

Survival Spanish

Survival Spanish — Course Outline

(Neutral / general Latin American Spanish for travelers)

This outline focuses on the practical phrases and structures you will actually use when traveling in Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. It prioritizes high-frequency language, clear explanations of why something is said a certain way, and built-in practice ideas so the material sticks under real-world pressure.

1. Course Foundations & Pronunciation Basics

- How to use the course (focus on communication over perfection)
- Pure Spanish vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and key consonant differences (j, ll/y, r/rr)
- Stress and basic rhythm of spoken Latin American Spanish
- Politeness markers that work everywhere: por favor, gracias, disculpe, con permiso
- Practice suggestion: Record yourself saying the five vowels and the most common polite phrases. Listen back and compare to native audio.

2. Greetings & Basic Conversation

- Time-of-day greetings (Buenos días / Buenas tardes / Buenas noches)

- Informal vs. formal “How are you?” (¿Cómo estás? vs. ¿Cómo está usted?)
- Introducing yourself and asking someone’s name
- Simple responses and leave-taking
- The importance of starting every interaction with a greeting

3. Numbers & Time

- Numbers 0–100 (and how to say prices)
- Telling time and asking the time
- Days of the week and basic calendar language
- Months of the year

4. Shopping & Money

- Asking and understanding prices (¿Cuánto cuesta? / ¿Cuánto es?)
- Currency and payment phrases
- Basic shopping phrases
- Asking for sizes, colors, or different options
- Bargaining language (when appropriate)
- Markets vs. stores

5. Food & Restaurants

- Ordering food and drinks
- Dietary needs and preferences (sin picante, vegetariano/a, alergias)
- Asking for recommendations
- Requesting the check and tipping language
- Useful food vocabulary that travels well across countries

6. Getting Around (Airport, Taxi, Bus, Directions)

- Airport essentials (baggage, immigration, finding transportation)
- Taxi phrases and confirming the destination/price
- Asking for and giving simple directions
- Key location words (aquí, allí, cerca, lejos, derecha, izquierda, derecho)
- Common local variations for “bus” and how to handle them

7. Hotels & Accommodations

- Checking in and out
- Requesting what you need (towels, extra pillow, quiet room, Wi-Fi)

- Asking about amenities and location
- Handling common problems politely

8. Asking for Help & Handling Problems

- “I don’t understand” and “Please speak more slowly”
- Asking whether someone speaks English
- Getting lost and asking for directions
- Simple problem-solving language

9. Health & Emergencies

- Describing basic symptoms or needs
- Asking for a pharmacy, doctor, or hospital
- Emergency phrases and numbers awareness
- Staying calm and clear under stress

10. Core Survival Structures & Mini-Dialogues

- High-frequency question words (dónde, cuánto, cómo, qué, cuándo)
- Key verbs in present tense that unlock many situations (ser/estar, tener, querer, poder, ir, necesitar)
- Gender agreement basics that matter in real speech
- Full mini-dialogues for the most common travel scenarios (taxi, restaurant, asking for help)

11. Cultural Notes & Final Survival Tips

- Why politeness and a smile matter so much
- Regional vocabulary differences you may hear
- What to do when you get stuck
- A simple 7-day pre-trip practice plan

Course Foundations & Pronunciation Basics

How to Use This Course

The goal here is **communication, not perfection**. You will make mistakes, mispronounce words, and mix up genders — and you will still be understood. Native Spanish speakers in tourist and everyday contexts are used to hearing accented, imperfect Spanish and will meet you halfway. Prioritize:

- Getting the *message* across over getting every word exactly right.
- Speaking a little slower and clearer rather than fast and mumbled.
- Learning phrases as whole chunks first; the grammar explanations behind them are there to help you adapt them, not to be memorized in the abstract.

The Five Pure Vowels

Spanish vowels are short, crisp, and always sound the same — unlike English vowels, which shift depending on the word. This consistency is good news: once you learn the five sounds, you can read almost any Spanish word aloud correctly.

Letter	Sounds like (English approximation)	Example
a	“ah” as in <i>father</i>	ca sa (house)
e	“eh” as in <i>bet</i>	me sa (table)
i	“ee” as in <i>machine</i>	sí (yes)
o	“oh” as in <i>note</i> (no glide)	co mo (how/like)
u	“oo” as in <i>food</i>	tú (you)

The most common mistake English speakers make is letting vowels glide (turning “o” into “oh-oo” or “e” into “eh-ee”). In Spanish, keep each vowel a single, clean sound.

