

# Canary Island's Lanzarote



Text and photos by Charles Stirling

**A small, warm, sub-tropical Atlantic Ocean island with enough tourist visitors to make access easy and facilities plentiful, diving not mainstream but both good and also dependable—this is Lanzarote.**

It is the most easterly, most northerly and fourth largest island of the volcanic chain of the seven main Canary Islands, which are part of Spain but located just off the African coast. Lanzarote is only 37 miles (60km) long and 12 miles (20km) wide, with 130 miles (213km) of shoreline. The whole island has Unesco World Biosphere Reserve status and an ecological style of tourism without mass high rise developments.

Lanzarote attracts something around

a million visitors a year with its good weather, low rainfall, clean streets, towns and beaches, lack of hassle, low crime and generally informal, friendly atmosphere. About 15,000 of those visitors go diving. In the past, it had a reputation as a 'get-drunk-and-party' destination, particularly for British youth, but that reputation has long ago faded with a much more diverse range of visitors now.

The divers range in experience from those doing their first ever dives through

to the very experienced. Many divers, having found Lanzarote, treat it as an alternative to the more heavily promoted locations and return time after time.

In some respects, the island offers "a holiday with diving" while some of the many repeat dive visitors seem to think of it as a diving destination first with a smidgen of holiday thrown in. The good mild weather is attractive not just for holidays, which means diving is year round with few days lost due to inclement

weather—it's dependable.

The island is volcanic in origin, as evidenced by underwater escarpments of lava walls, tunnels, caverns and sink holes along with the sandy areas. Marine life is a mixture of tropical and temperate, with reefs volcanic not coral. It's said there are about 500 species of fish and 1,200 of invertebrates here. Water temperatures run from 19°C in winter to 23°C in late summer. With little rainfall, no rivers and unpolluted waters, visibility







varies from 15m to 30m.

Lanzarote is one of the seven main islands in the Canaries archipelago, which forms a chain about 500km long off the African coast. All of the volcanic islands started to form some 20 million years ago, with the movement of the African tectonic plate and the submergence of the Atlantic plate. Lanzarote itself started forming about 11 million years ago in three phases with the oldest regions in the north and south of the island followed by later infill between these regions in the second phase four to seven million years ago.

The third phase and latest volcanic activity was in the 17th and 18th centuries and can now be seen in the Timanfaya region. These near-continuous volcanic eruptions in 1730-1736 were devastating, destroying the best farmland along with some 26 villages and hamlets covering a quarter of the island in lava. Smaller eruptions lasting for three months in 1824 produced three more volcanic cones. The results of



these eruptions are well preserved, with little erosion due to the limited rainfall. The exact geological mechanisms are not fully understood. The common theory of a mantle plume, or hot spot, in the mantle giving rise to the volcanoes is contested by some.

The shelf around the island drops away to very deep water a mile or more offshore, which may have limited the numbers of naturally occurring wrecks (they end up too deep) and means most diving is near shore. There are a few

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) swimming; Playa del Reducto Beach and Arrecife skyline; Tube-dwelling anemone on sandy seabed

PREVIOUS PAGE: Town of El Golfo





Sea hare, *Aplisia dactylomela*, grazing on marine algae (above); Divers with school of grunts at Playa Chica (left)

moved on to look at its exterior. I would happily have spent all my time on the wreck, but my buddy wanted to check out the adjacent volcanic landscape, so we continued on a slow swim examining nooks and crannies, fish and invertebrates before surfacing after an hour's dive for the boat pick-up. It was a very enjoyable dive. Several divers back on the boat gushed with excitement and considering it one of their best dives. Our boatload of



"natural" wrecks and more wrecks that have been purposely sunk, but it is as much for the landscape and marine life that divers keep returning to the island. For the technical diver, deeper valleys and lava tubes and channels with faster drifts exist.

The islands highest point, 670m, isn't enough to induce rain producing cloud formations from sea winds, just clouds. This has limited the vegetation with more species diversity on the older, more weathered regions. Relatively few native land animals are found, predominately birds (40 nesting species); six mammal species are known and only three species of reptiles. The underwater world is much richer.

