

A winter wonderland

Take an out-of-season trip to Tenerife's Mount Teide and prepare for roads and scenery that are out of this world

Tenerife, the largest of the Spanish Canary Islands is synonymous with timeshare and all-day cheap booze. There is however another side to this enigmatic winter getaway – and it is truly wonderful.

A route along the centre of the island from West to East climbing up one side of its volcanic core – the majestic Mount Teide – and descending along the forested ridge towards the distant end of the island is one of the most scenically varied and otherworldly experiences you could ever have.

Our journey starts in the village of Masca on the North Western tip of the island. The road to and from Masca is a narrow, tightly winding, single lane snake of good tarmac with low, whitewashed stone-block side walls, like rows of stubby teeth waiting to bite those who err. My rented BMW R1200GS and my wife's 750 had scarcely warmed up before the fun of the hairpins was over. The verdant gorges and stone cliff faces of the Masca road were soon replaced by a series of almost alien vistas as we climb up the side of the volcano on the TF-38. Teide has six distinctly different ecosystems and its sci-fi scenery is one reason it's been used as the setting for so many films.

Initially we're surrounded by volcanic rubble dotted with shrubs and cacti, however this is rapidly replaced as we enter a pine forest area a little different to any I have experienced before. The ground between the trees is carpeted with brown pine needles and huge cones. Nothing else is growing at all. It's as if the trees themselves are preventing anything else from taking root.

As we climb higher around a series of wide sweeping hairpins the trees begin to thin revealing views of the coastline dropping away on the right and the peak of Teide visible in the distance on the left. It's mid morning in the middle of January and although



Author Geoff and wife Liz with their rental BMWs

'The black pumice crunches like Rice Krispies underfoot'

the temperature will have risen to a balmy 20°C on the coast, here it has dropped to 12°C as we pass through a wispy layer of cloud clinging like candy-floss to the remaining pine trees on the slopes to our right. The space between the trees has widened and in many places the carpet of pine needles is now replaced by an even layer of black pumice that crunches like Rice Krispies if you walk on it.

The land of lava

We're traversing the North Western Santiago ridge and passing the Chinyero vent, site of the most recent eruption in 1909. The landscape here looks like a building site where plants have barely had time to start poking through the rubble of lava and ash. Green shrubs are dotted around on a red and coal-black canvas, like spots of mould on dark rye bread.

As we ride this road it's clear that the various eruptions have dumped different types of rocks in sharply defined areas. Often one side of the road will feature red rubble while the other side is black like a colliery slag heap. After another ten minutes we reach the end of the trees and pass through a vast ocean of desolation. Velvety black lava stretches away on either side of the road as far as the eye can see and nothing is growing at all. It's really quite surreal.

We cross this desert to reach the TF-21, which comes up to this point from Vilflor, and turn left heading deeper into the National Park and closer to Teide itself. The scenery here changes to a vast flat sandy looking shrub desert, called Las Cañadas, and contrasts sharply with all we have passed through so far. We are actually

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'We enter a forest area different from any I have experienced before'



The verdant landscape of the Masca road soon gives way to the unworldly lava



Cloudless skies at the top of Teide



The observatory is world-famous

The trees thin as the road heads ever upwards



‘We leave the green rocks and head for the volcano’

riding across the flat interior of a volcanic crater, a fact which becomes very clear when viewed from the top of Teide.

There is one more region of spectacular contrast before we arrive at our planned cable car ride to the top of Teide. At the end of the long straight across this flat crater floor the road makes a left turn towards the volcano then a short series of bends as it cuts into and through a mix of red and then bright green rocks. This green colour comes not from copper, but from clay minerals in the ash, mainly chlorite. Most volcanic ash is a shade of grey or black, but when exposed to air and water the constituent elements can react to create colourful new minerals.

To the top of Teide

We leave the green rocks and continue heading for the volcano itself. I can see a few traces of snow at the peak (the temperature gauge on the bike has now dropped to 7°C) and dark fissures scar the left-hand side of the cone where rivers of lava have left their trails.

The lower cable car station is now just ahead and a build-up of cars and coaches are beginning to line the access road. We manage to park close to the ticket office and are soon on our way to the top in a very modern cable car which holds up to 44 passengers and takes about eight minutes to go from 2356m at the bottom station to 3555m at the top.

