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Chilling out in the shadow of a volcano

THE PERFECT BREAK

La Gomera is a great winter hideaway, says Louise Rodden

Why go?

This laid-back little island is just 40 minutes by hydrofoil from Tenerife, yet the contrast could not be more marked. You exchange the brashness of Los Cristianos for a tiny eco-kingdom, where low-rise hamlets, banana plantations, ferny rainforests and ancient laurels dominate. Offsetting the fertile, verdant softness are cloud-topped volcanic heights: a dizzying tangle of shark-tooth peaks and vertiginous gorges.

La Gomera is a hiker's heaven. The well-marked trails along old bridle pathways offer walks for every ability. Or you

can lose yourself retracing Columbus's footsteps in San Sebastian, where the explorer stopped for supplies. Listen to locals puckering up to perform their "Silbo" whistling language, or simply gaze out to sea in the sunnier south.

Don't expect soaring temperatures. Do anticipate a little rain. Right now, La Gomera is like a hot British summer – and spring flowers, from white broom to almond blossom, add colour to this grey-and-green peaked gem.

Travel by...

Plane to Tenerife South with Monarch (08700 405 040, www.monarch.co.uk) from Birmingham, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester from £92 return, including taxes; easyJet (0905 821 0905, www.easyJet.com) from Gatwick, from £50.58 return; Thomson Airways (0871 231 4787, www.thomson.co.uk) from 10 UK airports, from £110 return.

The Fred Olsen Express jetfoil (0034 902 100 107, www.fredolsen.es) crosses from Los Cristianos thrice daily, from £52 return. For car hire, Rent a Car La Rueda (0034 922 870 709, www.autoslarueda.com) has rates from £27 a day.

Prestige Holidays (01425 480 400, www.prestigeholidays.co.uk)

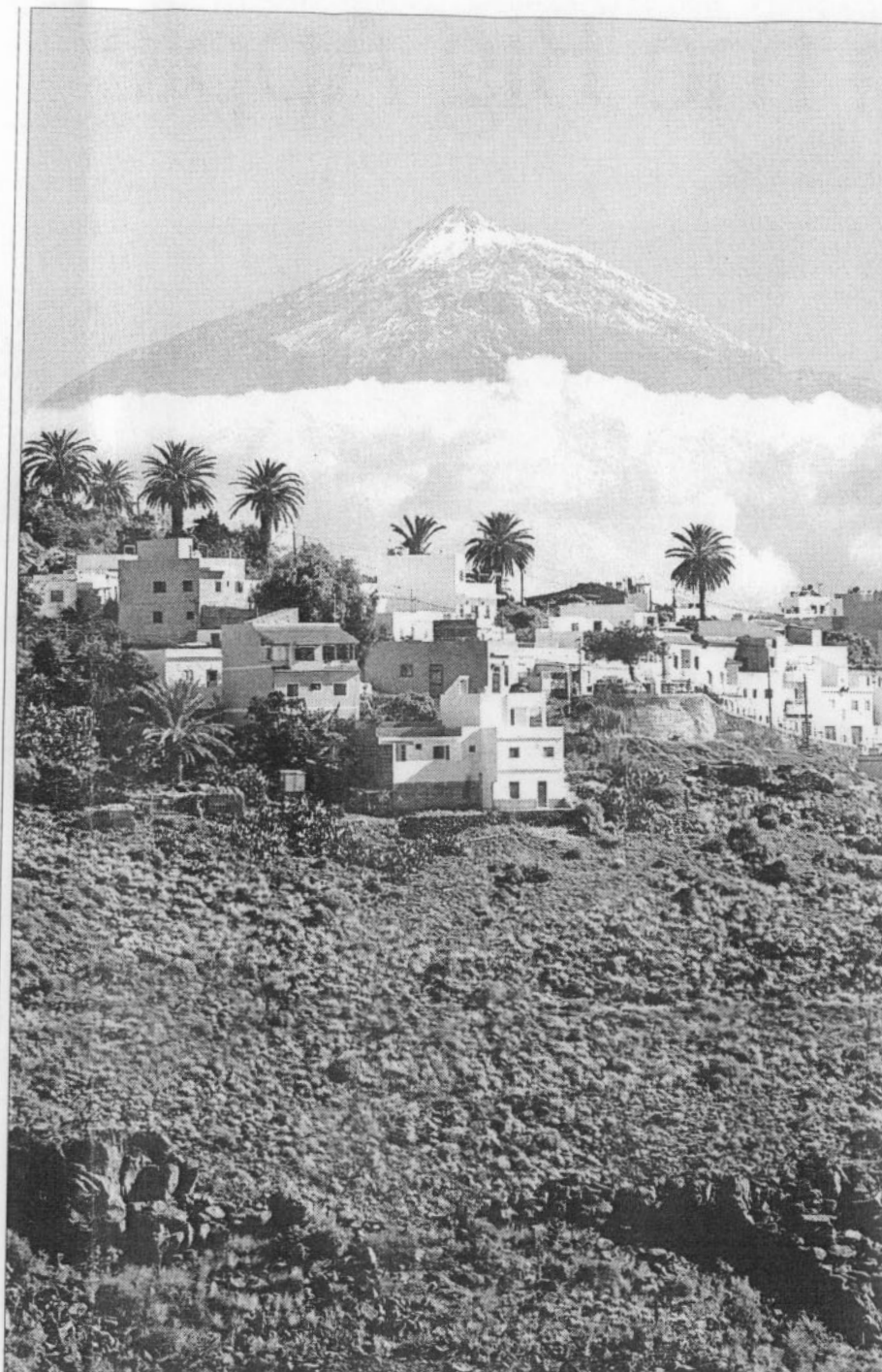
tailor makes short breaks. A five-night stay costs from £638pp inclusive of flights, b&b and private transfers.

