

The Canaries Trip – La Gomera and La Palma

The plane arrives at Tenerife Sur airport and with only hand luggage I'm one of the first out of the airport into the sunshine (it is the last day of February 2017) to catch a bus to Los Cristianos. The four-hour flight from Newcastle was ridiculously cheap - my guess is that the vast majority of passengers were on package holidays and Thomas Cook release seats for flight-only passengers once the holiday booking deadline has passed. It is only my second visit to the Canary Islands - the other was to Gran Canaria in 1988. One of my memories of Gran Canaria was the large number of half-finished houses in grey concrete waiting for people to add more living space when they could afford it. On Tenerife today almost all the houses are completed and painted, not only in white but also in red orange and yellow, making the villages look much more attractive.

It is high season in Tenerife and, booking a few weeks before, the only place I could find for the night is a self-catering apartment. The block cannot be missed – it is a skyscraper on the edge of town overlooking the beach, which is showing its age. Later, on a bar wall, there is a 1975 photograph showing the newly-built block, the only building in the area, well outside of the town. Today, there is an English sports bar and a storage-cum-charging room for mobility scooters on the ground floor. The apartment is basic but it has a view over the bay and it is clean – it reeks of bleach until I've had the windows and doors open for a while.

Later I walk along the front to the town centre and the port. Los Cristianos is pleasant enough but very definitely a resort – there must be a couple of quiet bars somewhere where the locals go for a quiet drink, but I don't manage to find them. I'm not in the mood for a solo restaurant meal so after a couple of pints in an English bar I have some bread, cheese and chorizo in the apartment. The bar is the only one I find without a loud television, and the main entertainment is watching an enormous woman break the chair when she sits on it – she was unharmed, the chair was no more.

La Gomera



In the morning, I'm up early and round to the port to catch the ferry to La Gomera. Even with a cheap advance ticket it costs nearly as much for the fifty-minute crossing as for my flight from Newcastle. We dock at San Sebastián, the port and capital of the island. The ferry was busy, but the majority of people head to coaches for day tours of the island, and peace and quiet soon returns to the town.

It is too early to check in to my hotel so I

walk along past the marina to the small promenade and black volcanic beach and sit in the sun. It is the final few days of Carnival, celebrated throughout the Canaries in late-February / early March. The main sign of the celebrations is a row of battered old vehicles parked along the main road, decorated with a superhero theme, entrants in a carnival competition. My introduction to La Gomera is streams of overweight people walking up and down the promenade. I reckon they are under doctor's orders to exercise, and the prom is the only significant stretch of flat road on the island. Given the terrain, everyday walking should keep people fit, but many people may have become car dependent.

San Sebastián de la Gomera

San Sebastián has a fine natural harbour, sheltered by cliffs. Christopher Columbus called in in 1492 on his way to 'discover' America, and again on subsequent voyages, to provision his ships. The Spanish first arrived on the islands in 1440 and his arrival was only three years after many of the original inhabitants, the Guanches, had been massacred following a failed rebellion which consolidated Spanish rule.



The old town is by the bay, a mixture of older single and two-storey houses and a few modern blocks. The Torre del Conde, built as part of the first Spanish fortifications in 1447, sits in a small park, and the church, the Iglesia de la Asunción, is a nineteenth century building on the site of the original church. New development spreads further back and up the hillsides, painted houses making it attractive. Tourist accommodation is limited to a couple of small hotels and some apartments, and a parador on the clifftop overlooking the town. Today the town has a population of 8668, out of the island total of 20940.

Like other small island towns it has its daily rhythm and, when I'm not travelling around, I spend some time sitting in the park or by the beach. watching the ferries manoeuvre in and out of the harbour helped by a pilot boat. Each morning a truck comes off the ferry to replenish the Trébol supermarket, and small trucks scurry off to provide deliveries to the rest of the island. The islanders are a mixed bunch – some look typically Spanish, others are Canarian, and there is noticeable number of Latin-Americans. Most non-Spanish tourists are German, and there are a small number of British and Scandinavian walkers using the town as a base. Tourism is focused on active tourism – many people are dressed for serious walking. The town has begun to cater for upmarket tourists - there are a few places on Calle Real serving bistro type meals, Canarian food at Scandinavian prices, and a few galleries have sprung up in the old streets.

As normal I spend plenty of time in the bars and cafes of which there is the usual variety. A couple of them sell Latin-American tapas, others the usual selection. Prices looked high but the tapa portions were larger than on the mainland. On the promenade Kiosko Pajarito is a good place to watch the sunset while eating fish and seafood - I enjoyed both the octopus and the squid. There are a couple of places on the main square aimed at younger people and the yachties from the marina by the ferry port, but it is all very laid-back.

