

Galicia

Galicia is an autonomous community of Spain that is nestled in the northwestern corner of the country. Surrounded by mountains, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Bay of Biscay, its relative remoteness has made it unique in history, culture, and landscape. Galicia is divided into four provinces: La Coruña, Pontevedra, Orense, and Lugo.



Localización de Galicia, Rastrojo

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9e/Localizaci%C3%B3n_de_Galicia.svg

Galicia is often called “the land of a thousand rivers.” The rivers carve through the region, often from mountain to coast. Some of them meet the ocean via drowned river valleys that open to the sea, called *rías*.

The entire coast of Galicia is called the *Costa da Marisco* (Shellfish/Seafood Coast) because of the abundance of fresh seafood. The seaside is filled with tiny coastal fishing towns, sandy beaches, and dramatic cliffs, including those of the *Costa do Murte* (Coast of Death).

This diversity and contrast in Galicia make a haven for nature lovers to explore via hiking, swimming, and other outdoor pursuits.

Galicia is, however, perhaps, best known for the city of Santiago de Compostela, a major pilgrimage destination. Pilgrims follow St. James’s Way for hundreds of kilometers and arrive at the city’s massive cathedral, which holds Saint James’s remains.

Galicia is still considered to be a relatively unspoiled travel destination with sometimes-deserted beaches, small towns with medieval touches, ancient Celtic and Roman ruins, and friendly locals. It is a popular destination with Spaniards looking to escape the heat of the south, but each year more and more foreigners discover its charms. Hidden gems for all six senses await discovery. Galicia is a taste of the unexpected Spain.

As a Roman province, the Romans bestowed the region its name, *Gallaecia*, but it was the Celts that made a more lasting, memorable mark on the land and its culture.

Galicia is often compared to the British Isles. Partly because of the lushness of its landscape (it is part of Green Spain) and partly because of the ancient vein of Celtic culture that runs through and remains integral to Galician identity. Traditional Galician music, for example, often contains *gaita galega* (bagpipes).

It is the mix of Celtic, Spanish, and Portuguese influence that makes the region’s identity unique. Galego, the Galician language, for example, is related to Portuguese.



Galicie, Kirk via Wikimedia Commons

Typical Places

Santiago de Compostela

Located in the south of La Coruña province, Santiago de Compostela is the capital city of Galicia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is most famous for its massive Romanesque and Baroque granite cathedral, which was completed in 1211 and houses Saint James's tomb.

The cathedral is the destination for the Way of St. James pilgrimage. Many pilgrims follow the *Via Regia* (Royal Highway), a medieval road that crossed the Holy Roman Empire from east to west, and *Le Camino Francés* (the French Way). Its four branches begin in the French cities of Paris, Tour/Vézelay, Le Puy-en-Velay, and Arles. Each day the cathedral holds mass for arriving pilgrims.

In 2010, Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez made a movie, *The Way*, about a father taking the journey after the loss of his son.

Things to do/see besides the cathedral:

- Santiago's old town, which surrounds the cathedral and is rich in Romanesque, Baroque, and Gothic architecture.
- The *Mercado de Abastos* is a large local food market. It is open 6 days a week and is famed for its seafood section. There is a nearby tapas restaurant, Abastos 2.0 that only serves what they find in the market, so the menu changes frequently, even throughout the day. Their philosophy, from [their website](#), is that each day starts with a bare cupboard and nothing should be left by the end of the day.
- Located outside Santiago's old town, the City of Culture of Galicia is a massive project designed by Peter Eisenman that started in 1999. It is a "city" of cultural attractions connected by streets and plazas, including a performing arts center, a library, the archive and museum of Galicia, and an international art center.





 Pontevedra, Socpunk



 Pontevedra, Socpunk

Pontevedra

In the eastern coastal region of Galicia called the *Rías Baixas*, Pontevedra is the capital city of its province.

Local mythology states that Teucer, a Greek archer and Trojan War hero, founded the city. Its name, however, means “old bridge,” referring to its Roman bridge. The Lérez River bisects the town and empties into a *ría*, which is the foundation for the city’s rich maritime and fishing history. Its old town is the best destination for visitors with medieval architecture and small *prazas* (plazas) to discover.

Lugo

Lugo is the capital city of the northeastern province of the same name. The Celtic cult of Lugh, the god of light, is said to have founded the city and given it its name.

Lugos’s main attraction is the massive Roman wall that surrounds the town, making it a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is one of the few completely intact walls of its kind in the world, with 71 towers, over 2 kilometers in length, and 10 meters in height.



 Lugo Galicia, Rafael Gomez



 Roman Walls, Tanya Hart

Vigo

Vigo is located on the Atlantic Ocean in the province of Pontevedra. It is the largest, most cosmopolitan city in Galicia.

The city itself has an historic section and some cultural attractions, including a zoo, but it is the number of beaches in the area and the *Ría de Vigo* that seem to attract the most attention.

