Beyond the Surf and the Ocean Deep

KICK BACK ALL YOU WANT AT THE BEACHES IN THE CANARY ISLANDS, BUT GREATER MAGIC AWAITS IN ITS LUNAR-LIKE VOLCANOES, COLONIAL TOWNS, AND VILLAGES TEETERING ON MOUNTAINS

BY SWAGATA GHOSH

Playa de las Americas is the party capital of Tenerife. Here you can surf by day, stretch on black sand beaches all afternoon and party the night into the small hours of the morning.

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It was the morning after our first night in Tenerife and I was strolling down a cobbled promenade half asleep. Lunch was a slow, staid affair after which I convinced myself I needed a walk. So I abandoned my book and a more sensible husband under the shade of some jacaranda trees and set off by bus for the nearest big town.

Playa des las Americas is the party capital of Tenerife, the largest of the seven main islands that make up the Canaries. Everything here is packaged and purpose-built—bars, discos, nightclubs and even the beach. Wine flows on the tap, food comes all-inclusive and mornings roll into afternoons that begin and end on either a gold or a volcanic black beach. Every year planeloads of young, mostly European tourists make a beeline for Tenerife, the island of eternal summer dreams.

But halfway through my walk I realise the sunny paradise is not all it seems, for unless you are submerged neck down in the cobalt blue waters, the sun is unforgiving. Amidst the clamour of tourist shops selling buckets, spades and fridge magnets, I spy a potter's studio across the street and quickly go in.

"Looking for anything in particular?"

"Non." I mumble with an awkward smile, trying to hide that I had only come in for the shade. The shop is packed with ceramics, lace and sundry souvenirs, but a small glazed terracotta roundel with broken outlines depicting a stylised female form catches my eye. "That's Tara, the goddess," says the owner, Maya.

"Tara! She looks nothing like Tara."

"Oh! Not the Hindu goddess. This Tara is our very own, the Guanches' figure of fertility," Maya smiles at my confusion.

The legend of Tara is mysterious and dates back to a custom of ritual fattening as part of pre-marital ceremonies practised by Canarian aborigines who descended from the Berber tribes of North Africa. Like most ancient people, the Guanches worshiped the sun, wind and the female form. Tara is very feminine with a slender neck and voluptuous hips. "Isn't she erotic?" Maya quips as she wraps the roundel in brown tissue. "You see there's a lot more to us than sun, sea and Columbus. But the average tourists rarely scratch the surface."

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Beyond the surf and the ocean deep lives a very different Tenerife. A shouting distance from Morocco and a long way from Spain, it shares neither of their characteristic temperaments. Instead it has its very own 'mojo'—a duo of red and green dips that you pair with everything from fish, rabbit, goat and even wrinkled potatoes. The *mojo verde* (green dip) which smells and tastes very like the Parsi *dhaniya chatni* (albeit with a friendly helping of olive oil and sherry vinegar) had been the mainstay of our lunch throughout the trip.

As the week wends, I realise the mojo encapsulates the very soul of the Canaries. Its three base ingredients—chilli, olive oil and cumin—arrived from South America, Spain and North Africa. The islands' geographical position at the heart of four continents—the two Americas, Europe and Africa—and its relative isolation made the islands irresistible to trade, conquest and discoveries. For every big city that was ever founded since Columbus first set eyes on the West Indies—Havana, Caracas, and Buenos Aires—owe their origins in some small measure to this tiny archipelago in the Atlantic.

It was here that Spanish caravels stopped to restock, refuel and hire trained sailors for the often-dangerous voyage across the Atlantic. These islands were Europe's last known bastions in the West before the land tripped and fell into the ocean. Nothing lay beyond the Canaries, or at least not until that fateful morning in October 1492, when Columbus discovered what he thought was the Indies. The Canaries was also the first European port where on the voyage back the ships came laden with potatoes, chillies, pineapple, cocoa, tobacco... the list is endless. These New World foods have come to define the island today.

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The next morning, we pack breakfast and leave at first light. We have a volcano to climb. Mount Teide (12,200 feet), the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world, is an active volcano. It last erupted in 1909. The story goes that Columbus while sailing past Tenerife on the voyage where he accidentally

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While the Canaries' waters (5) are inviting all year round, its charms lie equally in towns like Icod de los Vinos, where Moorish-influenced balconies (3) grace plain walls. Its main draws are the dragon tree (1) and the annual carnival (4); The town of La Orotava (2) stands out with its ochre roofs and Castilian mansions; The hills of Masca (6) tower over the surrounding green, a bit like Machu Picchu.

JAN WLODARCZYK/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (1), WILHELM MENZE/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES (2), NATALIA PEREZ WAHLBERG/SHUTTERSTOCK (3), KAROL KOZLOWSKI/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (4), JAIRO DIAZ/EYEEM/EYEEM PREMIUM/GETTY IMAGES (5), WESTEND61/WESTEND61/GETTY IMAGES (6).

discovered America, saw a ball of fire high on the mountains and made a note in his diary. Apparently it was Teide erupting.

But destination Teide is only half the story. The drive from the Blue Flag beaches of Costa Adeje up the highland through a landscape black, bruised and barren is breathtaking. It seems nothing lives on the road to Teide, well almost nothing apart from Teide natives—flora that only bloom between April and June and then slowly wither. About an hour into our drive, the terrain turns completely lunar. Isolated columns of red rocks rise from the ground like mushroom clouds. Calderas as old as 1,70,000 years formed from massive landslides that once swept the top of the island and left it exposed to the ocean floor and strewn with debris and dykes today provide fertile locations for film crews across the Atlantic. Teide is a hotspot for Hollywood films, *Clash of the Titans* (2010) being one of the most memorable.

