the morning on a Wednesday, full of people who have work the next day and do not seem to mind.

Spain is also seventeen autonomous communities wearing one national costume loosely. Catalonia has its own language and a capital, Barcelona, that feels like a separate country. The Basque Country has a language unrelated to any other living tongue and a food culture that may be the finest in Europe. Andalusia carries eight centuries of Moorish civilization in its palaces, gardens, and place names. Galicia feels Celtic and misty, more Ireland than Iberia. A trip that visits three regions can feel like three trips.

For the American traveler, Spain is also unusually easy. No visa is required for short tourist visits. English is widely spoken in hotels, restaurants, and attractions in the major cities. The euro removes currency math. Direct flights from the United States land in Madrid and Barcelona in about eight to nine hours from the East Coast. And the value is real: a superb three-course lunch with wine can cost less than a mediocre sandwich back home.

This guide will help you plan the practical side so you can enjoy the rest. It starts with timing, then the paperwork of getting in, then money, then the regions themselves, then the logistics of moving

around, eating well, and staying safe. It closes with two complete itineraries, packing and pre-trip checklists, answers to the questions every traveler asks, and a short list of resources worth bookmarking.



The Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace) in El Retiro Park, Madrid, built in 1887 as a glasshouse for exotic plants and now one of the city's most photographed landmarks.

The Glass Palace was built in 1887 to house exotic plants from the Philippines, then a Spanish colony. It stands on the lake in El Retiro Park, Madrid's green heart, and now hosts rotating art exhibitions with free entry. Rowboats on the lake in front of it are one of Madrid's classic afternoons.

Chapter 2: When to Go

There is no bad month to visit Spain, but there are better and worse months for the trip you have in mind. Spain's climate splits roughly into three zones: the green, rainy north; the high, dry central plateau with hot summers and cold winters; and the Mediterranean and Andalusian south with mild winters and scorching summers. Pick your season to match your route.

Spring: April through June

Spring is the sweet spot for most itineraries. Temperatures sit in the 60s and 70s Fahrenheit across most of the country. Wildflowers cover the Andalusian hillsides. Crowds are moderate, prices are reasonable, and the great festivals arrive: Semana Santa (Holy Week) processions in Seville and Malaga, usually in March or April, and Seville's Feria de Abril, a week of dancing, drinking, and horse parades two weeks after Easter. Valencia's Las Fallas, a spectacular festival of giant satirical sculptures that are burned on March 19, technically closes out winter but sets the tone for spring.

Book festival weeks well ahead. Hotel prices in Seville during Semana Santa and Feria can double or triple, and the best rooms sell out months in advance.

Summer: July and August

Summer belongs to the coasts and islands, and the Spanish know it: August is the national vacation month, when city dwellers empty Madrid for the beach and many small businesses in the capital close for a week or two. Coastal Spain in summer is glorious, with warm Mediterranean water, long evenings, and beach towns at full energy.

Inland, summer is a different story. Seville, Cordoba, and Granada regularly top 100 degrees Fahrenheit in July and August, and sightseeing in that heat is punishing. Madrid is hot but manageable, and Barcelona's sea breeze helps. If your trip must be in summer, weight it toward the north (San Sebastian, Bilbao, Galicia) and the coasts, or plan Andalusia for early morning and late evening with a long midday rest, which is exactly what the locals do.

Summer is also festival season in the north: San Fermin in Pamplona (July 6 to 14), with the famous running of the bulls, and countless local fiestas.

Fall: September and October

Fall rivals spring as the best all-around season. September still feels like summer on the coasts, with warm seas and thinning crowds. October brings harvest season: wine regions like Rioja and Ribera del Duero are at their most beautiful, and many bodegas welcome visitors for the vendimia. Temperatures in Andalusia drop back into the comfortable 70s and 80s. Prices ease after the August peak.

Late October into November, the weather turns unsettled in the north and on the central plateau, but southern Spain stays pleasant.

Winter: November through March

Winter is Spain's secret season for city trips. Madrid and Barcelona in December and January are crisp and sunny more often than not, with daytime temperatures in the 50s, far smaller crowds at the Prado and the Sagrada Familia, and the lowest hotel rates of the year. Christmas markets and lights make December especially atmospheric.

The south shines in winter: Seville and Malaga see 60-degree days in January, and the Costa del Sol earns its name. Skiers head to the Sierra Nevada above Granada, Europe's southernmost major ski resort, or the Pyrenees. The one caution: winter days are short, some coastal businesses close from November to February, and Galicia and the north coast can be genuinely wet and gray.

The Festival Calendar at a Glance

- **Las Fallas, Valencia** (March 15 to 19): enormous sculptures, fireworks, and the final night's burning.
- **Semana Santa** (March/April, dates vary): solemn Holy Week processions, most famously in Seville and Malaga.
- **Feria de Abril, Seville** (two weeks after Easter): a week-long fair of flamenco, sherry, and celebration.
- **San Fermin, Pamplona** (July 6 to 14): running of the bulls and round-the-clock fiesta.
- **La Tomatina, Bunol** (last Wednesday of August): the famous tomato fight, near Valencia.

- **Christmas and Three Kings** (December to January 6): markets, lights, and the Cabalgata parade on January 5.

Festivals transform the cities that host them, for better and for worse. If you want the festival, book six months ahead. If you do not, check the dates and steer around them.



Flamenco, born in Andalusia, is on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Seville and Granada offer nightly performances in intimate tablaos.

Flamenco was born in Andalusia, with deep roots in the Roma communities of Seville's Triana neighborhood and the Sacromonte caves of Granada. A performance is a conversation between the singer, the guitarist, and the dancer, and the best shows are in small tablaos, not tourist dinner theaters. Book a late show; flamenco starts after ten.

Chapter 3: Entry Requirements for US Travelers

This chapter describes the entry rules as they stand in September 2026. European entry systems have changed on a shifting schedule for years, so read this chapter for the framework, then verify the current status at the official sources listed before you book anything. Do not rely on third-party websites that claim to process travel authorizations; several are scams.

