

■ OFF THE BEATEN TRACK {Tenerife}

# Unfollow the crowd

Break away from the tourist throng in Tenerife, and make a beeline for the island's less-travelled routes to discover some true gems, says **Robin McKelvie**

**M**ost arrivals at Tenerife-South airport immediately head left on the highway. My wife and I are heading in the opposite direction, however. We've got nothing against the popular southern resorts – but we have unfinished business. Last time we turned right, we just zoomed up the motorway north to Puerto de la Cruz with the kids, rushing to a theme park. This time we're intent on seeing a different side to the island.

The idea of finding a 'hidden Tenerife' may seem surreal on the busy beaches of Playa de las Americas, but in the other direction, it soon becomes a reality. We ease into El Médano and instantly fall for the lotus-eating vibe of a resort town that still feels authentically Canario. Gone are

the sun loungers and in their place bleached-blond surfers and beaming windsurfers. And that is just in the Café Flashpoint surf shack. We recline and watch the efforts of the wetsuits in the water as we enjoy the cooling ocean breeze and the tang of salty surf.

Hungry, we cut north in search of a sleepy wee village a local writer friend told us about. We park on a rough patch of ground by the thundering ocean, wondering if the rugged cliffs and coves around Tajao look the same as they would have when Christopher Columbus sailed by here on his epic voyage to the Americas in 1492.

There's no chance of suffering the privations of a long sea voyage today, not when Tajao turns out to be the best place in Tenerife to savour a seafood lunch. We pick one of the gaggle of little places much beloved of the Canarios ▶



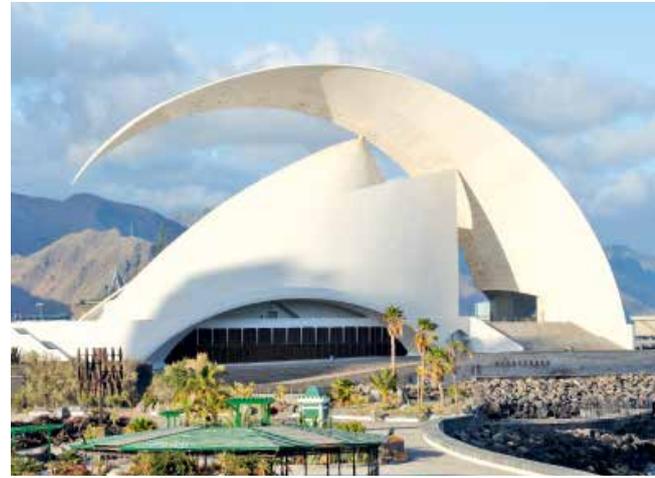
## “The subtropical rainforest in the Anaga Mountains feels like a different continent”



**Previous page: The resort town of El Médano is a haven for windsurfers; Clockwise from above: The enthralling road through the Anaga Mountains; Auditorio de Tenerife; Tajao is the best place on the island for seafood**

and aren't disappointed. We feast on a hulk of tuna, a gleaming bass, a brace of plump langoustines and the local fish cherne, all grilled in front of our eyes with a flash of fire and intoxicating splash of garlic-laden olive oil.

Sated, we zigzag on and off the main highway north, taking as many of the smaller roads as we can as we head for Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the seriously underrated island capital. When we get there, we're treated to stunning views of the closest you'll get to the Sydney Opera House in Europe – Santiago Calatrava's gleaming white Auditorio de Tenerife, the city's remarkable arts complex that thrusts like a leviathan from the waterfront. We're bound



for a rougher, less formal cultural experience, though. The raffish La Noria neighbourhood is all brightly painted stone houses, charming old wooden hanging balconies and tight little lanes – and is the epicentre of Tenerife's carnival culture. The Tenerife Carnival is no tourist confection. In fact, it's the second largest in the world after Rio and the biggest event in Tenerife's calendar.

We find preparations already feverishly underway, even in November, for the seismic events of February. The carnival societies are not just interested in putting on a show, insists barman Jose: “We use Carnival to make political points and keep our officials in check. There is a serious edge to Carnival in this part of town.” It's palpable in the bars and carnival societies of Calle de la Noria.

Our penultimate stop takes us far away from the world of man and mobile phone signals. The Anaga Mountains feel like a different continent, never mind country. This subtropical rainforest is awash with laurisilva, a type of forest only found here in Macaronesia and a few other spots globally. As we eke our way around seemingly impossibly tight turns, it becomes instinctive to breathe in so as not to feel too close to the precipitous drops. A handy network of hiking trails slices through the Anaga, and we head into the dense forest, dwarfed by vaulting trees on all sides and lose sight of the sun – rare on Tenerife – as we explore a world more Jurassic Park than theme park.

Our journey's end comes in Puerto de la Cruz. Last time, we dashed up here in just over an hour. This time, it's taken all day. We settle in at Brunelli's, just in time to witness them lowering the restaurant's massive feature window wall to reveal a fiery Atlantic sunset. We toast our day with a crisp white wine from the little-explored Orotava Valley and start making plans for our next trip around the less-travelled roads of this truly magical island.

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