Key Consonant Differences

- **j** — Always a breathy “h” sound, like clearing your throat gently. *Jugo* (juice) sounds like “HOO-go,” never “JOO-go.”
- **ll / y** — In most of Latin America, both are pronounced like the English “y” in *yes*, or sometimes closer to an English “j” (this varies by region — you’ll hear both and either is fine). *Llamo* →

“YAH-mo” or “JAH-mo.”

- **r / rr** — A single **r** between vowels is a quick tap of the tongue, close to the “tt” in American English *butter* (*pero* = “but”). A double **rr**, or an **r** at the start of a word, is a rolled/trilled r (*perro* = “dog,” *rápido* = “fast”). This is the hardest sound for most English speakers — don’t worry about perfecting the roll right away; a tap is close enough to be understood in most cases.

Stress and Rhythm

Spanish words follow predictable stress rules:

1. If a word ends in **n, s, or a vowel**, stress falls on the **second-to-last** syllable: **ha-BLAN**, **za-PA-tos**, **CA-sa**.
2. If a word ends in **any other consonant**, stress falls on the **last** syllable: **ha-BLAR**, **co-MER**, **ciu-DAD**.
3. Any word with a written accent mark (á, é, í, ó, ú) breaks the above rules — the accented syllable is always stressed, no exceptions: **ca-FÉ**, **RÁ-pi-do**, **te-LÉ-fo-no**.

Spoken Spanish also runs faster and more evenly than English, with less emphasis piled onto individual words. Don’t worry about matching native speed — clear and correctly stressed is far more important than fast.

Politeness Markers That Work Everywhere

These four expressions will smooth over almost any interaction, in any Spanish-speaking country:

Spanish	Meaning	When to use it
Por favor	Please	Attach to almost any request
Gracias	Thank you	After any request is fulfilled — say it often
Disculpe	Excuse me / Pardon me	Getting someone’s attention, or a mild apology
Con permiso	Excuse me (with your permission)	Passing by someone, entering/exiting a space

A small but important distinction: **disculpe** is for getting attention or apologizing for an interruption (“Excuse me, do you have the time?”), while **con permiso** is for physically moving past or through someone (“Excuse me” as you squeeze by in a narrow aisle).

Practice Suggestion

Record yourself saying the five vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and the four politeness phrases above. Listen back, then compare against a native speaker clip (search “Spanish vowels pronunciation” on YouTube).

Repeat daily for a few minutes — this short daily habit trains your ear and mouth far more effectively than a single long session.

Next: [Greetings & Basic Conversation](#)

Greetings & Basic Conversation

Start Every Interaction With a Greeting

In much of Latin America, walking up to someone — a shopkeeper, a taxi driver, a hotel clerk — and launching straight into a request without a greeting reads as brusque or even rude. A quick “**Buenos días**” or “**Hola**” before your question costs nothing and immediately makes the interaction warmer. Make this a habit before anything else in this course.

Time-of-Day Greetings

Spanish	Meaning	Roughly used
Buenos días	Good morning	Until around midday
Buenas tardes	Good afternoon	Midday until dusk
Buenas noches	Good evening / Good night	After dark (both arriving and leaving)
Hola	Hi / Hello	Any time, informal, works alongside the above

A safe combo: “*Hola, buenos días*” — friendly and correct at any formality level.

Asking “How Are You?” — Informal vs. Formal

Spanish has two “you” forms, and picking the right one matters more in this phrase than almost anywhere else:

Form	Phrase	Use with
Informal (tú)	¿Cómo estás?	Peers, people your age, casual settings, most young people
Formal (usted)	¿Cómo está usted?	Elders, officials, hotel/restaurant staff, anyone you’d address respectfully

If you're unsure which to use, default to the formal **usted** version — it's never wrong to be too polite, while using **tú** with the wrong person can come across as overly familiar. Many service workers will use **tú** back with travelers regardless; just follow their lead after the first exchange.

Introducing Yourself and Asking Someone's Name

Spanish	Meaning
Me llamo...	My name is... (literally "I call myself...")
¿Cómo te llamas?	What's your name? (informal)
¿Cómo se llama usted?	What's your name? (formal)
Mucho gusto	Nice to meet you
Soy de...	I am from...
¿De dónde eres?	Where are you from? (informal)

Example exchange:

Hola, buenos días. Me llamo Ben. ¿Cómo se llama usted?

Me llamo Carla. Mucho gusto.

Mucho gusto, Carla.

