

Planning my future winters (Initially in Spain)!

From December 2017 my winter lifestyle is changing, from being aboard boat in the Caribbean (early 2001 – April 2017) to exploring new horizons, in the first instance Spain. As a start I've been researching the cities of Spain that I would like to visit, not just for a short time, but for an appropriate length of time to permit full exploration of the culture and lifestyles of local people. So here's what I've looked at to date (April 2017):



Some of the major cities of Spain

(The following cities are worth researching, but do not represent a definitive list of places to be visited)

Malaga:

Malaga is a stunning, arty and culturally rich city you won't want to miss. Packed with museums, theatres and monuments to discover including the remains of a Roman amphitheatre, the 1,000-year-old Gibralfaro castle, 13th century Alcazaba as well as several art museums dedicated to the city's most famous son: Pablo Picasso. Wander around the atmospheric, pedestrianised historic centre and stop off at the stunning cathedral or amble through the historical botanical gardens before heading to one of the many sumptuous tapas bars. For a bit of retail therapy, head to one of Spain's most elegant shopping streets, the marble-lined Calle Marques de Larios which is worth a visit for the architecture alone. Boasting views of the Mediterranean and surrounded by lush gardens, Málaga's five-star Hotel Miramar was once a place to see and be seen for Spanish royalty and bourgeoisie. Now, 90 years after it was inaugurated by King Alfonso XIII, it sits empty. Construction workers mill about the site meticulously working to restore the hotel to its former glory so that it may one day reopen. For Málaga's mayor, Francisco de la Torre, the rebirth of Hotel Miramar is a sign that his €100m gamble on rebranding the city is paying off. During his 15 years in office he has led an aggressive campaign to turn Málaga into a place brimming with culture. This southern city of 570,000 people now has more than 30 museums, most of them added under Torre's watch. "This city doesn't have a heritage that's as striking as the Alhambra in Granada or the Córdoba mosque or the Giralda of Seville," he told the Guardian as he shuttled between museum openings this week. "But now we have museums." His campaign reached new heights this week with the opening of the first foreign outposts of two high-profile museums: the Centre Pompidou Málaga and the Málaga branch of the St Petersburg State Russian Museum. France's Centre Pompidou has signed a five-year agreement allowing Málaga to house a popup Pompidou, with the Spanish city paying €1m a year for the rights to use its name as well as pieces from its vast collection. The Málaga branch of the Russian museum, the subject of a 10-year agreement, opened its doors on Wednesday. Housed in an old tobacco factory refurbished for more than €500,000, its opening display is dedicated to Russian art of the 16th to 20th centuries, featuring works by Ilya Repin, Wassily Kandinsky and Vladimir Tatlin. After touring the Russian museum on Wednesday, De la Torre said he was thrilled to see the latest phase in the city's transformation. "It's a feeling of great satisfaction for me," said the fast-talking mayor. While his People's party colleagues across the country have been accused of crippling the country's cultural sector with tax hikes and cuts to subsidies, De la Torre has done the opposite, pouring tens of millions into turning Málaga into a big-name arts hub. The Pompidou sits in the city's "mile of art", as it has been dubbed by some media, near the Picasso Museum and the Centre for Contemporary Art, both of which opened in 2003, as well as the Carmen Thyssen Museum, which features 250 pieces from Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection on loan to the city. The city's investment in culture isn't just about attracting tourists, according to De la Torre, although tourism is a factor. "Years ago all the tourists would