The Basics: Visa-Free Travel

United States citizens do not need a visa to visit Spain for tourism or business. You may stay up to **90 days within any 180-day period** in the Schengen Area, which includes Spain and most of continental Europe. The 90 days are cumulative across all Schengen countries, not per country: ten days in Spain plus ten days in France counts as twenty days toward your ninety.

Your passport must be valid for at least **three months beyond your planned departure date** from the Schengen Area, and it must have been issued within the last ten years. In practice, travel with at least six months of validity remaining to avoid any argument at check-in.

The Entry/Exit System (EES)

The European Union began rolling out the Entry/Exit System in October 2025. Under this system, non-EU travelers have their passport details and biometric data (a facial image and fingerprints) registered electronically when they first enter the Schengen Area. On later trips, the process is faster. The practical effect for American visitors is a somewhat longer first passport-control experience and no more passport stamps in many cases. There is nothing to apply for in advance; enrollment happens at the border.

ETIAS: The Travel Authorization (Not Yet Required)

The European Travel Information and Authorisation System, usually called ETIAS, is the item that generates the most confusion, so here is the situation plainly.

As of September 2026, **ETIAS is not in operation and no traveler needs one**. The European Union had targeted the last quarter of 2026 for launch, but that target was removed from the official EU website in mid-July 2026, and reporting since then points to a launch sometime in 2027. No firm date has been announced.

When ETIAS does launch, this is what is expected, based on the EU's published plans:

- It will apply to visa-exempt visitors, including US citizens, traveling to 30 European countries.
- It is a travel authorization, not a visa. Americans will still travel visa-free; they will simply complete an online pre-screening first, similar to the US ESTA system.
- The application will be online, take about ten minutes, and cost 20 euros (free for travelers under 18 and over 70).
- The authorization will be valid for three years or until the passport expires, whichever comes first, and will be linked electronically to the passport.
- The exact start date must be announced well in advance of the requirement taking effect.

Three warnings matter. First, **any website offering to process an ETIAS application today is a scam**; the system does not exist yet and no application is possible. Second, the United Kingdom is not part of the Schengen Area or ETIAS; it has its own separate Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for US visitors. Third, rules can change between this writing and your trip, so check the official source below about a month before departure and again the week before.

Official source to verify: the European Union's travel site for ETIAS (search "EU ETIAS official" and use only the europa.eu result). For Spain-specific entry information, consult the US State Department's country page for Spain and the Spanish consulate guidance.

At the Border

Even visa-free travelers can be asked to show a return or onward ticket, proof of accommodation, and evidence of sufficient funds for the stay. In practice, Americans arriving with a passport, a return ticket, and a hotel booking pass through with minimal questioning. Keep your first night's hotel confirmation accessible on your phone.

Chapter 4: Money and Budgeting

Spain is one of Western Europe's best values. It is not the cheapest country on the continent, but the quality you get for the price, especially in food, is unmatched. A traveler who would feel squeezed in Paris or London lives comfortably in Spain on the same budget.

The Currency

Spain uses the euro. Banknotes come in 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 denominations (the 500 is rare in daily life); coins run from 1 cent to 2 euros. Prices include VAT, so the price on the tag is the price you pay.

Cards, Cash, and ATMs

Credit and debit cards are accepted nearly everywhere in cities: hotels, restaurants, shops, taxis, and even many market stalls take contactless payment. Visa and Mastercard are universal; American Express is accepted in fewer places. Chip-and-PIN is the norm, though most US chip-and-signature cards work fine, and contactless phone payment (Apple Pay, Google Pay) is widespread.

Still, carry some cash. Small bars, rural restaurants, market vendors, and tips are easier in euros. Withdraw from a **bank-affiliated ATM** (look for Santander, BBVA, CaixaBank, or Sabadell branding) rather than standalone tourist ATMs, which charge steep fees. When an ATM or card terminal offers to convert the charge into dollars for you, always decline and choose to pay in euros; the terminal's exchange rate is far worse than your card issuer's.

Before you leave home, get a credit card with **no foreign transaction fee** if you do not already have one; the typical 3 percent fee adds up over two weeks. Tell your bank your travel dates so a sudden string of Spanish charges does not trigger a fraud block.

What Things Cost

Prices below are rough planning figures for 2026, and they vary sharply between Madrid/Barcelona and smaller cities.

- **Budget traveler:** 100 to 150 euros per day. Hostel or budget hotel, menu del dia lunches, tapas dinners, public transport, one paid sight a day.
- **Mid-range traveler:** 180 to 280 euros per day. Comfortable three-star hotel or apartment, a mix of casual and sit-down restaurants, high-speed trains between cities, several paid attractions.
- **Comfortable traveler:** 300 euros and up per day. Four-star hotels, top restaurants, private tours, taxis.

For reference: a coffee runs 1.50 to 2.50 euros standing at a bar, a glass of house wine 2.50 to 4 euros, a three-course menu del dia lunch 14 to 20 euros, a tapas dinner with drinks 20 to 35 euros per person, a high-speed train between major cities 30 to 90 euros booked ahead, and major museum or monument entry 10 to 16 euros.

Tipping

Spain does not have an American-style tipping culture, and service staff are paid full wages. The customs:

- **Bars and cafes:** leave the small change or round up; nothing expected.

- **Restaurants:** 5 to 10 percent for good service at dinner is generous; at lunch, rounding up is fine. A service charge is almost never added.
- **Taxis:** round up to the nearest euro.
- **Hotels:** a euro or two per bag for porters; a few euros per night for housekeeping at nicer hotels is appreciated but not required.
- **Guides:** 5 to 10 euros per person for a good half-day tour.

Saving Money Without Sacrificing the Trip

- Eat the **menu del dia** at lunch: a three-course fixed menu with wine or beer, often the best value in European dining.
- Book **trains early**: high-speed fares work like airline tickets, cheapest weeks ahead.
- Travel in **shoulder season** (April to June, September to October) for lower hotel rates.
- Stay in **apartments** for trips of four nights or more in one city; kitchens cut breakfast costs.
- Many major museums have **free hours** (often Sunday mornings or weekday evenings); check ahead.
- Fill a **reusable water bottle**: Spanish tap water is safe in nearly all cities.



Jamón ibérico, Spain's celebrated cured ham, hanging in a Barcelona shop. Food markets are both a sightseeing stop and a budget strategy: assemble picnic supplies for a fraction of restaurant prices.

