

# PERIOD DRAMA

Old plantations and fishing villages. Rainforest and volcanic peaks. Beyond the resorts a wildly different Tenerife unravels, untouched by time or tourism. **Linda Cookson** explores

Photography: **Sergio Villalba**

Jagged edge: the mountainous massif of Anaga, Tenerife's rugged northeast tip

Canary mellow: clockwise from top left, the old quarter of La Laguna; moon over El Teide; driving through the lava fields of Parque Nacional del Teide; toasted corn grain; colourful houses in Puerto de la Cruz;

aerial view of Playa de los Patos, near Puerto de la Cruz; seafront sculpture in Garachico; ripening bananas at Finca Punta del Lomo; church towers in La Orotava; a local farmer; view from the beach in Masca

## In a small workshop in Masca, overlooking a spectacular ravine

and surrounded by avocado, orange and almond trees, I happened upon 55-year-old Rafael Hernandez. He was sitting making 'timples' – traditional Canarian stringed instruments similar to ukuleles. Crafted from medlar wood, each instrument takes at least 70 hours to make – more, Rafael explained to me, if he varnishes them by hand rather than with a spray. Lovingly he described the bowled base and the inlaid rosette around the sound hole, and after the sun set I had the thrill of hearing one in action. In his wife Blanky's nextdoor bar – a rustic riot of lime green walls and bright red tablecloths – the couple entertained customers with a heartstring-tugging medley of folk songs. As Rafael played and Blanky sang, the melody drifted out through the open windows and over the ravine in heart-melting bubbles of sound. It was pure magic – an exquisite timewarp moment.

The tiny hamlet of Masca balances on a ridge of grey rock 650m above sea level, like a mouse on the back of an elephant. Until 1991, when a helter-skelter highway was built across western Tenerife's Teno mountain range, it could only be reached on foot or by donkey. Electricity didn't arrive until even later. Humming with upbeat locals and thirsty hikers, Masca, like Blanky's bar, belies preconceptions of Tenerife, a destination all too often damned and dismissed for its crowded southern coastal stretch, where the jets descend into the main airport.

With waterfronts of cocktail bars, burger joints and signs promising full English breakfasts, Tenerife has for years been a winner for party animals, or families seeking bargain winter sun. But I'd come in search of the quiet life. Here for 10 days, I was following a hunch that, if you know where to go, the island is a paradise lost in some pastoral past. I say a hunch. More accurately, I'd spent the preceding winter spellbound, reading the 1887 travelogue *Tenerife and its Six Satellites*, an account by Englishwoman Olivia Stone of the six months she and her husband spent touring the Canary Islands in 1883.

Her detailed traveller's tales painted an alluring picture of Tenerife and its culture, the couple oozing unintentional comedy as they hobnobbed with wealthy expats, flew a Union Jack from their tent flap and fretted about supplies of beef tea. Unspoilt charm was exactly what early UK visitors encountered as they alighted from their 19th-century steamer to be drawn into an Eden of rainforest and banana plantations, rolling vineyards and

yawning *barranco* precipices, black-sand beaches and lava-rock coves. I hoped some of that heritage might remain 130 years on as I got off the plane last spring.

The north of the island is its historic pulse, and there I headed first, to relax among arguably its most beautiful terrain. I was staying in the coastal resort of Puerto de la Cruz. Originally a simple fishing village – effectively the sea-level suburb of the much more important hillside settlement of La Orotava – it had expanded hugely over the past few decades. And yet, designed in the '70s by the Lanzarote-born artist César Manrique, it struck me as decidedly classy. In the old part of town – the winding streets by the port – a jumble of Canarian mansions painted in spice-bazaar colours were reassuringly timeless. After wandering around the Ranilla area of fishermen's cottages on my first morning, I stopped for a caffeine-hit *cortado* in the laid-back bar-cafe Agora. Next to a fountain in secluded Benito Pérez Galdós Square, it was overlooked by the brightly painted murals that form part of an ongoing Puerto Street Art project. The trunks of several of the square's palm trees were encircled with vibrant bands of woven cloth. Colours swirled in the sunshine like fragments in a kaleidoscope.