Cuttlefish

### Wreck diving

After the briefing, a short boat ride of about five minutes on calm seas, a quick final buddy check and a giant stride into blue waters, a few moments passed on the surface before a gentle free descent commenced. Within a few metres of depth, the outlines of a wreck started to appear.

The wreck was listing on its side but looked like a ship. Its bow, stern, decking and holds were intact with enough ravages from the sea to feel real.

We were diving one of the "Harbour Wrecks" of the Los Erizos Wreck Park. It was an easy dive. I swam inside its open structure, exploring it without sediment exploding up to block visibility, and

Divers and angelshark buried in sand







nine divers included a few with dive numbers approaching or well over the 1,000 figure in number, and these divers rated it as a great dive.

Another wreck park and a marine conservation zone is just west of Puerto del Carmen. Off Punta Tinosa are the “New Wrecks”. Three fishing boats were prepared and sunk in 2004 in shallow water, but with more currents here and the ravages of an occasional winter storm, they have moved from their initial resting places to slightly deeper water, nothing above 17m. One is only part of a shell now; the other two are more intact. It is still possible to dive all three in a single dive, but doing two or just one is probably a more interesting option. Going slow, you see more.

I dived two of these, and again,

penetration was safe and easy. The exteriors were interesting with lots of fish. None of these wrecks pretend to be world class; they are simple good holiday dives.

### Dive centres

There are many dive centres scattered mainly along the east coast of Lanzarote mostly located in resort areas—Playa Blanca, Arrieta, Mala, etc—but with the overwhelming majority in Puerto del Carmen. The Atlantic-facing west coast has diving, although limited, due to prevailing winds and is more the preserve of the surfer or kitesurfer.

In Puerto del Carmen most diving starts at the small protected beach of Playa Chica. A perfect location inside a natural protected horseshoe-

shaped cove with stone outcrops extending on both sides providing shelter to the gently sloping sandy beach—ideal for divers, snorkelling or swimming with the family. The local dive centres from around the island visit this site.

The reefs formed by these outcrops and the area just beyond offer most of the marine life that can also be seen in other parts of the island. Depending on the season, angel sharks, octopus, cuttlefish, sea horses, yellow striped nudibranchs, arrow crabs, scorpionfish, wrasse, flatfish, bream and more can be seen.

The underwater volcanic arch of the Blue Hole, The Cathedral, Red Coral site, volcanic walls, small caverns are all right here at Playa Chica. Its protected beach entry

THIS PAGE: Scuba divers on and inside one of the “New Wrecks” off Puerto del Carmen





LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver on one of the "New Wrecks"; Easy entry on one of the "New Wrecks"; Bow of one of the "New Wrecks"

## Lanzarote

more, so with the right choice, you can add qualifications that suit. They all offer holiday style dives with a single tank and air; many have nitrox; and a few offer technical diving, mix gas, rebreather dives and training.

Reviews and comments suggest that most operators are appreciated for what they offer, have rental equipment in good condition and are well run. So, pick your operator with your intentions in mind.

Spanish diving law is different from many destinations and changed substantially a few years ago. Now, one

thing to watch for is that the operator you dive with is legally registered as a dive operator. Not all are, as it's expensive, and operators did not need to register in the past. It could void your insurance coverage if you do not use a registered centre. All the registered operations are listed at: [www.turismolanzarote.com/en/buceo.jsp](http://www.turismolanzarote.com/en/buceo.jsp).

Do bring both your medical certificate and dive insurance card with you, as it's required by law in Spain. However, insurance can be arranged locally, if needed.