At the summit the air is thin and cold and smells slightly of sulphur. We make slow and careful progress. The temperature has dropped to 2°C and the two open hiking routes, one to the left and one to the right of the top station are very uneven and require attention. The views all around and back down to the road below are spectacular and the experience is one not to be missed.

It's with some relief that we finally descend to the warmer and more breathable air back with our bikes at the bottom. As we mount up and set off, the access road is now packed with cars and coaches

on both sides of the road, but with a twist of the wrist we leave them all behind. Lunch at the biker-friendly Papillon restaurant in Las Cañadas del Teide is calling, but before we get there we pass through yet another series of starkly different scenic regions.

I'm starting to think of them as zones, there's the sandy yellow beach zone, the red rubble zone, the orange-brown earth and grey-green shrubs zone, the black rubble zone, the black shiny glasslike zone: all produced from different outpourings of lava from the volcano combined with different levels of initial exposure to water. Some show no plant growth at all, some have only low shrubs and others are dotted with the towering feathery skeletal remains of Teide Bugloss flowers. This must be one of the most visually varied rides packed into such a short distance anywhere in the world.

In touch with the stars

The next phase is very different again. Soon after leaving our lunchstop we turn right onto the TF-24 and climb up a long straight through dark red earth towards the Teide Astronomical Observatory visible at the top of the high point ahead. Along with Chile and Hawaii, the Canary Islands are one of the three best spots in the world to observe the sky. This combination of solar, nocturnal and radio telescopes extends over 50 hectares and was inaugurated in 1964. It is the world's largest Solar Observatory and makes an awe-inspiring site as we ride up and past its array of odd shaped crystal white sentinels on the horizon above us.

This is the high point of our route (2240m) and as we begin to descend the road is cut into and sometimes through the rocks revealing a breath-taking variety of colours and striations. The final curve before we head down to forest again is like passing through a wedge cut into a chocolate and cream layer-cake. This is La Tarta del Teide.

It can get extremely windy up here, as it's so exposed, but thankfully today it is relatively calm and we enter the forest suddenly. It's like passing through a curtain into a different world. As we wind our way through the beautiful woodland, which lines this long ridge on both sides all the way to the far end of the island, the sun is flashing and twinkling between the branches above, it's a section you never want to end.

Our passage through the ever-changing zones of Teide is almost over and after a further 15km or so on one of the finest forest roads we've ever ridden we start to see signs of civilisation again as we approach La Esperanza. From here we could easily go down the TF-274 to the coast and head home rapidly on the TF1 motorway - but there is still time!

With big smiles on our faces we turn around and ride the whole route in reverse back to our base in Costa Adeje. What a great day! **MCN**

The route



RIDING IN TENERIFE

Biking weather is perfect from November to April



‘Road surfaces are excellent quality’

Tenerife is the largest and most popular of the Canary Islands. It's blessed with guaranteed sunshine almost all year round thanks to its location just west of the west coast of Africa. Temperatures rarely drop below the 20s on the coast.

The winter months between November and April are probably the best times to visit as it's a bit cooler - around 21-22°C. It can rain but the showers are infrequent and don't usually last long. The summer months between May and October get very hot with daily highs of around 28°C.

As with most mountainous islands there are two distinct sides you can choose to stay. The North is the lush and wetter side where you are more likely to have overcast skies and rain. The coastal tourist areas in the South West and South are much drier and more barren.

Most of the roads in Tenerife, as with all the Canary islands,

are excellent quality. The Masca road at the beginning of this ride is only single lane and very twisty with passing points for cars every now and then. This might prove challenging for less experienced riders not accustomed to tight climbing hairpins. The ride up and over Teide also has hairpin bends but is a wider two track road that poses no real challenges. Traffic is generally quite light but it can get busy at different times of the day. There are no tolls to pay on the roads. You drive on the right-hand side of the road.

The speed limit on the highways is 75mph and on most of the mountain roads it is 50-60mph.

We rented our bikes from Moto 4 fun (moto4fun.com) in Costa Adeje. They have a wide range of good quality rental bikes available from €45 per day. They also hire out kit, but due to coronavirus now recommend you bring your own.