Simple Responses

When someone asks how you're doing, you need a quick reply, not a monologue:

Spanish	Meaning
Bien, gracias	Good, thanks
Muy bien	Very good
Más o menos	So-so / okay
¿Y tú?	And you? (informal) — always bounce the question back
¿Y usted?	And you? (formal) — always bounce the question back

Leave-Taking

Spanish	Meaning	Notes
Adiós	Goodbye	General farewell
Hasta luego	See you later	Very common, casual
Hasta mañana	See you tomorrow	
Nos vemos	See you around	Casual
Que tengas buen día	Have a good day	Warm, common closer

Mini-Dialogue

¡Hola! Buenas tardes.

Buenas tardes. ¿Cómo está usted?

Muy bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?

Bien también. Me llamo Ben. ¿Cómo se llama usted?

Me llamo Sofía. Mucho gusto.

Mucho gusto, Sofía. Hasta luego.

Hasta luego, que tenga buen día.

Practice Suggestion

Pick three greetings, one “how are you,” and one leave-taking phrase, and use them out loud in a full mini-conversation like the one above — with a language partner, a tutor, or just talking to yourself. Repeating the whole exchange (not just isolated phrases) builds the reflex of stringing greetings together naturally.

Next: [Numbers & Time](#)

Numbers & Time

Numbers 0–30 (Learn These Solid)

#	Spanish	#	Spanish	#	Spanish
0	cero	11	once	21	veintiuno
1	uno	12	doce	22	veintidós
2	dos	13	trece	23	veintitrés
3	tres	14	catorce	24	veinticuatro
4	cuatro	15	quince	25	veinticinco
5	cinco	16	dieciséis	26	veintiséis
6	seis	17	diecisiete	27	veintisiete
7	siete	18	dieciocho	28	veintiocho
8	ocho	19	diecinueve	29	veintinueve
9	nueve	20	veinte	30	treinta
10	diez				

Numbers 30–100 (By Tens)

Spanish	Value
treinta	30
cuarenta	40
cincuenta	50
sesenta	60
setenta	70
ochenta	80
noventa	90
cien	100

From 31 onward, combine with **y** (“and”): **treinta y uno** (31), **cuarenta y cinco** (45), **noventa y nueve** (99). This pattern holds all the way to 99 — once you know the tens words and 1–9, you can build any number in between.

Larger round numbers you’ll hear often when shopping: **cien** (100), **doscientos** (200), **quinientos** (500), **mil** (1,000). Prices in many countries are in the hundreds or thousands of local currency units, so recognizing these matters more than perfecting numbers in the millions. You’ll put these numbers to work asking about prices in [Shopping & Money](#).

Telling Time

Spanish	Meaning
¿Qué hora es?	What time is it?
Es la una	It’s one o’clock (singular — only used for 1:00)
Son las dos	It’s two o’clock (plural — used for every hour except 1:00)
y media	half past (e.g. <i>son las tres y media</i> = 3:30)
y cuarto	quarter past (e.g. <i>son las cuatro y cuarto</i> = 4:15)
menos cuarto	quarter to (e.g. <i>son las cinco menos cuarto</i> = 4:45)
de la mañana	in the morning
de la tarde	in the afternoon
de la noche	in the evening

Together, **mañana/tarde/noche** are the Spanish equivalent of am/pm. Example: “*Son las siete de la noche*” = It’s 7:00 pm.

Days of the Week and Basic Calendar Language

Spanish	Meaning
el lunes	Monday
el martes	Tuesday
el miércoles	Wednesday

Spanish	Meaning
el jueves	Thursday
el viernes	Friday
el sábado	Saturday
el domingo	Sunday
hoy	today
mañana	tomorrow
ayer	yesterday
el día	day
la semana	week
el mes	month
el año	year
la próxima semana	next week
la semana pasada	last week
el próximo mes	next month
el mes pasado	last month

Days of the week are **not** capitalized in Spanish unless they appear at the start of a sentence.

Mañana (tomorrow — same word as “morning,” context tells you which).

In English we refer to things happening on a week day (e.g. I am going to the beach on Friday). In Spanish you refer to things happening **the** week day (e.g. Voy a la playa el viernes) (I am going to the beach **the** Friday).

Months of the Year

Spanish	English
enero	January
febrero	February
marzo	March

Spanish	English
abril	April
mayo	May
junio	June
julio	July
agosto	August
septiembre	September
octubre	October
noviembre	November
diciembre	December

Months of the year are **not** capitalized in Spanish unless they appear at the start of a sentence.