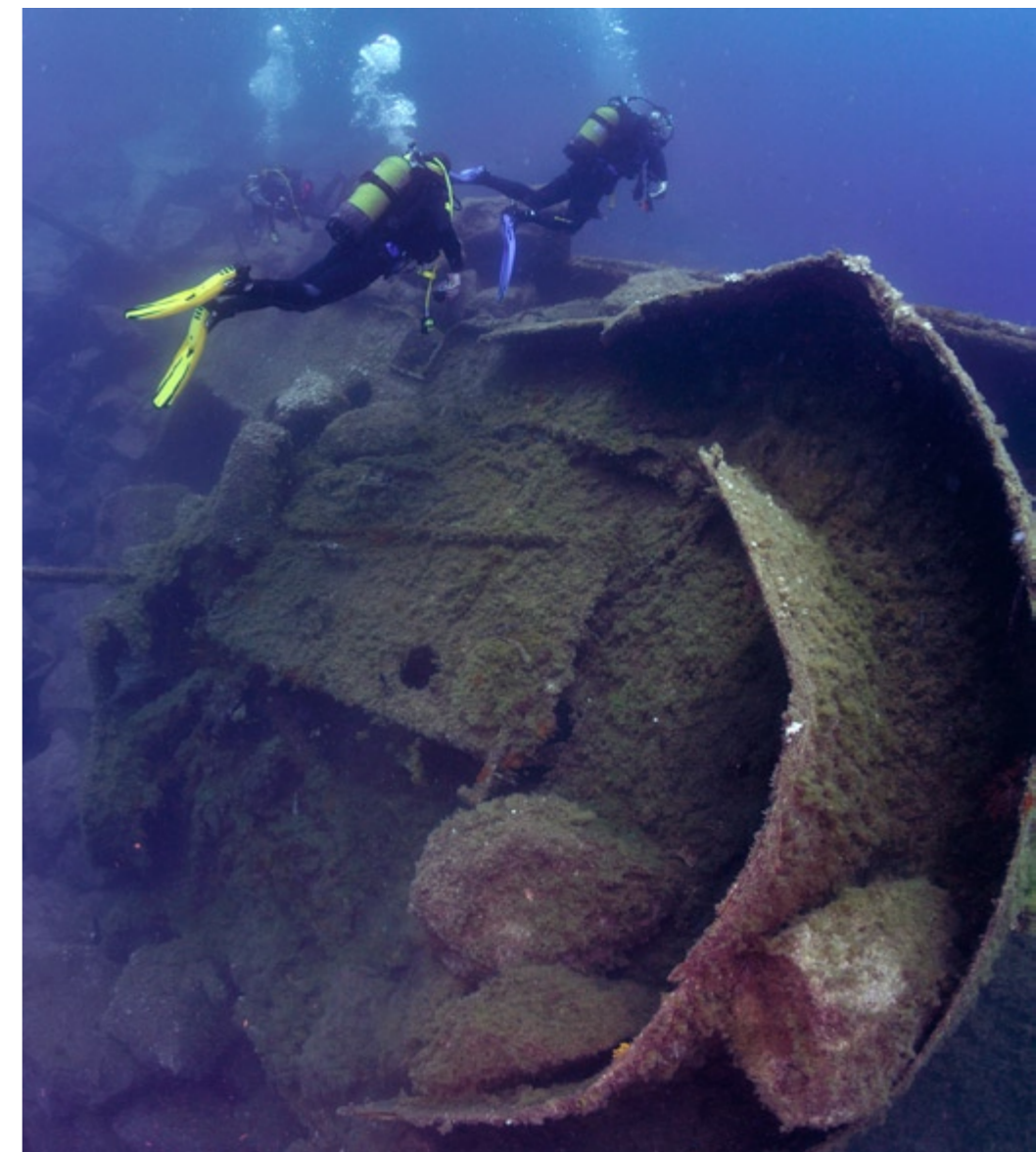
I dived with Safari Diving,

Depths of up to 10m are found inside the cove, which is protected by walls, lava boulders and overhangs in steps to 30 or more meters. It was the shallower rocky outcrops and sand right at the bottom of

Garden eels seemed to be at the right of the cove or around its outer corner, and schools of jacks were found near shore. The site is the ideal place to just go exploring.

Most of the dive centres in Puerto del Carmen, and those outside town, seem to offer both shore and boat dives with boats varying from fast RIBs (Rigid-hulled Inflatable Boats, or Zodiacs) to small hard boats. Some have only guided group dives while others have both buddy and guided trips. Some have fixed times for dives, others are more flexible and, at least for shore dives, you can chose your own times.

Many training agencies are represented including PADI, BSAC, CMAS, IANTD, BARAKUDA and



makes it ideal for training, and the marine life makes it interesting for underwater photographers.