Stay at...

Hotel Jardin Tecina (Playa Santiago, 0034 922 145 850, www.jardin-tecina.com). Sprawling above sleepy Playa Santiago, this resort hotel has bungalow-style rooms (the best with sea-view balconies) in a lushly planted landscape. There are tennis courts, pools, five restaurants and a buzzy lounge. Doubles half-board from £138.

If you don't mind the odd glum look from morose waiters, San Sebastian's rock-perched Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera (Calle Lomo de la Horca, 0034 922 871 1100, www.parador.es) offers attractive, colonial-style rooms with rich wooden floors and four-posters, set within an enchanting botanical garden. Doubles b&b from £93.

Alternatively, consider an intimate hotel in the cooler north. Ibo Afaro hotel in Hermigua (0034 922 880 168, www.gomera-hotel.com) is a friendly 19th-century country inn with tastefully decorated bedrooms, and a terrace overlooking Tenerife. Doubles b&b from £67.



Overlooked by a giant: the town Playa de Santiago has a grand view of Tenerife's El Teide volcano

Spend the morning...

Exploring the island's mountainous heart. A good overview of the national park is found at the Juego de Bolas visitor centre (0034 922 800 993) – a short drive from the pastel-painted town of Agulo. A museum showcases the island's handicrafts, traditions and extraordinary biodiversity. While there, collect free hiking maps.

Time now for a scenic drive on TF 711, which zigzags along the craggy north coast. Palm-studded mountain ridges and eye-smartingly green terraced slopes give way to juniper-covered gorges, winding down to charming Vallehermoso which nestles in the crook of a fertile valley, overshadowed by the awesome "Roque Cano" volcanic plug.

Whet your appetite with a glass of Gomeran wine at Bodegon Agana, before heading to the pottery hamlet of El Cercado. An easy pre-lunch walk is the Las Creces trail through the forests of Garajonay National Park.

Lunch on...

Gomeran specialties: watercress soup, tortilla and goats' cheese spiked with molo sauce at Bar Maria (El Cercado 38840, 0034 922 804 034, closed Saturdays). This homely restaurant, with long tables around a charcoal brazier, is a walkers' favourite. Cheery Maria and her husband Manolo are wonderfully welcoming – mains around £4.

Similarly rural is Efigenia's Las Hayas (0034 922 804 077). You share tables and eat whatever comes out of the kitchen: soups, salads, cheeses and "leche asada" puddings. Set lunch is £9.

Over in San Sebastian, the popular Bar La Tasca (Calle Ruiz de Padron, 57, 0034 922 141 598) serves fresh fish and meat dishes; mains £10.50.

Stroll around...

The lower reaches of the

national park – driving the TF 713 – before cutting south to Playa Santiago and enjoy the views to El Hierro island. Equally rewarding is the scenic meander along the Valle Gran Rey highway, the cave-pocked gorge, taking in towns like Arure, before hitting the resort of La Playa.

However, of all the low-key resorts, Playa Santiago is easily the most idyllic. This was once the island's busiest port – but these days it bumbles along as an unpretentious hamlet, where fish restaurants run the length of Avenida Maritima, and cafés are filled with locals.

Buy...

Syrupy honey made from palm tree sap; goats' cheese, lace and jewellery. Try San Sebastian's Wednesday and Saturday markets in Plaza Americas.

Have dinner at...

Junonia (Avenida Maritima, Playa de Santiago, 0034 922 895 450). This friendly, harbour-facing favourite specialises in Canarian dishes and fresh fish served with papas arrugadas. Mains from £10; closed Tuesdays.

La Cuevita (0034 922 895 568) is a zany cheerful restaurant set in a natural cave. Beautifully cooked seafood tops the bill. Mains from £16; closed Sundays.

For an early supper watching the sun sink below Valle Gran Rey, head for Restaurante Mirador Cesar Manrique (0034 922 805 868), a glass-sided restaurant cut into the cliff-face. Mains from £11; closed Saturday and Sunday.

Recover with...

A game of downhill golf at Jardin Tecina's 18-hole course. Or try the hotel's small spa.

At all costs avoid...

Hiking without proper boots and a waterproof. Take note of the weather forecast.

Further information...

www.gomera-island.com

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