

An underwater photograph of three whales swimming in clear blue water. The whales are dark grey with lighter patches on their sides. The water is bright blue with some light rays visible. The whales are swimming from left to right. The top of the image shows the surface of the water with some ripples and light reflections.

Canary Island's Tenerife

— *Where the Highest Mountain
Meets the Deepest Sea*

Text by Claudia Weber-Gebert
Photos by Sergio Hanquet



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Los Cristianos on Tenerife, Canary Islands (above); The island has strange volcanic shapes (top right) and a rugged, rocky coast with dramatic surf (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Pilot whales at Tenerife

Spain's highest mountain lies off the continent of Africa and is surrounded by the deepest chasms of the Atlantic Ocean—what a unique place! And the islands where the mountain is located are just as special. We are talking about the Canary Islands, which lie in the Atlantic off the coast of Morocco.

They are of volcanic origin, the evidence of which is still clearly visible and often bizarre. Spain's highest peak, Teide-Pico Viejo stratovolcano, reaches 3,718m (12,198ft) and is found on the island of Tenerife. It attracts a lot of tourists, nature lovers, rest seekers and

folks on weekend getaways. Varied landscapes also offer the best conditions for other sports. For many Europeans, the island is also the ideal place to spend the cold winter months. The mild climate in the winter here draws one straight to it.

And precisely because of the climate, Tenerife is also becoming more interesting to divers. While the political situation in various popular diving destinations in other parts of the world is scaring off a lot of dive travelers, the friendly Canary Islands can be reached from Germany (where I am based) in four to five hours with airlines offering cheap fares. So for many, this destination is suitable for short breaks throughout the year.