Practice Suggestion

Count out loud from 0 to 100 by tens, filling in the teens and twenties in full. Then practice saying the current time out loud every time you check your phone for a day — it builds automatic recall far faster than flashcards alone.

Next: [Shopping & Money](#)

Shopping & Money

Asking and Understanding Prices

Spanish	Meaning
¿Cuánto cuesta?	How much does it cost? (one item)
¿Cuánto es?	How much is it? (total, e.g. at checkout)
¿Cuánto cuestan?	How much do they cost? (multiple items)
Son [amount]	It's/They are [amount] — the typical reply
Es muy caro	It's very expensive
Es muy barato	It's very cheap

Example:

¿Cuánto cuesta esta camisa?

Son doscientos pesos.

¿Cuánto es todo?

Son quinientos pesos en total.

Currency and Payment Phrases

Spanish	Meaning
¿Aceptan tarjeta?	Do you accept card?
Solo efectivo	Cash only
¿Tiene cambio?	Do you have change?
La cuenta, por favor	The bill, please
¿Puedo pagar con dólares?	Can I pay with dollars?

Basic Shopping Phrases

Spanish	Meaning
Solo estoy mirando, gracias	I'm just looking, thanks
¿Me puede ayudar?	Can you help me?
Estoy buscando...	I'm looking for...
¿Lo tienen en otro color?	Do you have it in another color?
Me lo llevo	I'll take it
¿Puedo probármelo?	Can I try it on?
¿Dónde está el probador?	Where is the fitting room?

Example:

Buenas tardes, ¿en qué le puedo ayudar?

Solo estoy mirando, gracias. ...Disculpe, estoy buscando una chaqueta.

Claro, por aquí tenemos varias opciones.

Asking for Sizes, Colors, or Different Options

Spanish	Meaning
la talla	size (clothing)
el número	size (shoes)
¿Tiene una talla más grande/pequeña?	Do you have a bigger/smaller size?
el color	color
¿Tiene otro color?	Do you have another color?
¿Tiene otro modelo?	Do you have another style?

Bargaining Language (When Appropriate)

Bargaining is common and expected in open-air markets and with independent street vendors, but generally **not** appropriate in fixed-price stores, supermarkets, or malls — watch for a visible price tag as your cue.

Spanish	Meaning
¿Cuál es su mejor precio?	What's your best price?
¿Me puede hacer un descuento?	Can you give me a discount?
Es mucho, ¿qué tal [lower price]?	That's a lot, how about [lower price]?
Le doy [amount]	I'll give you [amount]
Trato hecho	Deal
Lo dejo así, gracias	I'll leave it, thanks (if walking away)

Keep bargaining light and friendly — a smile and a bit of back-and-forth is part of the culture in markets, not confrontation.

Markets vs. Stores

Spanish	Meaning
el mercado	market
el mercado de artesanías	craft/artisan market
la tienda	store
el supermercado	supermarket
el centro comercial	mall
precio fijo	fixed price

A **mercado** is generally where bargaining is welcome; a **tienda** or **supermercado** with **precio fijo** signage is not.

Practice Suggestion

Practice a market bargaining exchange out loud, starting with “¿Cuál es su mejor precio?” and working through at least one counter-offer, ending in “**Trato hecho**” or politely walking away with “**Lo dejo así, gracias.**”

Next: [Food & Restaurants](#)

Food & Restaurants

Ordering Food and Drinks

Spanish	Meaning
Una mesa para [number], por favor	A table for [number], please
¿Me puede traer el menú?	Can you bring me the menu?
Quisiera...	I would like... (polite, softer than “quiero”)
Voy a pedir...	I’m going to order...
Para tomar, ...	To drink, ...
Para mí...	For me... (used when ordering for a group)
¿Qué me recomienda?	What do you recommend?

Example:

Buenas tardes, una mesa para dos, por favor.

Claro, síganme.

Gracias. ¿Me puede traer el menú?

Aquí tiene. ¿Qué desean tomar?

Quisiera un agua, por favor.

Quisiera is generally the most polite and widely-safe way to order (“I would like...”), softer than the grammatically simpler **quiero** (“I want”).

Dietary Needs and Preferences

Spanish	Meaning
sin picante	not spicy / without spice
sin [ingredient]	without [ingredient]
vegetariano/a	vegetarian

Spanish	Meaning
vegano/a	vegan
Soy alérgico/a a...	I'm allergic to...
¿Esto tiene...?	Does this have...?
No como carne	I don't eat meat
¿Tiene opciones vegetarianas?	Do you have vegetarian options?