For garden-lovers like me, Puerto de la Cruz was a revelation. The La Paz area, on a hillside above the waterfront, is a horticulturalist's paradise. My base – Hotel Botanico, Tenerife's first five-star hotel, also set in luxuriantly landscaped grounds – was opposite the town's Botanic Gardens, a *Jurassic Park* jungle of vegetation that has flourished since the 18th century (entry just £2.70). An ancient cypress at the entrance bore cascades of what looked like wire-wool dreadlocks. Banyan trees centuries old sprouted roots like organ pipes. Coral-pink spikes of amaryllis nosed through canopies of tropical ferns.

A tip from a resident pointed me down a maze of leafy side roads to Sitio Litre, a British-owned villa with an exquisitely tranquil orchid garden open to the public (£4). Agatha Christie and her daughter Rosalind were houseguests in 1927. With tea rooms, a croquet lawn and a mannequin of the Queen of Crime sitting daintily in a floral bower, the gardens were time-in-a-bottle magic, as far from the modern crowd as I could have wished to be.

From Puerto de la Cruz the road led me 7km to its elegant inland counterpart, La Orotava. With terrace upon terrace of colonial houses and streets of wrought-iron >

### GETHOLD OF THIS BOOK

If you can't track down a hard copy, the 1889 edition of *Tenerife and its Six Satellites* can be downloaded for free from [archive.org](http://archive.org)



TENERIFE

THE OLD TOWN CENTRE LACKED ONLY THE CLATTERING OF HORSES PULLING CARRIAGES ACROSS THE COBBLES

lamps, the Old Town centre was astonishingly well-preserved, lacking only the clattering of horses pulling carriages across the cobbles. Skilled embroiderers and carpenters continued to work and sell their creations in galleried workshops. On the edge of town a *gofio* mill, in action since 1736, ground out the toasted wheat flour that forms the basis of many Canarian snacks.

It was too early in the year for me to catch the town's annual Corpus Christi celebrations, held every June, when streets are carpeted with flower-petal 'paintings' and squares are covered by vast mosaics crafted from multicoloured volcanic sands. But, over in Plaza de la Constitución, clown masks and lights were being rigged to the old bandstand and a huge stage erected as La Orotava geared up for the island-wide Carnival that takes place in February, the time of my visit. In front of the scaffolding a bunch of men in onesies – dressed variously as mice, dogs, cats and crocodiles – were lining up for a team selfie, with much exuberant adjusting of tails and ears.

The landscape surrounding La Orotava is mesmerising – a vast plain teeming with lush vegetation, clouds of white oleander and serrated ranks of vineyards. On my third day I hired a guide for a bit of off-the-beaten-track exploring and he drove us deep into the heart of wine-growing country. Along the roadside, clumps of wild poinsettias exploded in splashes of red among fat palm trees with trunks scored like pineapples. Suddenly, we took a sharp turn up a dirt track and pulled in at a haphazard garden choc-full of golden irises and Canarian bell flowers. 'Lunch time!' said my guide. My eye fell on

a tall wire enclosure full of budgerigars next to an ancient-looking barbecue. For a fleeting moment I wondered if I was about to sample a budgie-burger. That might have been one local custom too far.

But no – we were in a *guachinche*, one of the many unsophisticated regional home-restaurants where winemakers are licensed to serve food with their wine. The budgies were family pets. Typically, *guachinches* are well off the tourist trail and have prices to match. This one – Casa Lito in Santa Ursula – was a cracker, set in a former priest's house dating back to 1721, and patrolled by goats, chickens and partridges. After a feast of farm cheese and *heuvos al estampido* – a medley of smashed-up fried eggs and potatoes – I asked cheery proprietor Miriam Perez how much wine she sold a year. About 10,000 litres were drunk on the premises, she reckoned. Another 3,000 were decanted as takeaways. Heady stuff.