Arona

The Arona region is located in southwes-

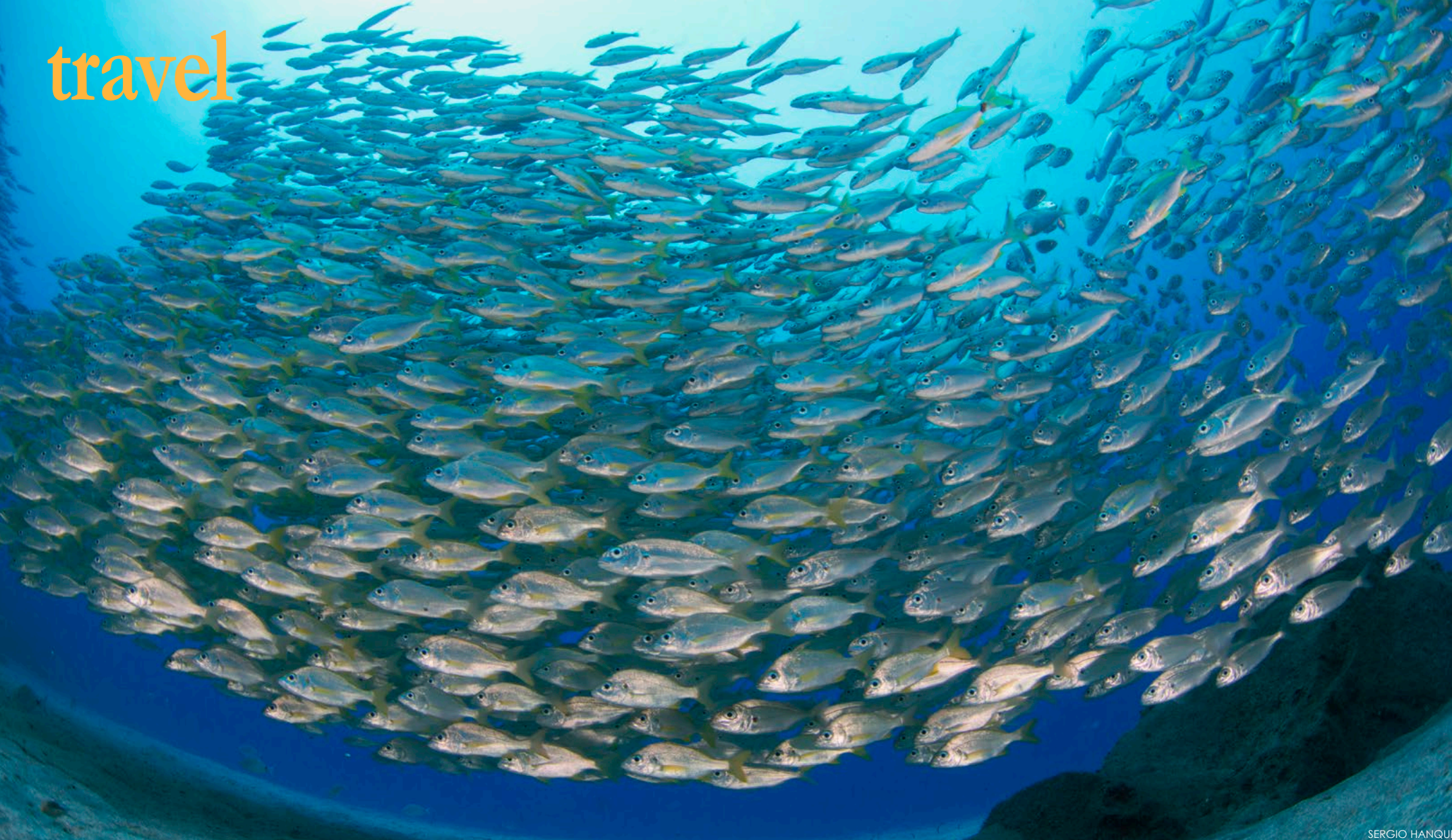


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tern Tenerife. In February 2018, I was invited by the Arona Son Atlántico ocean festival to take a closer look at this area. Accompanied by underwater photograp-

her Sergio Hanquet, I spent some exciting days on the island.

One of the most interesting areas, where most of the dive centers in the Canary



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Large school of silvery yellow bastard grunt fish (called *roncadores* by the locals)

Islands are found, is the southern part of the island, especially near the port of Los Cristianos and the Marina de Las Galletas. In particular, the area of Punta de la Rasca is recommended, because in this area, about 30 different dive sites can be found. Here, you can dive by boat or from the shore.

Sergio is Belgian but has been living in Tenerife for over 30 years. He knows the dive sites like the back of his hand and has published two books on them (which are only available in Spanish): *Bucear en Canarias 1* and *Bucear en Canarias 2*. These books detail 400 dive sites as well as the flora and fauna that can be found in this region.

Atlantic location

The exposed location of the island of Tenerife in the Atlantic Ocean brings with it a lot of unique aspects. Because the coasts of the islands drop steeply—up to 4,000m (13,123ft)—many marine creatures from the deep and pelagic species from the open ocean can be sighted here. Ocean currents in the Atlantic ensure that water temperatures do not drop below 18°C in the winter months. As a result, the fauna is a mix of Mediterranean and subtropical. The main characters are the large stingrays (called *chuchos* by the locals) as well as angelsharks, sea turtles and huge swarms of silvery yellow bastard



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Large stingrays at Tenerife are called *chuchos* by the locals.

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 An advertisement for Buddy Dive. At the top left is the Buddy Dive logo. Below it, three divers in wetsuits and gear are walking on a sandy beach towards the ocean. The text reads: "Your Buddies Spring Fling". Below that, it says: "Get excited and book your spring break to Bonaire! Pick your favorite resort and enjoy the best specials. Check www.buddydive.com/springfling for details." At the bottom, there are logos for Buddy Dive Bonaire, Caribbean Club Bonaire, and BLUE MAR Bonaire. Contact information is provided: "International Reservations: +599 717 5080", "Call Toll Free US/Canada: 1-866-GO-BUDDY", and "WWW.BUDDYDIVE.COM/SPRINGFLING".


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grunts (called *roncadores*).

Even in bad weather, there is always a chance to do shore dives in one of the sheltered bays and marvel at the island's macro world. The waters in the

Arona region invite you to dive into a diverse underwater landscape at various sites.