Within the cove, the bottom is coarse salt and pepper sand, which settles relatively quickly

when kicked up by someone else's fins—never your own, of course—with many flounder, lizardfish and garden eels present, and at night, tube anemones, which hide by day buried below the surface.

these steps that seemed to hold the greatest number of creatures.

Some of the divers reported seeing the rather shy angel sharks on nearly every dive and sea horses at specific locations.





which is owned and operated by the British couple, Steve and Wendy Hicks, who offer both guided shore and boat dives and the possibility for simple unguided buddy diving—if you are a solo diver, they find you a buddy—as well as training. Using them as an example, one can note the questions to ask of any potential centre one might chose.

Safari Diving is exceptionally well placed right on Playa Chica beach where all their shore diving is conducted, with the boat diving jetty almost adjacent. Due to the location, the centre is relatively small, without the dry changing areas, locker rooms, hot showers, dry camera set-up areas, etc., which larger centres can offer, but it has wet storage for your kit, hire kits in good condition, rinse tanks and hose to wash down, and the water's edge is right there.

Safari Diving is a very popular

centre with many visitors, so hired kit is not kept just for you but turned in and taken out for each day/dive. They do not bus you around to other locations, as there is no need since it is already at the prime location, so you save time but don't see other locations. Their hard boat is comfortable but goes to relatively local sites only. They can offer nitrox, but it's not routine, and they don't do technical dives.

They use a nearby hotel with a pool when needed for teaching, but also go through some teaching more informally over coffee in a café.

The guides know the area well and point out the unusual, so they are worth using. I totally missed the small wreck just beyond the bay entrance by not using a guide. Instead, I joined a buddy group, and we turned to the right instead of the left at the wrong point. On another occasion, I missed sea



CLOCKWISE: Arrow crab; Bastard grunt fish in shallows at Playa Chica; Yellow striped nudibranch, *Hypselodoris picta*, also known as *H. edenticulata*





horses for a similar reason.

Night dives are a regular item in the Playa Chica cove, staying relatively shallow at eight to 12 metres around the stone outcrops and off the boat jetty, which seems to offer the best observations. Again, I went with a buddy pair who went deeper than needed, so I missed some of what could have been seen.

Most dive centres anywhere on the island offer Playa Chica with the adjacent attractions, or just the cove itself, and use the jetty for the popular wreck dives. They drive to the parking lot near the beach where divers change in the vans and carry their kits the short distance to the entry point at either the beach

or the jetty. Other beach entry points along the Puerto del Carmen seafront, or around the island, also have good diving—so, just take your pick.

**Holiday destination**

Year round sun, minimal rainfall and many good “blue flag” beaches are enough to attract many holiday makers. If you want a bit more than lying on a beach, the natural environment plus



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Golden barrel cactus at Cactus Garden (Jardín de Cactus); Viewing cliffs, sea and black volcanic beach of El Golfo; Playa Chica; Camel ride at Parque National de Timanfaya; Tourists watching volcanic heat set fire to dry lichen in Timanfaya park

a few of man's interventions are well worth a visit. Car rental and fuel are reasonably priced. The roads are good and not crowded outside of major

towns, so driving is the most productive way to tour, but lots of coach tours exist as well. During the volcanic eruptions of 1730



