

# Call that a caldera? Take a hike

Volcanically active La Palma may have fooled a German geologist but walkers can go with the flow

WORDS ROBIN MCKELVIE

WHEN the Canarios themselves hail an island as “La Isla Bonita” you take notice. That is because the seven spectacular main Canary Isles and their myriad islets could all lay claim to being “The Beautiful Island”. But it is La Palma, an isle little touched by mass tourism, that people in this Macaronesian archipelago proclaim the most special of all. La Palma, as I discovered hiking along its trails for a week, is a subtropical oasis awash with active volcanoes, lush forests and a dramatically rugged coastline that well deserves this adulation.

Over two decades as a travel writer, other Ramblers Worldwide Holidays adventures have taken me hiking in Tenerife, Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria and, while the other Canary Islands do offer world-class walking, La Palma takes things to another level. Unesco rates it so highly that it proclaimed it a Biosphere Reserve in 2002, and when you take into account its bijou size and its towering mountains – the peak of Roque de los Muchachos rises to 2,426m – it is the steepest in the world.

It is a remarkable environment, sweeping from the Atlantic Ocean into dense forests of sturdy pine and subtropical laurel, before a final dramatic flourish of vertiginous mountain peaks and epic volcanoes.

A part of the island that is well known – at least among mainland Spanish visitors – is the National Park Caldera de Taburiente. La Palma may be scenically and geologically varied, but it helps to think of it as one giant volcano which rose millions of years ago like a leviathan from the Atlantic depths. Indeed the volcanic term

“caldera” was coined on the island by the German geologist Leopold von Buch to describe what he presumed was the collapsed volcanic “cauldron” of Taburiente. In fact, it is not a crater at all, but rather the gigantic arch of a mountain, spreading 10km across, its walls in places towering 2,000m above the ground below.

It was here during the 15th century Spanish conquest of La Palma that the indigenous people, the Benahoaritas, made their last stand after being betrayed in peace talks. Today the population of La Palma may be more settled, but its terrain is among the most volcanically active in Europe. The last major eruption was in 1971 and talk is rife about the next major eruption that everyone expects, with one theory that the ensuing tidal wave could threaten much of the US Eastern Seaboard.

My first walk instantly opened up the epic local scenery. Our guide – a



charming Irish lady, Ita, who expertly looked after us on trail and off – arranged for taxis to the start point. We spent the morning and early afternoon trekking through dry barrancos (gorges) in the hills around San Pedro.

On one flank the cobalt Atlantic sparkled in welcome. On the other slopes rose improbably steeply through thick forests into the volcanic netherworld. Here the high peaks lay hidden up above the Cumbre Vieja – the volcanic ridge that often protects

the loftier summits with a shroud of cloud. The next day we ventured into this lunar landscape, walking from Montes de Luna to El Faro, a trip that swept us through thick forest, across lava fields and finally dropped us down to the coast by way of a hike up the Teneguia volcano. From its summit views opened up of the neighbouring volcanic isles of La Gomera and El Hierro.

Our third day brought the most spectacular walk of all, its name giving



**HIGH LIFE** Clockwise from main: walkers in the National Park Caldera de Taburiente; the government-run Parador hotel; Robin McKelvie enjoys the view



the game away – the Ruta de los Volcanoes. This hike is up there with any I have tackled in Europe. After working our way through pine forests up on to a chunky ridge we rose up and down a series of volcanic peaks, enjoying lunch with a view of Tenerife across the water and its phenomenal peak, Teide, at 3,718m the highest mountain in Spain.

After a rest day relaxing at the modern four-star H10 Hotel Taburiente Playa, with one of La Palma's best beaches just a short stroll away and Tenerife in the distance (book a room with an ocean view and a balcony), our

## FACT FILE

Ramblers Worldwide offers week-long guided hiking trips from £810, including walks, transfers and dinner in the four-star H10 Hotel Taburiente Playa ([www.ramblersholidays.co.uk](http://www.ramblersholidays.co.uk)). Self-guided trips are available with Scottish operator Macs Adventure ([www.macsadventure.com](http://www.macsadventure.com)). Double room at the Parador Nacional from £75 ([www.parador.es/es/paradores/parador-de-la-palma](http://www.parador.es/es/paradores/parador-de-la-palma)). easyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) fly to Tenerife from Edinburgh. Regular Binter ([www.bintercanarias.com](http://www.bintercanarias.com)) flights and Fred Olsen ([www.fredolsen.es](http://www.fredolsen.es)) ferries make the short hop to La Palma.

last two days of hiking took us deep into the national park, where on a brace of walks we saw more lizards and birds than people. We ended our first and began our second national park day at its visitor centre, which tells the story of the protected park and the geology of the island. A scale model of the national park helped the minds of our group wrap around the facts and figures of this unique landscape. A little bar lay across from the visitor centre, which came in handy when we reached the end of our walk. Many of our excursions ended with a glass of local beer, or a glass of one of the seriously underrated local wines, and a cake. Different parts of this continually diverse island boast their own welcome sugary treats.

