

HOT TICK



Canary Islands

SPAIN

Since winter temperatures in the Canary Islands rarely drop below 20°C, they make an ideal destination for sunseekers not wanting to stray too far. And with seven islands to choose from, there's something for everyone – hike in the mountains, explore quaint hamlets, surf and snorkel, or lounge on the beach.

THE PERFECT BEACH

If you're seeking sun, you'd probably like a nice stretch of sand to go with it, and the Canaries have playas aplenty. Here's a rundown of some of the best to help you decide where to lay your towel.

Best for escaping the crowds

If you want the sand to yourself, Gran Canaria's Güigüi Beach is the place. Reachable by a five-hour hike or by chartering a fishing boat, this black sand beach backed by imposing cliffs has no amenities, but virtually no patrons either.

Best for an all-over tan

Punta de Papagayo boasts golden coves to rival Europe's finest beaches and while stripping off isn't obligatory, if you're a fan of nude sunbathing then Papagayo is a great place to let it all hang out.

Best for watersports

Fuerteventura's vast and beautiful Sotavento Beach is the top spot for windsurfers, be they pros looking for practice or first-timers wanting lessons. If you crave waves rather than wind, head to Lanzarote's Caleta de Famara – the self-proclaimed 'Hawaii of Europe'.

Best for swimming


Las Canteras Beach clings to the edge of the Canaries' largest city, Las Palmas (Gran Canaria). At low tide a reef holds back the waves, making this the perfect place for swimming, snorkelling or just sunbathing.

Best overall

Sometimes there's a reason tourists flock to a particular spot. Gran Canaria's Maspalomas Beach is one of those reasons. Shifting sand dunes provide a striking backdrop to a beach that, while touristy, is large enough to rarely seem crowded.

VOLCANIC WANDERS

While best-known for beaches, the steep, volcanic landscape on most of the islands makes for superlative hiking country. Most challenging is the trek to the top of



Escape the
chill this winter
and head
to the balmy
Canary Islands

WORDS LUCY CORNE

WINTER SUN: SHORT HAUL

PORTUGAL

The Algarve caters to all travel types, with its idyllic beaches, laid-back seaside towns and rugged beauty spots. Even if it's not sunbathing weather, the coast still has its allure, especially in the Costa Vicentina Natural Park – a fine spot for surfers, hikers and photographers.

MAINLAND SPAIN

It seems too perfect that the most exquisite corner of mainland Spain is the part most suited to winter travel. Even if the Andalusia sun doesn't shine enough for a beach visit, you can admire the dazzling architecture of Seville and Granada, sample stellar tapas and spot Europe's only wild monkeys in Gibraltar.

CYPRUS

You'll likely have a beach to yourself in winter, but if the weather doesn't co-operate you can enjoy myriad monasteries, churches and castles. Even the party-hard resorts of Ayia Napa and Paphos are lined with monuments and museums. As an added bonus, you can ski down Mount Olympus from January.



Lazy days: a world away from rainy London

Teide, Spain's highest mountain at 3718m. After a five-hour uphill slog, spend the night in a mountain hut before summiting at sunrise – just be prepared for bizarre weather changes and don't be disappointed if the incredible view is obscured by cloud.

If climbing mountains doesn't appeal, you could delve into Gran Canaria's 200m-deep Bandama Crater, an extinct volcano. Verdant and until recently inhabited by a lone farmer, the crater is an easy hop from Las Palmas and a relatively gentle two-hour walk.

“ It's easy to wander off the beaten track ”

There are options for those who'd like to avoid gradients altogether, most notably Lanzarote's informative ramble through the Timanfaya National Park. Guides explain the unique surroundings as you scramble over – and occasionally under – blackened lava fields.

If solidified lava is a little stark, the pine forests of La Palma's Caldera de Taburiente might appeal. Start atop the gargantuan crater and descend through clouds, stopping to swim in waterfalls en route.

But if you only tackle one volcanic wander, make it La Palma's uniquely beautiful Ruta de los Volcanes. Starting in the island's centre, the seven-hour trek takes

you past the Canaries' most recent volcano and many of its peers en route to the coast.

ISLAND NIBBLES

Canarian food is rustic, hearty and shaped by years of hardship, but that's not to say it isn't tasty. In fact, it's a delight, whether you self-cater from farmers' markets or dine on traditional dishes made with home-grown ingredients. Gran Canaria and Tenerife are the top spots for variety, but the lesser-known islands have lots to offer in the way of local specialities.

Cheese is a theme running through Canarian cuisine, be it the strong goats' cheese of Fuerteventura, the fabulously flavourful almogrote (a garlicky cheese dip) spread on farm-style bread in La Gomera or El Hierro's take on quesadillas. These dense sponge cakes made with cheese are altogether easier to swallow with a drink and luckily booze is savoured across the archipelago. Lanzarote's wine is considered some of the best, if only for their ingenuity in growing vines in volcanic gravel.

If you're looking for something stronger, Gran Canaria and La Palma specialise in rum, while Gomerans swear by parra – moonshine – or the slightly less lethal gomeròn – moonshine mixed with honey.