Jamon iberico de bellota comes from black-hoof pigs raised on acorns in the oak dehesas of western Spain, cured for up to four years. It is eaten alone, sliced paper-thin, often with nothing but bread. In market halls and bars across Spain, a leg on the stand is as common as a coffee machine.

Chapter 5: The Regions of Spain

Spain's regions differ the way American regions differ: in accent, in food, in attitude, and sometimes in language. This chapter covers the places first-time visitors most often combine, with the highlights that justify the stop and the practical notes that make it smooth.

Madrid and Central Spain

Madrid is Spain's geographic and cultural center: elegant, energetic, and gloriously livable. Unlike Barcelona, it has no beach and no single postcard monument; its pleasures are cumulative. The great art museums anchor any visit. The **Prado** holds one of the world's finest collections of European art, Velazquez, Goya, El Greco, Bosch, in a building you could spend two days in. The **Reina Sofia** is Madrid's modern answer, home to Picasso's Guernica. The **Thyssen-Bornemisza** fills the gaps between them. Buy timed tickets online for all three.

Between museums, Madrid is a city of grand public spaces. **El Retiro Park** is the city's green heart, with rowboats on the lake and the glass Palacio de Cristal. The **Royal Palace** offers opulent state rooms and an armory. **Plaza Mayor** and the winding streets around it are made for wandering. For food, head to **La Latina** on a Sunday, when the El Rastro flea market gives way to the city's best tapeo crawl along Calle Cava Baja, or to the Mercado de San Miguel for a glossy (if touristy) tasting hall.

Madrid makes the ideal base because of its day trips, all under an hour by train:

- **Toledo** (30 minutes by high-speed train): the former capital, a walled hill town of cathedral, synagogue, mosque, and El Greco's house and masterpieces. Its steel blades have been famous since Roman times, and sword and knife workshops still line the old town. Go early; day-trippers flood the center by noon.
- **Segovia** (27 minutes): a jaw-dropping 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct and a fairy-tale castle, the Alcazar.
- **El Escorial** (under an hour): Philip II's immense monastery-palace, a monument to imperial Spain.



Toledo, the "city of three cultures," rises above the Tagus River. Its cathedral and medieval streets make it the classic day trip from Madrid.

Toledo was the capital of Spain before Madrid, and its old town compresses two thousand years of history into a hilltop maze: a Gothic cathedral, two preserved synagogues, a former mosque, and the house and masterpieces of El Greco. The "city of three cultures" name comes from the centuries when Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities lived and worked side by side here. Arrive before 10 am; by noon the day-trippers from Madrid fill every lane.



Toledo steel: blades have been forged here for over two thousand years, and the old town's workshops keep the craft alive.

Toledo steel has been prized since Roman times, when the legions sought out blades forged on the Tagus. The craft survived the Visigoths, the Moors, and the Christian reconquest, and the old town's workshops still forge swords, knives, and armor by hand. A blade stamped Toledo remains the souvenir that actually means something.

Barcelona and Catalonia

Barcelona is Spain's most visited city and its most architecturally astonishing. The modernista movement, Catalonia's version of Art Nouveau, left the city a collection of buildings that look dreamed rather than designed, most of them by Antoni Gaudi. **La Sagrada Familia**, his unfinished basilica, is the single most visited monument in Spain; book timed entry weeks ahead, and go in the morning when light streams through the stained glass. **Park Guell**, his mosaic-covered garden-city on the hill, requires timed tickets for the monumental zone. The **Casa Batllo** and **Casa Mila (La Pedrera)** on the Passeig de Gracia show his residential genius.

Beyond Gaudi, walk the **Gothic Quarter** for medieval streets and the cathedral, cross Las Ramblas once (and only once; it is a pickpocket gauntlet), and spend an evening in **El Born** or **Gracia** for bars the locals actually use. The **Barceloneta** beach is fine for a city swim, though the prettier beaches lie up and down the coast. **Montjuic** hill offers the Miró museum, the Olympic stadium, and sunset views over the port. Food-wise, Barcelona excels at seafood, vermouth bars, and market halls: **La Boqueria** is famous and crowded; **Santa Caterina** and **Poblenou** markets are calmer.

Catalonia beyond the city rewards a day or two: the mountain monastery of **Montserrat** (an hour by train and cable car), the Dalí Theatre-Museum in **Figueres**, and the medieval town of **Girona**.



La Sagrada Familia, Antoni Gaudi's basilica, under construction since 1882. Timed tickets are essential; morning light through the stained glass is unforgettable.

Antoni Gaudi took over the Sagrada Familia in 1883 and devoted the rest of his life to it; he is buried in its crypt. The basilica has been under construction for over 140 years, funded entirely by private donations and ticket sales. Go in the morning, when the sun streams through the stained glass and floods the nave with color.



Park Guell's mosaic salamander, "El Drac," guards Gaudi's stairway. The monumental zone requires timed tickets booked in advance.

Park Guell began as a failed luxury housing development and became Gaudi's mosaic-covered garden city on the hill above Barcelona. The salamander on the stairway, covered in trencadis broken-tile mosaic, is the park's mascot and its most photographed resident. Timed tickets are required for the monumental zone; the surrounding park is free.

Andalusia: Seville, Granada, Cordoba, and Beyond

Andalusia is the Spain of the imagination: flamenco, orange blossom, whitewashed villages, and the great monuments of eight centuries of Moorish civilization. It is also Spain's horse country, home of the Andalusian breed whose bloodlines run through the white Lipizzan stallions of classical dressage. It is also the hottest region in summer, so spring and fall visits are ideal.



The white Lipizzan stallions of classical dressage descend from Spanish Andalusian stock, a living link to Andalusia's centuries-old horse culture.

The white Lipizzan stallions of classical dressage trace their bloodlines to the Spanish Andalusian horses brought to the imperial stud at Lipizza centuries ago. Andalusia remains Spain's horse country, and the Feria de Abril in Seville fills the streets with riders in traditional dress. Equestrian shows run year-round at the Royal Andalusian School in Jerez.

