

Getting Started

Independent travel or package tour? One island or several? Plane or ferry? Set itinerary or spontaneous serendipity? There are many ways to organise a trip to the Canaries, and the one you choose depends entirely on your tastes and your plans for the trip.

If relaxing is your goal, it's best to choose a home base where you can chill out for a few days or a week, taking day trips or even hopping over to a nearby island. If you do this, arranging a flight-and-hotel (or flight-and-apartment) package deal will give you the best value; if you can get the rental car thrown in too, all the better. But if money isn't your main concern, consider basing yourself in a *casa rural* (rural farmhouse), which rarely partner with big tour operators. It will be a bit more expensive, but also more special. Either way, you'll need to book in advance.

If you plan to move around a lot, you're probably better off looking for a cheap flight, then booking lodging separately. Once you're on the island it's easy to find spare rooms, especially out of peak season. If you're picky, plan your itinerary in advance and book hotels or apartments before you leave home.

Island hoppers can fly or ferry to their chosen destinations within the archipelago. Flights are €60 per leg, no matter where you go. Ferries cost €20 to €50, depending on the length of the trip and the type of ferry. For more information, see the Transport chapter on p258.

If you're planning to go scuba diving, sailing, hiking or biking and need a guide or rental, it would be a good idea to reserve in advance, especially if your plans aren't flexible. That said, it's usually possible to call up the day before and arrange an excursion.

See Climate Charts (p248) for more information.

WHEN TO GO

When it comes to sunshine, the Canary Islands are caught in a kind of weather warp, with an eternal spring-summer climate. They're a year-round destination; you can pretty much take your pick of when to go.

The winter months – December to March – are a tad cooler but still paradise compared to mainland Europe, the UK and most of North America. This makes winter the islands' busiest period. The summer months – July to September – are a rival high season, mainly because that's when mainland Spaniards elect to go on their annual holiday. The Carnaval

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting waxed
- Your local and international driving licence (p262)
- Sunscreen and a hat – remember, you're closer to Africa than Europe
- Adapter plug for electrical appliances (p245)
- A good book – hard to find on the islands
- Your iPod and island playlist
- An oversize beach towel – most hotels and apartments won't let you use theirs
- Hiking boots (and poles if you're really intrepid)
- A backpack for day trips

TOP PICKS



RURAL RETREATS

Escape from it all at these out-of-the-way spots.

- El Nísparo (p219), La Palma – for a true break from the world, head to this *casa rural* near Fuencaliente
- El Sitio (p243), El Hierro – a cluster of restored farm huts where activities include yoga classes and massage
- Ibo Alfaro (p197), La Gomera – to retreat with style, there's no better spot than this hotel
- Hotel Rural Mahoh (p112), Fuerteventura – perfect for romance, this intimate hotel is surrounded by a lovely cacti garden
- Hacienda del Buen Suceso (p80), Gran Canaria – the oldest estates on the archipelago pairs old-world style with modern comfort for the ultimate pampered retreat

BEACHES

So much sand, so little time.

- Playa Carpinteras (p88), Gran Canaria – beyond the bustle, this hidden strip is a locals' secret
- El Médano (p176), Tenerife – at 2km in length it's the island's longest beach and has the best breezes for windsurfers
- Playa de Sotavento de Jandía (p113), Fuerteventura – a series of drop-dead-gorgeous beaches popular with swimmers and windsurfers
- La Caleta de Famara (p135), Lanzarote – this hidden little island paradise is definitely no built-up beach resort
- Playa de Alojera (p200), La Gomera – at the end of a twisted highway, this little cove is home to a calm, inviting beach

WALKS

Get off the beach and out of the car, and discover the wild, natural beauty of the islands.