Around La Gomera.

Like the other Canary Islands La Gomera is volcanic. It is roughly circular in shape rising steeply to the centre of the island. Water flowing from the upper slopes has created a series of deep ravines known as barrancos, in all directions, making travel by path and now road around the island tricky. Five times a day buses leave from the estación de guaguas in San Sebastian for the rest of the island. Guagua (pronounced 'wa-wa') is the local word for bus – it must stem from the sound of their horns as they travelled round the hairpin bends and blind corners on the island. I have two trips out by bus – one across the centre of the island and on to Valle Gran Rey in the south, the other to Vallehermoso via the north coast of the island. Both days the bus station is busy with locals, walkers and tourists heading for the 1030 buses.



The bus journey to Valle Gran Rey takes two hours, and the road immediately begins to climb as we leave San Sebastian. It is clear that the road is modern - there are some deep cuttings which have been blasted out of the rock - but the topography means there is scarcely a straight stretch. In the centre of the island some of the walkers get off to climb the highest peak, Garajonay, 1487m high. We divert from the main road through

Valle Gran Rey small villages such as Igualero, Chipute and El Cercado, then travel through a dense laurel rain forest as we reach the wetter side of the island. On the final 15 kilometres to Valle Gran Rey the road drops over a thousand metres to sea level, with tremendous views down the valley. Along the way, terraces built to trap the run-off water reach high up the mountainside – some still in agricultural use but many others abandoned. At Valle Gran Rey we loop round by the beaches (the road is unmade for a stretch - perhaps it has washed away by storms) and into the bus station (recently built, complete with café and toilets to cater for the seven departures a day).

There is over two hours before the return bus, so there is time for a walk and a beer. Valle Gran Rey has developed as a resort and, though it is by no means overdeveloped, it would probably be unrecognisable to the hippies who arrived here in the 1960s and 70s for an alternative lifestyle. A few of them are still around and I spot them from time to time around the island. Some are getting on a bit – I spot one elderly hippy with hair in braids down to his knees hobbling round looking in desperate need of a hip replacement. Most of the original visitors were German and it remains the second language in Valle Gran Rey. The accommodation, and facilities have moved upmarket. I settle for a beer and an excellent huge cheese salad sandwich made with the local goats cheese and including at least a whole avocado, before catching the bus back to San Sebastian.

The following day's bus journey to Vallehermoso is almost as spectacular. Initially the road heads inland and upward until it reaches the tunnel through the summit of the ridge. This is followed by a long descent down the Valle de Hermigua to the eponymous town and on to the village of Agulo. This stretch takes us through banana plantations, which occupy every patch of cultivated land. There are views over to Pico del Teide, the highest mountain and extinct volcano on Tenerife at 3718m. Then the journey is over more mountain ridges which separate the valleys from one another, finally reaching the small town of Vallehermoso. Though it has its share of expat residents it is more of a working town than a tourist destination. It is a pleasant place today but the area has gone through

hard times until recently¹. The main plaza and around has a few decent café bars, home-made pork scratchings are the free tapa in one of them, and the couple of hours before catching the return bus pass quickly.

Back in San Sebastián I discover an exhibition of old maps of La Gomera in the Torre del Conde. They date from the fifteenth century until recently but it is the two most recent maps that I find particularly interesting. In the 1950s there were very few roads on the island, just some short, disconnected stretches from villages by the coast to inland hamlets. The main way to travel must have been on foot across the mountains, or by boat along the coast. Even in 1973 the current road across the island was incomplete – travel from San Sebastián to Valle Gran Rey was by a much longer roundabout route than today. The road network today is comprehensive (though not for the faint-hearted) and the old network of footpaths is one of the main tourist draws. Today the paths are well signposted and, if I return to La Gomera (and if my old knees hold out) I would love to try some of the walking routes.

Tenerife

I leave La Gomera on Saturday and the ferry to Los Cristianos is busy with people heading for Tenerife Sur airport. For me it is the first of two further overnight stops on Tenerife, on my way to and from La Palma². Both ferry companies, Fred Olsen and Naviera Armas, run free connecting buses onward to Santa Cruz, the capital of Tenerife – I left La Gomera at noon and arrived at the vast bus station (the intercambiador or interchange) in Santa Cruz before 2.30. The motorway journey along the East coast of Tenerife is not particularly interesting – past the airport then exits for the towns which straggle along the coast.

It was the last Saturday of Carnivall in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and the city centre was filling up – I was one of the few men in the city not in drag or fancy dress (and it explained some of the more bizarrely dressed people on the ferry). It looked like good fun, if I was younger and with friends. As there was no accommodation to be had in Santa Cruz I had booked a Bed and Breakfast in the nearby city of La Laguna and I found my way to the tram line which links the two cities³. Santa Cruz has expanded up the surrounding hills and the journey is a constant climb. There are views over the city and of the hordes of drag queens waiting for trams into town.