I finished my adventure in the capital, Santa Cruz de la Palma. Strolling through the streets of a city that was once the most important in the Spanish empire alongside Seville and Antwerp, its sense of grandeur lingered on in the architecture. There were few other tourists around, though, especially after the cruise ships departed at sunset. I was staying at the Parador, a government-run hotel with epic views. From here I could run my eyes all the way from the ocean, up through the forests to the Cumbre Vieja, where a sheet of cloud kept secret the peaks and volcanoes of La Isla Bonita beyond. □

## DO NOT DISTURB DUKES, ST JAMES, LONDON

IT MAY be just ten minutes' walk from Piccadilly Circus, but Dukes is an oasis of tranquil elegance nestled in a secluded courtyard in well-heeled St James.

The site is brimming with history. Henry VIII erected his palace here in the 16th century, and having been rebuilt more than 300 years later, it has played host to writers, politicians, royalty and musicians. Sir Edward Elgar, for example, always stayed at Dukes apartments when he was in the city for concerts.

The hotel now offers Duchess Rooms, a “discreet service tailored to female business and leisure guests” which includes a female attendant to escort guests to their rooms and handle all room and housekeeping services.

### BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

The feel is of a friendly stately home with the benefits of modern facilities such as wi-fi and spa treatments.

### ROOM SERVICE

The hotel has 90 rooms, including 15 suites and a penthouse with its own terrace and private dining area. My junior suite is spacious but cosy, decorated in dark woods, creams and berry colours fitting in with the hotel's classic style, although I realise after a few minutes of nosing around the room with the curtains open that I am in full view of offices on the other side of the courtyard.

There is a small living area where my dinner is served, and a writing desk sizeable enough for a guest travelling on business to catch up on work comfortably. The bathroom has super-fluffy towels and Ren toiletries as well as a shower that could give any good masseur a run for their money. You can also order films, with one option during my stay perhaps aimed at the female traveller: the roadstrip movie *Magic Mike XXL*.

### WINING AND DINING

Before dinner I make my way to the legendary bar, frequented by James Bond author Ian Fleming and said to be the inspiration for the classic “shaken, not stirred” line.

Equally legendary is charming bar manager Alessandro Palazzi, who arranges for me to be seated at a quiet corner table and, as all martinis are served tableside, a trolley is wheeled over to me and my drink created using Dukes Exclusive Dry Vermouth from Sacred distillery. The hotel also has a Perrier-Jouët Champagne Lounge and a Cognac and Cigar Garden.

It is then time for dinner, and while the Duchess Rooms can arrange for solo female diners to be seated at a quiet corner table in Dukes' restaurant Thirty Six by Nigel Mendham, I opt for room service, which I imagine would be a popular alternative. I choose the tasting menu, showcasing the Michelin-starred chef's seasonal, locally sourced British cuisine with two dishes for each of three courses. The



flavours vary from a starter of rich pork terrine perfectly balanced with the acidity of granny smiths, to the lightness of a main course of John Dory with sea herbs, and a palate-cleansing margarita is a welcome segue to the sublime desserts including dark chocolate offset with apricot sorbet.

The meal is a memorably luxurious experience on every level from the beautiful presentation of each dish to the faultless service in the comfort of my room, although I do regret not using the hotel's state-of-the-art gym earlier to try and offset some of the calorific damage.

At breakfast the next morning I am still so full that the full English is out of the question and I instead opt for porridge with berry compote. However, my willpower doesn't extend to turning down deliciously fresh mini pastries with coffee.

### WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

St James is a fascinating area in its own right, full of shops tailored for the English gent that hark back to a different era. To continue the luxurious experience, Burlington Arcade and Old Bond Street are only a few minutes away. It's also well-located for tourists looking to visit Piccadilly Circus and other similar attractions in the centre, such as seeing a musical as many theatres are within walking distance.

### LITTLE EXTRAS

Each guest is given a “Dukesy” stuffed toy of the hotel's dachshund mascot and there is the invitation to share photos of him on social media.

### GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

Martinis and *Magic Mike* – what's not to like? □

Emma Newlands

Rooms from £335, suites from £650 (with breakfast and one-way pickup from any London station/airport). Dukes, St James's Place, London, SW1A 1NY (0207 491 4840, [www.dukes.com](http://www.dukes.com))