



Canary Islands'

Tenerife

Text and photos
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Diving Macronesia



Most of us in Europe know of Tenerife, but many in North America won't have heard of it. It's one of those sunshine locations that isn't too long a European flight for warmth, sun and reliable weather—easy to reach with economy airlines from many United Kingdom and European airports. It's the largest of the Canary Islands, part of Spain, but off the coast of Africa on the same longitude as Western Sahara and Morocco. From the Americas, it may be less expensive flying to mainland Europe, then on. It's become the main vacation hub in the Canary Islands, with five million visitors last year. It has, or at least has had, the reputation of being a party location, with cheap, slightly substandard accommodations in package holidays. Does its old reputation still hold, and more importantly, how is the diving?

I first dived in Tenerife in January 1998 and have been back diving a few times. It has over 300 days a year of sunshine, with a summer that's not too hot and a warmish winter, which brings in the tourists—while the diving plus point is all-year-round diving, with very few days blown out. It's reliable, it's affordable.

I'm not one for package holidays, though at times, they do seem good deals. In Britain and throughout most of Europe, packages offering very cost effective visits are available, which can then have independently booked diving

linked in.

Here, I booked independently. I flew with EasyJet from my local airport, as EasyJet doesn't have a weight limit for carry-on bags (only size) so I could safely take my underwater camera housing. I wanted the reliable diving weather, but also a location in which my partner and dive buddy, Jenny, could do interesting non-diving activities if her recurrent ear-clearing problem—a damaged Eustachian tube—flared up.

Tenerife's nature

Tenerife is a temperate water location



White sandy beach, Las Americas/Los Cristianos

Rock formation, Zapatilla de la Reina, with caldera rim in the distance, Mount Teide National Park; Observatorio del Teide, with Mount Teide in the background, is a solar research centre (top left)



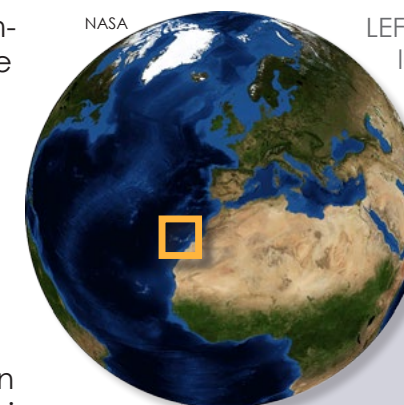
situated in the central Atlantic Ocean. It is a volcanic island; there are no coral reefs, no large diversity of tropical fish, not many wrecks, but interesting topography and marine life. The water is too cool in winter to support coral. During my trip, in early May, the water temperature was 19°C, just up from its lowest—territory for a good wetsuit.

The comments one might hear will be about the lack of marine life, these comments seem to me partly due to the contrast between tropical and temperate locations. It may also reflect that “reliable diving” aspect, as operators are used to being called upon for teaching—students can book and know they can do training—so dive centres haven’t worked to develop the marine life appreciation. It might be that Tenerife’s sheer reliability is almost the downfall for great diving. There isn’t the thinking and work done yet to develop its own special aspects, as was the case for “muck diving” in Southeast Asia. There seems to be scope to develop specialist diving in addition to the now-happening technical and rebreather areas.

Tenerife is very environmentally aware and protective on land and also of its resident and visiting cetaceans. They’re just not quite fully with it on all of the

marine life. For example, some fish like the grouper—which evidently is very tasty—seem less common than they were. Grouper eat sea urchins and would help to control the over-abundant sea urchin population—in so doing, reduce their overgrazing, allowing larger fish populations, which eat seaweeds, to thrive.

If one believes advertising, fishermen have found the island’s marine life appealing, as it is said to offer “some of the best angling on the planet”. Yes there is a lot of fishing in Tenerife with fish counters and dinner plates showing what we might have seen underwater. Grouper maybe too often end up on the dinner table. More protected marine zones would be a real move forward, and if handled properly, would probably be helping the fishing as well as the diving, but that’s a discussion for another time.