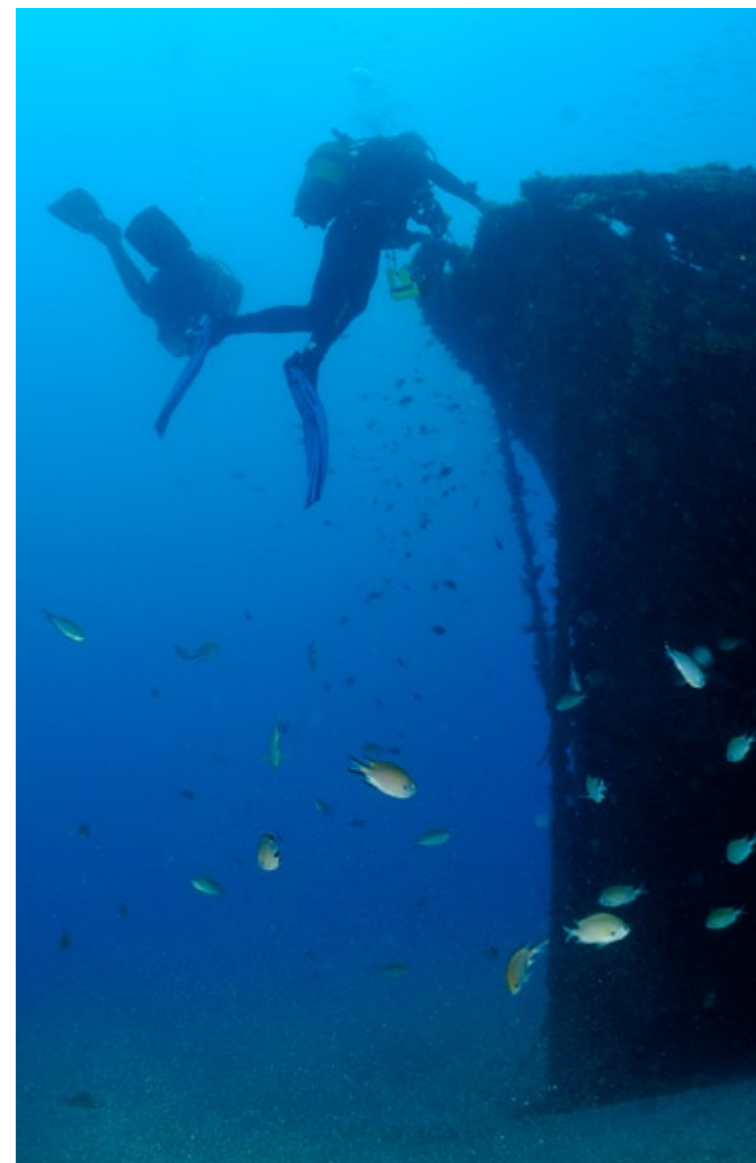
Red comb starfish, *Astropecten aranciacus*

to 1736, more than 30 volcanoes let loose burying entire villages and covering a quarter of the island in lava and coarse ash. Part of this is now protected in the Timanfaya National Park (The Parque Nacional de Timanfaya), which is one of the visitor must-see locations. Parts of it, the badlands, really are still barren of nearly any plant or animal life. Outside the park, farmers are

cultivating crops using the ash as mulch and building rock windbreaks to protect the plants. It's worth seeing if one ever thinks home has a drought problem. This area is just north of Yaiza in the south of the island, and one could include El Golfo with its volcanic lake and the flats producing sea salt in one slightly hurried outing. To the north of the island,



cafes plentiful and nearly any nationality of cuisine on offer. For really local food, try a dining spot outside the main tourist areas. Shopping in both the small independent shops or larger malls plus various markets should be able to fill most desires, but avoid the majority of independent camera and electrical stores, as they have a reputation of carrying too many fraudulent deals. The streets are not full of hucksters, so you miss the fun of constantly saying you're not interested. Accommodation is plentiful and varied—maybe it's best to let the chosen dive centre organize it, but deals can be found independently. There are good museums, gallerias, festivals and things to do with the family.



The diving was good, relaxed holiday fare with lots of marine life to see. It would suit families, anyone wanting to learn to dive, anyone just wanting easy diving on a holiday as well as the underwater photographer interested in sub-tropical marine life. The possibility of deeper or technical diving including rebreathers is a possibility. ■

César Manrique's Cactus Garden (Jardin de Cactus) built in a volcano crater is much more interesting for its design than might be imagined and worth a visit. Surrounding this garden are plantations of prickly pear, host to the cochineal beetle. Not far away are the Los Jameos del Agua, the lava tube made into an underground

entertainment venue with a lake that is home to blind albino crabs. The Green's Cave (Cueva de los Verdes) is also part of the lava tube. On the very northern most point of the garden, are views over to Isla Graciosa and Chinijo Archipelago with a park at Mirador del Río, which I missed, as it closes at 6:00pm—the all too often normal closing time for attractions. Six o'clock is too early if one is trying to fit in a lot of siteseeing after a morning dive. The island simply has too much to see and do on a short visit—yet, another reason to revisit.