Adjectives like **vegetariano** and **alérgico** change ending based on your gender: use **-o** if you're male, **-a** if you're female (e.g., a woman says "**Soy alérgica**").

Asking for Recommendations

Spanish	Meaning
¿Cuál es la especialidad de la casa?	What's the house specialty?
¿Qué es esto?	What is this?
¿Es picante?	Is it spicy?
¿Qué lleva este plato?	What's in this dish?

Requesting the Check and Tipping Language

Spanish	Meaning
La cuenta, por favor	The check, please
¿Está incluida la propina?	Is the tip included?
¿Puedo pagar con tarjeta?	Can I pay with card?
¿Podemos pagar por separado?	Can we pay separately?

Tipping customs vary by country — 10% is a common baseline in restaurants across much of Latin America, but it's always worth checking "**¿Está incluida la propina?**" since some places already add a service charge.

Useful Food Vocabulary That Travels Well

Spanish	Meaning
el agua	water
el agua con gas	sparkling water
el agua sin gas	still water
la carne	meat
el pollo	chicken
el pescado	fish
las verduras	vegetables
el arroz	rice
los frijoles	beans
el pan	bread
la fruta	fruit
el postre	dessert
delicioso/a	delicious

Practice Suggestion

Order a full meal out loud from a Spanish-language restaurant menu (real or found online), using **quisiera** for each item and one dietary phrase that applies to you. Then practice asking for and closing out the check.

Next: [Getting Around](#)

Getting Around

Airport Essentials

Spanish	Meaning
el equipaje	baggage/luggage
la maleta	suitcase
el reclamo de equipaje	baggage claim
inmigración	immigration
aduana	customs
¿Dónde está la salida?	Where is the exit?
¿Dónde puedo tomar un taxi?	Where can I catch a taxi?
¿Dónde está la parada de autobús?	Where is the bus stop?

Immigration officers may ask “**¿Cuál es el motivo de su viaje?**” (What’s the purpose of your trip?) — a simple “**Turismo**” (tourism) or “**Vacaciones**” (vacation) is a complete answer.

Taxi Phrases and Confirming Destination/Price

Always confirm the price *before* getting in, especially where taxis don’t use meters.

Spanish	Meaning
¿Está libre?	Are you available? (to a taxi)
Al [place], por favor	To [place], please
¿Cuánto cuesta al/a la...?	How much does it cost to...?
¿Puede usar el taxímetro?	Can you use the meter?
¿Cuánto le debo?	How much do I owe you?
Aquí está bien, gracias	Here is fine, thanks (to stop)

Example:

¿Está libre?

Sí, ¿a dónde va?

Al hotel Plaza, por favor. ¿Cuánto cuesta?

Son cien pesos.

Perfecto, vamos.

Asking for and Giving Simple Directions

Spanish	Meaning
¿Cómo llego a...?	How do I get to...?
¿Está cerca?	Is it close?
¿Está lejos?	Is it far?
Siga derecho	Go straight
Doble a la derecha	Turn right
Doble a la izquierda	Turn left
Está a dos cuadras	It's two blocks away
Está enfrente de...	It's in front of...
Está al lado de...	It's next to...

Key Location Words

Spanish	Meaning
aquí	here
allí	there
cerca	near
lejos	far
derecha	right
izquierda	left

Spanish	Meaning
derecho	straight ahead

Note the overlap between **derecha** (right, direction) and **derecho** (straight ahead) — they look similar but mean different things; mixing them up is a very common beginner mistake worth double-checking.

Buses — Regional Name Variations

The word for “bus” changes significantly by country, and using the local term makes you much easier to understand:

Region	Common word(s) for “bus”
Mexico	camión, autobús
Central America	camioneta, bus
Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic)	guagua
Argentina, Uruguay	colectivo
Most of South America	autobús, bus

If you’re unsure which local term applies, “**autobús**” is understood almost everywhere as a safe default, and pointing while saying “**¿Este autobús va a...?**” (Does this bus go to...?) works in a pinch.

Practice Suggestion

Before a trip, look up the specific local word for “bus” and any relevant transit app names for your destination. Practice the full taxi mini-dialogue above out loud, substituting your actual hotel or destination name.