NASA

LEFT: Global map with location of Canary Islands
BELOW: Location of Tenerife on regional map



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Lodging

Considering my buddy’s potential ear problem, we booked diving with Aqua-Marina right in the middle of the tourist hot spot of Las Americas/Los Cristianos, so if Jenny couldn’t dive, she wouldn’t be isolated. I was a bit apprehensive

La Caleta Reef (above); The built up coast in the tourist area of South Tenerife (top right)



The summit of Teide (above). The national park hosts a variety of plant and animal species, many of them endemic; El Medano or Windy beach (right). Parts of Tenerife are constantly windy while farther down the coast it can be nearly dead calm, the effects of the lee side of Mount Teide



In a roadside cutting, layers of ash are evidence of many millennia of volcanic eruptions on Tenerife

about being in the middle of a tourist area, but it proved fine—not all just candy floss. Yes, it was touristy—much like Sharm El Sheikh—yet offering a vast range of activities, the legacy of the package holiday era updated with what's new.

Our accommodation was a good-sized, reasonably priced, self-catering apartment organized by and near the dive centre. Quality was okay, but the lodgings needed a bit of minor repair. Tenerife has a very wide range of accommodation options from self-catering apartments to one-star and luxury five-star hotels, all

inclusive deals, camping, villas and more.

Besides activities the tourism tradition provides a wide range of accommodations, food and drink. This is particularly true in the Las Americas/Los Cristianos region in the south of Tenerife but has moved along the seafront in both directions. Going just slightly outside this resort area, the touristy side wanes somewhat and local customs, history and geography do come in.

Topside activities

Take your pick of activities of both water sports and land:

diving (of course), parasailing, flyboarding, windsurfing, whale and dolphin watching, sailing, fishing, golf, horse riding, quad bikes, push bikes (even a pedalling free 22-mile ride), mountain bikes, walking and hiking trails, wine sampling, paragliding, Segway tours, plus night clubs, casinos, bars and rather a lot more including theme parks and kids adventures.

So there are lots of choices when not diving. Hiring a car does make it quicker and easier to do non-diving activities. The roads are good and well signposted.

A drive up through Teide National Park is one very worthwhile excursion either by hire car or organized tour; it can even be done on a quad bike tour. The road reaches an altitude over 2,500m so it is not one to do immediately after diving. The volcanic landscape and views are stunning. Car hire here does have its sharks, but I booked through AutoReisen, which had good online reviews and proved problem-free.

Alternative underwater activities

As divers we see the underwater world in an up-close sort of way, non-divers can snorkel, but two activities here offer a different experience—BOB dives and a trip in a yellow submarine.

The BOB dives are effectively an underwater scooter with a "Breathing Observation Bubble". The driver's head goes in the air-filled acrylic bubble, with the air continu-



Yellow submarine (left and above) in harbour of Marina San Miguel with dive tender boat in background; Thierry Garrigues (top right) showing marine life to visitors behind the porthole; BOB "The Breathing Observation Bubble" scooter diver (right)



rine, so I joined Thierry Garrigues of Buceo Aventura Tenerife who does the fish feeding by the submarine portholes. The sub leaves the harbour and starts descending almost immediately, going to a gully at 30m depth, in which it settles. Here Thierry, who has gone out separately on a tender, uses a fish as food to attract in more fish and maybe also shows other marine life of interest while he swims past the portholes.

He and his partner, Mari Mar Varela, a PADI Instructor, run a dive business and boat from next to the submarine base; they can organize dives with either the sub or most other locations around the south of Tenerife. So the chance exists to dive with a submarine that isn't a wreck.

Diving Tenerife

The earlier comment, "good wet-

suit", is said with feeling. I started with my trusty old 5mm and 2mm shorty on top but felt slightly cool on a first shore dive. The dive shop offered a thicker shorty to go on top, which I accepted, but my weighting was then all wrong and I missed a night dive without time to correct it. After this, I stuck to my original, which was reasonably okay thermally for dives up to an hour in the 19°C water.

So, why are there only a few wrecks? After all, Tenerife has been on major trade routes for centuries and has lots of sharp rock pinnacles. The island's vol-



canic origin and Mount Teide gives the game away—the land plummets steeply both above

and below sea level. Three miles offshore, depths can be 2,500m while the 100m depth contour

ally replaced from a scuba cylinder. The scooter is attached to a float so that one can't go deeper than 4m, so it is safe. I've also seen these at Stuarts Cove in the Bahamas. The BOBs went out from Puerto Colon to a cove along the coast.

Then there's the yellow submarine—yes, a proper submarine, not just a glorified glass-bottom

boat floating on the surface, as seen in amusement parks or some resorts. This submarine goes out of the new Marina San Miguel and is one of 15 commercial subs worldwide. With viewing ports along its sides and ample room inside, it should be comfortable, but I was outside.