As the time neared for me to move on, to the south and west of the island, I felt slightly dejected. I'd been having such a fantastic time here in the north. I'd joined milling crowds celebrating Carnival in fancy dress along the waterfront of Santa Cruz, Tenerife's capital. (The sight of Superman pushing a pram containing a baby dressed as a frog is now imprinted on my retina.) I'd spent a Sunday morning exploring the beautiful World Heritage city of La Laguna, the former capital – then found what was clearly everyone's favourite *churreria* by Plaza del Cristo's covered market, where I sat dunking sugary *churros* in hot chocolate. Later that same day, I'd climbed 1,000m into the heart of the prehistoric Anaga Rural Park >

#### FANCY DINING OUT?

Tenerife does gourmet, too – on the west coast, the Abama hotel's MB restaurant has two Michelin stars (10-course tasting menu £126pp), while its Kabuki also boasts a Michelin for its Japanese extravaganza (£95)

The time is ripe: right, banana plantation at Finca Punta del Lomo; Roque de Tierra and the craggy Anaga coast. This page, helter-skelter highway to Masca

TENERIFE



Game on: kids playing football in Plaza de la Libertad, Garachico. Opposite, sunset off the coast of Anaga



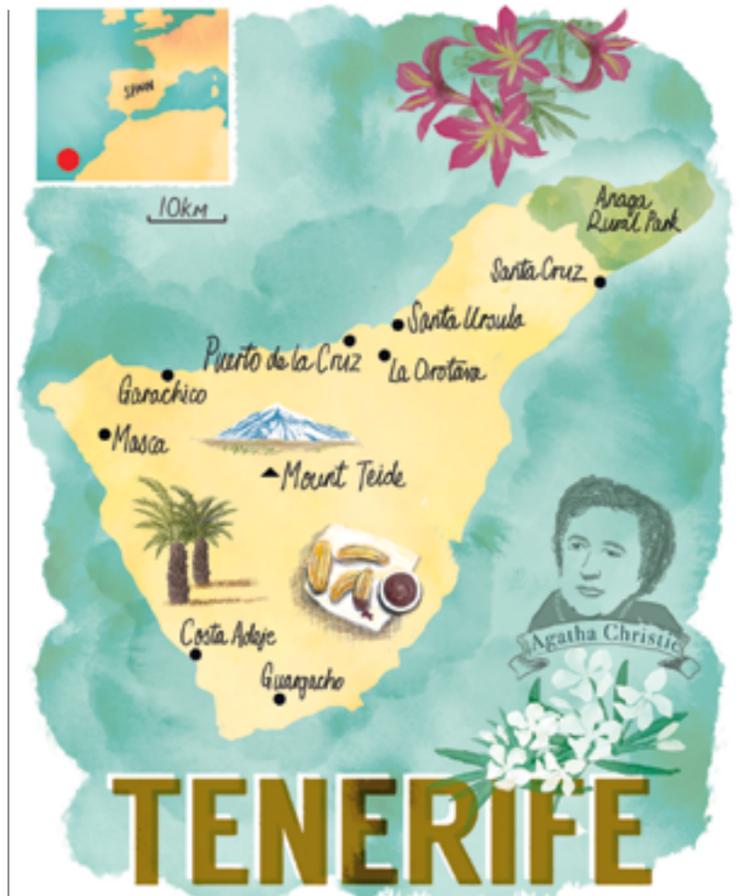
SHADED BY TREES, I SAT SIPPING A BARRAQUITO COFFEE AND ADMIRING THE SCENE. GARACHICO SEEMED SUSPENDED IN ANOTHER AGE...

rainforest, where iridescent shrouds of moisture clung to ancient laurels and bays. Sure, I was only going south for a couple of days, but what if it proved a let-down?