turn right as they left the airport, heading directly to the Costa del Sol. Now they're coming to Málaga," he said. In 10 years the number of visitors to the city has increased by 127%, to 3.5 million last year. The mayor argued that Málaga could also use culture to attract top talent from around the world to work in fields such as technology and innovation. "To have a city like Málaga that has everything from medieval to contemporary art, it gives us a certain security that Málaga is competitive when it comes to attracting talent." As the city searched for its identity, culture was an obvious direction given the city's links with Pablo Picasso, said José María Luna, who heads the public agency that oversees several of the city's most prominent museums. "We're tremendously lucky in that one of the icons of 20th-century painting was born in Málaga. It felt natural for culture to be the backbone of our identity." From this starting point, the city's ambitions kept growing, he said. "I think there's nothing like it anywhere else, in terms of square metre of museum per inhabitant." In a region where one in three people is unemployed, the mayor's decision to pour money into culture hasn't been without controversy. This year Málaga – a city carrying a debt of €600m – is poised to spend €4.2m on the Pompidou and €3.7m euros on the Russian museum alone. In the past 10 years the city has spent €100m on arts and culture, say opposition councillors, who last year called an emergency council meeting to address the issue. "They finance whatever interests them from a political point of view, without thinking about their own citizens," said María Gámez, a Socialist member of the city council. Eduardo Zorilla, a United Left councillor, called the spending an "excessive waste", arguing that the funds could be better spent on social housing or policies to create employment. De la Torre passionately defended his decisions. "We're not spending exaggerated quantities. And what we have spent has had exceptionally clear impact," he said, pointing to the rise in tourists. "Along with wealth, tourists bring jobs, and that's the best social policy, the creation of jobs. The reality is that both within and outside of Spain, other cities are looking at us with envy." De la Torre, who hopes to be re-elected when Málaga goes to the polls in May, said he wasn't quite done building museums just yet. "We can always add on, there's always room for more projects. We have to evaluate our resources, but I think it's worth pushing forward," he said. He smiled as he added: "It's a beautiful line: Málaga, city of museums."

Santiago de Compostela:

Santiago has one of the most magnificent old towns in Europe, with a labyrinth of cobble stone streets laced with gothic buildings galore which are, according to locals, at their best when it rains. Galicia's capital is the final stop in the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, also known in the UK as the Way of St. James, but a more sedate stroll is recommended, as the medieval streets take on an old world vibe after dark. Head to the Rua do Franco towards the cathedral for a wonderful dining experience; the tapas bars and taverns here are legendary. "Galician-style octopus" goes down very nicely with the local Albariño wine.

Granada:

Granada, the final stronghold of the Islamic occupation in Spain, has a fascinating blend of Moorish and Spanish heritage. Set against the backdrop of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountain range and boasting an Arabic quarter, a stunning old town filled with authentic flamenco shows as well as Spain's most visited building, the Alhambra Palace, this Andalusian city is breathtaking. Romantics can enjoy watching the sun set over the Alhambra Palace from the Mirador de San Nicolas in the Albaicin Quarter. After exploring the maze-like streets, head to one of the bustling bars where the tapas are still free; a must for foodies.

Salamanca:

Salamanca is considered to be one of the most beautiful cities in Spain with an old town listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and an exceptional Plaza Mayor regarded as one of the country's most elegant city squares. The Plaza is illuminated at night, making it one of the city's more unforgettable highlights. Salamanca has a huge student population that keeps the city buzzing with a youthful energy. The renowned university, which is thought to be the third oldest in Europe, was founded in 1218 and is well worth a visit. It is one of the many architectural wonders built from local sandstone which over the years have acquired a soft glow, giving rise to Salamanca's moniker: the 'Golden City'. For one of the city's most iconic views, head to the Patio Chico, where you can see both the old and new cathedrals of Salamanca. La Universidad de Salamanca has gained an enviable reputation, attracting students from around the world. The façade of the university hides a surprise: a frog. People usually spend a lot of time trying to find it due to its small size. However, it is worth the effort as finding the animal is supposed to bring luck. Moreover, La Celestina, a renowned play written in 1499, is said to have taken place there. La Plaza Mayor, of Baroque style, is the icon of the city, and it is always crowded with students and tourists. La Casa de las Conchas is another important and original building, decorated with more than 300 shells, symbols of the order of Santiago. La Nochevieja Universitaria takes place in December every year, when students have to eat 12 sweets in order to celebrate the new year with their classmates before going back home. Located in central Spain, Salamanca owes its breathtaking beauty to the nearby sandstone quarries from which many of the city's buildings were constructed. The glowing light that emanates from the stone at sunset has earned Salamanca the nickname "The Golden City." A university town since 1218, Salamanca is still home to one of Europe's finest universities. The city is filled with historic architecture, including the 12th-century Catedral Vieja and

Casa de las Conchas, a 15th-century structure ornamented with hundreds of sandstone shells. Visits to Salamanca often begin at the Plaza Major, a Baroque square where students gather at all hours to eat, drink and sing. Their enthusiasm and confidence offer assurance that Salamanca's future will be as bright as its golden past.