Just off the coast is Galicia’s only national park, the Atlantic Islands of Galicia National Park. It is made up of four archipelagos: Cíes, Ons, Sálvora, and Cortegada. The Cíes islands and beaches are considered especially beautiful with their dramatic cliffs, rugged landscapes, and gorgeous beaches. In 2007, *The Guardian*, for example, named the beaches of Cíes, specifically Praia das Rodas, the best in the world: “a perfect crescent of soft, pale sand backed by small dunes sheltering a calm lagoon of crystal-clear sea.”



 Vigo - Vista Parcial, elchicogris



 As Illas Cíes, Oscar

Ourense

"The Golden City"

Nicknamed "The Golden City" by the Romans, the city of Ourense is the capital city of the Ourense province. Its main attractions are a pretty old town section, a Roman bridge, and Roman baths. There are also a number of thermal springs available for bathing on the Miño River near the city.



Betanzos, amaianos



Pasatiempo 03, nsr1986



Globo de Betanzos 2009, Moncho Piñeiro

Betanzos

"Betanzos of the Knights"

Betanzos is a medieval hill town near the northwestern coast of the La Coruña province. A Roman wall encircles the town, a reminder of its ancient roots as *Flavium Brigantium*. The town is full of medieval architecture and coats of arms can still be seen decorating some buildings.

Just outside of town, there is a unique "encyclopedic" garden, El Pasatiempo (which translates to pastime gardens), full of interesting landscaping, caves, and fanciful murals.

In August, there are two important festivals. During the festival of San Roque, townspeople launch a large paper balloon. Later in the month, they decorate boats and sail down the Mandeo River to eat, drink, and be merry.

Costa da Morte and Cape of Finisterre

"Coast of Death" and "The End of the World"

The Costa da Morte runs along the Atlantic Ocean in the province La Coruña from the town of Malpica in the north to Fisterra in the south.

It is the wild, rocky coastline that caused sundry shipwrecks and gave the area its morbid moniker. The coast provides dramatic views and cliffs nestle hidden, fine sand beaches between them.

The area is ripe for exploration. Small fishing villages dot the shore. Massive megalithic rock structures and formations still stand as reminders of the deep history of this region.

Cape Finisterre sits as the westernmost part of Spain. It was once believed to be the very edge of the world.



Cabo Vilano, Carlos de Paz



Golden Light, Paulo Brandão

Weather

Galicia is part of Green Spain, the lush region of coastline that stretches across the north and northwestern of the country. In general, its wetter maritime climate more closely resembles that of the British Isles than the hot, dry, Mediterranean climate most often associated with Spain—although there are a few microclimates within the region. May and June can be rainy but are also the best time to see the flowers in bloom. June average highs in Santiago de Compostela are 71°F/22°C with average lows around 53°F/12°C. Since the beaches are situated along the Atlantic Ocean, waters also tend to be much chillier than the south.

Food



Galicia offers great variety in terms of food due to its location, climate, and the fertility of its land.

Just as the name *Costa da Marisco* suggests, seafood, especially shellfish, is a staple in Galicia. Just some of what is available includes: oysters, mussels, razor clams, scallops, octopus, and a variety of fish.

Pulpo a fiera, or fairground octopus, is a local specialty. It is often prepared in large quantities for festivals because it is cheap and easy to make. The octopus is frozen for a few hours to tenderize it, dipped in boiling water, and then simmered for another few hours in

onion and bay leaves.

Gooseneck barnacles—which are really a type of small crab—are also Galician delicacies. They are incredibly dangerous to harvest. The barnacles can only be harvested during winter at an extremely low tide, after a spring tide, and new or full moon. The collectors can wait for over a month for the right time and, then, lower themselves down dangerous rocks into freezing water to collect the barnacles.

For the extremely adventurous iron stomachs: Lamprey is boiled and braised in a fine Ribeiro wine and its own blood.

Although Galician seafood is said to be some of the best in the world, there is also a lot to be offered from the bounty of the land. Potatoes are a staple (another similarity to the British Isles and Ireland).

Culinaria Spain calls Galicia “Spain’s Wild West” because of the “cowboy (or *vaqueiro*) country” in the province of Lugo. A number of Spanish cattle are raised for meat and dairy on the abundant grasslands, including the *Rubais Gallega*, a Galician breed. Besides beef and veal, other meats like pork and chicken are local and readily available.

The area also has a number of different cheeses. A soft cow’s milk cheese called *Queso de Tetilla*, for example, is a favorite. Its name translates to “little tit” thanks to its breast-like shape. The story behind its name is that town leaders in Santiago thought a statue of Queen Esther was too “busty” so they ordered the breasts to be reduced. Cheese makers responded by creating *tetilla* as a way of honoring Esther (and probably annoying the staid town cronies).

Tapas is always popular in Spain, including Galicia. Like much of the country, dinner often begins after 9:00 pm. Empanadas are another well-loved snack/meal. They are a type of turnover pastry filled with everything from chorizo to mushrooms to salt cod.

Drink



[Un Viñedo con Vista](#), Enrique Dans



Wine

Galicia has an interesting wine history. The quality of its wine offerings is largely a well-kept secret by Galicians who produce small quantities and keep it to themselves. Although Galicia is considered to be underdeveloped, the wine industry is being revitalized and rediscovered.