It was much cooler in (to give it its full name) San Cristóbal de la Laguna, which sits at an altitude of 543m, around the bed of a former lake (the laguna de Aguere) near the summit of the low pass between the east and west coasts of Tenerife. It is the former capital of the Canaries and today it has a population of 153,111, plus large numbers of students attending the university. The impressive historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, laid out in a grid pattern around the cathedral, and has been well preserved and restored. At the time it reminded me of photographs of Spanish colonial cities in Latin America, and there seems to be truth in this⁴. I had pleasant afternoon and

¹ The population of Vallehermoso dropped from 7929 in 1940 to 2876 in 1991 (it is 2979 today). A local history signboard mentioned that the area was opposed to Franco, many people emigrated, other people disappeared and an attempt to re-establish sugar cane production failed, and many young people still leave.

² There are direct ferries between La Gomera and La Palma but a combination of ferry and flight times and lack of accommodation during Carnival means my initial plans for a two night stay in Tenerife are split in two.

³ Despite the Canaries being railway-free, this provides the excuse for some railway buffery. See page 11

⁴ Wikipedia says that the urban plan of La Laguna was a model for Havana (Cuba), Lima (Peru), Cartagena (Colombia) and San Juan (Puerto Rico). The Wikipedia reference link has been broken but the UNESCO World Heritage Site list states that La Laguna was ‘the first ideal ‘city-territory’ laid out according to philosophical principles.....the first example of an unfortified town with a grid model that was the direct precursor of the settlements in the Americas under Spanish rule’ www.whc.unesco.org/en/list/929 .



La Laguna

council was out cleaning streets. In the main square, there were a few mystified tourists wandering around – there was a small cruise ship in the harbour. Otherwise the only people about were a few dazed people staggering home from wherever they'd found themselves waking up. After a quick look round I headed to the Intercambiador and caught the express bus to Tenerife North Airport. Along the way, there were some repairs being made to the motorway retaining walls and I realised that they were actually very large dry-stone dykes.

On my return visit to Santa Cruz the city was back to normal. The NH Hotel was up to their usual standard – though a little more expensive than most. Walking round I gained the impression that accommodation options are limited – while the city is not a major tourist destination it is the commercial and political capital of the Canaries. The street plan provided by the hotel included a Rambla del General Franco in Santa Cruz and a Calle General Franco in La Laguna. Many years ago they became the Rambla de Santa Cruz and Calle Herradores respectively, so maybe the local printer is an unreformed Falangist. I wandered around the main streets and through the Mercado de Nuestra Señora de Africa, both a mixture of the vibrant and the rundown, had a few beers, delicious chicken pibil tacos and later, because I felt like one, a pizza. Several of the official buildings date from the thirties and the Franco era and detract from the overall appearance. Overall I wasn't very impressed with Santa Cruz, but it seems to be improving. It reminds me of Málaga twenty years ago, though there are signs of regeneration –a splendid new modern art gallery (TEA – Tenerife Espacio de las Artes) and auditorium, and improvement of the few remaining old streets, with restaurants and bars along Calle Dominguez Alfonzo by the dry Barranco de Santos. There is still a way to go, and for the moment I prefer La Laguna.

evening visits to a few bars for beer and tapas. And there was a choice of beer – on La Gomera there seemed to be nothing but Dorada on draft – including one bar with imported German and Belgian beers. Nice town – liked it.

The B&B is very swish, with good views back to Santa Cruz from by balcony. It is run by an obsessively tidy Italian couple – I'm scared in case I drop a crumb at breakfast. I had time before my flight to La Palma so I took the tram back into Santa Cruz – there were still a few people in drag heading home after a very long night. The city centre looked as though a bomb had hit it, with rubbish and the reek of stale piss everywhere, and the entire workforce of the local

La Palma.

La Palma is a thirty-minute hop by plane from Tenerife Norte airport – I flew out by the low-price upstart Canaryfly and back by the main local airline Binter Canarias. They both use the same ATR72 turboprop planes and the only difference I could see is that on Binter is that you are given a biscuit along with your plastic glass of water⁵. La Palma airport is built on a clifftop raised beach, with sea at either end of the runway, but is long enough to take larger planes. La Palma is one of the larger Canary Islands with a population of 81486, but until recently there has been little tourism apart from walkers. A couple of small resorts have been built, Easyjet has started flying twice a week from Gatwick and I saw other flights from Germany and the Netherlands. On the bus into the capital, also named Santa Cruz, we pass through the Los Cancajos resort then the industrial area and freight port (La Palma, unlike La Gomera, is big enough to import and export via direct freight ferries from Spain).

