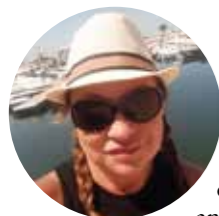


wine & wildlife



Few who go to Tenerife discover the real beauty of this mysterious island where the rarest of plants, the brightest of stars and the finest of wines are among her many hidden jewels. *Norah Casey* uncovers the secrets of the Island of Fortune.



I visited Tenerife for the first time many years ago when I was a journalism student. Playa de las Américas was a collection of buildings (Veronicas) and it took us 30 minutes to walk through the desert to get to the pretty fishing village of Los Cristianos. We visited beautiful Los Abrigos for fish freshly caught with not a tourist in sight and took a boat from the small village of Los Gigantes to see the whales and dolphins. Of course, none of these places look the same today. Tourism has transformed Tenerife, but not in a bad way.

Tenerife is probably not your idea of paradise. But let me convince you of this island of hidden wonders that few bother to uncover. I am about to share with you the real secrets of this beautiful place and I am confident that you will go there with fresh eyes.

Tenerife has a deserved reputation as a mecca for hordes of tourists who want nothing more than a home from home in the sun, complete with a full English breakfast. And that's brilliant. In the most spectacularly clever way that Ireland, Britain and many other countries could learn from. Because far from spoiling Tenerife, tourism has saved it and with very little impact on the real beauty and culture of the Island. The clever

people of Tenerife, called *Tinerfeño*, managed to corral the vast majority of the visiting holidaymakers into a string of manufactured resorts in an area of the island that was largely uninhabited. And they rarely stray further afield. It's a win-win. And while I love exploring strange and exotic worlds, unearthing mysteries, learning about new cultures and trying out new food, thankfully not everyone feels the same. Otherwise all



the fantastically isolated adventurous haunts would be jam-packed with travellers. Tenerife caters mostly for the huge number of unadventurous tourists that just want sun sea and sand, food they recognise and someone who speaks their language. And so most people who go to Tenerife get exactly what they want and are blissfully unaware of this fascinating island steeped in ancient culture.

Tenerife is home to two Unesco World Heritage Sites, a national park, over 40 protected areas and one of the world's largest

volcanos. It shelters species of plants and animals that don't exist anywhere else. It has over 500 fiestas that few tourists have ever witnessed. There are unspoilt villages, distinctive music, food and art that visitors rarely see. Those intrepid few who leave the beach-beds and venture out from the shore are treated to stunning sea life, from families of pilot whales to playful dolphins. You can swim with turtles, experience life above the clouds on its volcanic snowy peaks, sample the finest of local wine and dine on the freshest of local fish, fruit and vegetables. Behind the gaudy façade of the resort areas there is a beautiful island preserved by those who live where they have always lived, far away from the millions they rely on for economic security.

THE MYSTERIOUS GUANCHES AND THE PYRAMIDS

Tenerife is a land of mystery dating back to the earliest inhabitants, the powerful blond, blue-eyed Guanches who lived on the high ground far away from the fearful sea. There are various theories about the origin of this unique race, some link them to the Berbers of Morocco, or the ancient Portuguese, some even suggest that the Guanches were the sole survivors of the mythical city of Atlantis saved by the high peaks of Tenerife. The first Europeans arrived in the 15th century and despite showing great bravery the Spanish Conquest wiped out the Guanches along with

much of their culture. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest and commemoration of the Guanches with memorials and archeological artefacts preserved. Among their legacy are ancient pyramids, the most notable being the six found at Güímar, a town in the south, suggesting a link perhaps to ancient Egypt. The Guanches also embalmed their dead and mummified remains can be seen at the Museum of Man and Nature in Santa Cruz (Museosdetenerife.org).



Carnival De Santa Cruz de Tenerife

A HAVEN FOR RARE PLANTS AND ANIMALS

Nearly half of Tenerife is protected and the centerpiece is the Teide National Park, now a Unesco World Heritage site. You get a real sense of this ancient land and its incredible ecological diversity walking the volcanic crater at Spain's highest peak, the towering and still active Mount Teide.

