

CATALUNYA

A. Geographical location

Catalonia is one of the gateways from the Iberian Peninsula to Europe, which has had an effect on the country's history and personality.

Catalonia is in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula and covers an area of approximately 32,000 km². The population numbers some six million, giving a density of around 188 inhabitants per km². It is one of the autonomous communities of Spain and has its own governing body, the Generalitat de Catalunya.

To the east is the Mediterranean Sea, to the north the borders with France and Andorra, and to the west it adjoins the autonomous communities of Aragon and Valencia. This strategic position has fostered close relations with the other Mediterranean countries and with continental Europe.

Given the varied altitudes of Catalonia, which has plains alternating with very mountainous regions, there is a wide range of bioclimatic habitats here



B. Physical geography

The notable relief features are the Pyrenees and Pre-Pyrenees, the Central Depression or the Ebre depression, and the Catalan Mediterranean system, as well as the coastal plains and the Cordillera Transversal

The impressive mountain range of the Pyrenees, with its east and west facing slopes, stretches from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, separating the Iberian Peninsula from the rest of Europe. The south-east slopes of the range in Catalonia form a long strip running 230 km from the Val d'Aran to the sea. The axial Pyrenees are predominantly of granite and dark slaty areas, and have steep sides and high peaks (the Estats peak is 3,143 m high, Comaloformo is 3,033 m and Puigmal is 2,913 m) as well as lower areas such as La Cerdanya, with its very beautiful, diverse landscape marked by glacial cirques with tarns and pools, water courses that have cut out deep valleys, meadows and forests of pine, fir trees and birch. The pre-Pyrenean folds of Montsec and Pedraforca are also steep and largely consist of limestone. The protected areas include Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, El Cadí-Moixeró Natural Park, the Natural Park of the Volcanic Region of La Garrotxa, and the Cap de Creus Natural Park.



The Catalan Mediterranean System consists of three areas that run parallel to the coast: the Serralada Litoral, a range of mountains that stretches from the Garraf massif to the Begur massif; the Serralada Prelitoral, which stretches from Les Guilleries to Els Ports, with major massifs such as El Montseny, Montserrat and El Montsant; and between them the Depressió Prelitoral, which holds the most densely-populated regions of El Gironès, La Selva, El Vallès, El Penedès and El Camp de Tarragona. The natural parks in this area include the Garraf, El Montseny, Montserrat, Sant Llorenç del Munt and El Montnegre-Corredor parks.

The Depressió Central, at the eastern end of the Depressió de l'Ebre, consists of a series of basins formed by erosion (the Plana de Vic, the Pla de Bages, the Conca de Barberà), high plateaus (La Segarra and El Lluçanès) and the alluvial plains (El Segrià and L'Urgell) that are largely used for growing crops. Other smaller distinctive areas include the coastal plains of L'Empordà and the Delta de l'Ebre, and the Serralada Transversal (Puigsacalm) range of mountains. The natural parks of the Aiguamolls of L'Empordà and the Delta de l'Ebre are on the coast and are important havens for migratory birds.

The sheer coastline consists of 580 km of steep cliffs interspersed with hidden or sandy coves depending on the proximity of the mountains. The various stretches of coastline, from north to south, are known to tourists as the Costa Brava, the Costa del Maresme, the Costa del Garraf and the Costa Daurada.

C. The climate

In general, the climate in Catalonia is Mediterranean, with lots of sun. It is mild in winter and hot in summer.

The morphological diversity also determines the variations in climate. The Pyrenees and nearby areas have climates typical of high mountainous regions, with minimum temperatures below 0°C, annual rainfall of above 1,000 mm and heavy snowfall in the winter. Coastal areas have mild, temperate weather, with temperatures that rise and rainfall that decreases as one moves from north to south. Inland, far from the sea, the climate is typical of continental Mediterranean regions, with cold winters and very hot summers.



D. Political geography

Catalonia is an autonomous community in Spain and has its own government, the Generalitat

Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia and one of the most important cities on the Mediterranean. Virtually half of the population in the country lives in the Barcelona area.

For administrative purposes, Catalonia is divided into the Spanish system of provinces (Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida and Girona) and into the Catalan government network of 41 comarques, or districts. These districts are very different in terms of their population density and are established on the basis of geographical and historical criteria, usually around a town that acts as a centre for services. Each has its own district council.