Valencia:

Valencia has so much to offer, from fabulous Modernist architecture and elegant art nouveau buildings to great museums and a characterful old quarter. History lovers and culture vultures can head to the UNESCO-listed La Lonja de la Seda (Silk Exchange), the Valencia and Mercado Cathedrals and the Museo de Bellas Artes. Gourmet cuisine is one of the great pleasures of Valencia, with long lunches and dinners a must. The coastal city is surrounded by fertile, fruit-and-vegetable growing farmlands and is famed for its rice dishes like paella; but its dining and nightlife scene offers plenty more.

Toledo:

Dramatic Toledo is a diverse and compelling city, home to some of Spain's finest monuments. It was known as the 'city of three cultures' in the Middle Ages when Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities lived peacefully together for centuries behind its impressive city walls. The result of this rich multicultural heritage is a treasure chest of an old town full of churches, palaces, fortresses, mosques and synagogues, earning it the reputation of an open air museum and a UNESCO Heritage Site award in 1986. Surrounded by the River Tajo on three sides, Toledo sits atop a gorge and is small enough to explore on foot, although one of the best ways to discover the city is to wander aimlessly around the city's medieval streets while seeking out the works of famous artist, El Greco. Also known as 'The Imperial City,' Toledo used to be home to Muslims, Jews and Christians, who co-existed peacefully for almost two centuries. El Greco, a well-known painter that spent part of his life in Toledo, is the icon of the city. If you ever go to Toledo, you can't miss his most famous painting El Entierro del Conde Orgaz (The Burial of the Count of Orgaz). Its city center is also outstanding, featuring beautiful structures like the Gothic Cathedral or the synagogue, la Sinagoga del tránsito. Encircled on three sides by bends in the Tagus River, Toledo served as a natural fortress for a succession of Roman, Visigoth, Muslim and Christian rulers. Getting lost in the Old Quarter in Toledo is one of the great charms of a trip to this medieval city, as visitors have only to head uphill to the Plaza de Zocodover to recover their bearings. Among the must-see attractions in Toledo are the city's Cathedral, a resplendent structure ornamented with gold relief, and the El Greco Museum, a recreation of the artist's home that features several important paintings. Spain's former capital until the mid-15th century, Toledo is home to a large chunk of the country's monuments. It's known as the city of three cultures as Arabs, Christians and Jews lived together for centuries behind its impressive city walls. The old town is a treasure chest of churches, palaces, fortresses, mosques and synagogues, earning it the reputation of an open air museum and a UNESCO Heritage Site award in 1986. Almost an island city as it is surrounded by the River Tajo on three sides, Toledo is small enough to explore on foot, although one of the best ways to discover the city is to literally get lost by wandering aimlessly around the city's medieval streets. This is especially exciting at night as you feel like you've been transported back to the middle ages.

Barcelona:

Famous for iconic architecture, excellent food and pulsing nightlife, Barcelona is a vibrant seaside city packed with excitement. La Rambla is the city's beating heart, filled with restaurants, shops and entertainers. Head through La Rambla to the must-see medieval Gothic Quarter, which brims with beautiful churches, narrow streets and grand, palm-tree filled plazas. No visit to Barcelona would be complete without visiting Gaudi's famous La Sagrada Familia Basilica. The masterpiece has been under construction since 1882 and is not expected to be completed until 2041.

Seville:

The sultry city of Seville is known as the frying pan of Spain, but a cool city vibe, Moorish architecture and ancient streets make it a perfect city to explore over a few days. The capital of Andalusia is famous for its flamenco, tapas bars and orange trees – the fragrance of which hang in the air. To further indulge the senses there's the excellent Cathedral of Saint Mary, Plaza de Espana, the Alcázar palace as well as the Jewish Quarter of Santa Cruz, a beautifully preserved Jewish District. The capital of Andalusia is mostly known for its high temperatures – in Summer 40°C is considered normal – and Triana, the most popular neighborhood situated on the west bank of the Guadalquivir River. However, it has more to offer. The Gothic Cathedral is outstanding and a contrast to La Giralda, a tower built in the 12th century by the Moors. La Giralda will offer you the best views of the city... after 35 ramps (they built ramps instead of stairs in order to be able to climb up on horseback). La Plaza de España is an outstanding and enormous square built in the 20th century for the Ibero-American Exposition. It includes a great amount of tiled walls representing different Spanish regions. In April, Seville is all decked out for La Feria de Abril. On the first day, at midnight, the city is illuminated (el alumbrado) and during six consequent days attendees dance Sevillanas (Sevillian flamenco

songs) and enjoy local food and drink in casetas. Bullfighting also plays an important role, lately leading to a nation-wide debate.