Santa Cruz de la Palma



Santa Cruz de la Palma is an attractive old town, founded in 1493 and with a current population of 15711. The oldest part lies by the coast and the modern town climbs the hills behind. Though it is more cosmopolitan than San Sebastián de la Gomera it still has a small town atmosphere. I'm staying at the Hotel Castillete, a fifteen-minute walk through the old town. It is an aparthotel and my room, with small kitchen, could sleep three on comfortable beds for 40 euros a night. I have a balcony overlooking the sea and on the ground floor there is a public cafeteria serving breakfast, snacks and beer at normal prices.

I spend three nights in the town, so there is time to explore the cafes and bars. Food includes excellent tapas in the Venezuelan-run Bar El Encuentro, a fine pizza in the Cuban-run Pizzeria Piccolo and tostada con tomate for breakfast in bars along the front. There's a small German-run brewery on the island (Cervecería Isla Verde) – though I try hard I can't find their beers on draught in town. However, the small supermarket round the corner from the hotel stocks their bottled beers, which go down well sitting on the balcony. The island is known for its astronomical observatory and for tracking spacecraft, and I find bars called Sputnik, Cosmos and Halley.

⁵ Info from www.planespotters.net

Around La Palma

As on La Gomera I spend the two full days travelling round the island by local bus. On the first day I head for the south of the island. There is a dual carriageway for the first couple of kilometres toward the airport but it soon ends and from then on it is typical country roads. There is some evidence en route of work to improve the road, but at some stage work has ground to a halt.....no money? After an hour we reach the southernmost village on La Palma, Fuencaliente, named after the local hot thermal springs. The full name is Los Canarios de Fuencaliente - some signposts point to Los Canarios others to Fuencaliente - a bit confusing for drivers but the bus driver knows where he is going.



La Palma is also a volcanic island. The highest peaks and largest volcanic caldera are in the north of the island. Behind Fuencaliente is the Cumbre Vieja (old ridge) a volcanic ridge with numerous active but dormant volcanic cones, which forms the backbone of the south of the island. I walk to the Volcán de San Antonio which has an informative visitor centre, from which one can walk round the rim of the caldera looking down into the crater.

Bear and Volcano

From the end of the path there are views to the lighthouse at the southern tip of La Palma. On the lower slopes, the local wine is grown on the volcanic ash. There was a small eruption nearby at Teneguía in 1972. Ted and I have a beer in the visitor centre bar before climbing back up the hill to Fuencaliente to visit a couple of local bars which sell the local soft white cheese and the volcanic wine.

The next bus takes us up the west side of the island to Los Llanos through a very rural area. For a stretch we are travelling through an area of landslips where the vegetation has been burnt and stretches of the road are under repair. This turns out to be the result of a massive forest fire in August 2016 that ravaged 48000 hectares, about 7% of the island, allegedly started by a man living in a cave who set light to his used toilet paper. It stretched from near Los Llanos towards Fuencaliente, where the town was evacuated, though it was narrowly missed by the fire⁶.

Los Llanos de Aridane is now the biggest town on the island (population 20043), though it only became a separate municipality in 1925⁷. The bus station is on the edge of town but within five minutes I'm in the main square by the church where I have a quick beer from a kiosk café before the next bus to Santa Cruz is due. An express bus could link the two main towns, thirty kilometres along the main road, in thirty minutes but the journey takes over an hour. We climb to the summit, through the Túnel de la Cumbre, the key link between the east and west of the island, call in at the island hospital high above Santa Cruz and make our way down to the town through a series of villages.

The northern circuit of the island from Santa Cruz to Los Llanos is much longer than the southern route (113 km, compared to 54km) as it encircles the highest peaks of the island. At the centre is the massive volcanic Caldera de Taburiente, nine kilometres wide and fifteen hundred metres deep. The

⁶ The Guardian, 9 August 2016, www.guardian.com

⁷ It is in the centre of a rich agricultural area and also, compared with Santa Cruz, has a fair amount of flat land, which has provided space for the development of blocks of apartments and areas of light industrial units.

northern lip of the Caldera rises to the highest point on the island, the Roque de los Muchachos (2426m). Close to the summit is the astronomical observatory with its complex of telescopes, including the largest optical telescope in the world. The area with its clear skies is the world's first UNESCO recognised starlight reserve⁸. To the west, north and east, leading down to the sea from the caldera a series of barrancos form steep valleys. separated by high ridges.