Next: [Hotels & Accommodations](#)

Hotels & Accommodations

Checking In and Out

Spanish	Meaning
Tengo una reservación a nombre de...	I have a reservation under the name of...
¿A qué hora es el check-in?	What time is check-in?
¿A qué hora es el check-out?	What time is check-out?
Quisiera hacer el check-out	I'd like to check out
¿Me puede dar la llave, por favor?	Can you give me the key, please?
¿Necesito dejar un depósito?	Do I need to leave a deposit?

Example:

Buenas tardes. Tengo una reservación a nombre de Anderson.

Un momento... sí, aquí está. ¿Me permite su pasaporte?

Claro, aquí tiene.

Requesting What You Need

Spanish	Meaning
¿Me puede traer...?	Can you bring me...?
toallas	towels
una almohada extra	an extra pillow
una habitación tranquila	a quiet room
el wifi	the wifi
la contraseña del wifi	the wifi password
más papel higiénico	more toilet paper
jabón	soap

Example: “¿Me puede traer más toallas, por favor?” (Can you bring me more towels, please?)

Asking About Amenities and Location

Spanish	Meaning
¿Tienen piscina?	Do you have a pool?
¿El desayuno está incluido?	Is breakfast included?
¿A qué hora es el desayuno?	What time is breakfast?
¿Está cerca del centro?	Is it close to downtown?
¿Tienen estacionamiento?	Do you have parking?
¿Hay servicio de lavandería?	Is there laundry service?

Handling Common Problems Politely

Spanish	Meaning
Disculpe, hay un problema con...	Excuse me, there's a problem with...
El aire acondicionado no funciona	The air conditioning doesn't work
No hay agua caliente	There's no hot water
La habitación no está limpia	The room isn't clean
¿Me puede ayudar, por favor?	Can you help me, please?
¿Es posible cambiar de habitación?	Is it possible to change rooms?

Leading with “**Disculpe**” and phrasing the issue as a simple statement of fact (rather than a complaint) tends to get the fastest, friendliest help — staff respond well to calm, polite requests.

Practice Suggestion

Role-play a full check-in, then a request for something missing from your room (towels, wifi password, or a problem like no hot water), entirely in Spanish. Say both sides of the conversation out loud if you don't have a partner.

Next: [Asking for Help & Handling Problems](#)

Asking for Help & Handling Problems

“I Don’t Understand” and “Please Speak More Slowly”

These are among the most valuable phrases in this entire course — they turn a stalled conversation into a workable one, instead of leaving you stuck.

Spanish	Meaning
No entiendo	I don’t understand
¿Puede repetir, por favor?	Can you repeat, please?
¿Puede hablar más despacio, por favor?	Can you speak more slowly, please?
¿Puede escribirlo, por favor?	Can you write it down, please?
No hablo mucho español	I don’t speak much Spanish
Estoy aprendiendo español	I’m learning Spanish

Saying “**Estoy aprendiendo español**” early in a conversation often prompts native speakers to naturally slow down and simplify for you — use it proactively, not just as a last resort.

Asking Whether Someone Speaks English

Spanish	Meaning
¿Habla inglés?	Do you speak English?
¿Hay alguien que hable inglés?	Is there someone who speaks English?

Ask this politely and as a backup, not a first move — attempting Spanish first, even briefly, is generally well received.

Getting Lost and Asking for Directions

Spanish	Meaning
Estoy perdido/a	I’m lost
¿Dónde estoy?	Where am I?

Spanish	Meaning
¿Me puede ayudar a encontrar...?	Can you help me find...?
Estoy buscando mi hotel	I'm looking for my hotel
¿Cómo regreso a...?	How do I get back to...?

Remember to match your gender: a woman says **“Estoy perdida”**, a man says **“Estoy perdido”**.

Simple Problem-Solving Language

Spanish	Meaning
Tengo un problema	I have a problem
Perdí mi...	I lost my...
Se me perdió el/la...	I lost my... (also common phrasing)
mi pasaporte	my passport
mi teléfono	my phone
mi maleta	my suitcase
¿Qué debo hacer?	What should I do?
¿Puede llamar a...?	Can you call...?

Example:

Disculpe, tengo un problema. Perdí mi teléfono.

Tranquilo, ¿dónde lo tenía la última vez?

En el restaurante, creo.

Practice Suggestion

Memorize **“No entiendo,” “¿Puede hablar más despacio, por favor?”** and **“Estoy buscando...”** cold — these three alone will get you through most stuck moments. Practice deploying them in a mock scenario where you pretend not to understand directions someone gives you.

