

TENERIFE'S TEIDE NATIONAL PARK

RIDE THE SPINE *Of the Sleeping Dragon*

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Tenerife, the largest of the Spanish Canary Islands, lies some 200 miles off the coast of northwest Africa in the Atlantic Ocean. It has become synonymous with endless apartments, timeshares, restaurants, and all-day cheap booze. This, combined with full English breakfasts for a few euros and tacky tourist attractions, does not at first glance suggest it would make a great destination for motorcycling.

However, there's another side to this enigmatic winter getaway in the sun, and it is simply wonderful. Tenerife is dominated by the currently dormant volcano, Mount Teide. At just over 12,000 feet high, Teide is the tallest peak in any Spanish-controlled territory and the third highest volcanic structure in the world. The volcano erupted as recently as 1909. Tenerife is truly a sleeping dragon.

Living in the Austrian Alps, we are normally drowned in snow over the European winter months, so we like to take a week or two away somewhere we can still ride. This time, we decided to explore a route taking us from west to east along the otherworldly scenery on this sleeping dragon's spine.

THE MASCA ROLLER COASTER

Our route starts in the village of Masca on the northwestern tip of the island. This tiny village is swamped with tourists every day. They come to see the beautiful mountain village, once used as a pirate hideout, and until relatively recently only accessible by donkey or hiking. Like so many places that develop such fame, the scale of tourism completely outmatches the location's resources.

The road to and from Masca is a narrow, tightly winding, single-lane snake of good tarmac with low, whitewashed stone-block side walls. The occasional passing points are scarcely adequate for cars, let alone the numerous coaches that attempt to traverse this route. You need to get there early in the day, or much, much later in the afternoon.

Having said that, if you get there at the right time, the Masca road is a wonderful technical roller coaster, winding through and over a series of verdant mountain ridges. Spectacular views are all around, not least of the road itself—clinging and winding along the cliff faces of the majestic Macizo de Teno.



El Drago Milenario, the famous dragon tree of Icod on Tenerife's north coast, is said to be over 1,000 years old and has become a symbol of the island.

Riding on the TF-38 through endless fields of black lava rubble on the way to Mount Teide is a truly surreal experience.



This sand sculpture on the beach at Los Cristianos shows two iconic symbols of Tenerife—Mount Teide and a lizard. Most of the trinkets on offer to tourists display one of them.



We start our ride early in the morning and are rewarded with unimpeded passage along this twisting road. The famous Masca road is actually not very long and our rented BMWs have scarcely warmed up before the fun is over. After passing through the town of Santiago del Teide and the coastal TF-1 road, we find ourselves on the TF-38, starting the long climb up to the Teide National Park and the sleeping dragon itself. All road names in Tenerife begin with TF.

The verdant gorges and stone cliff faces of the Masca road have now transformed to the first of a long series of unusual scenic regions as we climb up the side of the volcano. Teide has six distinctly different ecosystems and its alien scenery is one reason it's been used as the setting for countless films. In 2017 alone, \$11.5 million were spent on the island by film productions.

First, we pass through a region of relatively uninteresting volcanic rubble, dotted with shrubs and cacti. This is rapidly replaced by our first strange scenery as we enter a pine forest area. The ground between the trees is carpeted with brown pine needles and huge cones. Nothing else grows here. A landscape gardener's dream—no weeds.

Many sections of the road here are lined with safety barriers, themselves seemingly made from pine logs. In reality, they are solid steel barriers

dressed this way for aesthetic reasons. It all goes to produce some postcard-perfect forest road vistas.

As we climb higher, the trees begin to thin out. There are 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 the temperature will have risen to a balmy 70 degrees on the coast, here it has dropped to 50 as we pass through a wispy layer of clouds. The space between the trees has widened and in many places the brown carpet is replaced by an even layer of black pumice that crunches like Rice Krispies.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

We are traversing the northwestern Santiago Ridge and passing the El Chinyero vent, the site of the most recent eruption. The landscape here is a reflection of how young this island actually is. It looks like a building site where plants have barely had time to start poking their way through the rubble of lava and ash. Green shrubs and valiant pines are dotted around on a red and coal-black canvas.

The asphalt is racetrack smooth and looks like it was laid down very recently. It stands so proud of the rubble to either side of the road that riding off the edge with a sportbike would not be

The amazing Masca road in the early morning. Ocean mists often rise to fill the ravines between the ridges of the Teno mountain range here at the northwest tip of the island.

The TF-21 cutting through a desert-like sandy region. A roadside parking area here is popular with tourists, who briefly leave their coaches and cars to wander through the rocks.