Cordoba:

One of the greatest cities of the medieval world, Cordoba was the capital of the Muslim occupied Iberian Peninsula and home to one of the grandest mosques in the western world – the magnificent Mezquita of Cordoba. The Mezquita is widely regarded as one of the world's greatest pieces of Islamic architecture, made more exceptional by the cathedral which was built at its heart many years after the Christian conquest of the city in 1236. The city is perfect for those who like to explore on foot or by bike as the narrow streets surrounding the Mezquita are filled with beautiful plazas, narrow side-streets and bustling tapas bars and old, moody wine bars.

Logroño:

The northern city of Logroño was once a fortified medieval town, and the city's Old Quarter is still its greatest attraction. The Casco Antiguo has long served as a stop for pilgrims on their trek to visit the tomb of Saint James at Santiago de Compostela. With its magnificent carvings and statues, the Gothic-style Santa Maria de Palacio is well worth a visit, as is the beautifully sculpted Romanesque front of Church of Saint Bartholomew. As the trade center for wine in the La Rioja region, Logroño is known for its world-class Spanish wines and dining scene as well. Lined with historic gardens, pretty Paseo del Espolón is the best place to join locals for the early evening stroll known as the paseo.

Girona:

Located in Spain's northeast region of Catalonia, Girona is a small medieval city with a long and varied past. For its ability to withstand invasions from powerful forces for centuries, Girona is known as "The City of a Thousand Sieges." An exploration of the city's Old Quarter takes visitors past Roman walls, Moorish baths and Gothic churches, and it's easy to get lost in time navigating the labyrinth of narrow alleyways and stone lanes. No visit to Girona is complete without climbing the 89 steps to the Girona Cathedral to view its famous "Tapestry of the Creation," an embroidered panel that dates back to the 11th century. The scenic riverside "Rambla de la Llibertat," Girona's main promenade, is lined with cafés, shops and restaurants.

Pamplona:

The capital of the Navarra region, Pamplona is known the world over as the site of the annual "Running of the Bulls" held during the Fiesta de San Fermín. For visitors not interested in risking life and limb dodging bulls through crowded streets, however, it's best to avoid the city during the week-long festival in early July. Pamplona has plenty to offer visitors the other 51 weeks of the year. In addition to the city's Old Quarter with its pretty park and historic churches, the Museum of Navarra is a can't-miss attraction. Housed in a 16th-century hospital, the museum boasts an impressive collection of Roman artifacts and mosaics as well as 13th-century murals, Renaissance paintings and Goya's portrait of the Marqués de San Adrián.

Jerez de la Frontera:

Most visitors come to the Andalusian town of Jerez del Frontera for its world-famous sherry, but they often succumb to the city's other charms as well. Jerez del Frontera's history dates back nearly 3,000 years, and remnants of its past are scattered throughout the city. The city's star attraction is the Alcazar, a Moorish fortress built in 1255. The complex features a mosque, Arab baths and picturesque gardens. Jerez de la Frontera has several themed museums too, including a clock museum, a flamenco museum and one about the region's fine wines. The city's Old Quarter is notable for its Mudéjar chapels and for its archeological museum, which has artifacts ranging from a 7th-century-B.C. Greek helmet to a 15th-century blown-glass ceiling lamp.

Ourense:

Ourense is a provincial capital in Spain's Galicia region situated along the banks of the Miño River. The city is best known for its many scenic bridges, some of which date back to the Roman Era. Although surrounded by urban sprawl, the heart of Ourense has been lovingly restored and preserved, and wandering through the Old Quarter can make visitors feel as if they've traveled back in time. The city's oddly sloping Plaza Mayor features structures constructed during the city's 18th-century expansion. Ourense is also notable for its "pozas," hot springs that bubble up to the surface throughout the city, including along the banks of the Miño.