Being a holiday destination has its advantages with bars, restaurants and

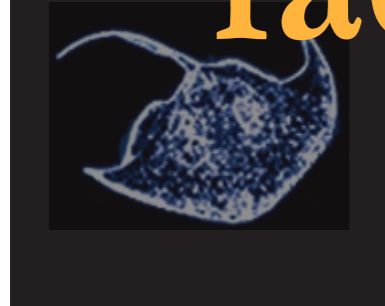


Biosfera shopping mall at night in "Old Town" Puerto del Carmen  
Bleak landscape of Parque Nacional de Timanfaya (center)

Bow of one the "New Wrecks" (above); Seaside board walk in "Old Town" Puerto del Carmen (top right)



# fact file



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

## Canary Islands, Spain



**History** The earliest settlers were African about 1000 to 500BC probably from central Algeria. Some of the place names such as Yaiza, Teguisse, Tinajo, and Timanfaya stem from those early settlers. Those settlers found the island with more substantial vegetation, and it is thought that the introduction of pastoral animals and cereal farming by early settlers destroyed much of this. These early settlers knew nothing of metal, of sea navigation, lived in caves or semi-buried huts when Europeans first arrived in 1312. By the latter half of the 14th century, marauding pirates had reduced the original population down to near 300 individuals. Norman privateers conquered the island protecting it from the pirates and slavers in 1402. Over the next 70 years, various battles, power struggles and issue of sovereignty finally ended with the treaty of Alcacovas granting the islands to

Spain and governed by nobility under a feudal system. To repopulate the island under Spanish feudalism, slaves were brought in from Africa, but Moorish and other pirate slavers also continued to raid the island. It was these slaves brought in who dug the hillside terraces with the help of camels introduced at the same time. This was a dangerous and difficult place to live in those times, and many fled to other islands or to South America. Feudalism and numerous conflicts continued until 1812 when the Canaries became a province of Spain.

It is now a Spanish autonomous community as Spain has decentralized after Franco's dictatorship ended, and it is an "outermost region of the European Union". In 1852, the law of free ports granted the islands immunity from customs and excise duties—which sort of still applies as duty is low so prices are low—but

limits on what can be brought back into EU countries applies, as they are outside the European Union Value Added Tax Area.

Principally due to the growth in tourism and EU membership, but also the high birth rate, the islands population has grown dramatically in recent times, ten times the growth in Spain. With 65,503 in 1988 to 139,506 or more in 2008. It's a young population with over half between the ages of 25 and 39. Over a quarter are non-Spanish in origin.

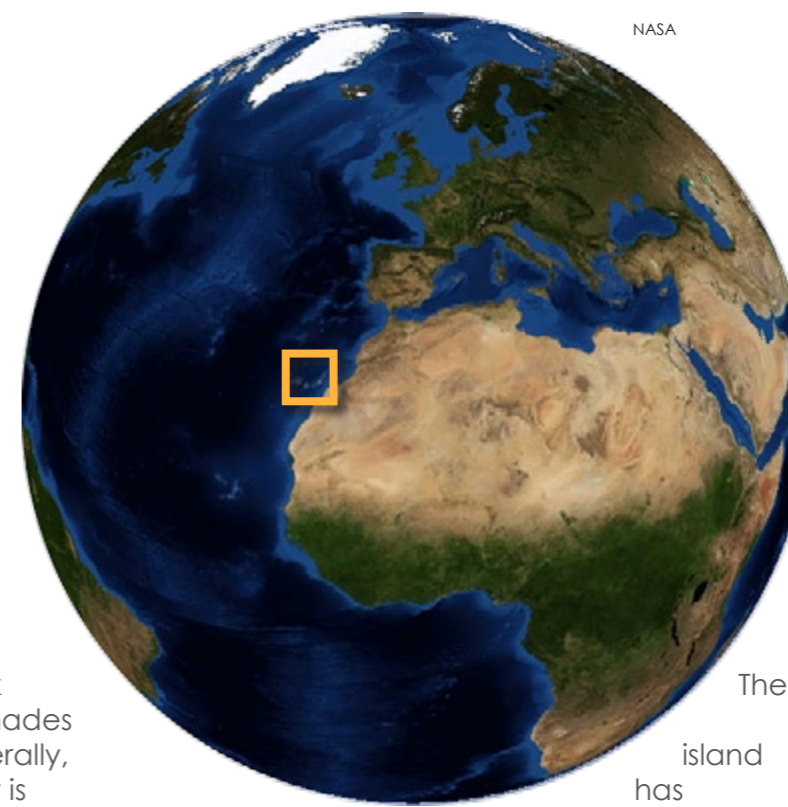
**Climate** Warm and dry, pleasant year round with average temperature of 24°C and 3,000 hours of annual sunshine. Fuerteventura and Lanzarote have the sunniest weather of the Canaries, rainfall 5.9 inches (150 mm) annually. Moderate north-easterly trade winds come April through to October; at other times, winds can come from any direction. For diving, by moving around the island, a lee side can always be found. Water temperatures can go down to 18°C in winter, up to 23°C late summer, cooler at depth.