Punta de la Rasca is the most popular diving area of Las Galletas, Playa de Las Américas

and Los Cristianos. In general, the dive centers do two dives a day, and there is also the option of doing a night dive.

The most well-known dive sites include El Bufadero (15-26m), the wrecks of El Condesito (18m) and El Meridian (30m), La Cueva de las Morenas (18-31m), Los Roncadores del Faro (15-21m), La Cueva de Ali Baba (25-42m) and El Arco de Coral (25-40+m). The rocks slope steeply, reaching nearly 50m in depth just a few meters from shore, and visibility in the water is usually around 30m. The diversity of habitats brings forth a great variety of fauna, including an infinite number of invertebrates, bottom-dwelling fish (individually or in schools), or large fish that suddenly emerge from the deep blue sea. At a depth of 35m, there are beautiful black corals, which can be found protruding upward like branches from the

ground and rocky outcrops or hanging in caves.

In addition to the many species of fish, lovers of invertebrate animals will also find sponges, anemones, fireworms and squid as well as various types of shrimp, crabs, colorful nudibranchs and starfish. And for the experts who like to explore with a magnifying glass, there are scary-movie aliens—ghost crabs that hide in the algae!

Practical information

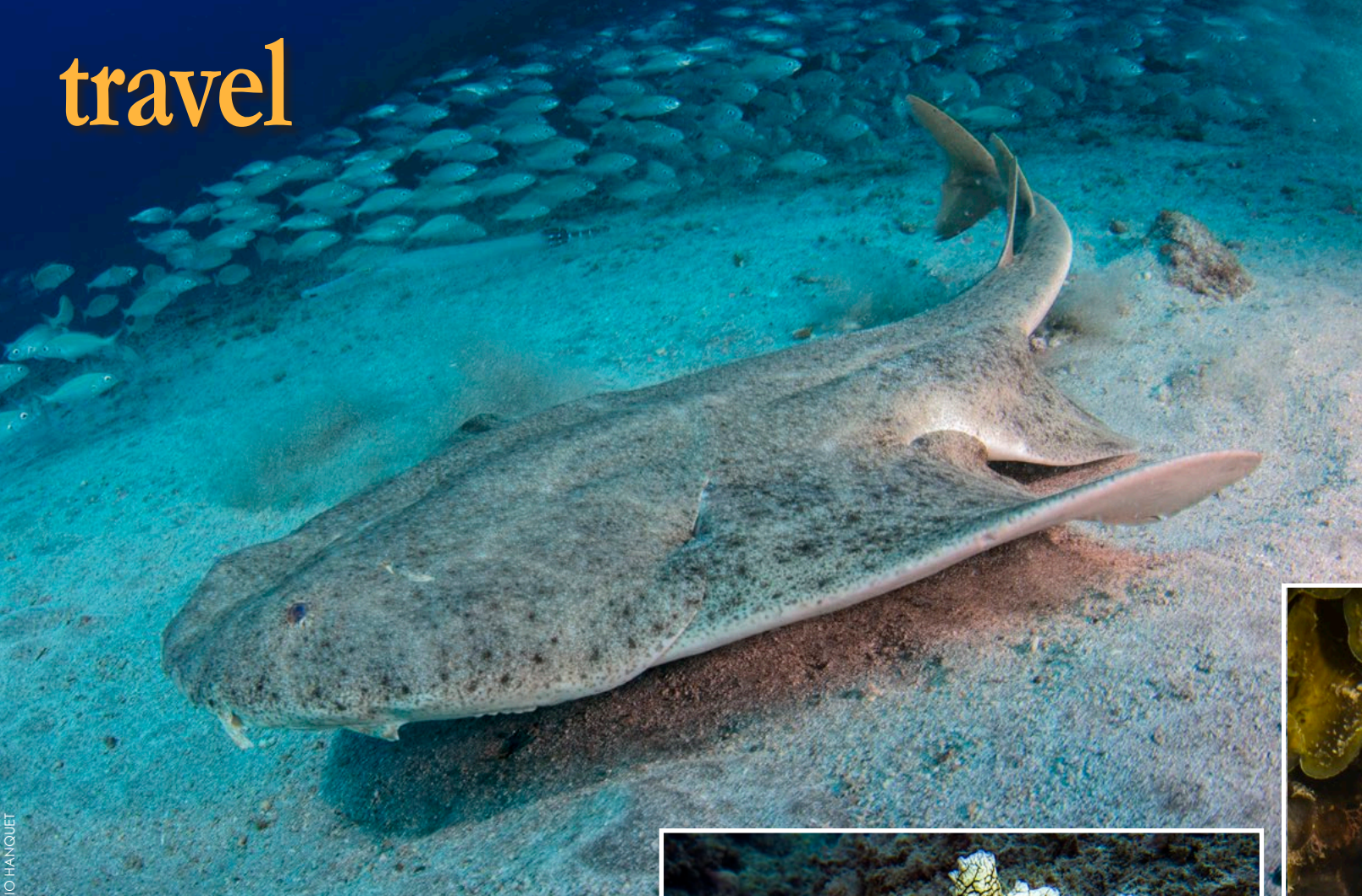
Tenerife is a tourist destination and divers come from many European countries. The staff of various dive centers speak a variety of languages, including Spanish, English, German, French and other European languages. The average price for a dive is about EU€30 (US\$34), or EU€25 (US\$28) with the purchase of a package of six dives. There are excellent conditions for all types