Next: [Health & Emergencies](#)

Health & Emergencies

Describing Basic Symptoms or Needs

Spanish	Meaning
Me duele...	...hurts (literally “it pains me...”)
la cabeza	head
el estómago	stomach
la garganta	throat
Tengo fiebre	I have a fever
Tengo náuseas	I feel nauseous
No me siento bien	I don’t feel well
Soy alérgico/a a...	I’m allergic to...
Tomo esta medicina	I take this medicine

Me duele is used with a singular body part (**Me duele la cabeza** = my head hurts); for plural body parts, it becomes **Me duelen** (**Me duelen los pies** = my feet hurt).

Asking for a Pharmacy, Doctor, or Hospital

Spanish	Meaning
¿Dónde hay una farmacia?	Where is there a pharmacy?
Necesito ver a un médico	I need to see a doctor
¿Dónde está el hospital más cercano?	Where is the nearest hospital?
Necesito un doctor que hable inglés	I need a doctor who speaks English
¿Tiene algo para...?	Do you have something for...?

Example (at a pharmacy):

Buenas tardes, ¿tiene algo para el dolor de cabeza?

Sí, tenemos esto. ¿Tiene alergias?

No, ninguna.

Emergency Phrases and Numbers Awareness

Spanish	Meaning
¡Ayuda!	Help!
¡Emergencia!	Emergency!
Llame a una ambulancia, por favor	Call an ambulance, please
Llame a la policía, por favor	Call the police, please
Es urgente	It's urgent

Emergency numbers vary by country — **911** works in Mexico and several other Latin American countries, but always confirm the local emergency number before traveling (some countries use different numbers for police, fire, and medical). Save it in your phone in advance.

Staying Calm and Clear Under Stress

In a real emergency, short, simple sentences work better than long or complex ones — both because they're easier for you to produce under stress and easier for a stranger to understand quickly.

- Lead with the most urgent word: “**¡Emergencia!**” or “**¡Ayuda!**” to get attention first.
- Follow with one short, direct sentence: “**Necesito un médico**” rather than a longer explanation.
- If you're struggling to form Spanish under stress, it's completely reasonable to say “**¿Habla inglés?**” immediately — don't let pride slow down getting real help.

Practice Suggestion

Write down (physically, on a card you carry) your key allergies and any medical conditions in Spanish using “**Soy alérgico/a a...**” and “**Tengo...**”, along with the local emergency number for your destination. Having it ready beats trying to recall vocabulary under stress.

Next: [Core Survival Structures & Mini-Dialogues](#)

Core Survival Structures & Mini-Dialogues

High-Frequency Question Words

These five words unlock the majority of practical questions you'll need to ask:

Spanish	Meaning
dónde	where
cuánto/a	how much
cómo	how
qué	what
cuándo	when

Combine any of these with **está / es / cuesta / puedo** and you can ask most of what you need: -
¿Dónde está...? (Where is...?) - **¿Cuánto cuesta...?** (How much does... cost?) - **¿Cómo llego a...?**
(How do I get to...?) - **¿Qué es esto?** (What is this?) - **¿Cuándo abre/cierra?** (When does it
open/close?)

Key Verbs in Present Tense

A small set of verbs, conjugated for **yo** (I) and **usted/él/ella** (you-formal/he/she), does most of the heavy lifting in survival Spanish:

Verb	Meaning	yo (I)	usted/él/ella
ser	to be (identity/permanent)	soy	es
estar	to be (location/state)	estoy	está
tener	to have	tengo	tiene
querer	to want	quiero	quiere
poder	to be able to / can	puedo	puede
ir	to go	voy	va
necesitar	to need	necesito	necesita

Ser vs. estar — the classic Spanish stumbling block: use **ser** for identity, characteristics, and origin (**Soy de Estados Unidos** — I’m from the US); use **estar** for location, temporary states, and how something currently is (**Estoy perdido** — I’m lost; **¿Dónde está el baño?** — Where is the bathroom?).

These verbs combine directly with the question words above and with infinitives (the “-ar/-er/-ir” form of other verbs): **¿Puedo pagar con tarjeta?** (Can I pay with card?), **Necesito ir al hospital** (I need to go to the hospital), **Quiero pedir la cuenta** (I want to ask for the check).

Gender Agreement Basics That Matter in Real Speech

Spanish nouns and their adjectives are either masculine or feminine, and they must match:

- Nouns ending in **-o** are usually masculine (**el baño**), nouns ending in **-a** are usually feminine (**la habitación** is an exception to watch for — many words ending in **-ión** are feminine regardless).
- Adjectives change their ending to match: **perdido** (m) / **perdida** (f), **alérgico** (m) / **alérgica** (f).
- Articles must agree too: **el** (m singular), **la** (f singular), **los** (m plural), **las** (f plural).

