

Squiz the World goes to... Spain

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country that's on top of the football world... where dinner might not be served until your usual bedtime... and where, at Christmas, some children feed a smiling wooden log, tuck it under a blanket—and then whack it with sticks until it poos out presents. Yes, you heard that correctly!

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Spain.

JUST THE FACTS

Spain sits in south-western Europe, taking up most of the Iberian Peninsula, which it shares with its neighbour Portugal. To the north, beyond the towering Pyrenees mountains, are France and the tiny country of Andorra. Spain has the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Mediterranean Sea on the other, which means it has almost 6,000 kilometres of coastline, and a LOT of beaches.

"Spain's capital is Madrid, which sits close to the very centre of the country, and around 50 million people call Spain home.

But not all of Spain is attached to Europe. It also has groups of islands, including the sunny Canary Islands, which sit in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of north-western Africa. Spain even has two small cities, located on the African mainland.

At the closest point, Spain and Africa are separated by the Strait of Gibraltar, a narrow stretch of water just 14 kilometres wide. "

Spain's landscape changes enormously as you travel around. There are snow-covered mountains, a wide, dry plateau in the centre, green hills and forests in the north, wetlands, sandy Mediterranean beaches and volcanic islands. Spain's highest mountain, Mount Teide [TAY-deh], is actually a volcano on the Canary Island of Tenerife.

The warm, sunny climate in much of Spain also makes it an excellent place to grow food. In Andalusia you'll see silvery olive groves, orange orchards around Valencia, vineyards stretching across the countryside and fields filled with tomatoes, almonds, rice and other vegetables. In fact, Spain produces more olive oil than any other country in the world.

The official currency in Spain is the euro, and its political system is a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy. That means Spain has a king, King Felipe [feh-LEE-peh] the Sixth, as its official head of state, but he doesn't run the government.

Voters elect members of parliament, and the prime minister leads the country's government.

"Spain is also divided into 17 self-governing communities, a little like Australia's states and territories. Each has its own elected parliament and regional government, usually led by a president, and a good deal of control over areas such as schools, healthcare and culture.

So, Spain is one country, but unity doesn't mean uniformity. Its different regions have their own landscapes, foods, festivals and powerful local identities. People might feel connected to their region, to Spain, or to both."

To understand how Spain became so wonderfully varied, and how the Spanish language travelled from this one corner of Europe to countries right around the world, we need to wind back the clock and do a little...

TIME TRAVEL

Long before Spain had kings, castles or champion football teams, people were creating extraordinary art inside caves. At Altamira in northern Spain, prehistoric artists painted bison, horses and deer across the rocky ceiling, some more than 14,000 years ago. Over the centuries, many different peoples settled or conquered parts of the Iberian Peninsula. But one of the biggest changes came around 2,000 years ago, when it became part of the Roman Empire. The Romans built roads, bridges, aqueducts and cities... and brought their language, Latin. Over time, the Latin spoken there changed and developed into several languages, including Castilian, which we now commonly call Spanish.

"Then, in the year 711, Muslim armies crossed the narrow Strait of Gibraltar from North Africa and took control of much of the peninsula. Their territory became known as al-Andalus.

For hundreds of years, Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities lived across the region... sometimes peacefully, although certainly not always. Their ideas and knowledge helped shape Spanish architecture, farming, medicine, mathematics, food and language. Thousands of Spanish words have Arabic roots... look for an al or an az at the start..."

Meanwhile, Christian kingdoms in the north gradually expanded southwards. In 1492, the final Muslim kingdom, Granada, was defeated by the Catholic rulers Isabella and Ferdinand. That same year, Isabella and Ferdinand paid for an Italian sailor named Christopher Columbus to sail west across the Atlantic. Which he did - sailing straight into what we now know as Central and South America. Columbus didn't "discover" an empty continent... millions of Indigenous people had lived throughout the Americas for

thousands of years... but his voyage opened the way for Spain to invade and colonise enormous areas.