"If you can't go to the surface of the moon, this is the next best thing," quips Christoph, our guide, as the ground, powdery and red, crumbles under our feet. This is hikers' haven. "You can easily scramble to the top. If you are agile, it will take you the best part of a morning." Teide's climate works in extremes. In winter it turns into an Arctic wasteland; during the rains—which are few and far between but not altogether absent—a ring of cloud settles around the neck of the volcano like a shimmering pearl necklace. Little wonder the Guanches worshipped it as the abode of Gods. To them it was their Mount Olympus. On clear summer nights, Teide Observatory offers one of the finest stargazing opportunities.

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The road out of Teide is long, solitary and unglamorously called the TF-24. Yet it offers one of the most romantic drives through Canarian pine forests gently sloping towards the north Tenerife coast. As we approach the town of La Orotava in about an hour, the scenery changes dramatically. Around us descends a curtain of green with large, stately mansions dotted around pretty manicured squares. The streets are narrow, prefect for strolling even in intemperate weather. In 1927, Agatha Christie, keen on avoiding the English press following her 11-day disappearance two months previously, escaped by boat to Tenerife. She took refuge in a villa not far from La Orotava. A keen bather, Christie did not fancy the town's shallow and treacherous volcanic beach. But in an orchid garden on the grounds of her villa, Sitio Litre, she did finish her manuscript *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. And then, perhaps to take her mind off her husband's infidelity and impending divorce, she wrote a very uncharacteristic short story, *The Man from the Sea*. The villa and its garden are still flourishing.

From La Orotava, the road creeps up higher into the hills past huge swathes of plantain green. Here they farm bananas on terraces along the cliff face interspersed with the Canarian palm and bright crimson geraniums in terracotta pots to add colour. In the distance the Atlantic swells with impending high tide. We reach Icod de los Vinos. It's lunchtime.

Clockwise from top left: **Sunrises over Teide volcano are breathtaking and worth the harrowing climb; You're rarely alone in Tenerife's waters—green sea turtles often swim alongside; Made with coriander, garlic and olive oil, the green dip *mojo verde* is the mainstay of Canarian cuisine; Siam Park is a water wonderland packed with rides and fun for all the family; The native North Tenerife beaches are volcanic black and the sand here is coarser than the imported yellow sand from Western Sahara that make up many beaches in South Tenerife; An artist weaves a carpet of sand and flowers for the Corpus Christi carnival in La Orotava.**

Icod has a famous resident who's nearly a thousand years old. It's a dragon tree that has found its way from bank notes to Canarian folklore and myths. Every season, coaches full of tourists descend to take a turn around it. Yet Icod has remained surprisingly un-touristy and perfectly preserved. It sits in a long line of towns, along with La Orotava and La Laguna, that came up following the Castilian conquest of the Canaries and the rich trade in sugar and wine throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. As the local merchants prospered, so did their town. Handsome squares and big, burly mansions with expansive courtyards grew around pretty stone plazas.

But the town's true beauty lies when you look up to window height. Intricately carved, Moorish-influenced Canarian pine balconies with shuttered windows peer out of whitewashed or russet-coloured walls. These are Azimez, balconies that let you survey the street without been seen. Today they survive as some of the finest examples of transnational influences in Castilian architecture. Tourists on day trips often treat Icod as a mere pit stop for lunch and a selfie with the tree. But if you have a half-day to spare, do spend some time lingering at Plaza de la Constitution or meandering around its many churches and courtyards. It will remain memorable.

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But your Canarian adventure isn't complete until you have reached the swooning heights of Masca.

The edge-of-our-seat drive from Garachico on Tenerife's northern coast to the village of Masca is breathtakingly beautiful and a bit hell-raising. As you gain altitude and the road ribbons around the mountain, first appears Masca ravine—dark, brooding and handsome. The hairpin bends around here are particularly sharp and a little all-too-frequent for comfort. The weather changes sharply and mist hangs heavy despite the soft afternoon sun. And then suddenly out of nowhere, appears the a village of 120 adults, three children and no supermarkets. Until about 28 years ago, Masca didn't have roads to the outside world. The only way in was a steep, vertigo-inducing six-hour climb from the beach. Apparently once you arrived, you fell in love and never left.

Like Teide, Masca is a hiker's haven. Apart from a handful of whitewashed stone cottages, the village is all of green hills alive with the sound of whispering wind. I take the road to the beach. A thick mist floats in and descends sharply into the gorge. Above rises Masca, a little like Machu Picchu, towering over the deepest, widest indigo blue sea underneath.

Essentials

All flights between Delhi/Mumbai to Tenerife require at least two layovers, mostly at London, Rome or Doha, and Madrid or Barcelona. Travellers to the Canary Islands need a Schengen visa. Although spring and autumn are the best times to visit Tenerife, the island enjoys a subtropical climate where even winters are mild and warm. The average temperature through the year is a pleasant 22°C.

SANTIAGO URQUIJO/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (MOUNTAIN), JAMES R.D. SCOTT/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (TURTLE), ALAN DAWSON/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (MAN), ERNST WRBA/IMAGEBROKER/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (DIP), ALAN DAWSON/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (OCEAN), JAMES R.D. SCOTT/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (FLOATS).