- Ruta de los Volcanes (p221), La Palma – see the archipelago's most active volcanic area up close and personal
- Up to the Alto de Garajonay (p196), La Gomera – the highest point on the island; from here you can see across to Gran Canaria
- Roques de García (p171), Tenerife – if chugging up to the summit of El Teide is too much, hike in its shadow among these strange rock formations
- Camino de Jinama (p238), El Hierro – constant, soul-satisfying views unfold before you on this downhill hike overlooking El Golfo
- Isla de Lobos (p108), Fuerteventura – bird-watching and pristine beaches make the loop around this tiny island a real treat

CANARY CULTURE CONNECTIONS

- Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (p65), Gran Canaria – opera, dance, theatre and film festivals make it a hot spot for refined culture
- Auditorio de Tenerife (p155), Tenerife – designed by the famed Santiago Calatrava, this iconic auditorium invokes a crashing wave and has become Santa Cruz's cultural icon
- Parque Ecológico de Belmaco (p218), La Palma – the first ancient rock carvings on the archipelago were found at this spot in the island's south
- Ecomuseo de Guinea (p242), El Hierro – this fascinating outdoor museum depicts islanders' lifestyles through the centuries
- César Manrique (p119), Lanzarote – Lanzarote's favourite son, César Manrique left wonderfully designed *miradores* (lookout points) all over his homeland

HOW MUCH?

Sun lounge with big umbrella €5

Cocktail with little umbrella €8

Local bus ticket €1

Apartment for two €60

Bottle of local wine €11

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Litre of petrol (unleaded) €0.60

Bottle of water from €0.80

Bottle of beer €2.50

Serving of *papas arrugadas* (wrinkly potatoes) €1.50

Souvenir T-shirt €20

season (February/March) is an intensely popular period, when anyone and everyone decides to partake in the fun.

For maximum value on airfares and accommodation, the best periods are from November to mid-December and, better still, April to June (with the notable exception of the Easter rush). The latter especially is a great time to be around.

COSTS & MONEY

Daily living expenses on the Canary Islands are lower than those in most countries of Western Europe. Accommodation, which is plentiful, can be a bargain compared to other popular European holiday destinations. Food, too, is inexpensive for both self-caterers and avid restaurant-goers. Car hire is cheap, taxi transport good value over short distances and public buses are generally economical. Flying between the islands can be a bit more expensive but time-saving. Theme and amusement parks are all pricey, especially for large family groups.

The daily budget you'll need depends largely on the kind of trip you have planned; whether or not you're self-catering, if you plan to eat in restaurants or pack picnics, and whether your hotel includes meals. To stay in a comfortable midrange hotel, eat one formal and one simple meal out each day, and hire a car, expect to pay at least about €100 per person per day.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Diving in Canaries (Sergio Hanquet) If you plan to explore the archipelago's underwater wonderlands, this is a great source of information and inspiration.

Lanzarote (Michel Houellebecq) By turns savage and clinical, hilarious and disturbing, Houellebecq takes a package tour and gets to know some of his fellow travellers.

More Ketchup Than Salsa: Confessions of a Tenerife Barman (Joe Cawley) This humorous memoir takes a look at the Brits-abroad culture on Tenerife, as seen from behind the bar run by the author and his girlfriend.

The Gauches – Survivors and their Descendants (José Luis Concepción) This book is helpful for those interested in knowing about the islands' history and in honouring the legacy of its indigenous peoples.

Todos los Mojos de Canarias (Flora Lilia Barrera Álamo and Dolores Hernández Barrera) Get hooked on *majo* (spicy salsa sauce) before you even taste it, with this book devoted to the ubiquitous and delicious Canary Islands sauce.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Additional online resources and island-specific tourist offices are listed in the individual island chapters.

Canary Island Flora (www.canaryislandflora.com) A fascinating site covering the varied plant life on the islands.

Canary Travel (www.canary-travel.com) A great travel resource to the islands.

Dive Canary Islands (<http://canaryislands.dive-international.net>) All about diving in the Canaries.

EcoTurismo Canarias (www.ecoturismocanarias.com) An interesting site covering wildlife, rural accommodation and related services.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Great travel information, online booking and internet-only features and blogs about the islands.