Racetrack-quality asphalt cuts a line through a pine forest section of the climb along the TF-21 to Teide. The lack of vegetation between the trees lends an otherworldly feeling to the experience.





Above the clouds on the TF-24, looking toward Teide in the distance. Beneath the clouds is the north coast of the island and Puerto de la Cruz.

This shrub is a reminder that forest fires are common in summer months. High temperatures and dry wind create the perfect recipe. Normally the fires are rapidly contained, but sometimes huge areas are devastated.

Food out in the mountains is rustic but delicious. Salt-baked Canarian potatoes and meat kebabs are a typical offering.

recommended. Traffic is still extremely light—we've seen perhaps three cars all morning and we glide elegantly past them without even breaking rhythm. I'm riding the big R 1200 GS, which I guess is somewhat overkill on these roads, while Liz's F 750 GS has ample power and is more nimble in the corners.

It seems like the eruption has 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. It's as if the road has been positioned to run along the border between the two types of eruption material.

After another 10 minutes or so, 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. It's really quite surreal.

We soon meet the TF-21, which comes up to this point from Vilaflor, 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. It reminds me of a recent trip we did in the U.S. along the eastern Sierra. In this case, however, we are actually riding across the flat interior of a volcanic crater.

THE EMERALD BEND

There is one more region of spectacular contrast before we arrive at our planned cable car ride to the top of the sleeping dragon. At the end of the long straight across this flat crater floor, the road makes a left turn toward the volcano. A short series of bends follows as it cuts into and through a mix of red and then bright green rocks.

Most people immediately think of copper when seeing green rocks like this. In this case, however, the green color actually comes from chlorite in the ash. Most volcanic ash is a shade of gray or black, but when exposed to air and water, the constituent elements can react to create colorful new minerals. Red is basically rust, purple results from the oxidation of iron that produces hematite, and yellow and orange come from sulfur.



LA TARTA DEL TEIDE

The white layer originated from a volcano situated in Las Cañadas. During a violent Plinian-type eruption, pumice fragments were hurled to a great height and carried here on the wind. The dark layers were emitted by nearby volcanic cones. Their Strombolian eruptions were less aggressive and the materials were not expelled to such great height.

Each one of the layers originated from a different eruption and was deposited over a period of only days or weeks. However, centuries or even millenia may have elapsed between the deposition of each layer.

The white layer, made up of pumice fragments, is very light and porous, while the black layers, which are composed of basalt, emerged during eruptions with a low gas content. The reddish layers are also basalt. However, at the time they were formed, the basalt was oxidized by groundwater that then evaporated.



The red bugloss flowers that paint the scenery with flashes of crimson in spring are now feathery skeletons of their former beauty. This one is up on the plain of Las Cañadas beneath Mount Teide.

The Mount Teide cableway carries 44 passengers at a time to the top of Spain's highest peak. It climbs from the car park at 7,730 feet to 11,663 feet.

Riding through the red zone is an amazing experience, especially when contrasted with all the other differently colored zones created by the past eruptions of this sleeping dragon.

We eventually leave the green rocks and continue heading straight for the volcano itself. I can see a few traces of snow at the peak and dark fissures scar the left side of the cone where rivers of lava have left their trails. To the right of the main peak, in the distance, I can see a series of differently colored bands of rock descending down from a ridge to the road below. Green, black, brown, and red, like one of those ornamental bottles you sometimes see at coastal resorts.

We can see the lower cable car station quite clearly above us to the left of the road ahead. Cars and coaches are already beginning to line the access road. This is probably the only attraction on the island that entices even the most avid poolside sunbather and sports bar lounge to leave the tourist strip for a half day.

DRAGON HALITOSIS

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 7,700 feet at the bottom station to 11,600 at the top.

We are really on the shoulder of the dragon now—the air is thin and cold up here and we can smell its sulfurous breath with every step. The temperature has dropped to nearly 35 degrees and the two open hiking routes, one to the left and one to the right of the top station, are uneven and require attention. Access to the third route going to the very peak of the volcano is carefully regulated and requires an advance permit from the National Park Offices. The views all around and back down to the road below are spectacular, and we spend a good few hours exploring.

By now we need some lunch and it's with some relief that we descend to the warmer and more breathable air. As we mount up and set off, the access road is packed with cars and coaches. Optimistic drivers slowly patrol up and down looking for gaps. We twist our wrists and leave them all behind. We are heading to the Papillon restaurant, which we know should be coming up on our route soon.

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 gray-green shrubs zone, the black rubble zone, the black shiny glasslike zone—all produced from different outpourings of lava combined with different levels of initial water exposure. Some are barren, some have only low shrubs, and others are dotted with the towering remains of Teide bugloss flowers. It really does feel like another planet.