Costa Adeje, on the south coast, was clean, bright, elegant, and devoid of tattoo parlours. My hotel, Jardines de Nivaria, was a class act – swish and stylish, with Art Deco extravagances, attractive gardens and a beach on its doorstep. And it was here that I found Blanky and Raphael in Masca. But I had my sights set on the ultimate high: Mount Teide, Spain's highest mountain, ever-visible on Tenerife. And so, at sunset one day, I made my pilgrimage. The experience was heavenly in every way. And as the moon began to rise, I began to understand why the Romans called Tenerife Nivaria: white mountain.

Before I knew it, my time was dwindling: just one day left before a jet flew me back to Britain and modernity! There was still time for adventure. I made my way to the family-run Finca Punta del Lomo banana plantation in Guargacho, a 15-minute drive inland from the brash southern resorts. There I found a 19th-century plantation house among expanses of green banana plants bulging with tiered clusters of fruit. Run by brothers Javier and Francisco González de Chaves, the plantation – as otherworldly as a sci-fi movie set – welcomes visitors (entry £2.70, guided visits £31). But if it was lost in the past, it was progressive, too: 41-year-old Francisco is wheelchair-bound following a swimming accident four years ago. Now, as a brave response to personal tragedy, the brothers and their families have created a charity foundation that houses a state-of-the-art disability rehabilitation unit on the premises.

Driving on to contemplate the day's end, I said farewell for now to Tenerife at the chic little seaside town of Garachico, with its natural lava-rock swimming pools and leafy Plaza de la Libertad. Shaded by laurel trees, I sat sipping a *barraquito* – one of those alcohol-laced coffee pick-me-ups that Spain does so well – in the square's *kiosko* cafe, which sits beside a wooden bandstand. The bandstand was more than a century old, and Garachico seemed suspended in another age. I wished Olivia Stone could have joined me here. I know she'd have opted for a *barraquito* to revive her among all this bygone beauty – rather than reach for the smelling salts. ■



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

**EasyJet** (easyjet.com) flies to Tenerife South from Bristol, Gatwick, Luton, Southend, Manchester, Edinburgh and Newcastle, from £40 one way. Or try **BA** (ba.com), **Ryanair** (ryanair.com), **Jet2** (jet2.com) or **TUI** (tui.co.uk). Puerto de la Cruz is 75 minutes by taxi (£95), or 90 minutes on the 343 bus (£12 one way). Costa Adeje and nearby resorts are 20 minutes by taxi (£24) or 30 minutes on bus 111 (£3.30 one way); see [titsa.com](http://titsa.com).

### Where to stay

**Hotel Botánico** (hotelbotanico.com), in Puerto de la Cruz, has doubles from £200, B&B. At **Hotel Jardines de Nivaria** (adrianhoteles.com) doubles start at £258, B&B. Or try arty **San Roque** in Garachico (hotelsanroque.com; doubles from £210, B&B) and **Victoria Hotel** in La Orotava (hotelruralvictoria.com; doubles from £63, B&B). Fancy self-catering? In Guargacho, **Finca Punta del Lomo** (fincapuntadellomo.com) rents out stone houses from £72 a night.

### Go packaged

**Sovereign** (01293 762400, sovereign.com) can arrange a week's stay in Puerto de la Cruz, at Hotel Botánico from £840pp, B&B, with flights from airports including Gatwick, Exeter, Newcastle, East Midlands and Glasgow; alternatively it can fix you up at Hotel Jardines de Nivaria, in Costa Adeje, from £827pp, B&B, including Gatwick or regional flights.

### Get around

**PlusCar** (pluscar-tenerife.com) can arrange seven days' car hire from Tenerife South airport from £81.

### Eating and drinking

**Bar Blanky** (Casa Fidel, Masca; 00 34 922 863457, blankymasca.com; mains about £7). **Agora Bar & Café** (Benito Pérez Galdós 6, Puerto de la Cruz). **Gauchinche Casa Lito** (Calle Tijarafe 35, Santa Ursula; 00 34 630 590007; mains about £6).

### Further information

See [webtenerife.com](http://webtenerife.com).