

THE IBERIAN PENINSULA.

This peninsula has a remarkably compact, square shape, and is, to a great degree, cut off from the rest of Europe by the Pyrenees, which are snow-capped and, as yet, uncrossed by any railway. The lines that enter Spain from France do so at the eastern and western terminations of this range, and as the railway gauges are different in the two countries, there can be no through trains. On the south Spain is separated from Africa by the Straits of Gibraltar, which are about 10 miles wide, and are guarded by the fortified promontory of Gibraltar, which has been a British possession since 1704.

The peninsula falls into the following natural regions: (1) The central plateau; (2) the coastal regions of the south and east, including the plains of the Ebro and Guadalquivir; (3) the northern districts, chiefly occupied by the 'folded' ranges of the Cantabrians and Pyrenees; (4) the western coastal regions, which form the main part of Portugal.

Surface
 The Central Plateau occupies the greater part of the country, and consists largely of old crystalline rocks overlaid in places by recent alluvial deposits. On the north-east there is a sharp descent from this plateau to the Ebro basin, and again on the south to the basin of the Guadalquivir, the termination of the plateau being here called the Sierra Morena. The general slope of the land is from east to west, as can be seen by the direction of the rivers Douro, Tagus, and Guadiana, which form rapids near the frontier of Portugal, where they leave the highest parts of the plateau. The difficulty of communication between the various fertile marginal regions of the peninsula, due to the presence of the central plateau, has aided the political isolation of Portugal, and tended in the past to the creation of separate kingdoms within an area which, at first sight, seems naturally fitted to form but one. Even the rivers are practically useless for navigation, as they are too rapid in places and in general too shallow, and they flow at the bottom of deep valleys. The denudation of these valleys, moreover, has caused the intermediate regions to stand out like a series of parallel ranges, which increase the difficulties of transport north and south (cf. the Sierra de Guadarrama, mountains of Toledo, Sierra Morena, etc.).

lowland out of the river's action and valleys

Climate
 On account of the configuration of the land, the plateau suffers from great extremes of temperature, and also from drought, for the relatively high edges of the plateau rob winds from the sea of most of their moisture.