

La Palma



Perhaps more than any other island in the archipelago, La Palma offers the chance to experience real, unspoiled nature – from the verdant forests of the north, where lush vegetation drips from the rainforest canopy; to the desertscapes of the south, where volcanic craters and twisted rock formations define the views; to the serene pine forests of the Parque Nacional de la Caldera de Taburiente. No wonder the entire island was declared a Unesco biosphere reserve. It's the ideal place for a walking holiday, although trekkers are by no means the only ones who succumb to its attractions.

Mass tourism has yet to make its mark on 'The Pretty Island', as La Palma is nicknamed. The banana crop still represents a whopping 80% of the local economy, and the absence of golden beaches has diverted many travellers' attention elsewhere. Although things are changing – new hotels, golf course, ports and a bigger airport are all on the planning charts – for now La Palma is pristine and very pretty indeed.

Rainfall and spring water are more plentiful here than on any other island, making San Miguel de la Palma (the island's full name) the greenest of the archipelago. Orchards, vineyards and forests flourish, their soft beauty contrasting with the harsh crags and peaks of the volcanic heights that run down the island's centre. This is one of the most volcanically active islands; the archipelago's last eruption was in 1971 in Fuencaliente. That volcanic activity is responsible for La Palma's steep cliffs and plunging ravines. It's the steepest island in the world, shooting from sea level to 2426m in just over 10km.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Peer up at the night sky from the **Roque de los Muchachos** (p225), a world-class spot for stargazing
- Explore the natural wonderland of the **Parque Nacional de la Caldera de Taburiente** (p224)
- Bask in the sun and the breeze under the swaying palms of the black-sand beach at **Puerto Naos** (p223)
- Grab a rain jacket and hiking boots for a trek through the enchanted forest at **Los Tiles** (p227)
- Take a dip in the saltwater pools around **Piscinas de la Fajana** (p227)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 922

■ POPULATION: 86,000

■ AREA: 708 SQ KM

HISTORY

Long before Castilla conquered the island in the 15th century, this rugged land was known as Benahoare. The first inhabitants could have arrived as early as the 5th century BC (although there's no hard and fast evidence to set the date), and they set up an orderly society that eventually divided into 12 cantons, each with its own chief.

The island officially became part of the Spanish empire in 1493, after Alonso Fernández de Lugo (a conquistador and, later, island governor) used a tribesman-turned-Christian to trick the Benahoaritas into coming down from their mountain stronghold for 'peace talks'. They were ambushed on the way at the spot now known as El Riachuelo. Their leader, Tanausú, was shipped to Spain as a slave, but went on a hunger strike on board the boat and never saw the Spanish mainland.

The next century was an important one for the island. Sugar, honey and sweet *malvasia* (Malmsey wine; see the boxed text, p210) became the major exports and abundant Canary pine provided timber for burgeoning shipyards. By the late 16th century, as transatlantic trade flourished, Santa Cruz de la Palma was considered the third most important port in the Spanish empire, after Seville and Antwerp.

The sugar, shipbuilding and cochineal (a bug used to make red dye) industries kept the island economy afloat for the next several centuries, but the island's fortunes eventually took a downward turn, and the 20th century was one of poverty and mass emigration. These days, the banana crop represents 80% of the local economy, but tourism is slowly growing.

INFORMATION

Books & Maps

Maps are available for sale at petrol stations, newspaper kiosks and bookshops. Tourist offices give out a very basic island map, but if you plan to explore, invest in a more detailed map, like the 1:50,000 map published by Ediciones David and created by Palmero Juan José Santos. Even better is the Freytag & Berndt 1:30,000 map, in English and German.

The hiking maps covering southern, central and northern La Palma given out for free at the tourist office in Santa Cruz give a good overview, and its *Hiking Guide* (in English and Spanish) is helpful too. But if you're a serious

walker, you should buy a hiking guide, such as *Landscapes of La Palma and El Hierro*, published by Sunflower Books, *Walk! La Palma* by Discovery Walking Guides, or *La Palma* by Rother Walking Guides.

ACCOMMODATION

Although booking ahead is always recommended, during most of the year you can probably find last-minute accommodation on the island. Be sure to book if you're arriving on the late ferry from Tenerife, plan to arrive outside of regular business hours, or if you plan to come during a major holiday or festival (see p209).

Comfortable, quality lodging is available across the island, but some of the best options include the quirky B&B-style Hotel San Telmo (p215) in Santa Cruz, the Hotel La Palma Romántico (p228) in Barlovento and the Parador Nacional (p217).

Live like a local in the *casas rurales* (rural houses) for rent across the island. For information and reservations, contact the **Asociación de Turismo Rural** (☎ 902 43 96 25; www.ecoturismocanarias.com; Calle Pérez de Brito 102, Santa Cruz de La Palma), which rents nearly 100 rural houses across the island.

Free camping is banned on the island, as in the rest of Spain, but there are a few basic camp sites scattered around the island. In most cases you'll need to apply in advance and collect your permit in person before you intend to camp.

ACTIVITIES

Many outfitting companies operate island-wide, so regardless of where you're based you can enjoy the activities La Palma has to offer.

Walking

Don't come to La Palma without allowing a generous chunk of time to explore its wondrous landscapes on foot. With 850km of trails, this is the ideal place for a walking holiday. Several companies offer guided hikes; the best is **Natour** (☎ 922 43 30 01; www.natour-trekking.com; Apartamento Valentina 4, Los Cancejos; day-long walks with guide €29-37; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri), a company operating island-wide. Popular routes include the walk around the Parque Nacional de la Caldera de Taburiente (p224), the Ruta de los Volcanes (p221) and the 'Enchanted Forest' walk through