Tenerife is small, about the size of Wicklow (circa 2,000sq km), but because of its peaks and troughs it enjoys multiple micro-climates, sometimes all four seasons simultaneously from the hot, sunny south to the rainy north and the snowcapped peak of Mount Teide. The result is a rich ecosystem from which the rarest of plants and flowers have flourished along with the highest number of endemic species in all of Europe. There are thousands of plant and animal species, many unique to Tenerife. There are birds, fish, reptiles and mammals that you will only find here. The waters surrounding Tenerife are home to dolphins, whales and sea turtles and welcome many marine visitors annually. Tenerife has always been a big attraction for botanists and increasingly those who want to experience the beauty and biodiversity of this unspoiled landscape. I have walked many different pathways in this magical place, losing time to stare in wonder at the vivid beauty of violets or roses nestled amid volcanic rock. And in mid-May one year, I scrambled across lava fields to catch the blooming of the towering crimson rare Tenerife Vipers bugloss which happens for just two weeks a year

(from about May 10). As you venture upwards, the cactus and shrubs of the dry lowlands give way to forests of juniper and the rare dragon tree, a symbol of Tenerife. Higher still, you'll find yourself wandering through fragrant laurel, ebony and mahogany which give way on the ascent to wax myrtles and holly until finally you reach the intense aromas of the canary pine.

WORLDWIDE INTEREST

The rich diversity of the volcanic landscape is globally significant and the reason for its World Heritage status. The volcanic terrain is similar to Mars and various scientific

Flora Teide National Park



research teams have tested instruments and robots on Teide, one in advance of the recent NASA mission. Mount Teide is not only the third tallest volcano in the world but the changing weather patterns of this oceanic island creates a unique environment not just for plant and animal life but for us humans too. I have been to the top of Mount Teide many times and on each occasion the experience was different. A spectacular sunrise on a clear summer day with glimpses of the islands of Gomera, El Hierro, La Palma and Gran Canaria rising from the ocean. Another time the cable car glided through the clouds, rising above to a heavenly place. It was quite something to stand in the searing sun in the stillness above that white carpet of clouds. Once, in winter, I left the scantily clad sun seekers at the beach and found myself in

Wine and sex night!