The bus journey takes about five hours, and three connecting buses, changing at Barlovento and Puntagorda. I decide to build in a one-hour stop at each of these, partly to explore and partly for the sake of my bladder. An hour after leaving Santa Cruz, having crossed six barrancos and ascending and descending five ridges we call at Los Sauces on the north slopes of the Barranco del Agua. (I've checked the number on the map, and confusingly the second barranco is also named Barranco del Agua).



From Los Sauces to Barlovento the main feature is bananas (pictured) – endless fields of them, cascading down the hills towards the coast and the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. Barlovento is a one-horse town - for some reason it even has a by-pass, though it is closed for repairs adding virtually no traffic to the main street. I walk up and down the street, take in the view to the coast (apart from Santa Cruz, most La Palma villages are set a few miles back from the coast, either for protection or because there are few natural harbours), have a small beer in a bar where the bus driver is having a coffee, then tackle the second journey.

From Barlovento to Puntagorda the minibus runs every two hours – some of the roads we use could not be reached by a full-size bus. It takes about 1hr 45 mins to cover the 35 kilometres by the main road, though the bus diverts along single-track lanes to tiny villages. This is the most remote, and least populated part of the island. The barrancos seem even deeper here, and there are tremendous views as we climb to the summit of the ridges between each valley. There is the occasional glimpse of the complex of telescopes on top of Roque de los Muchachos. Two tiny villages are named Gallegos and Francesa, which may be where their inhabitants came from originally (in the sixteenth and seventeenth century La Palma was a rich trading post on the route to the New World and attracted immigrants from mainland Spain, Portugal and Flanders). Apart from a little agriculture and some rural tourism it is not clear what people do for a living today – we have left banana country behind. When I check the population of the local municipality it has dropped from 5196 in 1950 to 1607 today – the building of the road has encouraged people to move out rather than attract them in. Eventually we plummet down a side road into Santo Domingo, where there are signs of incipient tourist development. For the last few kilometres into Puntagorda we begin to re-enter civilisation.

⁸ More information, including details of visits is available from the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias, www.iac.es , and www.astrolapalma.com .

Puntagorda is an odd place – the bus terminus and onward connection is at a crossroads where there are a few houses, a Spar, an estate agents with ads in German and a decent bar. There are a few new houses, but it will be more than a few years before its fully developed.

The third section of the journey to Los Llanos is scattered with tourist villas and bungalows. We pass the Isla Verde microbrewery near Tijarafe. From the El Time viewpoint it looks as though we are almost at Los Llanos. However, it takes a further 40 minutes to get there, by the time we pass through more banana plantations, reach the bottom of the barranco and divert to Puerto Tazacorte. The Puerto is another strange place with a marina, beach and row of upmarket bars by the sea, but the remainder of the village has the appearance of an estate of council flats and is definitely not prosperous. We climb up into the pleasant town of Tazacorte itself, then reach Los Llanos just in time to miss the connecting bus to Santa Cruz. However, I explore Los Llanos a bit more and a find an Andalucian tapas bar run by people from Seville, before catching the next bus.



After my final night in Santa Cruz de la Palma, it is time to fly back to Tenerife Norte and an overnight in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, described above. The journey finishes with a cheap Vueling flight to Málaga – a two-hour flight for half the price of the hop from La Palma. I had hoped to see the coast of Morocco, but we hit land near Cadiz. And then it is home to Benalmádena.

Practicalities

Tenerife

Most flights to and from the UK are to Tenerife Sur (TFS) airport for quick transfer to Los Cristianos and the surrounding resorts. Tenerife Norte (TFN) airport is used by the inter-island flights, by flights to mainland Spain and a few international flights. There is a regular bus service between the two airports, and buses run every half hour from Tenerife South to Los Cristianos and Santa Cruz and from Tenerife Norte to La Laguna and Santa Cruz. See www.aena.es/en/tenerife-sur-airport/index.html and www.aena.es/en/tenerife-norte-airport/index.html.



Titxa (Transportes Interurbanos de Tenerife – www.titsa.com) has a good network of bus services throughout the island with fares varying according to distance.

Metrotenerife (www.metrotenerife.com) operates the tram service (Tranvia de Tenerife) between Santa Cruz bus station (Intercambiador), the city centre, major hospitals, university campus, La Laguna bus station and city centre (La Trinidad). Tickets from machines at each

stop. €1.35 for 1 journey, €6 for a five journey ticket. Validate tickets on board.

La Gomera

Two companies operate regular ferry journeys between Los Cristianos (Tenerife) and San Sebastian de la Gomera, taking about 50 minutes. Fred Olsen (www.fredolsen.es) runs 3-4 times daily and Naviera Armas (www.navieraarmas.com – in Spanish only) runs 2-3 times daily using a slightly slower ship. Fares are pricey for non-residents. Both companies include free bus transfers to and from Santa Cruz de Tenerife, where they have ticket offices in the Intercambiador. There are also regular ferries from La Gomera to La Palma – Fred Olsen 1-2 times daily, journey time 2 hours, Naviera Armas 1-2 times most days.