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Diver on reef covered in black coral (top left); Close-up of a fireworm (top center); Close-up portrait of an eagle ray (above); Pair of green sea turtles (left) at Tenerife



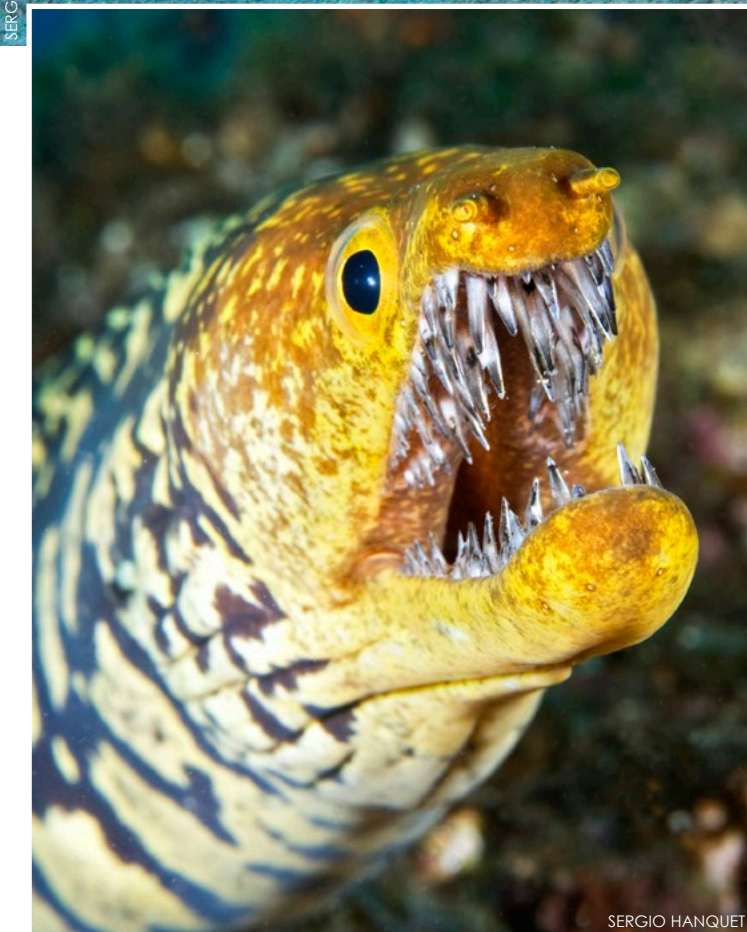


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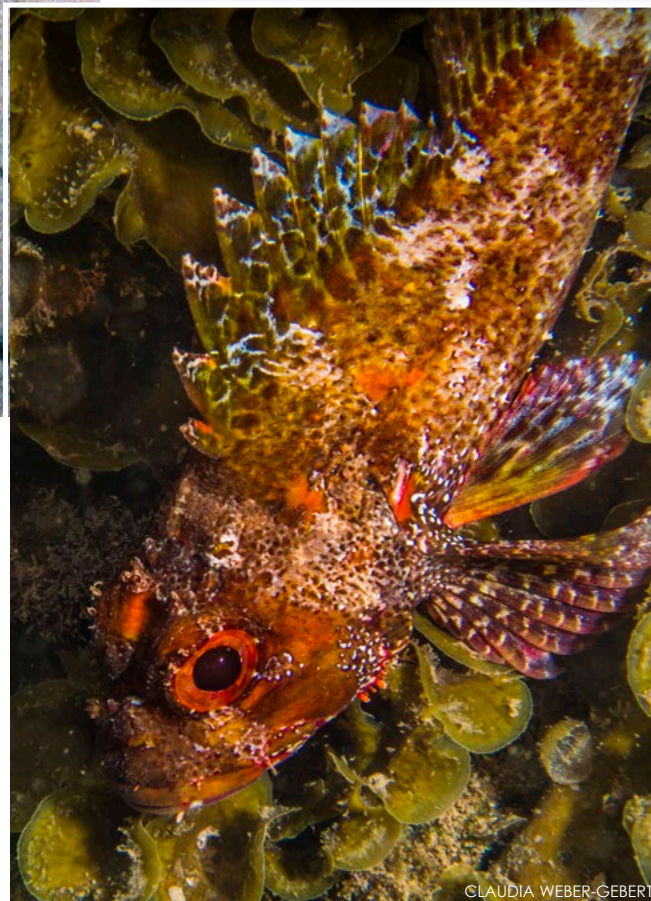
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Angelshark (top left); Nudibranch (above); Sculpin fish (right) is a bottom-dwelling fish; Black moray eel at La Cueva de las Morenas (far right)

of underwater photography. As for accommodation, dive centers can organize your lodging in advance. There are many types of accommodation, including hotels, apartments and rooms in cottages. As for transportation, one can easily and cheaply rent a car at the airport upon arrival.

Diving takes place all year

round. The trade winds are the prevailing winds. The south of the island is protected, which is conducive for diving and navigation. There are several dive centers in Los Cristianos and Las Galletas. We dived with Rincón de Arona.

A unique dive

La Cueva de las Morenas (The

Cave of the Moray Eels) is a dive on a 30m long hill and is home to a large population of moray eels. In this place, one can observe the three most common species in the area—brown moray eels, black moray eels and tiger moray eels—all of which may sometimes share the same hole. The fauna is rich here and many species allow one

to approach them with ease. In fact, many fish have made it a habit to accompany their human visitors during the dive.