Vive Canarias (www.vivecanarias.com) An informative site with plenty of information on the local arts scene, a good festival directory and plenty of entertainment listings.

Snapshot

It's all too easy to land in the Canary Islands and, feeling the sun on your face and the breeze in your hair, scurry straight to an idyllic beach resort or quiet rural retreat, not to be heard from again until the morning of your flight out. Yet while we're sunbathing, swimming, sailing, snorkelling and strolling, the 'real' Canaries are chugging along in the background.

Construction is strong in the archipelago; proof of that is the 2.5 million tons of concrete that's poured annually into hotels, homes and businesses. Agriculture is still alive and well; thousands of Canarios work as farmers, and their growing number of crops (planted across around 520 sq km) are responsible for tasty fruits and veggies and for the often-photographed, well-tended landscapes. New crops such as grapes, avocados, tropical fruits and flowers are contributing to a modern farming miniboom. The fishing industry is also still strong.

Still, there's no doubt that the prosperity we see in many parts of the islands was brought in large part by tourism. When Spanish dictator Francisco Franco opened Spain to the sun-starved masses in the 1960s, he paved the way for development (and overdevelopment) on the islands. Naturally, this large-scale construction brings its own problems.

With few rivers or sources of fresh water on the islands, getting clean drinking water has always been a problem. Added to that are issues related to erosion, with the depletion of nearby marine life and the general degradation of coasts and tourist areas. Thanks in large part to vocal environmental groups, leaders are beginning to take note. One particularly encouraging step was taken in 2007 by El Hierro, which set in motion a plan to make the island energy self-sufficient, using only renewable energy sources like water, wind and solar power. Less encouraging is what's happening on Tenerife and La Palma, where projects for new ports, golf courses and hotels are being pushed through over the screaming voices of environmentalists.

These seven islands were long some of the poorest regions of Spain, and only decades ago this territory was practically an afterthought to mainland Spain. Although prosperity has brought the Canaries closer to the mainland, the perceived separation still strikes a real nerve with islanders. Whatever you do, don't refer to the Iberian Peninsula as Spain – you are in Spain! A minority of islanders, however, argue just the opposite, insisting that the Canaries would be better off as an independent country. This sentiment, although often visible in the form of scrawled 'Spanish Go Home!' graffiti, is not a real threat to unity.

Ironically, the islands that have traditionally been sources of poverty-driven emigration are now the recipients of mass immigration. The presence of African immigrants, who arrive almost daily by boat to the islands, is one of the most polarising issues facing the Canaries today. The human drama played out on the beaches here, where sunbathing tourists are at times the first to greet the often infirm and dehydrated immigrants, is heart-wrenching. Aside from constantly calling on the Spanish government and the European Union for help, the Canaries so far have no solution to this situation.

FAST FACTS

Population: 1.99 million

Number of hotel beds:
176,000

Coastline length: about
1500km

Unemployment: 115,000
people (11.5%)

On the Road



SARAH ANDREWS Coordinating Author

El Hierro's rough, rugged coastline is captivating, and I spent a lot of time exploring the coves and swimming holes here. The day this photo was taken, I'd headed to one of the most beautiful places on the whole island – **Charco Manso** (p236) – where the ceaseless waves have battered the volcanic rocks into caves, tunnels and arcs that were so gorgeous they gave me goose bumps. There at the Charco, I met a few local Herreños, who led me to all the prettiest spots, like a nearly hidden cave where sunlight makes the water look orange and green, and a delicate arch that soars more than 10m above the water. It was unforgettable.



JOSEPHINE QUINTERO This photo was taken on the first day I drove to **El Teide** (p170). The volcano is visible from places all over the island, but nothing prepares you for actually getting up close and personal with Tenerife's emblematic pyramid. As you drive closer, the scenery is constantly shifting and changing, with colours, rock shapes and terrain that are simultaneously stark and extraordinarily beautiful. I walked several trails around the base, but the cable car was temporarily out of order so my planned trip to the peak was thwarted. I *will* be back!

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