I've always thought it would be cool to dive with a yellow subma-





Sand sculpture on beach at Las Americas/Los Cristianos (above); Simple sheltered beach entry for the RIB (right); Aqua-Marina is a well equipped dive shop with good condition hire equipment, space for leaving your own and a pool for testing (lower right and below)

runs about half to a mile offshore, with a few places where it can be reached by a giant shore-based stride entry. Sinking ships seldom end up at sports dive depths, though more are at technical depths.

The narrow coastal shallows tends to mean dives were not too far off shore, and boat rides were generally short, just going up or down the coast. The local dive sites weren't crowded. There were a lot of dive centres, but I can't remember seeing another centre's dive boat on any dive.

Dive operator

My main diving centre was Aqua-Marina, which has incorporated two other dive businesses—Wannadive and Tenerife Dive. The three family-owned businesses decided to combine in order to provide the most comprehensive offering possible, since before, each had slightly different directions of focus.

Training is a large part of their offering from very beginning PADI Scuba Diver through technical and instructor levels. Again, the reliable conditions has helped

make them the largest instructor trainers in Spain, and now they can teach in any of nine languages (English, Russian, Spanish, French, German, Polish, Dutch, Catalan and Ukrainian).

On the technical side, they have cylinders of 5, 10, 12 and 15 litres and can pump nitrox with a membrane compressor up to 36%, with fills blended up to 100% O₂. On the trimix side, they have helium in stock and can blend. They have Draeger Dolphin semi-closed rebreathers either for hire or training, but can organize training on most rebreathers with notice. They stock soda lime for divers bringing their own rebreathers.

Dive sites

Our first dive was from the shore along the local breakwater as a buddy pair to check out Jenny's ear, which proved fine on this 12m dive and continued to

be alright later on 30m dives. The dive we missed due to changing wetsuits was a night dive in the same shore location where the others saw stingrays, octopus, an angel shark, lobster and more fish—a very sad dive to have missed.

Having abandoned the extra thermal protection, weighting was fine and thermal comfort, okay. The remaining dives were, with a beach pickup, from one of the two RIBs in operation. Aqua-Marina were hosting a dive club from the United Kingdom who arrived a few days before us and also other independent divers

from a variety of countries, with varying experience levels.

Both boats were full and stayed together going to the same dive sites. This meant we missed a few preferred locations, since they had already



been done by the club divers, so we didn't have the chance to do sites out of Las Galletas or some others. The large number of divers also curtailed a lot of independence for the photographers.

El Meridian was our one wreck dive, a WWII mine sweeper later used as a cetacean watching boat before being scuttled for divers. Going down the shot line, the complete outline was visible from about 10m depth. It is reasonably intact at 29m depth, lying nearly upright on a sandy seabed with propeller and masts in place, its deck partly open. It's not a big wreck but photographically a good subject, particularly if the other divers





Trumpetfish (left); Arrow crab on rock with red encrusting sponge (below); Diver on reef at Las Americas (right)

reef top, but swimming to the edge at 25m, it dropped nearly vertically into the deep. This was used by some of the club divers to gain depth progression; carrying stage cylinders, they were going through a tunnel at 42m, exiting deeper. The rest stayed shallower, having a slow drift dive, going over rock reefs with sand-bottomed gorges in between, before ending on a shal-



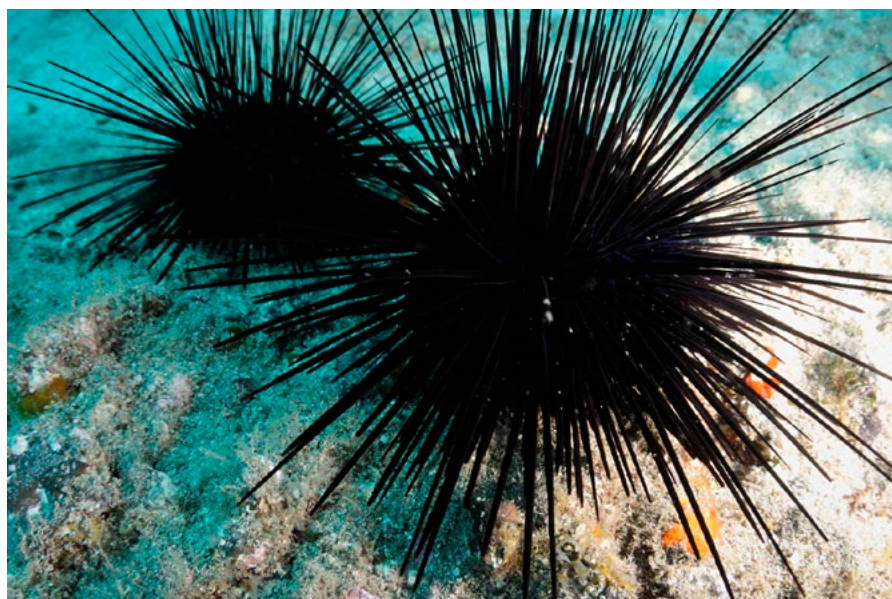
didn't kick up loads of sand cutting visibility from 20m to 5m.