The island airport (GMZ) opened in 1999. The only scheduled flights are twice daily Binter Canarias services to Tenerife Norte, which are only of use to catch connecting flights. The airport is difficult to reach - the airport bus leaves San Sebastian 1hr 45mins before the flight departure, and 2 hours before departure from Valle Gran Rey - it is quicker to reach Santa Cruz by ferry and the connecting bus.



Bus services on the island are operated by the island council company Guaguagomera (www.guaguagomera.com in Spanish only). The principal routes (from San Sebastian to Valle Gran Rey, Vallehermoso and Santiago run five times daily (twice daily at weekends). From San Sebastian to Valle Gran Rey costs €5 each way and to Vallehermoso €4.50. The buses can be full at peak times (for

example when walkers set out from San Sebastian) so be at the Estación de Guaguas in good time. At Valle Gran Rey, to avoid standing it is best to board at the bus station rather than the stops by the beach. Get there early at peak times as can get busy at peak times.

La Palma

Most people reach La Palma by interisland flight from Tenerife Norte, which are frequent and take 30minutes. Canaryfly (www.canaryfly.es in Spanish only) is usually cheaper and flies 4 times daily. Binter Canarias (www.bintercanarias.com) operates 11-12 flights daily (9 on Saturday, 14 on Friday). There are an increasing number of direct flights from abroad, including EasyJet from Gatwick. The airport (SPC) is just south of the capital Santa Cruz de la Palma and the regular bus service into town takes 20 minutes.

Ferries reach La Palma from Los Cristianos (Tenerife) via La Gomera and take three hours plus. Fred Olsen operates 1-2 crossings daily and Naviera Armas operate 1-2 most days. From Spain Naviera Armas operate a weekly ferry from Huelva and Trasmediterrania weekly from Cadiz, taking 2.5 days.



The bus service is operated by TILP (Transportes Insulares de La Palma). The website (www.transporteslapalma.com) is in Spanish but the PDF timetable download has an English translation. Bus operate hourly on the main routes every half hour to the airport and between Santa Cruz and Los Llanos. The Barlovento – Puntagorda and Fuencaliente – Los Llanos sections are every two hours. The No 100 Circunvalación Norte runs in three sections and counts as three journeys. However, fares are ludicrously

cheap and the maximum fare is €2.10 (even for the 1hr 45 min Barlovento – Puntagorda journey). This reduces to €1.70 if you buy a €10 or €20 (plus €1 for the card) top-upable card (tarjeta) from the driver.

Hotels

The hotels and apartments I stayed in were:

Apartamentos Costamar, Los Cristianos, Tenerife. (Apartment). Not recommended but was the only place available for a one-night stay. Clean. Good views.

Hotel Villa Gomera, San Sebastian, La Gomera, **, www.hotelvillagomera.com, good quality for a 2-star, central and quiet.

Sogno di Gio, La Laguna, Tenerife (bed & breakfast / guesthouse), www.sognodigiolalaguna.com run by obsessively clean Italian couple, luxury, good views, tram stop (Museo de las Ciencias) adjacent.

Hotel Castillete, Santa Cruz de la Palma, La Palma (aparthotel), ***, www.hotelcastillete.com, reasonable quality and excellent value for the money. On seafront with balcony. A few minutes from town centre.

NH Tenerife, Santa Cruz, Tenerife, ***, www.nh-hotels.com, Business chain hotel. Central and usual NH high standard.

There's not a huge amount of accommodation on either La Gomera or La Palma, and they fill up during the peak season, which is winter and spring – while Northern Europe is cold, and before it gets too hot for walking. I had planned to reach the smaller island of El Hierro, but there was nothing available for early March.

Railway buffery

The Tenerife tramway (Tranvia de Tenerife) opened its 12.5km line between Santa Cruz and La Laguna in 2007, followed by the short Line 2 connecting it with some of the densely populated suburbs in 2009. There is a planned extension to line 2, and a projected extension from La Laguna to Tenerife Norte airport. Peak frequency on line 1 is every 5 minutes. The line is operated by Metropolitano de Tenerife, owned by the island government (www.metrotenerife.com). In the longer term they are also looking at possible railway development elsewhere in Tenerife, for example from Santa Cruz via Tenerife Sur airport to Los Cristianos.

The first railway line in the Canaries is likely to be on Gran Canaria, linking the capital Las Palmas with the airport and Playa del Ingles. It is hoped that construction will begin in 2018 after many delays. (www.thecanarynews.com 'Gran Canaria train still in the works' 17 March 2017).