Burgos:

The capital of Spain's Castile region for nearly 500 years, Burgos has played a significant role in the country's history. As the home and burial place of the medieval Spanish hero El Cid, the city has long attracted visitors interested in Spain's rich past. A recent push to recognize Burgos as a designated "European City of Culture" has brought the city's best historic attractions to the fore. From its towering spires to the slab of marble that marks the tomb of El Cid, the remarkable Cathedral of Burgos has been restored to

its Gothic glory. The Old Quarter is surrounded by green spaces, including the beautiful parks on the banks of the Arlanzón River known as the Paseo de la Isla. Burgos. The cathedral in the city of Burgos was founded in 1221. It is the main Catholic church of Castile. The riverside city of Burgos is another important stopping point along the Camino de Santiago, and is often the city that most pilgrims vow to return to for a longer visit. Dominated by its 13th century gothic cathedral (the third largest in Spain after Seville and Toledo), it is the only one in the country to be awarded a World Heritage title by UNESCO. Many also claim that Burgos has the best gourmet tapas in Spain, while its strategic location between Ribera del Duero and La Rioja wine regions ensure that all food is washed down with some of the country's finest wine. You can still see much of the old city wall, including its 16th century fortified gate – the Arco de Santa Maria – adorned with so many turrets and towers it looks like the entrance to a fairy-tale castle. Meanwhile, one of the most pleasant ways to get to know this city is to follow the tree-lined Río Arlanzón, as it winds through the city centre.

Cádiz:

This maritime city fascinated the Phoenicians, the Romans and the Moors. Today, its white sand beaches and its yellow-domed cathedral will fascinate you. The impressive views from the Torre Tavira and the sunset from La Caleta, the most popular beach in the city, are not to be missed. Los Carnavales de Cádiz is one of the best-known carnivals in the whole country, apparently inspired by The Venice Carnival. The festival takes place over ten days in February, when festive costume local music groups take control of the city. Situated in Andalusia on a narrow slice of land surrounded by the sea, Cadiz is considered Spain's oldest continuously inhabited city. Its unique location on the Atlantic Coast has made it an important port for 3,000 years. The Archeological Museum in the Plaza de Mina features stone sarcophagi holding the remains of two of the city's 5th-century Phoenician inhabitants. Christopher Columbus set sail from Cadiz on his second voyage to the New World, and Sir Francis Drake delayed the Spanish Armada when he attacked ships in Cadiz in 1587. Today, a picturesque Old Quarter, several scenic beaches and an annual festival held in February attract visitors from all over the world. This maritime city fascinated the Phoenicians, the Romans and the Moors. Today, its white sand beaches and its yellow-domed cathedral will fascinate you. The impressive views from the Torre Tavira and the sunset from La Caleta, the most popular beach in the city, are not to be missed. Los Carnavales de Cádiz is one of the best-known carnivals in the whole country, apparently inspired by The Venice Carnival. The festival takes place over ten days in February, when festive costume local music groups take control of the city. Stylish, stunning and sun-drenched – Cadiz is one of Andalucía's most underrated cities. Hiding behind its old city walls on a peninsula that juts out from the mainland, Cadiz is under the tourist radar – which is exactly why you should visit. Filled with grand open squares, palm-fringed promenades and countless back streets just waiting to be explored, Cadiz also boasts pristine beaches and plenty of fresh seafood. A great way to get your bearings and explore is to hire a bicycle and circumnavigate the city's edges. Or better still, climb the Torre Tavira – the highest watchtower in the city to soak up the 360 degree views.

Tarragona:

Always under the shadow of Barcelona, Tarragona is not one of the best known Spanish cities. However, it is a potential tourist destination thanks to its proximity to the coastline, as well as its Roman ruins. For instance, the amphitheater is well-preserved and near the beach, featuring a wonderful landscape. With regards to religious art, La Catedral is outstanding and features an unexpected cloister. If you want to have a look at some splendid views, then you can't miss El balcó del Mediterrani. There, you can see the port, the amphitheater and la Platja del Miracle, one of the best-known beaches in the province. According to local custom, touching its railings gives good luck. The most important celebration in Tarragona is Santa Tecla. It takes place on the 23rd of September, when parades, fireworks, castells and local music fill the city with joy. Castells, also known as 'human castles' in English, are human towers built all over Catalonia during special occasions or festivals. Castellars can be of all ages, but the higher they go, the younger they are.