"At its height, Spain's empire stretched across much of the Americas and into Africa, Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippines. Spanish became the language of government, education and the Catholic religion, and was often forced upon Indigenous people.

Colonisation came at a terrible cost. Land was seized, people were enslaved, and entire communities were devastated by violence and diseases brought from Europe. But some Indigenous cultures and languages survived, and influenced Spanish too. Words including chocolate, tomato and avocado came from the Nahuatl [NAH-wahtl] language spoken by the Aztecs and other peoples in Mexico."

Today, more than 500 million people speak Spanish as their first language, and it is an official language in 20 independent countries. Most Spanish speakers now live outside Spain, and the language sounds different wherever it travelled, mixing with local cultures, accents and languages.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

"Today, Spain is home to people with many different beliefs. Some are Catholic, some follow other religions, and many aren't religious at all. But because Catholicism has played such a big part in Spain's history, Christian traditions are still woven through many festivals and family celebrations, including Christmas.

And in Spain, Christmas doesn't necessarily finish on December 25."

"Traditionally, many Spanish children receive their presents nearly two weeks later, on January 6, when Christians celebrate the arrival of the Three Kings, or Three Wise Men, who brought gifts to baby Jesus.

The night before, enormous Three Kings parades fill towns and cities across Spain. The kings travel on spectacular floats, surrounded by dancers, musicians and costumed characters, tossing handfuls of candy into the crowds. Children leave their shoes out before bed, hoping the kings will fill them with presents overnight."

"But in the north-eastern region of Catalonia, Christmas gets even stranger.

In early December, some families bring home a small wooden log called the Tió de Nadal [tee-OH duh nuh-DAHL]. It has a smiling face, little stick legs and a traditional red Catalan hat. Children tuck it under a blanket to keep it warm and "feed" it fruit, nuts and scraps.

Then, at Christmas, they hit the log with sticks while singing a song ordering it to poo.

Yes. Poo.

When the blanket is lifted, the log has magically produced, or pooped out, candy, nuts and small presents."

"And that isn't Catalonia's only Christmas poo tradition. Hidden somewhere in many nativity scenes is a tiny figure called the caganer [kuh-guh-NAIR]: traditionally a Catalan farmer, squatting with his pants down and doing a poo. Modern versions might look like footballers, celebrities or politicians.

The caganer is thought to represent fertilising the earth and bringing good luck—but let's be honest, searching for a pooping football star among the shepherds, angels and Three Kings is also pretty funny."

Ok..so, once the Christmas holidays are over, it's time to pack away the pooping log, shoulder your school bag and head back to class...It's ...

TIME FOR SCHOOL

In Spain, school is compulsory from the age of six until 16, and primary school lasts for six years. The school year begins in September and finishes in June, giving children a long summer holiday during the hottest part of the year.

"Let's imagine you're a ten-year-old Spanish student arriving at school at around nine o'clock. You probably won't wear a uniform, because most public schools don't require one, although some private and Catholic schools do. Your timetable might include Spanish, maths, science, social studies, art, music and physical education. You'll also learn at least one foreign language, usually English.

But remember how Spain is united, but not uniform? That applies in the classroom too."

In Catalonia, you may learn in Catalan and Spanish. In Galicia [guh-LISS-ee-uh], you could use Galician [guh-LISS-ee-an] and Spanish, while in the Basque Country, lessons might include both Euskara [ew-SKAH-rah] and Spanish. Add English, and some primary-school children are learning across three languages. My brain is tired just thinking about it.

"School hours vary too. Some students finish at around two o'clock, while others stay for a hot lunch and afternoon activities. Some schools have a long break in the middle before children return to class later.

That hot school lunch is called el comedor [el koh-meh-DOR], meaning the dining room. Instead of quickly gobbling down a sandwich, children might sit together to eat several courses, including soup, rice, fish, meat, vegetables and fruit. Spanish schools generally take lunch rather seriously."