Recently, for example, one of Spain's most famous directors, José Luis Cuerda (he also co-produced *The Others*) bought a bodega and vineyard in Ribeiro. He now produces Sanclodio wines (named after the neighboring San Clodio monastery) using Galician varieties and traditional methods.

There are five wine areas that have a *Denominación de Origen* (D.O.) mark:

- Monterrei
- Rías Baixas
- Ribeira Sacra
- Ribeiro
- Valdeorras

While there are a number of different reds, usually from **Mencia** or **Grenache**, produced here, it is the whites, mainly made from native grape varieties, that garner the most interest. The **Albariño** grape, for example, is most often grown in the Rías Baixas. It produces some of the best white wines in Spain with fresh, fruity, and aromatic qualities. Another Galician white grape is the **Godello**, which is known for being fruity and spicy.



[Albariños](#), imamon

Beer

Vineyards greatly outnumber breweries in Galicia, but there is one brewery located in A Coruña called **Estrella Galicia**. It has a few different options but **1906 Reserva Especial**, a pilsner-style with roasted double malt, seems to be the best quality.

Liquor

Orujo, also known as **Aguardiente de Orujo**, is the Galician version of grappa. It is made from what remains after grapes are pressed to make wine. The leftover residue, grape skins, seeds, etc. are fermented and the liquid is distilled in copper kettles.

When orujo is not aged—sometimes called *orujo envejecido*—it is colorless. Aged orujo, however, takes on an amber hue after being aged for two or more years in

oak barrels.

Galicians transform orujo into a "fire drink" called **queimada** through a unique ritual. Friends and family gather around a clay pot while a *bruxo*, or sorcerer, sometimes dressed in a pagan costume, mixes the brew and adds things like lemon peel, coffee, herbs, and cinnamon.



By [Andrés Nieto Porras](#)



 Fuego, Edu

The *bruxo* then lights to mixture on fire and as the alcohol burns and the flame dances, he recites a spell to purify the liquid (and, thus, its drinker):

Owls, barn owls, toads and witches.
Demons, goblins, and devils,
spirits of the misty vales.
Crows, salamanders, and midges,
charms of the folk healer.

Rotten pierced canes,
home of worm and vermin.
Wisps of the Holy Company,
evil eye, black witchcraft,
scent of the dead, thunder and lightning.

Howl of the dog, omen of death,
maws of the satyr and foot of the rabbit.
Sinful tongue of the bad woman
married to an old man.

Satan and Beelzebub's Inferno,
fire of the burning corpses,
mutilated bodies of the indecent ones,
farts of the asses of doom
bellow of the enraged sea.

Useless belly of the unmarried woman,
speech of the cats in heat,
dirty turf of the wicked born goat.

With this bellows I will pump
the flames of this fire
which looks like that from Hell,
and witches will flee,
straddling their brooms,
going to bathe in the beach
of the thick sands.

Hear! Hear the roars
of those that cannot
stop burning in the firewater,
becoming so purified.

And when this beverage
goes down our throats,
we will get free of the evil
of our soul and of any charm.

Forces of air, earth, sea, and fire,
to you I make this call:
if it's true that you have more power than people,
here and now, make the spirits
of the friends who are outside,
take part with up in this Queimada.

After the reading, and when the flame turns blue, the *bruxo* extinguishes the fire and serves the drink in small cups.

While the ritual harkens back to the Celtic paganism so deeply rooted in Galicia, it may have actually started some time in the 1950s. Whatever the origin, it remains a fun event for friends and family to share.

Shopping

Galicia offers visitors many options for shopping and traditional crafts. The town of Camarinas, for example, is a lace-making center, but Galician lace can be found throughout the area. Jet and silver are popular for local jewelry. Like many other areas of Europe local craftspeople also create unique leatherwork, woven baskets, carvings, glass, and ceramics, among other items.

Estimated Costs

Expenses	Group Total	Per Person
Madrid Hotel (3 night estimate, area near Prado)	\$1620 (\$180 per rm/per night)	\$ 270.00
Galicia Rental (7 days, average of 3 examples)	\$2704	\$ 386.23
Barcelona Hotel (4 night estimate)	\$ 1740 (145 per rm/per night)	\$ 290.00
Car (2 automatics)	\$2472.98	\$353.28
Gas	\$280.00	\$40.00
Sightseeing/Incidentals	-	\$100.00
Airfare (YYZ to Madrid + Madrid to Santiago + Santiago to Barcelona + Barcaleona to YYZ)	-	\$1379.00
Food & Beverages (~\$60/day)	-	\$1025.00
Grand Total		\$ 3843.51

***Note:** These estimated costs are based on a specific group of 7 for a specific set of dates. The totals are based on quotes and averages for housing, car, and flights. The food number is based on my family's average over a number of trips in different European countries. Hotels, rentals, flights, preferences, etc. can vary greatly based on personal preferences, locations, time of year, etc. They are meant only as an example and may not be applicable to you, but they might give you an idea of where to start with your own planning.