Seville is Andalusia's capital and, many travelers say, Spain's most beautiful city. The **Cathedral**, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, and its minaret-turned-bell-tower, the **Giralda**, dominate the old town. The **Real Alcazar** is a palace of Mudejar splendor still used by the Spanish royal family, with gardens made for lingering. The **Plaza de Espana**, built for the 1929 exposition, is a semicircular marvel of tile and bridges. The **Santa Cruz** quarter's narrow lanes are the place to get happily lost, and the **Triana** neighborhood across the river is flamenco's historic home. Eat well and cheaply: Seville's tapas bars are among Spain's best.

Granada exists for one reason above all: the **Alhambra**, the 13th-century Nasrid palace-fortress, arguably the most beautiful building in Europe. Tickets sell out weeks or months ahead; book the moment your dates are firm, choosing a morning Nasrid Palaces entry. The **Albaicin**, the old Moorish quarter of whitewashed lanes facing the Alhambra, and the **Sacromonte** caves, birthplace of flamenco's zambra, complete the visit. Granada's famous custom of a free tapa with every drink makes bar-hopping gloriously economical.

Cordoba holds the **Mezquita**, the Great Mosque turned cathedral, a forest of 856 striped arches that stops first-time visitors mid-step. It pairs perfectly as a stop between Seville and Granada, or as a day trip. In May, the city's **Patio Festival** opens private flower-filled courtyards to the public.

Beyond the big three: **Malaga** has reinvented itself with the Picasso Museum and a lively port; **Ronda** perches above a 300-foot gorge spanned by the Puente Nuevo; and the **pueblos blancos**, white villages like Frigiliana, Mijas, and Zahara, dot the hills inland from the Costa del Sol.



Seville's Plaza de Espana, built for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition: a half-mile semicircle of tiled alcoves representing every Spanish province.

The Plaza de Espana was built for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition: a half-mile semicircle of brick, tile, and bridges, each province of Spain given its own tiled alcove with scenes from its history. Come at golden hour, when the tilework glows and the rowboats drift across the canal.



The Alhambra, the 13th-century Nasrid palace above Granada. Book tickets the moment your dates are firm; the Nasrid Palaces entry routinely sells out.

The Alhambra is the last and greatest palace of Moorish Spain, built by the Nasrid dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries. Its stucco walls carry carved inscriptions, its courtyards are built around water, and the Generalife gardens above it were the sultans' summer retreat. The Nasrid Palaces entry routinely sells out weeks ahead; book the moment your dates are firm.



Inside Cordoba's Mezquita: 856 columns and double arches of red brick and white stone, the great mosque's forest of pillars, now a cathedral.

Cordoba's Mezquita was the largest mosque in the Western world, its forest of 856 columns and double arches unlike anything else in Europe. After the Christian reconquest in 1236 it was consecrated as a cathedral, and a Renaissance nave now rises from the center of the old prayer hall. Visit early in the morning for the quietest light.



Ronda's Puente Nuevo (New Bridge), completed in 1793, spans the 300-foot El Tajo gorge. The town is an easy day trip from Malaga or Seville.

Ronda's Puente Nuevo, the "New Bridge," took forty years to build and was completed in 1793, spanning the 300-foot El Tajo gorge. The town above it is one of Spain's oldest bullfighting centers and a favorite of Hemingway and Orson Welles. It makes an easy day trip from Malaga or Seville.

The Basque Country and Northern Spain

Spain's north is a different country in all but name: green, rainy, and fiercely proud. **San Sebastian (Donostia)** is the culinary capital of Spain and a contender for the culinary capital of Europe. Its Parte Vieja (old town) packs dozens of pintxo bars into a few streets; the ritual is txoko-hopping, one small plate and one small drink per bar. The city's crescent beach, La Concha, is regularly voted among Europe's finest urban beaches. **Bilbao**, an hour west, anchors the **Guggenheim Museum**, Frank Gehry's titanium landmark that transformed the city, plus a superb old town of its own.

Further west, **Galicia** offers Santiago de Compostela, the cathedral city at the end of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, and some of Spain's best seafood. The **Picos de Europa** mountains and the Asturias coast suit hikers and drivers. Northern Spain shines in summer, when the rest of the country bakes; expect rain as the price of green.

Valencia and the East Coast

Valencia, Spain's third city, is where paella was born, and it guards the recipe with pride. The old town's cathedral claims the Holy Grail; the **City of Arts and Sciences**, Santiago Calatrava's white fantasy of concert halls and an oceanarium, anchors the modern city; and the **Turia Gardens**, a park built in a diverted riverbed, runs for miles through the center. Eat paella at lunch in a beachside restaurant in the Cabanyal district, and order the authentic version: rabbit, chicken, and beans, not seafood and chorizo.

South of Valencia, the **Costa Blanca** offers resort beaches; north, the **Ebro Delta** and the medieval streets of Tarragona reward slower travel.



Paella valenciana in its wide, shallow pan. In Valencia, paella is lunch food, eaten at midday, and the authentic recipe uses rabbit and chicken, never chorizo.

The Islands: Balearics and Canaries

The **Balearic Islands** in the Mediterranean are an easy add-on: a short flight or overnight ferry from Barcelona or Valencia. **Mallorca** combines a handsome capital (Palma, with its sandstone cathedral), mountain villages in the Serra de Tramuntana, and coves of startlingly clear water. **Menorca** is quieter and greener, a biosphere reserve of beaches and prehistoric monuments. **Ibiza** is famous for nightlife but hides a UNESCO-listed old town and calm northern coves.

The **Canary Islands**, off the African coast, are Spain's winter-sun answer: Tenerife, Gran Canaria, and Lanzarote average 70 degrees in January. They are a longer flight, best as a dedicated week or a winter extension.



Mallorca's coves pair white sand with startlingly clear water. The Balearics are a short flight from Barcelona or Valencia, or an overnight ferry.

Mallorca's calas, small turquoise coves cut into limestone cliffs, are the island's signature. Calo des Moro and Cala Llombards in the southeast are among the most photographed, and they fill by mid-morning in summer. Go early, bring water shoes for the rocks, and stay for the evening light.