Economic history – a brief note

It became clear during my wanderings and then researching afterwards that the islands, particularly La Gomera and La Palma have experienced severe economic peaks and troughs over the years. A very brief summary is that after Spain took the islands, at the same time as the 'discovery' of the New World, the islands became a major trading post on the routes to and from the Americas. Sugar cane was a major crop (overtaken by the Caribbean) and later wine (markets in Europe declined during the various wars of the time). This was followed in the nineteenth century by cochineal (replaced by artificial dyes) and bananas. The islands were dependent on exports, and for much of the twentieth century much of the European market disappeared, due to the world wars, the depression and the isolationism of the Franco years. Bananas are still going strong but it is tourism that has had the major impact in the past fifty years. In the poor years many of the inhabitants emigrated to Latin America, particularly Cuba and Venezuela, and in boom years many have returned with their families.

Sources:

The principal sources I've used for basic facts are:

Wikipedia in English: www.en.wikipedia.org

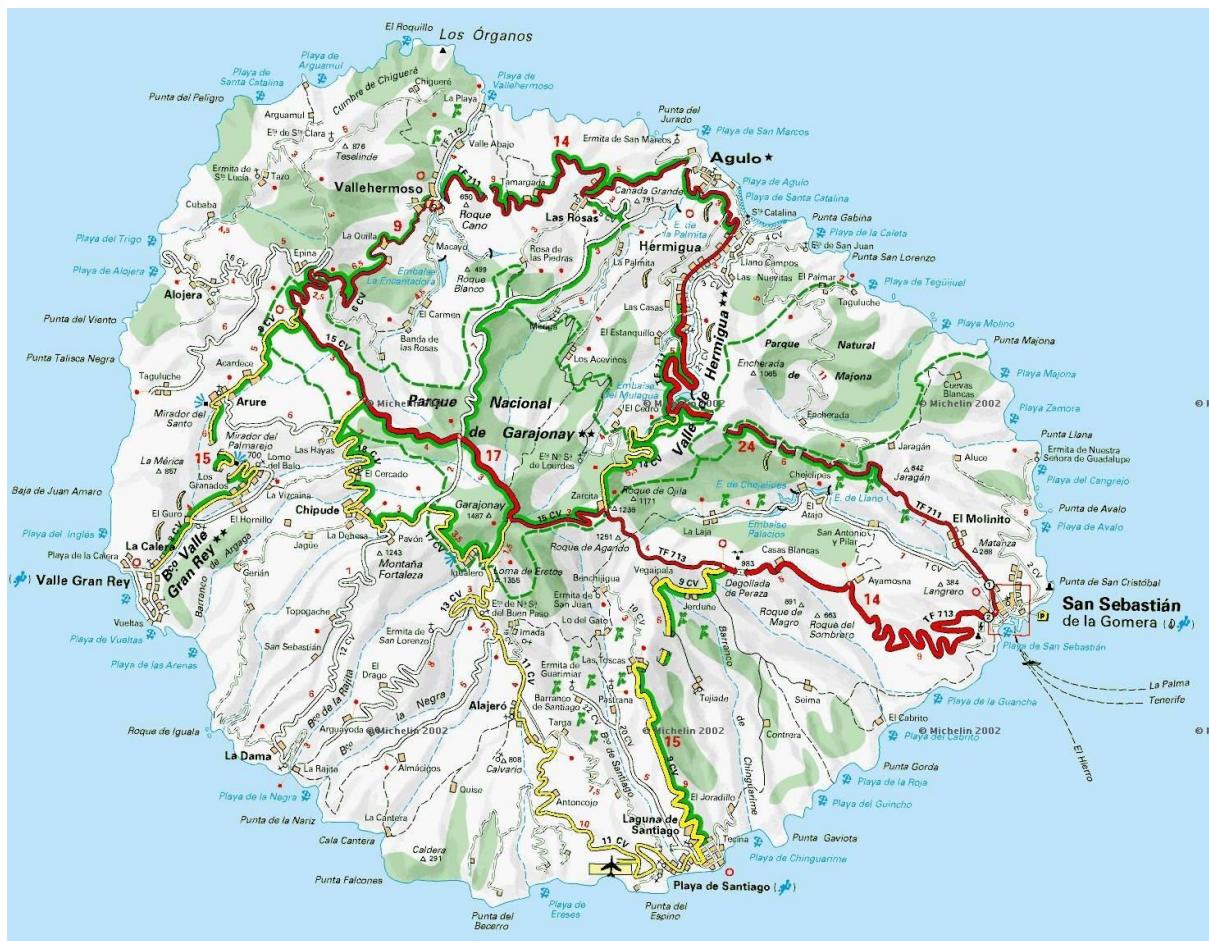
Wikipedia in Spanish: www.es.wikipedia.org

Lonely Planet Canary Islands, Lucy Corne and Josephine Quintera, 6th edn, Lonely Planet, Jan 2016
Population figures are from Wikipedia which references them to the Instituto Nacional de Estadistica or the Instituto Canario Estadistica. Unless it states otherwise the population figures are for 2016.
Websites mentioned in the text have an English version unless it states otherwise.