Perfectly placed for dolphin watching

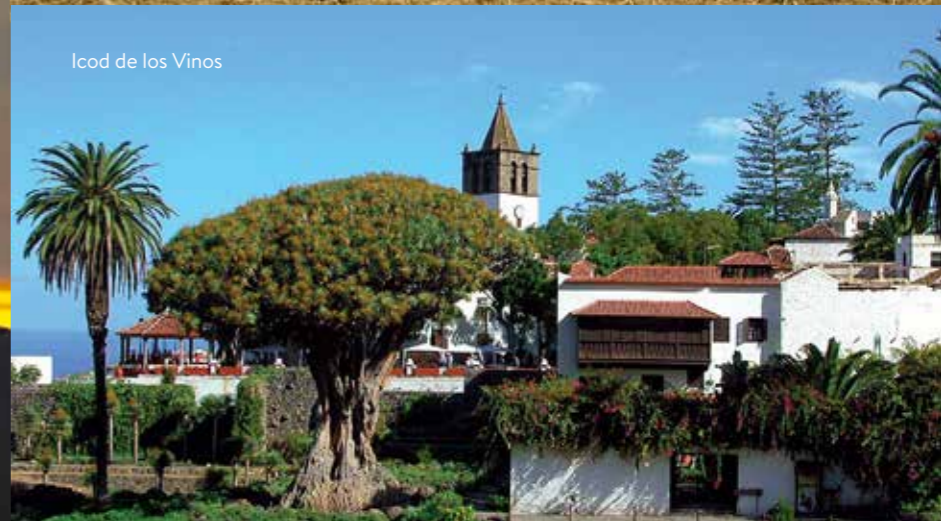




Star-gazing in Tenerife



Far from the tourist scene



Icod de los Vinos

the snowy drifts of Teide a couple of hours later. Las Cañadas caldera, formed 170,000 years ago when the volcano collapsed, is constantly changing and growing. Teide (also referred to as Mount Atlas) was a fascination to the ancient Greeks and the Romans with Renaissance adventurers lured to the last remaining land of Atlantis. If you want to follow in their footsteps and many others since then, my advice is to be prepared for all those changes in weather. That means bringing food, water, sunglasses, wearing layers, warm, wind- and water-proof outerwear and sturdy climbing or walking boots. If you don't want to face the five-hour climb then getting to the top is easy, just don't look down, as a cable car does all the hard work of getting you to just over 3,500 feet above the crater floor in just eight minutes (Telefericoteide.com). From there you have just 200 meters to climb, which will take about 45 minutes but the high altitude can lead to sickness, headaches and nausea and it may take longer than you think to reach the top. If you choose to descend on foot, then it will take around three and a half hours and the terrain can be pretty rough. If you don't want to go to the top then you can choose other routes from the upper level station, only route number 10 leads to the peak. You need to book an online permit (free) well in advance to go there – see Reservasparquesnacionales.es.

ROCK STARS AND STARS

Iconic rock musicians and the world's biggest

brains have flocked to Tenerife for the Starmus festival for the last three years with headliners including Professor Stephen Hawking, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and a host of Nobel Prize winners. Starmus co-founder Brian May brings along rock royalty like Peter Gabriel and Brian Eno. The reason why thousands descend on this little island in June is because, away from the busy beaches on clear nights the skies above are teeming with stars, making Tenerife one of the best star-gazing spots on the planet after Hawaii and Chile. An international astronomical observatory is based on the slopes of the volcano. You can head to areas with low light pollution and use a star-gazing app (the sky will be packed with stars so work around it slowly). I use an app called SkyView which is free to download. Or for around €80 you can join an organised Sunset and Stars experience at Teide National Park with Volcanoteide.com.

MARINE LIFE

Tenerife is one of the best dolphin and whale watching destinations on the planet, especially the south west coast. Resident pilot whales, dolphins and three different species of sea turtles are joined by over 20 other migrating species annually, including the stunning killer whale and the giant blue whale.

For snorkeling and a chance to swim in clear blue waters with the gigantic Atlantic

Green sea turtle, visit the protected bay at El Puertito beach in Adeje (also known as Turtle Bay). Tenerife is also home to loggerhead and leatherback turtles but are harder to spot. You will almost always see the Atlantic green at Turtle Beach and closer to the reef some colourful fish.

There are a number of places to join a boat tour to see the bottle-nosed dolphins and pilot whales and, on occasion, Bryde's whales lured by the plentiful sardines. I have taken all manner of boat trips from the packed, low-priced (€10 and poor viewing) options to the solo sailing, high-priced ones (€500 for three hours). This time we opted for something inbetween and went on a sailing boat from Puerto Colón with a company called Mola Mola which also provided transfers to and from the hotel. It was €50 each and there were only six of us on board which was great and meant we could experience the ocean virtually alone and see everything without dodging between the crowds trying to catch a glimpse of a fin. Book with Molamolatenenerife.com.

There are also a number of diving excursions (I am a bit fearful of diving so haven't tried it, but my late husband Richard did a number of years ago). As well as the chance to explore underwater caves and swim with the more exotic and mesmerising marine life including manta rays, sting rays, scorpion fish and much more you can also dive to a plane wreckage of a DC-3 which went down in a storm in 1966 off Santa Cruz.

COMIDA LOCA

Tenerife has some fantastic dining options and no less than four Michelin star restaurants and I have had dinner in all but one of them. But it also has some great traditional restaurants serving comida local (local dishes) in out-of-the-way villages with amazing fish, usually simply grilled or baked in salt and always served with the traditional papas arrugadas con mojo, the distinctive small wrinkly potatoes first imported from the Peruvian Andes over four centuries ago. You will experience many different flavours of mojo (sauce) – some restaurants claim secret and ancient recipes but traditionally the red mojo has hot and red peppers as a base and the green mojo usually has coriander and garlic in there somewhere. When in Tenerife I always eat fish, usually tuna which is fresh, plentiful and lightly grilled. Calamari, sea bream, mackerel, sardines, lobster and crab are also on most menus.

