

DISCOVER SPAIN

It's a long way to Mount Teide...

A walking festival in Tenerife next month will showcase the island's varied hiking terrain. **Helen Ochyra** gets a preview

I could only look at my feet as I climbed higher through the pine forest, negotiating volcanic rocks underfoot and focusing more on self-preservation than the view. As I opened my mouth to warn of another pine branch swinging in from the side, I stopped abruptly, still open-mouthed. The trees had petered out, opening up the path to balmy sunlight as we emerged on to a high ridge and peered down on houses that appeared no bigger than sugar cubes, clinging to vertiginous slopes that seemed to scamper down to an electric blue ocean.

This was Macaronesia, aka the Canary Islands, and I was here with a specific goal in mind. In March, Tenerife, the most visited of the islands, is to host a new walking festival and I wanted to know why. What was the island's appeal to serious hikers? In fact, Tenerife turned out to be the most underrated walking destination I have hiked, with lush forests, a volcanic plateau and plunging tropical valleys – all roughly an hour's drive from one of Europe's most popular tourist resorts. Despite this proximity, few people know these natural wonders exist.

The walking festival seeks to change all this, leading walkers on 15 trails across the north of the island. These are split into three categories – coastal, volcanic and forest – and each is led by an experienced guide. The festival's

nerve centre will be Puerto de la Cruz, at the gateway to the lush Orotava Valley, which several of the trails pass through. This is the island's most fertile region (and was once its most prosperous), with banana plantations and chestnut orchards competing for space with the exuberant pines.

We started our walk at a large volcanic crater, La Caldera, and were instantly plunged into a children's storybook. I felt certain the big, bad wolf would emerge from the thick cloak of laurel and pine trees that filled the caldera, causing our path to twist and snake. The real nightmare, though, was a series of horizontal cables bolted to a lichen-covered rock face, which set off alarm bells for me. This safety line was only a precaution, I'm sure, but I found myself clinging to it for dear life as I edged along the narrow pathway slashed into the rock face.

Hiking is about problem-solving, and this route tested our map-reading and navigation skills as we plunged on through the forest. It was a tiring first day and I was glad to arrive in La Orotava at the heart of the valley, once home to the island's wealthiest families. Many of their mansions remain and we headed straight for the oldest of these, where a restaurant, Sabor Canario, occupies a large 16th-century courtyard. Here we feasted on *papas arrugadas*, "wrinkly potatoes" with a salty crust, the



islands' best-known dish. After a challenging hike, there is nothing better than licking the salt from your fingers and scooping up the piquant red pepper sauce served with the potatoes.

Fortunately, the next day's itinerary gave us an opportunity to walk off the calories as the word "steep" littered our route notes. We were to hike up to Teno Alto and then head west, away from the banana plantations and on to the lava flats. From El Palmar, it took us mere minutes to reach dizzying heights as the path galloped straight up the hillside. At times, the trail

Clockwise from top left: Teno Alto has a large mountain goat population; breathtaking views across to Mount Teide; ancient, twisted lava formations dot the approach to the active volcano

seemed more like a mud staircase and trudging up it was unforgiving – but Teno Alto had a surprise in store, our first sight of our final destination, Mount Teide. From now on, this volcanic peak – Spain's highest – would stand sentry above us, at times disappearing behind swirling clouds and at others surprising us with its looming presence as we rounded a corner.

But Tenerife has many other peaks to conquer and Teno Alto snaps this into focus. The razor-sharp ridges of the island's north-west tip were clearly visible on the horizon as we picked our way along a path

far better suited to goats – plenty of which roam these slopes. As we walked, the dull chiming of dozens of their bells filled the valley. Apart from their peals, all was quiet now – though the landscape speaks of past dramas, its every peak billowing with the rocky remnants of explosion after explosion. In 1706, Garachico, then Tenerife's capital, was entirely reshaped by molten lava flowing down the slopes from Teide, its harbour clogged, its status as a port forever diminished.