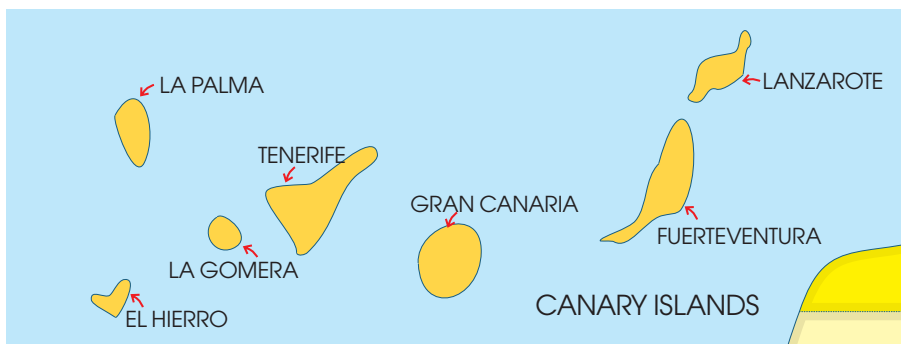
The honey in question comes not from

Warm up in the Algarve



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Something fishy ...





bees but from the sap of palm trees, and is a major feature of La Gomera's desserts. If you have a sweet tooth, head to La Palma for cakes and cookies heavy on honey, almonds and gofio – this roasted maize flour is central to Canarian cooking.

OFFBEAT CANARIES

Independent travellers often shun the Canary Islands, dismissing them as a predictable destination for package tourists. But with mass tourism confined to a few coastal pockets, it's surprisingly easy to wander off the beaten track.

Visiting El Hierro is pretty offbeat anyway, but if you're seeking serious solitude, head

for the south-west with its pine forests, quaint hamlets and wind-blasted trees. While in the area, stop at the Orchilla Lighthouse, Spain's westernmost point.

If you like superlatives, try the highest point on La Gomera, the Garajonay National Park. Harboured by a laurel forest, waterfalls and vistas of three other islands, it's great for a not-too-taxing hike. Walking also takes you far from the crowds on the larger islands, particularly Tenerife's Anaga Natural Park with its misty forests, rural hamlets and deep ravines.

But if you're talking absolute escapism, visit islets not islands. Isla de Lobos, a dot in the Atlantic off Fuerteventura's shores, warrants a wander for its barren beauty. For the ultimate in solitary travel, head to La Graciosa, home to 500 smiling souls and not a single paved road. Eat seafood in the sand-strewn town of Caleta del Sebo, lie on beautiful deserted beaches and enjoy a car-free wander around a little piece of paradise.

NEXT WEEK: TRAVEL WRITING AND PHOTOGRAPHY AWARD WINNERS

We pick our favourite travel features and photographs

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Anytime. The Canary Islands are sunny all year round.

GETTING THERE Fly direct from London to Gran Canaria, Tenerife, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura.

GETTING AROUND Go island hopping by plane or ferry.

VISAS South Africans will need a Schengen visa.

CURRENCY Euro. 1 GBP = 1.18 EUR.

LANGUAGE Spanish.

GOING OUT A beer costs around €2.

ACCOMMODATION Dorm beds from €12, private rooms from €15.

SEE spain.info.



TNT Images, Getty Images

WINTER SUN IN AFRICA

THE GAMBIA

Africa's smallest country is perfect for winter sun as it's exotic, hot and relatively cheap and easy to reach. Package tours to the coast make an ideal base for visiting fishing towns, traditional villages and nature reserves.

KENYA

If you're in Kenya, chances are you're looking for animals. The Masai Mara is the quintessential park for spotting the Big Five (lion, buffalo, rhino, leopard and elephant) but it's not the only place for an animal encounter. Amboseli is famed for elephants, framed against a Kilimanjaro backdrop, while Lake Nakuru is renowned for flamingos.

EGYPT

Red Sea resorts have plenty to attract travellers in search of winter sun. If you're deterred by Sharm el Sheikh's package holiday vibe, try Dahab – Egypt's backpacker Mecca. Both offer fine beaches, world-class scuba diving and chilled-out bars. For a more active alternative, scramble through the

Sinai Desert's Coloured Canyon or join a midnight hike up Mount Sinai to witness a desert sunrise.

MOROCCO

Morocco's vibrant cities and colourful markets are the perfect antidote to a drab British winter, with Marrakesh the best of the bunch. Head south to Essaouira or Agadir to hit the beach – the former is good for watersports, the latter boasts a wonderfully sheltered beach. If you tire of lounging in the sun, venture inland for a ski resort in the Atlas Mountains.

TUNISIA

The best option for a winter visit to Tunisia is to delve into the Sahara. Too stifling to explore at other times of the year, an early winter trip is ideal. Sci-fi fans can follow the *Star Wars* trail, taking in a dozen movie locations. Start in the Grand Erg Oriental, a vast sand sea occupying the south-western corner of Tunisia. Head east to the troglodyte homes of Matmata, stopping in Tataouine before ending on the beach-lined island of Jerba.