This time we ate very simply at some local restaurants. In the fishing village of La Caleta perched right on the sea, Masia del Mar is a good spot for seafood and the views are stunning (Masiadelmar.com). It's really busy and the service is often a bit hit and miss but the food is good. Majella O'Donnell who has been a Tenerife regular for many years (herself and husband Daniel have a house there) took me to a stunning contemporary restaurant also in La Caleta called Rosso Sul Mare (Rossosulmare.es). It was a great find with a

fantastic view of the ocean. I had a beautifully prepared carpaccio of tuna followed by a black tortellaci with salmon. She also introduced me to crater wine – a light, spicy, liquorish wine from Tenerife. I have been a fan of Tenerife wine for almost a decade. It is really well priced and always good but impossible to get outside of the Canary Islands. Crater wine comes from the oldest and most famous DO in the Canaries, Tacoronte-Acentejo (Tacovin.com). There are a few wine tours if you fancy going on a group experience or, better still, convince one in your group to be the designated driver and head out under your own steam. There are lots of bodegas to choose from and most serve tapas, some lunches.

A really nice buzzy place with great food and views is Limoncello at Playa Fañabe (Limoncellotenerife.com). We ate there quite a few times; great steaks with a multitude of different sauces and, of course, amazing tuna. The owner Alex will even take you home afterwards. For lunch Monkey Beach Club at Playa la Troya is a great spot right on the beach and the cocktails are divine (Monkeybeachclub.com). A little further up, also on Playa la Troya, is the stylish La Terazzo del Mare (Laterrazzadelmare.com) a perfect spot for a sundowner with view of La Gomera and some lovely Mediterranean food. Late music, contemporary chic and some really cool places to hideaway (think teepees and cabins). One of my favourite places for really good Spanish food is Maybe,

right on the seafront at Veonica 3 in Playa de Las Americas. It's run by Maria and her son and daughter and the Ibérico ham and manchego cheese are legendary. The steaks are also good. The constantly busy beach promenade provides for great people watching.

MICHELIN STAR RESTAURANTS *El Rincón de Juan Carlos at Los Gigantes – one Michelin Star*

Juan Carlos Padrón is one of the most exciting gastronomic chefs in Spain who shares the kitchen with his brother Jonathan with both of their wives front of house. The short and grand tasting menu features contemporary dishes and flavours from local produce and freshly caught seafood.

elrincondejuancarlos.com

MB, The Ritz Carlton Abama, Guía de Isora – two Michelin Stars

Signature restaurant of the renowned Basque chef Martín Berasategui and under the stewardship of head chef Erlantz Gorostiza, MB is a showcase for the best of Spanish cuisine. The menu features the finest Ibérico ham with award winning canarian cheeses used in many of the dishes. If you love fine dining with the precision of the highest Michelin standards, then a meal here is unmissable. We have dined here many times and it always surprises. ritzcarlton.com

Kabuki - The Ritz Carlton Abama, Guía de Isora – one Michelin Star

The beautifully refurbished Blue Lounge at the Meliá Jardines Del Teide



Poolside at the Meliá Jardines del Teide



Almost certainly the best Japanese restaurant I have dined in. Serene décor and beautiful presentation make an evening at Kabuki very special. This is fine dining Japanese with a modern twist. Using the freshest of local fish and Wagyu beef the chef serves up stunning sushi, sashimi and a wide range of Japanese dishes. ritzcarlton.com

Restaurant Kazan, Santa Cruz – one Michelin Star

I have never eaten at Kazan but fellow travellers say that it serves the best sushi platter in Tenerife – best enjoyed with chilled sake. The interior is wood clad and a good friend who dined there recently said to ask for a table near the open kitchen where you can see the theatre of the chefs at work. restaurantekazan.com

WINE & SEX NIGHT

For something completely different, head to Bodegas Monje for a wine and sex experience. Book in advance as these are proving very popular. Don't worry, it's more artistic than it sounds and based on the premise that wine and libido are interconnected (although too much obviously has the opposite effect). The bodega says it's a chance to enjoy wine "from an erotic and gastronomic" viewpoint. You get to taste on your own or with a group and through music and sensual language you learn more about wine. The tasting naturally features various aphrodisiac foods. Book through Bodegasmonje.com.

FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Head to the picturesque town of Garachico to swim with the locals in the cool waters of solidified lava pools. Over 400 years ago this pretty port was largely destroyed by a volcanic eruption with lava engulfing its houses and streets. But the resilient townspeople rebuilt it, made it beautiful again and created a series of diving and shallow pools carved out of the lava.

To the north west of the island you will find one of Tenerife's national symbols, the ancient Drago Milenario (Dragon Tree – legends say they are 1,000 years old, experts

put it at closer to 400) next to the Church of San Marcos in the pretty village of Icod de los Vinos. The name comes from the dragon's blood coloured resin from the tree which reputedly has many medicinal qualities. The tree can be seen from the village square or you can pay the €5 to visit the Parque del Drago to see it up close along with other native plants and trees from the island. The town itself is worth the detour, especially the beautiful Plaza de La Pila and surrounding grand homes.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

I've stayed in all manners of accommodation in Tenerife from five-star luxury to very basic apartments in my student days. If you are planning a week or longer the most important consideration is the room you are going to live in. Gorgeous common areas and stunning grounds count for a lot but it's where you hang your hat as the sun goes down that matters most. Meliá Hotels International is one of the biggest hotel chains in the world with nine hotels in Tenerife from the luxurious Gran Meliá Palacio de Isora to family friendly options. We stayed at the stylish platinum standard Gran Meliá Rome a few years ago, a stunning hotel on the banks of the Tiber. This time we stayed at the refurbished Meliá Jardines del Teide which was a lovely home from home. Meliá has a really cool personalised VIP experience called The Level. Although you arrive at the same front door with everyone else from then onwards you are a privileged guest with separate spaces and perks that make you feel that little bit special. Few hotels, even the high end ones, manage arrival and check-in well. But when it's done well it makes all the difference. We checked in at The Level with the ever attentive smiling Carolina and chatted over a glass of chilled rose Cava. It was effortless and how all hotel arrivals should be. We sat in the beautiful swing chairs soothed by the sound of the waterfall while time slowed down. Later, ensconced in a beautiful junior suite I lay back on the sun beds on the private terrace and watched the sun going down as easily as



my stress levels. Other personal touches include pillow menu, Nespresso coffee machine, Loewe bathroom amenities and a complimentary daily ironing service. The newly refurbished

rooms are bright and airy, with muted greys and browns and some lovely touches. My son Dara and I lived in our own private world, playing cards in the rooms, lying by The Level guest pool and as the sun was setting we gathered with our fellow Level guests to enjoy complimentary champagne and drinks in our own little enclave. We could dine with everyone else for breakfast or head to The Level lounge – well, I think you know which one we chose. There is nothing quite like Ibérico ham, fresh eggs and a chilled glass of fizz to start the day. I've been in withdrawal ever since. The hotel has a number of dining choices. The main restaurant Mosaico serves a sumptuous buffet for breakfast, lunch and dinner with lots of options cooked to order. On our first evening we dined in the hotel's Italian restaurant Casa Nostra and La Palapa at the pool area was great for daytime snacks. When returning at nighttime the bar was always lively with music. Salem and his team at the Blue Lounge are masters of cocktail making, so each night it was a challenge to pass up the lure of a night cap. I began to suspect that there was a secret and very addictive ingredient in the mojitos. Playa del Duque Beach (great shopping) was just a short walk from an exit near the main pool and the hotel also has a gym, kids club, hairdresser, massage, squash courts, table tennis and a range of wellness activities including yoga, pilates, dance, spinning and Tai Chi.

As always it's the people that make a place more home than hotel and the team at the Meliá Jardines was friendly and attentive. A special word for Carolina and the team at The Level reception who went above and beyond to help make our stay special.

Book through melia.com directly to get the best rates. At the time of writing a deluxe room in May was priced at €117.80.

PICS WERE TAKEN ON THE CANON POWERSHOT SX60 HS AND THE CANON POWERSHOT SX70 HS