Chapter 6: Getting Around

Spain's transport network is one of Europe's best, and choosing the right mode for each leg shapes the whole trip. The rule of thumb: trains between major cities, flights for long jumps and islands, rental cars for villages and coasts, and your feet everywhere else.

High-Speed Trains: The AVE Network

Spain operates Europe's largest high-speed rail network, and it is the backbone of most itineraries. The flagship **AVE** trains, run by the state operator Renfe, connect Madrid with Barcelona, Seville, Malaga, Valencia, Cordoba, Zaragoza, and more at speeds up to 190 miles per hour. Two low-cost competitors, **Ouigo** and **Iryo**, run many of the same routes, and competition has driven fares down sharply.

Key journey times from Madrid:

- Madrid to Barcelona: about 2 hours 30 minutes
- Madrid to Seville: about 2 hours 30 minutes
- Madrid to Valencia: about 1 hour 40 minutes

- Madrid to Malaga: about 2 hours 40 minutes
- Madrid to Cordoba: about 1 hour 45 minutes
- Barcelona to Seville: about 5 hours 30 minutes (consider flying)

Book at the operators' own websites (Renfe, Ouigo, Iryo) or a reputable aggregator. Fares work like airline tickets: cheapest weeks in advance, most expensive at the station. City-center to city-center, with no airport security theater, the train usually beats flying for trips under three hours. Luggage limits are generous, and the ride is smooth enough to work or nap.

For regional routes, Renfe's slower Media Distancia and Cercanias (commuter) trains fill the gaps: Toledo, Segovia, and El Escorial from Madrid; Montserrat from Barcelona; Jerez from Seville.

Domestic Flights

Spain's domestic air network is dense and cheap. **Iberia**, **Vueling**, and **Air Europa** compete on trunk routes, and low-cost carriers cover the islands. Flying makes sense for Barcelona to Seville or Granada (five-plus hours by train), for Madrid to Bilbao or Santiago, and for any island hop. The Madrid-Barcelona **air shuttle** runs almost hourly. Budget 45 minutes to reach Barajas airport from central Madrid, and similar for El Prat from Barcelona.

Rental Cars

Rent a car for the parts of Spain the trains skip: Andalusia's white villages, the Basque and Galician coasts, Extremadura, the Pyrenees, and island interiors. The highways are excellent, signage is clear, and driving is on the right, as in the US.

Practical notes: you will need your US driver's license plus an **International Driving Permit**, easily obtained from AAA before departure; Spanish law requires it for non-EU licenses. Book automatic transmissions well ahead; most rental fleets are manual. Speed limits are 120 km/h on highways, 90 on rural roads, 50 in towns, with heavy camera enforcement. Some autopistas are toll roads; keep a credit card handy. In old towns, do not attempt to drive into historic centers; park outside and walk.

Getting Around Cities

Madrid and Barcelona both have superb metro systems: cheap, fast, and air-conditioned. Buy multi-ride or multi-day passes. Taxis are regulated and metered; ride-hailing apps (Uber, Cabify, Bolt) operate in major cities. Seville, Granada, Valencia, and Bilbao are compact enough that a central hotel puts most sights within walking distance.

One cultural note: Spaniards walk, a lot, and late. A 10 pm stroll through the old town is not tourism; it is participation.



Spain's AVE high-speed trains link Madrid with Barcelona, Seville, Malaga, and Valencia at up to 190 mph. Book early for the lowest fares; Ouigo and Iryo compete on the busiest routes.

The AVE runs city center to city center with no airport security theater: Madrid to Barcelona in about two and a half hours, Madrid to Seville about the same. Luggage limits are generous and the ride is smooth enough to work or nap. Fares work like airline tickets, cheapest weeks in advance.

Chapter 7: Food and Dining Culture

Spain may be the best-fed country in Europe, and its food culture is as much about rhythm as about recipes. Understand the schedule, and you will eat twice as well for half the price. Fight the schedule, and you will find closed kitchens and puzzled waiters.

The Spanish Eating Day

Forget everything about meal times. The Spanish day runs roughly like this:

- **Desayuno (breakfast), 7:30 to 10 am:** light. Coffee and toast, or churros con chocolate on weekends. Hotel breakfasts are the main exception.
- **Almuerzo (mid-morning snack), 11 am to noon:** workers take a break for a bocadillo (sandwich) or pincho.
- **Comida (lunch), 1:30 to 3:30 pm:** the main meal of the day. Restaurants serve their best value now: the menu del dia.
- **Merienda (afternoon snack), 5 to 7 pm:** something small, often with children after school.

- **Cena (dinner), 9 to 11 pm:** lighter than lunch for locals, though visitors tend to make it the big event. Restaurants open for dinner around 8:30; arriving at 7 will get you an empty room.

Kitchens commonly close between 4 and 8 pm. Plan around it: eat a big lunch, snack at six, dine at ten. Within three days your body adjusts, and you will wonder why you ever ate dinner at six.

Tapas, Pintxos, and the Art of the Crawl

Tapas are small plates, and **tapear** (or ir de tapas) is the crawl from bar to bar, one or two plates per stop. The etiquette: order a drink and a tapa, eat standing or at a small table, pay, move on. Classic tapas include tortilla espanola (potato omelet), patatas bravas, pimientos de padron, gambas al ajillo (garlic shrimp), and croquetas.

Tortilla espanola deserves its own introduction. Potato, egg, and olive oil, cooked thick in a skillet and served in wedges at room temperature. Every bar has its own version, and every Spaniard has a strong opinion about the right one, starting with whether the center should be juicy or fully set. It is the tapa that never leaves the menu.



Tortilla espanola: the essential tapa, potato and egg in wedges at room temperature.

Regional rules matter. In **Granada, Leon, and parts of Andalusia**, a tapa arrives free with every drink, chosen by the house. In the **Basque Country**, the small plates are called **pintxos** (pronounced "peen-chos"), displayed on the bar and eaten in one or two bites; the ritual is one pintxo and one txakoli (local white wine) per bar, then onward.

San Sebastian's Parte Vieja packs the greatest concentration of pintxo bars in Spain into a few streets, and hopping through them is one of the country's great food experiences.



Pintxos in San Sebastian's Parte Vieja: one small plate and one small drink per bar, then on to the next.

The Dishes to Know

These are the dishes worth planning a meal around.

