THE OTHER TENERIFE

How to escape the tourist scrum.

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If Jonathan Swift were summoned from the grave to write a sequel to *Gulliver's Travels*, it might contain the following episode. Gulliver puts ashore on a small island off the north-west coast of Africa, and finds it divided in two by a range of mountains. On one side the terrain is stony and desiccated; on the other it is lush and green. Yet to Gulliver's astonishment, a succession of invading tribes (closely related to the Yahoos) have colonised the stony side of the island, covering the shore with densely built pleasure palaces. When asked why they choose to live in a desert, they reply that the land beyond the mountains is covered by a perpetual rain cloud – though as Gulliver subsequently discovers, this is a delusion. The original inhabitants, meanwhile, live happily on the fertile side of the island, marvelling at the invaders' bizarre choice of territory.

This, more or less, is the situation with Tenerife. Until I went there, I imagined that it consisted entirely of ugly, beach-to-beach tourist complexes – which indeed is all that most visitors see. But this sun-lounger sprawl is confined chiefly to the south-west, between Los Gigantes and Playa de Las Americas. Head north across La Columna Dorsal, as the dividing mountains are known, and you find yourself in verdant, awe-inspiring and comparatively unspoilt countryside, where tour buses are held up by sputtering tractors.

The landscape is not the only advantage of the Other Tenerife. It also has some truly delightful towns – among them La Orotava, with its steep, narrow, cobbled streets, and Garachico, a fishing port of quiet squares and antiquated shopfronts. Here, in the Moorish courtyards and baroque churches, you get a

vivid sense of the island's history as a stepping stone between Europe, Africa and the Americas, where the merchant gloated over his rich cargo and the pirate waited to relieve him of it.

Towering between the two halves of the island like an intransigent referee is the great El Teide volcano, and on my first day I journeyed up to it by car from Puerto de la Cruz. The shortest road is a wicked zig-zag through the Orotava Valley, but we followed a gentler, more roundabout route past Los Puertos airport and through the beautiful woods of La Esperanza. As we climbed, palm trees gave way to eucalyptus and tall Canarian pines whose long-needled branches glowed in the bright sunshine. (Although this was February, the wet season, it rained on only one of the four days I was there.) The road was empty, and when the trees thinned to give a glimpse of the ocean far below, we could almost have been touring the Cote D'Azur.

At 2,000 feet the scenery changed again, as the soil became overlaid with volcanic ash, supporting only scrub and the occasional cedar tree. This was the approach to Las Canadas National Park (named after the crater in which the volcano sits), which boasts one of the weirdest landscapes you will ever lay eyes upon.

The first impression is of apocalyptic chaos: an astonishing rubble of red-brown rocks, strewn around like a giant helping of Jordan's Nut Crunch. Ahead looms the volcano itself – snow-capped in winter – with smaller outcrops guarding its flanks: isolated stone stacks jutting like forgotten chess pieces; black cinder cones; the Roques de Garcia, whose sharp, craggy pinnacles might have adorned a fortress in *The Lord of the Rings*. The sense of being in another world is increased by the sight of a futuristic observatory overlooking the crater. Underfoot, the fragments of broken lava feel like brittle coal.

A cable-car runs to the peak of the volcano, but the queues are generally very long, and I was advised that a better way to get a sense of the landscape was to walk along the rim of the Las Canadas crater. You can clearly trace the flow of lava from eruptions hundreds of years ago – dotted with bushes like grazing sheep – and glory in a geology lesson on a grand scale.

The parador within the crater is one of several enticing alternatives to the bucket-and-spade barracks that line the southern shore. The upmarket accommodation on the north side of the island ranges from the five-star Hotel Botanico in Puerto de la Cruz, with its state-of-the-art Oriental Spa, to groovy boutique establishments such as the Hotel San Roque and Hotel la Quinta Roja in Garachico. More traditional, but full of character, is the type of inn known as a 'hotel rural' or 'tasca', consisting of half-a-dozen rooms over a small restaurant. The one in La Orotava dates from the sixteenth century and is set – like all Canarian townhouses – around a balconied courtyard; it has high-ceilinged rooms, antique-lined corridors, and a suit of armour as a night porter.

Balconies, either of delicately carved wood or of wrought iron, are the great glory of La Orotava: indeed, its finest building is known as La Casa de Los Balcones. But many of its elegant houses have equally splendid carved wooden ceilings, and there are other intriguing details to be found, such as the revolving hatch in the door of the Hospital de la Santisma Trinidad, through which unwanted babies could be safely posted. Just as unexpected are the fine masonic gardens of the Marques de Quinta Roja, and the hardy watermill which still grinds out flour as it did in Cervantes's day.

Historians should also visit Santa Cruz (the naval museum contains relics of the eponymous battle, in which Nelson lost his arm) and the island's original capital, La Laguna – a charming university town painted in bright

ochres, purples and blues. Beyond it lies the Anaga Peninsula, with its thick laurel forests (excellent for walking) and its dramatic coastline.

The roads on Tenerife – largely built by Franco's prisoners after the Spanish Civil War – are well maintained, but once you leave the dual carriageway along the coast they tend to arrange themselves in hairpin bends of varying degrees of terror. The TF-421 which took us westward from Icod de Los Vinos (home of the world's oldest dragon tree) was a mild taste of things to come as it wound down to the banana plantations of Garachico, past vast rockfaces which used to be cliffs until the sea retreated. (The town, once Tenerife's main port, suffered a similar downshift in 1709 when a neighbouring volcano filled the harbour with lava; today you can swim in clear pools among the resulting rocks.)

The western point of the island, Punto de Teno, is famous for its cliff views, but reaching it means following minor roads which are prone to landslides and not be attempted in windy weather. Instead, we turned off at Buenavista and headed south along a road which – though comfortingly edged with hefty concrete blocks – twisted like a python with indigestion.

It took us to the village of Masca, a tiny settlement of red-roofed houses and neatly terraced fields which until the 1970s was accessible only by foot or mule. Perched on the edge of a spectacular, wooded ravine stretching down to the Atlantic, it is as far as you can imagine from the Tenerife of the holiday brochures. Gazing out over the valley, I couldn't imagine how anyone could prefer a beach; and as we drove on over the mountains towards the massed time-shares of Los Gigantes, it felt like an expulsion from Eden.