In the spring and summer, it is common to see some pelagic species like the yellowtail horse mackerel, the blue triggerfish or the peto fish. We paid a little attention to the cracks and crevasses of the rocky

reef, discovering a myriad of small invertebrates—especially shrimps, anemones, sea squirts and slugs. On the sandy bottom, which is 32m deep, there is an significant colony of sand eels. It is also an excellent place to watch rays.

The journey to the dive site takes 10 minutes from the port of Los Cristianos and 25 minutes

Tiger moray eel at La Cueva de las Morenas





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THIS PAGE: Octopuses and frogfish (left) are common but difficult to spot due to their clever camouflage; Cheeky octopus grabs a camera from a diver (above).

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from Las Galletas or Puerto Colón. The dive time is 30 minutes, the difficulty level is zero and currents are normally absent.

Octopuses and frogfishes

On my first dive together with Sergio and a Spanish photogra-

pher from Madrid, Fernando de la Torre, we discovered an octopus that had decorated its cave entrance with many beautiful shells. One after the other, we photographed the little fellow, which actually did not want to get out of its hole. Finally,

Fernando approached the octopus with his action camera. This rig aroused the interest of the octopus, and with a quick movement, it clasped the camera with its arms. In this moment, one could easily underestimate the power that such an animal has—

but it really did not want to let go. Incredibly, the octopus turned the camera around and began to pan the area. We all laughed until our masks were full of water.