Restaurant Papillon is a popular stop for bikers and cars alike. We order a chicken sandwich and a tuna sandwich. When they arrive they both look exactly the same and nothing like we expected. Basically, we have a kind of paste spread between two lightly toasted slices of white bread. Surprisingly, however, they taste great!

LOOK TO THE STARS

Soon after leaving the restaurant, we turn right onto TF-24 and climb up a long straight through dark red earth toward the Teide Astronomical Observatory visible at the top of the high point ahead.





On the top of the world. Walking around the peak of Teide affords amazing views of the island. It's very uneven and requires concentration as well as fitness at this altitude.

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 telescopes extends over 123 acres and was inaugurated in 1964. It is the world's largest solar observatory and makes an awe-inspiring sight.

This is almost the high point of the spinal route and as we begin to descend, the road is cut into and sometimes through the rocks, revealing a breathtaking variety of colors and striations. The final curve before we head down to the forest again is like passing through a wedge cut into a cake. This is La Tarta del Teide.

As we turn the corner, paragliders silently swoop above us. It can get extremely windy up here, but thankfully today is calm and we suddenly enter the forest. Zebra-striped lighting flashes across our visors as we glide down a road winding through the beautiful woods that line this long

ridge all the way to the far end of the island. This is a really great ride with the sun flashing and twinkling between the branches above.

TANGLED TAIL

Our passage through the ever-changing zones of the dragon's spine is almost over and after a further nine miles on one of the finest forest roads we've ever ridden, we start to see signs of civilization. We pass through the conurbation of San Cristóbal de La Laguna and enter the final zone of this amazing journey. We take the TF-12 on route to El Bailadero in the Anaga Mountain rural park. The tail of the dragon.

This is a mountainous area of peaks and ravines carpeted with laurel trees and dotted with charming hamlets. The damp road twists and turns through tangles of mossy trees and impenetrable vegetation. This is clearly an area where the relationship between humans, nature, and



Approaching the end of the route along the island's spine, the vegetation gets more lush and tall moss-covered trees line the road.



The quaint village of Masca cannot be quite reached by road. It's well worth taking the time to walk down the cobbled winding path through cacti and ferns to take in the spectacular views.

The Teide observatory was opened in 1964 and became one of the world's first international observatories. Guided tours for small groups can be arranged by most hotels and tour organizers.



geology has been long established. A fitting place to end this ride of a lifetime.

We could easily go down to nearby Santa Cruz on the coast and head home rapidly on the TF-1 highway—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. RR

The road through the El Bailadero region toward the northeastern tip of the island. It's a twisted roller coaster of asphalt threading its way between, around, and over the extremely verdant and hilly environment.

In contrast to the untouched natural beauty of most of the island, the southwest coast is lined with apartment blocks and elegant hotels set against the blue of the Atlantic Ocean.

TOURS

TENERIFE APPROXIMATELY 90 MILES



OVERVIEW

Tenerife is the largest and most popular of the Canary Islands. It's blessed with guaranteed sunshine almost all year round, and temperatures rarely drop below 68 degrees on the coast. The best time to visit is between November and April as it's a bit cooler—around 70. Showers are infrequent and don't usually last long. The summer months between May and October get very hot with daily highs above 80.

As with most mountainous islands there are two distinct sides to Tenerife. The north is lush and wet, while the coastal tourist areas in the southwest and south are much drier and more barren. It's easy to make day trips via ferry to the island of La Gomera. You can also take your motorcycle with you. This particular

route includes all of the amazingly different geological and ecological zones with plenty of time for stops and lunch in a single day's ride.

No visa is required for a U.S. citizen staying on Tenerife up to a maximum of 90 days. You do need to have a three month expiry period left on your passport beyond the period of the stay, though.

ROADS & BIKING

Most of the roads on Tenerife, as with all the Canary Islands, are of excellent quality. The Masca road is the only single-lane road and very twisty, with passing points for cars every now and then. It might prove challenging for less experienced riders. The ride up and over Teide also has hairpin bends but is a wider two-track road. Traffic is generally

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

RESOURCES

- Moto4Fun Motorcycle Rentals www.moto4fun.com
- Mount Teide National Park www.volcanoteide.com/en

MOTORCYCLES & GEAR

- BMW R 1200 GS
- BMW F 750 GS
- Helmet: Shoei Neotec 2
- Jacket: Helite Turtle 2.0 Airbag Vest
- Pants: Vanucci Textile trousers
- Gloves: Probiker GORE-TEX
- Boots: Alpinestars New Land GORE-TEX

FACTS & INFO