Paella. Born in Valencia, eaten at lunch. The authentic paella valenciana uses rabbit, chicken, and beans. Seafood paella (paella de marisco) is for the coast; mixed paella (mixta) is the tourist compromise. Never order it at dinner in a serious place.

Jamon iberico. Acorn-fed cured ham, sliced paper-thin, best eaten alone with bread. The black-hoof (pata negra) de bellota grade is the pinnacle and priced accordingly.

Gazpacho and salmorejo. Cold tomato soups, the first from Andalusia generally, blended with olive oil, vinegar, garlic, and bread, the second thicker and from Cordoba, crowned with chopped egg and jamon. Gazpacho is the perfect answer to a hundred-degree Seville afternoon.



Gazpacho: cold tomato soup with olive oil, the Andalusian answer to summer.

Pulpo a la gallega. Galicia's signature dish: octopus boiled until tender, sliced, and dressed with olive oil, paprika, and coarse sea salt, traditionally served on a wooden plate. Simplicity is the point; there is nowhere to hide.



Pulpo a la gallega: tender octopus with paprika and olive oil, Galicia's signature dish.

Gambas al ajillo. Shrimp sizzled in olive oil with sliced garlic and dried chili, served still bubbling in its clay cazuela. Mop up the oil with bread; leaving it behind is the only real mistake. Order it everywhere; it is never the same twice.



Gambas al ajillo: garlic shrimp in a bubbling clay cazuela, with bread for the oil.

Mejillones. Galicia's cold Atlantic rias produce some of the world's finest mussels, plump and sweet. Steamed simply and served with lemon, they want nothing more than a glass of Albarino, Galicia's crisp white wine, and good bread for the broth. This is the taste of the Galician coast.



Mejillones in Galicia: Atlantic mussels with Albarino and bread, above the rias.

Cochinillo. Segovia's roast suckling pig, slow-roasted until the skin crackles.

Churros con chocolate. Ridged doughnuts fried crisp, served with a cup of thick drinking chocolate for dipping. A breakfast or late-night institution, best eaten standing at a churreria counter; chocolate con churros after midnight is a Madrid tradition.



Churros con chocolate: thick hot chocolate for dipping, a breakfast or late-night institution.

Crema catalana. Catalonia's answer to creme brulee, citrus-and-cinnamon custard under crackled sugar.

Drinks

Spain is a wine country first. **Rioja** (tempranillo-based reds) and **Ribera del Duero** lead the reds; **Rueda** and **Rias Baixas** (albarino) lead the whites; **Cava** is the sparkling wine of Catalonia, and **sherry (jerez)** from Andalusia is criminally underappreciated: try a chilled fino with tapas. A glass of house wine (vino de la casa) at a bar costs a few euros and is usually perfectly good.

Order like a local: **tinto de verano** (red wine with soda, the summer drink) or **vermut** (vermouth on tap with an olive and orange slice) at aperitivo hour. Sangria is for tourists; Spaniards drink it at beach resorts and that is about it.

Dining Etiquette and Practical Tips

- The **menu del dia** is the deal of Spanish dining: starter, main, dessert, bread, and wine or beer, usually 14 to 22 euros at lunch on weekdays. It is not a tourist menu; it is how working Spain eats.
- Bread, olives, or appetizers placed on the table may appear on the bill (usually a euro or two). This is normal.
- To get the check, catch the server's eye and say **"la cuenta, por favor."** Bringing it unasked is considered rude.
- **Sobremesa**, the long after-lunch conversation over coffee, is sacred. Do not rush it.

- Spaniards rarely ask for food to go, and many kitchens will not pack leftovers. Order what you can eat.
- Restaurant kitchens serve lunch until about 3:30 and dinner from 8:30 or 9. A restaurant "open" at 6 pm may only be serving drinks.



Tapas in a Madrid bar: tortilla, croquetas, padron peppers, and more. The tapeo, a crawl of one or two plates per bar, is Spain's great social dining ritual.

Chapter 8: Safety and Practical Tips

Spain is one of the safest countries in Europe for travelers. Violent crime against tourists is rare. The risks are the petty, opportunistic kind, and nearly all of them are preventable with awareness.

Theft and Scams

Pickpocketing is the number one issue, concentrated in Barcelona (Las Ramblas, the metro, the beach), Madrid (the metro, El Rastro market, major stations), and anywhere crowds gather. Professionals work in teams with distraction techniques: the petition, the spilled drink, the helpful stranger pointing at bird droppings on your shoulder, the jostle at the metro door.

Defenses that work: a cross-body bag worn in front with zippers, nothing in back pockets, a money belt or neck pouch for passport and backup cards, and only the day's cash in your wallet. Leave the passport in the hotel safe and carry a photocopy; Spanish law technically requires ID, but a copy plus a second card satisfies nearly every real-world encounter.

Common **scams** to recognize: the "found ring" (a stranger "finds" a gold ring near you and offers to sell it), the petition clipboard (held high to block your view while a partner works your pockets), overcharging at beachfront restaurants (check menus for prices before sitting), and unofficial "guides" at major monuments. Say no firmly and keep walking.

Health

Spain's healthcare is excellent, and pharmacies (marked by a green cross) handle minor ailments with knowledgeable pharmacists who can dispense many medications without a prescription. For anything serious, dial **112**, the all-purpose European emergency number, which connects to police, fire, and ambulance with English-speaking operators.

Travel health insurance is strongly recommended; a US health plan rarely covers you abroad, and while Spanish public hospitals will treat emergencies, the billing afterwards is real. Tap water is safe to drink in Madrid, Barcelona, and nearly all cities; in some coastal and island areas it tastes heavily mineralized, and bottled water is cheap.

Staying Connected and Powered

Spain uses **Type C and F plugs** at 230 volts. Americans need a plug adapter; most modern phone and laptop chargers handle the voltage automatically (check for "100-240V" on the charger). For phone service, buy a prepaid Spanish SIM or eSIM on arrival (Vodafone, Orange, and Movistar shops are everywhere, including the airports), or confirm your US carrier's international plan. Free Wi-Fi is standard in hotels, cafes, and on high-speed trains.