The population of Catalonia is concentrated not just in Barcelona - a cosmopolitan city that is an important centre for shopping, cultural events and services, as well as a major tourist destination - and its metropolitan region (which between them account for virtually half of the total population in the country), but also in areas on the coast. However, there are a number of other major cities with their own historical



tradition and historic buildings which have undergone considerable economic and demographic growth in recent decades. These cities include Girona, Tarragona, Lleida, Tortosa, Vic, Manresa, Reus, Figueres, Sabadell, Terrassa and Igualada. The founding of new universities outside Barcelona has contributed towards the development and standing of some of these cities.

The areas inland and mountainous regions are rural in character and have much lower population densities. Such places are currently being abandoned by their residents, who are shifting to the large cities, but this process has in part been halted by new transport networks and by the recent rise in eco-tourism and mountain and adventure sports.

E. Economic geography

Despite the fact that the country does not have substantial resources of raw materials, Catalonia has a very high standard of living both in absolute figures and in comparison with other parts of Spain

GDP for 1999 stood at 17.7 billion pesetas, 19.02% of the total GDP for Spain.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution - in which Catalonia led the way - industry has been one of the bases of the Catalan economy. Textile manufacturing, especially the manufacture of wool and cotton fabric in the early days and then later of manmade fibres, used to be extremely important but has given way to high-technology industries including the chemical, pharmaceutical and precision mechanics sectors, and, more recently, the car building and allied industries, railway parts and machinery, the petrochemical and electronics industries and so forth. The publishing industry, graphic arts and fashion are also economically important. The construction sector, often allied to tourism, has always been and remains a driving force of the economy.



Since the Middle Ages, when merchant ships reached all the ports on the Mediterranean, trade has been a decisive element in the country's economy. Small traders, who traditionally have been very dynamic, today co-exist with the large hypermarkets that are a feature throughout Europe. Other sectors worth mentioning in the service industries include transport and communications, telecom and advertising companies, and especially the hotel and restaurant sector, which have grown hand in hand with the explosion in tourism that began in the Sixties.

F. History

Catalonia has been a nation since Medieval times and has its own language and a distinctive cultural, political and legal tradition that have shaped the character of the country and its people.

Catalonia's formation as a political unit originated in a number of feudal counties that came into being in the area bordering the Carolingian Empire and the northern lands in the Iberian Peninsula conquered by the Muslims, known as the Spanish March. The county of Barcelona grew to greater power than the others and at the end of the 10th century effectively became independent of the Franks. In 1137, the ruling families of Catalonia and Aragon were united by marriage, the ruler being Ramon Berenguer IV, who defeated the last Arab redoubts (the kingdoms of Lleida and Tortosa and the province of Siurana) between 1148 and 1153.



Jaume I el Conqueridor was responsible for beginning Catalan expansion around the Mediterranean by conquering the Kingdom of Majorca and Valencia (1229-1238). During the course of the 13th and 14th centuries, the country became economically powerful (with maritime consulates in many of its ports) and politically strong (with the conquests of Sicily, Sardinia, the duchies of Athens and Neopatria, and, in the 15th century, Naples). The permanent committee of representatives at the Catalan Corts - one of the first parliaments in Europe - gave rise to the Generalitat de Catalunya, the country's government that was reinstated in the 20th century.

The marriage of Ferdinand II and Isabel of Castile (the Catholic Monarchs) brought about union with Castile, but Catalonia preserved its political institutions and its sovereignty (its own law, coinage, taxation system, etc.) right through to the 18th century. The War of the Spanish Succession between the Bourbons and the Habsburgs resulted in the crowning of Felipe V as king, and was a grave defeat for Catalonia, which had sided with the House of Austria. The Decree of the New Plan led to the abolition of Catalan institutions and to the implementation of an absolutist strategy to bring Catalonia into line with Castile.

The 18th century, however, saw an economic comeback and the start of the country's industrialisation, which became firmly established beginning in 1832 through steam-powered machinery and the predominance of the wool and cotton textile industry. The national restoration movements in Europe in the 19th century influenced the blossoming of the cultural *Renaixença* (the *Jocs Florals* poetry competitions and the revival of the Catalan language and literature) and of political Catalanism, as well as of artistic movements such as *Modernisme* and the *Avant-garde*.

Under the Second Spanish Republic, the Generalitat de Catalunya was reinstated and the 1932 Statute of Autonomy approved. However, defeat in the Civil War (1936-1939) resulted in Franco's dictatorship and the abolition of all the country's rights and institutions. With the restoration of the Generalitat de Catalunya in 1977, a parliament and governing body for the autonomous community were set up and a new Statute of Autonomy approved (1979).