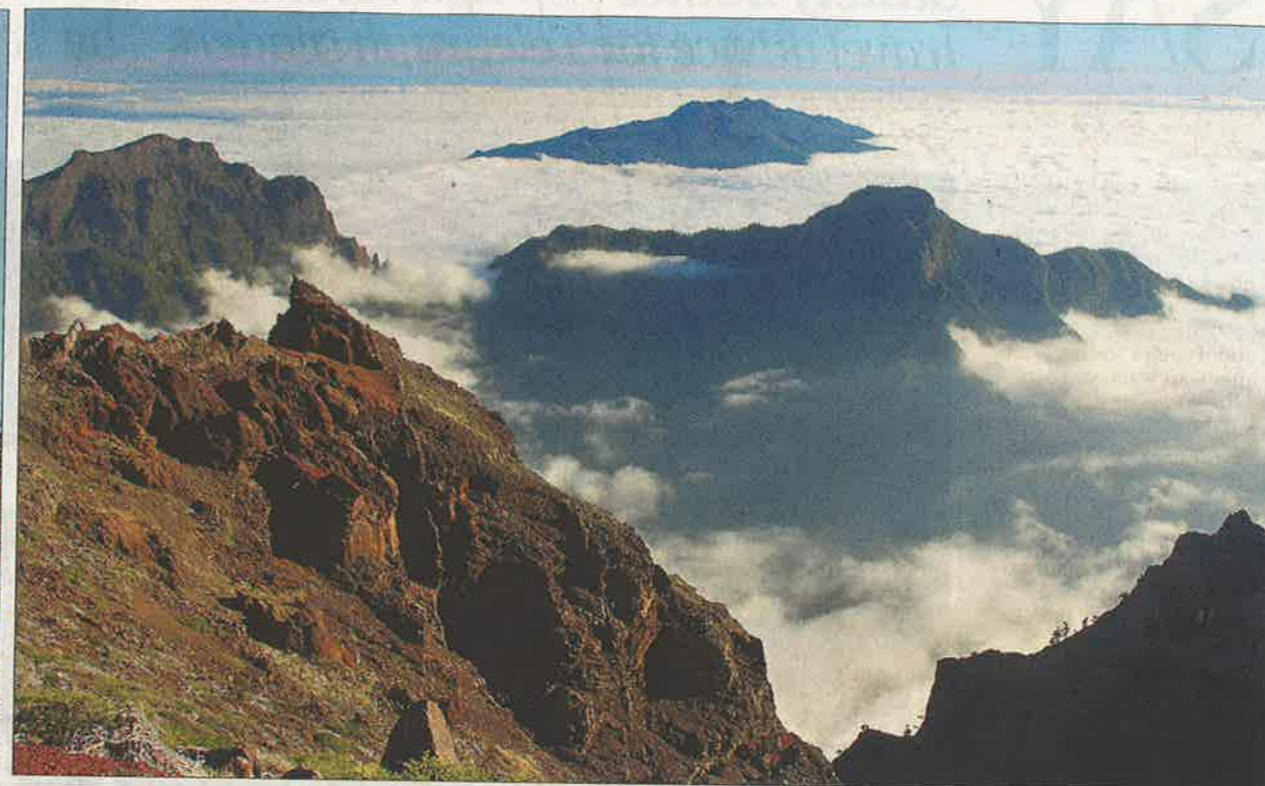
Trade may have moved on, but in its wake it left gracious mansions arranged around a plaza that is the

heart of the community. On Sundays it is filled with smartly dressed churchgoers, at dusk dotted with cap-wearing card players nursing *ron miel* (honey rum, a regional speciality). It is the perfect place to rest after a hike, stretching out tired muscles with a swim in the rock pools that the lava left behind, and refuelling on fresh fish direct from the fishing boats at Restaurante Ardeola on the seafloor.

That rest is necessary before tackling the Anaga mountains, which fill the island's north-eastern tip. Here, wide muddy paths slick with moss run through mist-



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Essentials

GETTING THERE

British Airways (britishairways.com) has return flights from London Gatwick to Tenerife from £170.64 including all taxes and fees. If you travel with hand baggage only, the fare drops to £134.64.