San Sebastián:

Voted the European Capital of Culture in 2016, San Sebastián is a top-quality destination. Situated between France and Spain, it is known for La Playa de la Concha, a well-known white sand beach, which stretches out for a kilometer and a half; and The San Sebastián International Film Festival, the most important Spanish film festival, which takes place annually in September. The regional speciality, the pintxos, are small snacks similar to tapas, usually accompanied by a glass of wine.

Avila:

This is a good example of a medieval city. Its city wall is the best conserved in Europe, and the old town and the churches to be found outside the walls are on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Cáceres:

Fortresses, Renaissance palaces and medieval town squares... All in all, an endless catalogue of different monuments. Its old town has the World Heritage designation. A night time visit is also highly recommended on account of the beautiful illumination.

Zaragoza:

Situated on the Ebro River, Zaragoza is a large and bustling city and the capital of Aragon. With a history that stretches back to 25 B.C., the city boasts architectural attractions from every era, from still-standing remnants of Roman walls to the Moorish castle Aljaferia, which Giuseppe Verdi used as his setting for the opera "The Troubadour." Of the city's two magnificent cathedrals, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Pillar attracts the most visitors.

Avila:

The capital city of the province with the same name, Avila claims to have more Romanesque and Gothic churches per capita than any other city in Spain, most notably the San Vicente Basilica with its 13th-century bas-reliefs. The birthplace of Santa Teresa, Avila attracts pilgrims for its religious history as well as for its architectural wonders. Of the latter, the ancient defensive walls of the city are the main draw. Considered the best preserved in Europe, the three-story high walls offer visitors panoramic views of the city from their more than 2,300 battlements.

Alicante:

Alicante is a very popular tourist destination because of its beautiful coastline and long sandy beaches. It has long wide seafront promenades that locals and tourists like to walk up and down at night. Often there are cafes on one side and street markets on the other. There are a considerable number of Africans in Alicante who work in the street markets selling their goods. Baroque buildings stand in the city's historical central area.

Merida:

The capital of Extremadura, has an absolute abundance of Roman remains. In fact back in 1993 the Archaeological Ensemble of Merida became a UNESCO World Heritage site. The city was originally founded in 25BC, by Augustus, and was then named Emerita Augusta. These days you can feel the influence of its neighbour Portugal, who once ruled the city, as did the Moors and the Christians. All of the influences can be spotted in the architecture. Apart from enjoying the feel, sights and tastes of this city, you can also visit the rather unique National Museum of Roman Art, which actually has a Roman street running through it. Another bonus about Merida is that you can wander around it in 3 days or so on foot, and take in its main highlights. If you decide to travel during the summer months of July and August, there are shows put on in the Roman amphitheatre and theatre.

Ourense:

Is considered to be the spa capital of Galicia, with both semi-enclosed and outdoor hot bath areas, which the locals have used for centuries. The city of Ourense has three distinctive parts to it; which are its modern perimeter, the area which was expanded during the 19th century, and its medieval historic quarter. If you don't know about the medieval part, it's easy to pass by on the road that connects Madrid to Vigo, and not bother to visit Ourense's pretty old quarter. This area had become quite dilapidated at one point, however renovation work has been carried out over the years. As is often the case in some of these fine Spanish cities, the Cathedral is considered to be the highlight. Although it was originally founded in 572, the Cathedral of San Martino that you can see today was re-built between the 12th and 13th centuries. It's the second oldest cathedral in Galicia, and the clock tower that is attached to it seems to stand over the old quarter. Part of the charm of the city, is how its appearance has been determined by the River Miño which crosses the city. The old bridge, which can be dated back to Roman times, connects the banks of the river. The old quarter has a lovely main square, which has been the heart of life in the city for centuries. Other buildings of interest are the Episcopal Palace, the City Hall, the church of Santa Maria Madre, and the Archaeological Museum.