

La Torre del Oro by Guadalquivir river, Seville. Right: view La Garrotxa by hot air balloon

HOW SPAIN REINVENTED SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

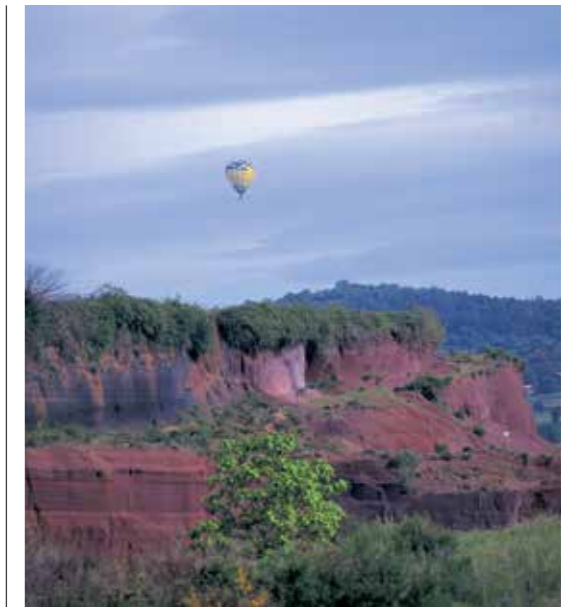
Why putting the planet first is transforming Spain's travel scene, from biosphere reserves to Michelin Green Stars. Gemma Askham reports

Sunshine, beaches and irresistibly priced wine have long topped the list of reasons to love Spain. But, as sustainability becomes an integral part of how we holiday, the country is showing that its true colours are green. Spain has the world's highest number of Unesco-accredited biosphere reserves – 52 in total, boasting more than 70,000 wildlife species – and is ranked the 12th most sustainable country on Earth.org's global index. Sustainability is now at the core of the country's development plans, with its 2030 Sustainable Tourism Strategy investing €4bn into fighting climate change and protecting the environment.

There's already impressive evidence of Spain's commitment to the cause. The Caribbean-like Cíes Islands, off northern Galicia, have capped tourist numbers to protect the archipelago's wildlife. Valencia is the first city in the world to monitor the carbon footprint of tourist activity as it strives to become emission-neutral by 2025. Plus 27 restaurants have earned a coveted Michelin Green Star for their commitment to sustainable gastronomy. Across the country, Spain is proving its leadership in green travel – as these hero eco-destinations showcase.

THE SELF-POWERED ISLAND: EL HIERRO

Less than an hour's flight from Tenerife or Gran Canaria, the smallest Canary Island may not yet be a household name, but it's already a global pioneer in sustainability. El Hierro created a self-sufficiency plan back in 1996, but it was the opening of an innovative hydro and wind energy plant in 2014 that propelled it towards being completely self-powered by renewables – a goal that's thought to be as little as four years away. The sheer power of nature is everywhere to be seen, from crystal-clear bathing pools formed in rock basins once eroded by lava (see: Charco



Azul), to wilderness trekking routes and dive sites that offer glimpses of parrotfish, dolphins, manta rays and even whales or sharks. Now a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve and Geopark, it's not just El Hierro's geology that's protected. The native language, Silbo Herreño, is one of the world's last whistling languages. To stop it from dying out, El Hierro's cultural association offers free classes.

THE AWARD-WINNING GREEN VILLAGE: LEKUNBERRI

Of the 44 towns recognised by the UN's World Tourism Organization for preserving local culture, traditions and biodiversity, two are in Spain: Morella in northern Valencia and the Navarrese village of Lekunberri, 90 minutes' drive from Bilbao airport. What do you need to scoop the accolade of being the best tourist town on the planet? In Lekunberri's case, it's down to a clever mix of technology and nature. Tech, because the village is dotted with QR codes offering insights into Lekunberri's heritage and attractions. (The town is socially conscious, too, with innovations such as an online job portal that gathers all openings in the local area – a simple way to promote employment generation.) Offline, the star is the Plazaola greenway – a former railway line connecting Pamplona and San Sebastián that's been reconditioned into a 68km walking and cycling route between Sarasa and Andoain. For the most part it's blissfully gradient-free, and you'll be retracing the footsteps of Ernest Hemingway, who regularly visited Lekunberri. The evergreen scenery takes in waterfalls, valleys, rewilded tunnels and traditional hamlets with their characteristic semi-circular doors and window lintels heaving with flowers, plus, if you're very eagle-eyed, griffon vultures in flight.

HIGH LIFE PARTNERSHIP

THE SUSTAINABLE CITY BREAK: SEVILLE

Andalusia's sun-soaked capital joined the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) last year, proving its commitment to protecting natural and cultural resources. The historic city has already been 'greenifying' its streets: it's the fifth best city in Spain in terms of green areas per inhabitant, the fourth for the number of pedestrianised roads, and there's an impressive 200km of cycle lanes – making it one of the world's best cities for cycling, particularly alongside the regenerated green banks of the Guadalquivir river. But Seville's sustainability measures don't always follow the route you might expect. In 2021, it launched a novel pilot scheme to turn the city's famous sweet-smelling but bitter oranges – which fall over the streets at the end of the fruit season – into electricity. As the oranges ferment, the methane captured will be used to power a water purification plant. The hope is that all of Seville's surplus oranges could be recycled in the future. A juicy idea.

THE ASTROTURISM PIONEER: MENORCA

The sky's the limit in Menorca's eco-credentials. The Balearic Island's commitment to sustainability began three decades ago, in 1993, when it was declared a Biosphere Reserve by Unesco. Since then, economic development has been carefully pitted against environmental impact. To see the success of this, you need only look up. In 2019, Menorca became the first Mediterranean island to achieve the double accreditation of being named a Starlight Tourist Destination *and* one of only 13 Starlight Reserves in the world – meaning you can gaze at the night sky without any light pollution. The island is now considered a leader in astrotourism – but that's not all. Menorca is the 2022 European Region of Gastronomy, a recognition of both the sustainability and quality of its food, which includes red scorpion fish, *carn-i-xulla* sausage made from native black pigs, cheese produced using ancestral methods, and spirits made from Menorcan camomile. Menorca has also applied for Unesco World Heritage recognition for its Talaiotic archaeology. There are 1,586 sites, dating back to the Bronze age, featuring talaiots – buildings made from enormous, horizontally stacked stone slabs.



THE VOLCANIC NATURE RESERVE: LA GARROTXA

Such is the staggering diversity of Spain's geography that only around an hour's drive from Barcelona you'll find a nature reserve with more than 40 volcanoes. (Before you wonder: yes, long extinct.) La Garrotxa is really a tale of two landscapes: smooth and flat in the south thanks to those lava flows, while the steep valleys of the Fluvià river in the north showcase ravines that will make you blink twice. Unsurprisingly, the area is a magnet for hikers: there are more than 700km of signposted trails, with one of the loveliest – El Carrilet greenway – taking you from La Garrotxa to Costa Brava, passing through Girona. All of these areas form part of the Natura 2000 Network – a European initiative to protect the rarest and most fragile natural spaces. The most spectacular way to see the region is by hot air balloon, followed by lunch at one of La Garrotxa's eight Volcanic Cuisine restaurants. This collective of zero-km eateries (cuinavolcanica.cat) creates dishes from ingredients that thrive in the volcanic soil, such as kidney beans, turnips, truffles and chestnuts, served with local pork, snails or wild boar.

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The port at Mahón
Menorca. Above, from
top: sunset over Gales
Fonts, Mahón, Menorca;
La Giralda de Sevilla