STAYING THERE

Macs Adventure (0141 530 1972; macsadventure.com) offers a seven-night self-guided walking tour from £530 per person, including bed and breakfast accommodation, a rental car and full route notes.

Hotel Botanico (0034 922 381 400; hotelbotanico.com/en) in Puerto de la Cruz has double deluxe rooms from €265 (£197), including breakfast and access to the superb spa. There are also several restaurants at the hotel. Choose from Italian classics on the terrace at Il Pappagallo or Thai dishes in elegant The Oriental.

WALKING THERE

The Tenerife Walking Festival 2015 (tenerifewalkingfestival.com) runs from March 10-14. The deadline for registration (€20) is 22 February.

WHERE ELSE TO WALK

Gran Canaria

Cliché alert: Gran Canaria is known as "a continent in miniature". But this time the cliché lives up to the hype. Sand dunes, lush pine forests, humid tropical valleys and gritty lava fields combine to make hiking here a real variety show. Highlights include the ascent to petrified lava chimney Roque Nublo, and La Cumbre ridge for views over to Teide.

La Gomera

The landscape on La Gomera is so dramatic that its residents were forced to invent a whistling language (silbo) to communicate across its sharp ravines. These very ravines may today have a 3G signal, but they still make for excellent, if challenging, hiking. Don't miss Garajonay national park, one of the last vestiges of the laurel forests that once covered the Mediterranean, and the steep banana plantation terraces of Hermigua valley.



shrouded forest and, as we walked, the ancient branches of bay laurels reached out to each other above our heads. Nor is it just these that blot out the sun. All manner of vegetation proliferates here. This is the wettest part of the island and every inch appears covered in green. Setting out from Cruz del Carmen (as participants in the walking festival will), we dropped into deep, dripping ravines, turning our heads to catch sight of the birds that tweeted but never emerged and wondering at the continued existence of tiny whitewashed cottages, even a goat farm, almost

Eerie cloud formations cloak the island from the vantage point of the peak of Mount Teide, top right; the forested slopes of Mount Teide national park, Tenerife, above

submerged in the subtropical forest. It seemed unlikely that, only miles away, tourists were tanning in the southern resorts.

Anaga may have felt like another island, but our final destination felt like another world. Many visitors to Teide agree, fooled by the myth that this was the filming location for *Planet of the Apes* and *Star Wars*. It wasn't, but arriving at Roques de Garcia it's easy to imagine you have landed on another planet. The twisting lava pinnacles and vertical magma streams rising up from the bald, dusty plains invite lunar comparisons.

The hike through these bizarre rock formations is featured in the walking festival. Another is the climb to the peak of Teide itself, and this was our final challenge. Teide is 12,198ft high, so acclimatising to the high altitude is paramount. The best option is to spend one night at the Parador, across from Roques de Garcia, before setting out from Montaña Blanca for the Refugio de Altavista, five miles into the climb. It takes about four hours to reach the refuge, following the path as it winds above the clouds. The final half-mile or so was more a clamber than a hike, and reaching the basic

hut felt like arriving at a five-star hotel, with a view to rival any luxury lodge. As the sun dips behind Mount Teide, the volcano dominates the skyline. The spectacle lasts for just a minute or two but remains in the mind forever.

We were up at 5am the next day to reach the peak for sunrise, wearing head torches to help pick our way between the rocks in a landscape illuminated only by the stars. As the sky lightened and unveiled the cable car station at La Rambleta, we realised sunrise was fast approaching, along with the finish line.

Thousands of people take the short hike from La Rambleta to the summit every year, but the cable car was not yet running (it starts at 9am), so the only people on the trail were those who had stayed at the refuge. We had the landscape to ourselves – and when the sun popped up above the horizon, it did so just for us. As it reached out its rays and lit up Teide's sulphurous rocks in a rosy pink, a sea of clouds cloaked the island, hiding its resorts from view. All we could see were forested slopes, an unspoiled coastline. It was an entirely different island from the one you might expect.