You will be understood even if you get this wrong — native listeners mentally correct minor gender mismatches constantly — but matching it when you can makes you noticeably easier to follow.

Full Mini-Dialogues for Common Travel Scenarios

Taxi: > ¿Está libre? > > Sí, ¿a dónde va? > > Al aeropuerto, por favor. ¿Cuánto cuesta? > > Son doscientos pesos. > > Perfecto, vamos. Gracias.

Restaurant: > Buenas tardes, una mesa para dos, por favor. > > Claro, síganme. ¿Qué desean tomar? > > Quisiera un agua, por favor. Y sin picante en mi plato, por favor. > > Por supuesto. ¿Algo más? > > No, gracias. Eso es todo.

Asking for Help: > Disculpe, estoy perdido. ¿Me puede ayudar? > > Claro, ¿qué busca? > > Estoy buscando mi hotel. Se llama Hotel Plaza. > > Ah, sí, está a dos cuadras de aquí, a la derecha. > > Muchas gracias.

Practice Suggestion

Say all three mini-dialogues above out loud, both sides, twice each. Then try adapting one — swap in your real hotel name, a real dish you’d order, or a real destination — to prove to yourself you can generate new sentences from these structures, not just recite them.

Next: [Cultural Notes & Final Survival Tips](#)

Cultural Notes & Final Survival Tips

Why Politeness and a Smile Matter So Much

Throughout Latin America, warmth and politeness in an interaction are often valued as highly as getting the words exactly right — and they smooth over almost any language gap. A genuine **“Buenos días”** and a smile before a request, patience while someone helps you, and a sincere **“Gracias”** afterward will get you further than perfect grammar with a cold tone. Don’t underestimate how much goodwill this alone buys you as a visibly non-native speaker making an effort.

Regional Vocabulary Differences You May Hear

Spanish varies noticeably by country and region — this is normal, not a sign you’re learning it “wrong.” A few examples you may encounter, beyond the bus vocabulary from [Getting Around](#):

Concept	Variations you may hear
Straw	popote (Mexico), pajilla/pitillo (Central America), sorbete/bombilla (South America)
Popcorn	palomitas (Mexico), cabritas (Chile), pochoclo (Argentina)
Money (slang)	plata (widely used in South America), lana (Mexico, informal)
“You” (informal)	tú (most places), vos (Argentina, Uruguay, parts of Central America — different verb conjugation)

You don’t need to memorize every regional variant before a trip — just know they exist, so an unfamiliar word for something ordinary doesn’t throw you off. Context and the words you *do* know will usually get you there.

What to Do When You Get Stuck

Revisit your core toolkit from [Asking for Help & Handling Problems](#) rather than freezing up:

1. **“No entiendo”** — buys you a moment and signals the issue honestly.
2. **“¿Puede hablar más despacio, por favor?”** — asks for exactly the adjustment you need.

3. Point, gesture, or show something on your phone (a photo, a translation app, a written address) — combining a little Spanish with a visual is often faster than either alone.
4. “¿Habla inglés?” — a reasonable fallback, not a failure.

Getting stuck and recovering gracefully is a normal, expected part of using a second language — it happens to fluent learners constantly, not just beginners.

A Simple 7-Day Pre-Trip Practice Plan

Day	Focus
1	Course Foundations & Pronunciation Basics — vowels, stress, politeness markers
2	Greetings & Basic Conversation — full greeting exchange, out loud
3	Numbers & Time — count aloud, practice telling time
4	Shopping & Money + Food & Restaurants — prices, a market bargaining scenario, and a restaurant mini-dialogue
5	Getting Around + Hotels & Accommodations — taxi and check-in mini-dialogues
6	Asking for Help & Handling Problems + Health & Emergencies — memorize your top “stuck” phrases and write your allergy/medical card
7	Core Survival Structures & Mini-Dialogues — run all three full mini-dialogues twice, then review this page

Spend 15–20 minutes a day rather than cramming — short daily repetition of spoken phrases builds far more usable recall under real travel pressure than a single long study session.

Final Note

You now have the core structures, vocabulary, and mindset to handle the situations that come up most often when traveling. You will still be misunderstood sometimes, and that’s fine — every interaction is practice. Buen viaje.