Money Safety

Use ATMs inside bank branches when possible, shield your PIN, and beware of anyone offering "help" at the machine. Keep cards and cash split between two places on your person. Photograph your passport, cards (front only), and insurance documents, and store the images in secure cloud storage.

Local Laws and Customs Worth Knowing

- **Smoking** is banned in all enclosed public spaces, including bars and restaurants.
- **Drinking in the street** is technically prohibited in most cities, though enforcement varies.
- **Beach rules:** topless sunbathing is common and unremarkable; nude beaches are marked. Swim between flags, heed red-flag warnings, and watch for jellyfish notices on Mediterranean beaches.
- **Siesta closures:** in smaller towns, shops close roughly 2 to 5 pm and many close Sunday afternoons and Mondays. Plan market and shopping stops for mornings.
- **Church visits:** cover shoulders and knees; many cathedrals enforce dress codes at the door.

Chapter 9: Sample Itineraries

These itineraries assume you land in Madrid and depart from Barcelona (or the reverse), the classic open-jaw that avoids backtracking. Distances are short by American standards, but resist the urge to add "just one more city." Spain rewards depth: three nights in one place beats one night in three places.

The 7-Day Essential Spain

Days 1 to 2: Madrid. Day one: the Prado in the morning (book the first timed slot), Retiro Park and lunch in the Ibiza neighborhood, the Royal Palace area and Plaza Mayor at sunset, tapas in La Latina. Day two: day trip to Toledo (morning train, back by late afternoon), evening tapeo on Calle Cava Baja.

Days 3 to 4: Seville. Morning high-speed train from Madrid (2.5 hours). Day three: the Cathedral and Giralda, lunch in Santa Cruz, the Alcazar in the late afternoon, flamenco show at night. Day four: Plaza de Espana and Maria Luisa Park in the morning, Triana market and lunch, free afternoon for the Metropol Parasol and riverside paseo.

Day 5: Granada. Morning train or bus to Granada (about 3 hours). Afternoon in the Albaicin with Alhambra views from the San Nicolas viewpoint at sunset. Tapas crawl at night; remember, the tapas come free with drinks here.

Days 6 to 7: Barcelona. Morning high-speed train from Granada via Antequera, or fly. Day six: Sagrada Familia (morning timed entry), lunch in Eixample, Casa Batllo, Gothic Quarter and dinner in El Born. Day seven: Park Guell in the morning, Barceloneta beach and seafood lunch, Montjuic for sunset. Fly home from Barcelona.

Pace note: this is a full week. Every leg is by fast train except Granada to Barcelona, and every city gets its essential sights without exhaustion.

The 14-Day Grand Tour

Days 1 to 3: Madrid. As above, plus a second day trip (Segovia for the aqueduct and roast suckling pig) and a full Madrid day for the Reina Sofia, El Rastro market (Sunday), and a proper late dinner.

Days 4 to 6: Seville, with Cordoba. Three nights in Seville allows the full program above plus a day trip to Cordoba (45 minutes by train): the Mezquita in the morning, lunch in the Jewish quarter, back for a Seville evening.

Days 7 to 8: Granada and the white villages. Two nights in Granada: the Alhambra (a full half day; it deserves it), the Albaicin, Sacromonte, and a day drive or tour through white villages or to the coast at Nerja.

Days 9 to 10: Valencia. Train to Valencia (about 3.5 hours from Granada via Cordoba, or fly). The City of Arts and Sciences, the old town and cathedral, paella at the beach in Cabanyal, the Turia Gardens by bike.

Days 11 to 14: Barcelona and beyond. Four nights: the full Barcelona program above, plus a day trip to Montserrat or Girona and Figueres, and a final slow day of markets, vermouth bars, and the beach. Fly home from Barcelona.

Alternative: the northern route. Replace Valencia with San Sebastian and Bilbao: fly Seville to Bilbao, two nights in San Sebastian for pintxos and La Concha beach, one night in Bilbao for the Guggenheim, then train or fly to Barcelona. Best in summer.

Itinerary Tips

- Book the Alhambra, Sagrada Familia, and Park Guell the moment your dates are firm; they are the three tickets that sell out.
- Keep one "empty" morning or afternoon per week for wandering. The best of Spain is unplanned.

- Sunday mornings are for markets and vermouth; Sunday afternoons many shops close. Plan museum mornings and long lunches.
- If traveling with children, weight the trip toward Barcelona and Valencia (beaches, parks, the oceanarium) and keep Andalusia for spring or fall.

Chapter 10: Checklists

Pre-Trip Checklist: Eight Weeks Out to Departure

Eight to six weeks out:

- [ ] Passport valid at least six months beyond your return date (three months is the legal minimum; six avoids trouble).
- [ ] Check the current ETIAS status at the official EU site (as of September 2026, not yet required; verify before you go).
- [ ] Book flights; consider open-jaw (into Madrid, out of Barcelona).
- [ ] Buy travel insurance covering medical care and trip interruption.
- [ ] Get an International Driving Permit from AAA if you plan to rent a car.

Four to two weeks out:

- [ ] Book the Alhambra, Sagrada Familia, and Park Guell timed tickets.
- [ ] Book high-speed trains for the lowest advance fares.
- [ ] Reserve hotels or apartments; confirm cancellation policies.
- [ ] Get a no-foreign-transaction-fee credit card if needed; notify your bank of travel dates.
- [ ] Arrange phone service: international plan, eSIM, or plan to buy a local SIM.

The week before:

- [ ] Photograph passport, cards, and insurance; store securely in the cloud.
- [ ] Download offline maps, train apps, and translation app language packs.
- [ ] Check festival and holiday dates for your destinations; confirm Sunday/Monday opening hours for key sights.
- [ ] Pack (see below); weigh bags against airline limits.