Spotfin frogfish (*Antennatus nummifer*) are common but hard to find here due to their small

size and excellent camouflage. They live in caves, cracks and under cornices—usually in reverse position. Frogfish are very bad swimmers and move with small jumps. Their coloring varies greatly, depending on the environment in which they are located.

The white-spotted octopus (*Callistoctopus macropus*) can be found in the warmer waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. As a master of camouflage, it can also be difficult to find.



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Marine mammals

Due to its location in the open Atlantic Ocean, whales and dolphins can be seen in the seas around Tenerife. These marine mammals hunt in the deep waters surrounding the island or just pass through the area during their migrations. Fin whales are seen more often than humpback whales or orcas.

On a boat trip, one always gets to see a variety of dolphin species, especially the resident species known as pilot whales. Around Tenerife, there is a population of about 400 of them, which dive to depths of 600 to 800m to hunt for squids and sardines.

In the Canary Islands, whales are protected, and there are rules for responsible observation so as not to disturb them. These

rules prohibit approaches less than 60m from the whales, and swimming or diving with them is not permitted (Royal Decree 1727/2007).

That is why whale watching is offered to tourists. Whale-watching tour operators are specially trained and require state approval before providing services. Diving and swimming with whales and dolphins is only possible with special permits from the Spanish government.

Whale-watching

It is definitely worth it to book a whale-watching excursion! One should definitely choose a provider with state approval. This certification can be verified by a blue sticker. There are a lot of "pirates" who do not follow the whale-watching rules and end-

anger the animals.

These rules require, for example, that boats and people stay at least 60m away from the animals; only a maximum of three boats may approach a group of whales; and one should behave calmly and avoid making

noise in their presence. There is a good reason for these rules. The animals hunt for food at great depths and may sprint up to 40 km/h during their hunts. When they return to the surface, the pilot whales need rest breaks to decompress.

As divers, we are familiar with this principle. After a difficult deep dive, we have to rest, and no one thinks about running a marathon. The same applies to the pilot whales. They should therefore not be disturbed nor startled.

THIS PAGE: Pods of pilot whales can be seen migrating or hunting for squid and sardines in the deep waters around Tenerife.

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The volcano, Teide-Pico Viejo, towers over Tenerife (above); Rocky reefscape of underwater Tenerife (left); Location of Tenerife on regional map (lower left)

make up the Canary archipelago, Tenerife stands out for the ubiquitous presence of Teide. The volcano Teide reaches 3,718m, rising 7,500m

sight of the volcano. Rather, it is the opposite feeling that overcomes us—an overwhelming awe of its magnificence. If you go there, please do not forget that it is a high mountain of considerable altitude with the associated risks. Fans of adventure sports will enjoy plenty of recreational activities here, such as climbing, mountaineering, caving in volcanic tubes and canyoning. ■

Claudia Weber-Gebert is an advanced diver, underwater photographer and dive writer based in Germany.

from the seabed. It is the roof of Spain and the largest peak of the Atlantic Ocean. It is also a national park and was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2007. It owes its name to a Guanche word, *Echeyde*, with which the indigenous people of the Canary Islands identified the presence of evil gods or hell.

But this has nothing to do with the feeling that seizes us today at the

boats and delighting boat guests with acrobatics in the bow wave. Dolphins do this voluntarily and are therefore not disturbed by the presence of humans. But even so, boats must not chase after the dolphins if the animals want to swim away from the boat.

Sometimes, you can see the very shy beaked whales, which live in the waters of the Canary Islands throughout the year, especially near the small neighboring island

of El Hierro. And with luck, you might also see the great whales, such as the humpback whale, fin whale, minke whale or sperm whale, which travel north in the spring and towards the Equator in the fall.

A final highlight

The volcano, Teide-Pico Viejo, is definitely worth a visit! Of the seven islands that



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Pilot whales are often seen on whale-watching excursions