

## **Why Spain Is A Great Destination For GCC Travelers**

Among an abundance of iconic cities rich with beautiful landscapes, Spain remains a treasure trove of history and culture as a result of various civilizations and religious identities shining alongside its vibrant energy and unique way of life. Spain was one of the world's top visited destinations in 2018. The country welcomed more than 82 million tourists last year and brought in a total of \$89.5 billion of tourism receipts.

These impressive figures include a marked increase in the number of visitors from the GCC region. In the past few years, the number of GCC travelers in Spain rose from 119,000 in 2014 to 24,0000 visitors in 2018.

“While the UAE ranks No.1 in terms of arrivals—close to 100,000 tourists—Kuwaiti visitors have doubled in the last four years. In 2017, we had more than 39,000 tourists from Kuwait,” said Miguel Nieto-Sandoval, Tourism Counselor for the Spanish Tourism Office in the GCC.

GCC nationals are also some of the biggest spenders during their visits to Spain, spending on an average \$1,413 per trip. Countries like the UAE and KSA are also among the top spenders in Spain—their average spend is 45% higher than the highest spending country globally.

“Spain has now recently introduced a digital procedure (DIVA) and eliminated the minimum ceiling spend for claiming VAT refunds. This combined with the fact that Spain offers a great choice of Spanish designer brands, luxury shopping villages and street labels should hopefully encourage more tourists to indulge in a shopping spree during their next visit to Spain,” added Nieto-Sandoval.

Breathtaking cruises and the love of football have placed Barcelona as the most favorite city of GCC travelers in Spain, followed by Madrid and Malaga.

The Tourism Office of Spain aims to educate and highlight other beautiful locations in and around these cities, which are highly accessible by high speed train, AVE, or short walk, thereby increasing the average length of stay in these cities. For instance, cities like Toledo, Segovia and Cuenca outside of Madrid are an average of 30 minutes away from the capital by AVE and are rich with charm and history. Similarly, Barcelona is a gateway to exploring the breathtaking Costa Brava or Port Aventura-Ferrari Land Park.

Similarly, while the majority of tourists visit the coastal cities of Malaga and Marbella, which are mostly known for their beautiful beaches and luxurious retail and leisure points, the Tourism Board aims to encourage tourists from the GCC to explore the region of Andalusia itself. “GCC tourists should indeed visit the region of Andalusia as it was the home of the Moorish Empire where the Cordoba Mosque, Alhambra Palace in Granada and the Alcazar are built,” says Nieto-Sandoval.

Other destinations with good potentials for the GCC market are the Balearic and the Canary Islands. Tenerife Island, which is the most popular of the Canary Islands, is ideal for both families and honeymooners looking for a perfect island to spend their holidays with activities suitable for all ages. The Balearic Islands are most famous for Ibiza, a party lover's paradise, and just a one-hour flight from the main city.

The Tourism Board is working actively and relentlessly on finding ways to provide accurate and relevant information for tourists looking for their next visit to Spain. The website has been created with information specifically tailored for the GCC travelers, available in both English and Arabic. It highlights places to explore around the best-known destinations, recommendations for families, shopping, halal restaurants and masjids. The website also offers a link directly to a company responsible for processing Schengen visas to Spain.

The general trend so far, when it comes to travelers from the GCC, is to visit Spain in the summer, especially in the months of July and August, but the Tourism Board recently ran a successful online marketing campaign to show how Spain can be a great option for a winter vacation.

"Our figures from October to December in 2018 from the Gulf Region have shown a marked increase on a month-to-month basis compared to previous years—an average of 18%. I believe that GCC travelers are slowly recognizing how Spain can be an-all-year-round destination to enjoy their holidays," according to Nieto-Sandoval.

"It's not just the Christmas markets and traditions that are unique, but Spain also offers beautiful weather throughout the whole year in places like the Canary Islands or the Costa del Sol. Unlike most destinations that wind down during winter, the streets of Spain are still bustling with life, with shops and restaurants open till late at night with an active festive calendar."

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