There are other wrecks including among them the 20m depth *El Condesito*, the *Cita Del Mar* at 40 to 50m, and in the north, the *Tabai-ba* wreck as well as a DC3 plane.

The scenic dives ranged from volcanic reefs to drop-off's, deep gullies and sandy patches between reefs. The volcanic nature of the area meant that the underwater landscape was varied but had some similar attributes between sites. Cracks and fissures—homes to small creatures—were at most locations.

Marine life included a typical good variety of temperate water critters: rays, trumpetfish, cuttlefish, grouper, garden eels, turtles, barracuda, wrasse, bream, triggerfish,

jacks, a number of species of moray and conger eels, damselfish, lizardfish, scorpionfish, shoals of grunt (roncadores), flounder, angelsharks, long-spined sea-urchins and more. Then, more likely seen when on the surface than diving, there might be a variety of whales and dolphins (21 species can be found visiting).



Long spined black sea urchins, an invasive species here

We did have pilot whales on the way to one dive, and the club divers had dolphins on another.

The lava flows which make up the seabed have produced varied features, with short (or even very long) caves and tunnels, rock columns, ridges with erosion adding to the interest. On Barranco del Agua, we dropped in on a shallow flat slightly sloping

low plateau.

In the briefing before Palm Mar Cave, a cave, which has never been fully explored, the advice was not to even try entering as the entrance has badly silted up with sand, but we saw the cross commemorating lost divers and the Virgin del Carmen statue, which was placed by fishermen for the protection of both divers and fishermen. The Neptune Cave, actually a short tunnel with sandy bottom, had a magnificent opening along one side filled with trumpetfish. Often stingrays are seen on the sandy bottom, but that's another dive.



Brown lizardfish



Tenerife

visibility and warmish waters are all aspects that can satisfy desires from very beginner to advanced technical diver. For these reasons the island is used by many agencies for training for which it seems excellent. As a holiday dive destination, it

works both as a dive location with holiday or a holiday location with diving. □

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The crevices, nooks and crannies on most of the scenic dives had various species of moray eels often with cleaner shrimp, sometimes with arrow crabs, octopus, and on night dives, the greater locust lobster or spiny lobster. On the sand patches, one can find flounder, various rays, weever and lizard fish, garden eels and angelsharks. While up in the water column near rocky reefs and around the wrecks and pinnacles, puffer, file and triggerfish, wrasse, roncadors

(which we know as a bastard grunt), various bream, barracuda and damselfish can be spotted, and if very lucky, a grouper might be seen.

Dive safety & etiquette

Having joined this very mixed group of divers, the attention to safety was very evident. A guide would usefully lead the way, frequently hanging in the water checking back that everyone was following, and the tail would be brought up by a following guide who hurried

us (usually me) along so the group would stay somewhat together. For photographers this reduced chances to stop, look and compose.

Taking photos often takes time; one wants to wait for the right positioning of a fish, check out various angles, watch behaviour. The Aqua-Marina centre is aware of this. Normally, they let experienced buddy pairs have some freedom, but because of the numbers and mixed experiences of the divers, it was awkward to do

that on this visit. It was hard to complain, as everyone was so friendly and helpful.

Divers with cameras are not uniformly loved. We tend to be too slow for many, but here, it could be useful going slow. Some sites could warrant the full dive in a 20m square area.

So, the strong points about diving in Tenerife are the temperate waters, sheer reliability of getting dives in, plus all the accoutrements of a major holiday destination. The easy and wide range of depths, good



THIS PAGE: Scenes from *El Meridian* wreck; Diver at propeller and rudder (top right)