Packing List

Documents and money:

- [ ] Passport and a photocopy kept separately
- [ ] Travel insurance details
- [ ] Two credit/debit cards from different issuers, plus some euros for arrival
- [ ] International Driving Permit (if renting a car)

Clothing (one week, layer for season):

- [ ] Comfortable broken-in walking shoes (cobblestones punish new shoes)
- [ ] A second pair of shoes or sandals

- [ ] Light layers; a sweater or fleece even in summer for air-conditioned trains and cool evenings
- [ ] One dressier outfit for nicer restaurants
- [ ] Scarf or shawl (covers shoulders for churches, adds warmth)
- [ ] Swimsuit (Mediterranean summers, hotel pools, Canaries year-round)
- [ ] Compact rain jacket or umbrella (north and shoulder seasons)

Gear and health:

- [ ] Plug adapter (Type C/F); voltage converter only if a device is not 100-240V
- [ ] Portable charger and charging cables
- [ ] Cross-body bag with zipper for daily use; money belt or neck pouch for arrival day
- [ ] Sunscreen and hat (the Andalusian sun is serious)
- [ ] Prescription medications in original bottles, plus a basic first-aid kit
- [ ] Reusable water bottle

Leave behind: expensive jewelry, more than you can carry comfortably, and any expectation of eating dinner at seven.

Chapter 11: Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to speak Spanish? No, but a little goes a long way. English is widely spoken in hotels, major restaurants, and attractions in Madrid, Barcelona, and the tourist centers. In smaller towns and rural areas, English thins out fast. Learn the essentials: por favor, gracias, la cuenta (the check), una cerveza (a beer), and donde esta (where is). Download the Spanish pack in your translation app for menus and signs.

What about Catalan, Basque, and Galician? Spain has four official languages. Castilian Spanish works everywhere. In Catalonia you will see Catalan on signs (sortida for exit, gracies for thanks); in the Basque Country, Basque (Euskara); in Galicia, Galician. Using a local word, even badly, is always appreciated and never required.

Is the tap water safe? Yes, in virtually all Spanish cities. Madrid's water is famously good. In parts of the Mediterranean coast and islands it can taste strongly of minerals; bottled water is cheap and ubiquitous there.

How many days do I need? Seven days covers Madrid, Seville or Granada, and Barcelona at a brisk but enjoyable pace. Ten to fourteen days allows Andalusia in depth plus Valencia or the north. Three weeks lets you add the Basque Country, Galicia, or the islands without rushing.

Is Spain expensive? By Western European standards, no. A mid-range traveler spends roughly 180 to 280 euros per day all-in. The menu del dia lunch is one of Europe's great bargains, and excellent wine costs a third of what it would at home.

Do I need cash? Some, yes. Cards cover nearly everything in cities, but carry 50 to 100 euros for small bars, markets, taxis, and tips.

Should I tip? Modestly. Round up at bars, 5 to 10 percent for good dinner service, a euro or two for hotel porters. Nothing like American percentages is expected.

Are the free tapas real? In Granada, Leon, Almeria, and parts of Andalusia, yes: order a drink and a small plate arrives, courtesy of the house. Elsewhere, tapas are ordered and paid for. When in doubt, watch what the locals do.

What is the deal with dinner at 10 pm? Kitchens serve dinner from about 8:30 or 9. Eating at 7 marks you as a tourist and gets you an empty restaurant. Adapt: big lunch, light snack, late dinner. You will adjust in two days.

Is bullfighting still a thing? Bullfights (corridas) still occur, mainly during festivals, but attendance has declined sharply and they are banned in Catalonia and the Canary Islands. Many visitors prefer a flamenco show, which needs no ethical asterisk.

Can I drink the wine? I mean, is it good? Spain is the world's largest vineyard by area. The house red at an ordinary bar routinely outdrinks bottles costing four times as much at home. Say yes.

Is Spain safe for solo travelers? Women travelers? Yes. Standard big-city awareness about pickpockets applies; violent crime is rare. Solo dining is completely normal, and late-evening streets in city centers are lively and well populated.

What is the emergency number? 112 works everywhere in Spain and across Europe, with English-speaking operators, for police, fire, and ambulance.

Do shops really close in the afternoon? In smaller cities and towns, many shops close from about 2 to 5 pm. Large department stores and malls in big cities stay open. Museums and major sights keep their own hours; always check the day before.

When is everything closed? Sundays: most shops closed, markets and restaurants open. Mondays: many museums closed (including, traditionally, the Prado on Mondays; check current schedules). National holidays close nearly everything; check the calendar for your dates.

Chapter 12: Resources and Photo Credits

Official Resources

- **Spain's official tourism portal:** spain.info (in English; regional guides, events, and practical information from the national tourism board).
- **ETIAS official information:** the European Union's ETIAS pages on europa.eu. Check here before travel for the current authorization status. Use only the official europa.eu site; ignore third-party "application" sites.
- **US State Department, Spain:** country information page with entry, safety, and health guidance for American travelers.
- **US Embassy in Madrid:** usembassy.gov/es for emergency assistance and consular services.
- **Renfe:** renfe.com for AVE and national train tickets. Low-cost high-speed operators: Ouigo and Iryo.
- **AENA:** aena.es for Spanish airport information.

Photo Credits

Interior illustrations were generated with artificial intelligence for this edition and are original to it. Cover artwork was created for this edition.

About the Authors



C. Richard Penalta, Esquire

C. Richard Penalta, Esquire, is an American trial lawyer fluent in English and Spanish, licensed to practice in Florida, and a graduate of Washburn University School of Law in Topeka. A Senior Trial Lawyer and former Assistant State Attorney, he has maintained a Martindale-Hubbell “AV” rating since 2003, is a Florida Supreme Court Certified Circuit Civil Mediator, and is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA). He holds a Federal Aviation Administration Private Pilot’s License and is a certified NAUI and CMAS scuba diving instructor. Drawing on his bilingual fluency, Mr. Penalta frequently travels to Spain to explore its history, legal traditions, and culture.

Alexander Penalta, Esquire

Alexander Penalta, Esquire, is an American trial lawyer fluent in English and Spanish, licensed to practice in Florida and Washington, D.C., and a graduate of Washburn University School of Law in Topeka. He is the founder of the Law Firm of Penalta and Associates, P.A., whose practice spans animal enterprise law, aviation, complex business litigation, employment law, and state and national security matters. A former officer in the United States Naval Reserve Judge Advocate General’s Corps (1990-92) with an honorable discharge, he is also a licensed United States Coast Guard Merchant Marine Captain (Master 50 Ton with Auxiliary Sail) and a certified scuba diving instructor.