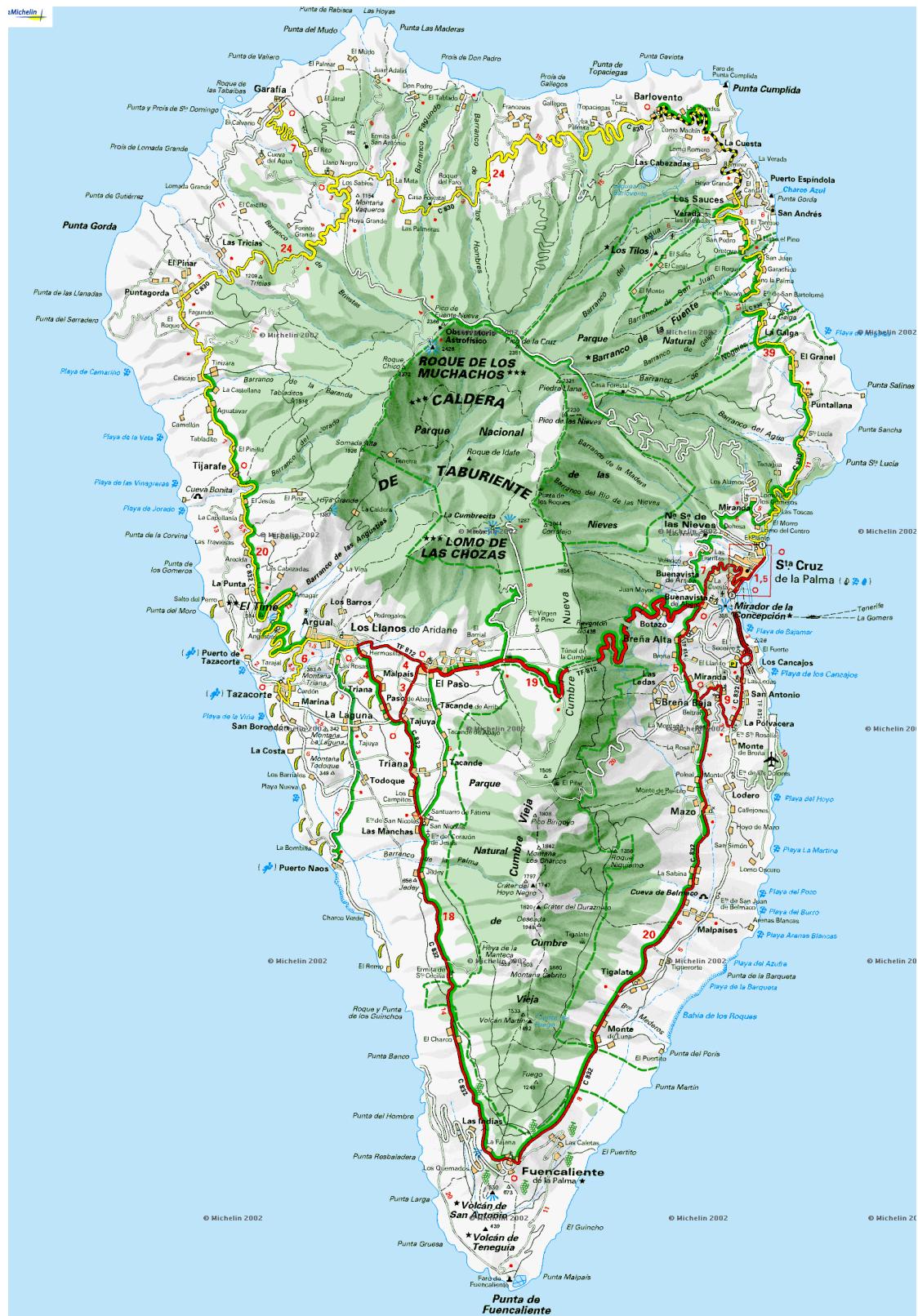
Maps:

I used the Michelin Islas Canarias map, which has maps of all of the Canary Islands at a scale of 1:150,000, which was fine for my purposes. The maps on the following pages are extracts from the Michelin map. Larger scale walking maps are available for each of the islands.

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LA GOMERA



LA PALMA