Grandparents often help with school pick-ups or look after children while parents work, and when the final bell does ring, plenty of children head to music, dance or sports

practice. Although, with Spain sitting on top of the football world, there's one after-school activity that might be particularly popular...

SPORT TIME

Football is the biggest sport in Spain, and right now, Spanish fans have plenty to celebrate. The men's national team, known as La Roja [lah ROH-hah], The Red One, has just beaten Argentina to win the 2026 World Cup, adding a second trophy to the one it won in 2010. Spain's women also became world champions in 2023, and the country's top competition, La Liga [lah LEE-gah], is home to two of football's most famous clubs: Real Madrid and Barcelona. When those fierce rivals meet, hundreds of millions of people around the world tune in to watch.

But Spain's sporting success doesn't stop at football. Tennis champion Rafael Nadal won 22 Grand Slam titles, including a record 14 French Opens and Carlos Alcaraz, another Spanish tennis player, is at the top of the rankings today. Spain also excels at basketball, cycling, handball, MotoGP and rink hockey... a lightning-fast version of hockey played on roller skates. It has even collected plenty of world championship medals in pétanque [pay-TONK], where players try to toss metal balls closest to a small wooden target.

"Then there's bullfighting.

People have faced bulls for entertainment since Roman times, although modern Spanish bullfighting developed much later. People have tried to restrict or ban it for centuries, and while some defend it as an important tradition, many Spaniards believe it is cruel and should end."

While not a sport, there's also the famous Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, which began as a way of moving bulls through town to the bullring. People started racing in front of them to prove their bravery, and perhaps their ability to make extremely questionable decisions. The run is dangerous for humans and distressing for the animals, but still draws tourists from all around the world.

All I'm certain that running away from a bull would certainly work up an appetite, which is handy, because it's almost...

DINNER TIME

"Like everything else, Spanish food varies enormously from region to region, but one dish has become famous around the world: paella [pah-EH-yah]. Paella comes from Valencia, where rice grows in fields near the Mediterranean coast. And while seafood paella is popular, the traditional Valencian version may contain chicken, rabbit, green beans and even snails.

It's cooked in a wide, shallow pan, which is also called a paella, and many people believe the best bit is the socarrat [soh-kah-RAHT]: the crispy, caramelised layer of rice stuck to the bottom. So, if someone serves you slightly crunchy paella, don't complain. You may have been given the prized part."

Spain is also famous for tapas. Now, tapas isn't one particular food. It's actually small dishes made for sharing. A table might fill with olives and cheese, croquettes, garlic prawns, meatballs, spicy potatoes called patatas bravas [pah-TAH-tahs BRAH-vahs], and thick slices of Spanish tortilla.

And just so we're clear: in Spain, a tortilla is not a flat wrap for tacos. It's a thick omelette made with eggs and potatoes. Whether it should also contain onion is the subject of a very serious national argument. I'm staying well out of it.

For something sweet, you could try churros, long strips of fried dough, sprinkled with sugar and dipped into hot chocolate so thick it's almost like melted pudding.

"Spaniards also tend to eat later than Australians. Lunch is often the largest meal of the day and may begin around two or three o'clock, while dinner might not be served until nine o'clock or even later. Meals are a chance to sit, share and talk.

So, by the time dinner arrives in Spain, you might usually be brushing your teeth and climbing into bed."

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

"What narrow stretch of water separates Spain from Africa by just 14 kilometres?

Is it:

- a) The Strait of Hormuz?
- b) The Tasman Strait?
- c) The Strait of Gibralta?

[c) The Strait of Gibraltar]"

"What crop does Spain produce more of than any other country in the world?

[Olives or Olive Oil]"

"If I was looking for the caganar in a Catalonia Christmas Nativity scene... what would I be searching for?

[the figure squatting with his pants down and doing a poo]"

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Spain

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.