### Environmental Issues

A UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, the island endeavours to have environmental friendly development such as no tall buildings, no billboard advertising,

and houses must be painted white with woodwork either of two shades of green. Generally, the community is environmentally aware (hence little litter—it's clean). There is limited rainfall, so water is desalinated. It doesn't taste great, and drinking water is bottled. Most energy production does come from oil, but wind farms have been developed. Commercial fishing was a major industry, but is now much reduced probably helping the marine life.

**Economy** Up to the 1980's, agriculture and fishing were the major economic activities. With its good climate, tourism was inevitable, and large amounts of European investment money poured in during the 1970's and 1980's buying up prime coastal land to eventually develop into the resort centres of Puerto del Carmen, Costa Teguisse and Playa Blanca. Infrastructure was greatly improved, various natural attractions were opened to visitors. The first desalination plant was inaugurated, and the airport was expanded with the first international flights in 1970. In 1974, the Island had 2,000 tourist beds on offer. By 2001, it was 50,000 rooms and 72,000 by 2006.



very dependent on tourism, predominantly from Britain with Germany next in numbers. Scandinavia and the Benelux countries and even the USA add to this. The current recession saw visitor numbers fall in 2008-9 with some shifts in demographics but greatly recovering by 2011.

Agriculture seems an improbable activity in this dry environment, but onions and ,to a lesser extent, potatoes and a range of green vegetables are exported. Ploughing used to be done with camels. Now, it's cheaper to buy a tractor even though this degrades the volcanic chippings called picon or lapilli, which helps to hold moisture in the soil. The onions, which have a delicious sweet flavour, mainly go to Spain but also do reach much of the rest of Europe. Another product is the cochineal beetle, used to make a dye extracted from the crushed beetles raised on cactus leaves. The cochineal dye gives the red to the drink Campari and is also used in lipstick, sweets and toothpaste.

It's interesting to see the

physical remains of former economic activities. Salt production by evaporating sea water in large holding ponds used to be a major export industry, which has since collapsed. The salt was particularly used in preserving fish on the fishing boats around the world just after catch before refrigeration/freezing became common. All around the island are now deserted salt pans. These pans once employed hundreds of workers. Now, the salt pan at Janubio has become a tourist attraction and produces more than 15,000 tons per year but this is less than half of its production 40 years ago.

**Currency** Euro

**Time zone** GMT, the same as London

**Electrical** 220 volt, uses standard European round pin sockets

**Language** Spanish (similar to South American dialect). Many other languages, particularly in tourist areas with English common.

### Hyperbaric Chambers

Arrecife Recompression Chamber with five spaces. Hospital Insular Arrecife; Tel.: 0034 928 810 000; 928 810 500

### Websites

Tourist board  
[www.canarias.es](http://www.canarias.es)  
Tourist board  
[www.turismolanzarote.com/en](http://www.turismolanzarote.com/en)



Sea salt concentrating pans, Salinas de Janubio

