



Reports about the death of sun and heat turned out to be exaggerated when **Jenny Woolf** visited Tenerife

THIS was a romantic, sub-tropical Valentine's break, so the worst weather since 1973 wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping for. But that's what it was, according to the man in the next seat of the plane.

Sure enough, as we rolled to a stop at Tenerife North airport that first evening, the tarmac glistened with water, the wind was whipping the palm trees furiously in the dark, and the air temperature was exactly the same as Camden had been a few hours before. Luckily I'd brought my gloves.

Fortunately, any similarities between the romantic sub-tropical north of Tenerife and the unromantic un-tropical north of Camden quickly evaporated. By the next morning, the sun was out, the Atlantic ocean was rolling dark blue and we didn't

need gloves or even coats any more. The clouds which still lurked over the jagged slopes of the volcanic hills created a changing light which added texture and charm to an extraordinary landscape which we could not wait to explore.

We were staying in the Hotel San Roque, in the little town of Garachico, where the foothills of the great volcano Tiede sweep down to the sea. A 17th century mansion built around two courtyards, this small hotel has an almost Cuban charm with deep red walls, wooden pillars, palm trees and a sparkly blue pool. The decor is quirky and artistic, with

furniture designed by, among others, Le Corbusier and Mondrian. There are some real artistic surprises, as we found that morning when we climbed the stone steps in the old tower that led onto the (now sunny) roof terrace. A glance upwards at the ceiling and we saw it was set, intriguingly, with hundreds of ceramic eyes.

Our bedroom was beautiful. It overlooked the courtyard, and was huge, high and painted dark blue. A tall traditionally tiled alcove was set behind the Jacuzzi, the bed was vast and white, and the acres of flooring were made of golden brown tea-wood, a rare indigenous pine which grows at high altitudes on the island. The chairs were by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, lacquered black and inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

And on arrival, visitors can arrange to be greeted with a bottle of excellent local wine in an ice-bucket. It really did make the unpacking more fun.

One of the few roads out of isolated Garachico leads directly into the green, jagged, volcanic landscape of the mountains that rise to the south. The scenery was like Lord of the Rings. It became particularly spectacular when the wind blew, for then the clouds would descend and swirl about us, or transform the jagged hills into the mountains of Mordor. Yet, within seconds they would roll away to reveal rainbows, flowers, blue sea and startling crags.

Tenerife is not large – its surface area is only about half that of Essex – and a good deal of that is occupied by Mount Tiede,

an unfeasibly large volcano about two miles high. It is a couple of hour's drive from the hotel, up winding little roads, whose hairpin bends can at some points only be negotiated in first gear.

Zigzagging higher in Teide's foothills, we entered different climate and vegetation zones. Lush banana plantations and cascading geraniums give way to temperate plants rather like those in England. A little higher, and we rose above the low clouds and entered a dazzlingly clear and sunny realm of sharp black volcanic rock dotted with brilliant green pines and gnarled fruit trees alight with pink and white blossom.

Further onward was the desert, with stark and multi-coloured spikes of rock and miles of coloured gravel blending from green to pink beneath an intensely blue sky. The desert vegetation was low-growing, sage-green, brown and white and it clung to the mountains' bare rocky slopes like embroidery. Above it all, Teide's peak shone with snow, and clouds boiled around it like steam, blown by furious faraway winds.

We completely avoided the south of the island, which is given over to mass tourism, but a couple of days later we took a look at Santa Cruz, capital of Tenerife, which is further along the north coast. Although it is not a big city, it has a good buzz and the shops are affluent and fashionable, although driving through its very narrow and congested streets is definitely not for the faint-hearted.

Tenerife's taxes are lower than on the Spanish mainland, so our poor hard-pressed pound went a little further than we had expected. We had a relaxing meal in GOM, a strangely named but elegant restaurant just off the tree-lined Ramblas. The highlight was sweet tapas for two – very

Above: The coastline near Santa Cruz. Below: Tapas dessert at the GOM restaurant.



Spanish, this, with orange flan, ice creams, brownie, lemon cheesecake and latticework chocolate, artistically arranged on a huge plate.

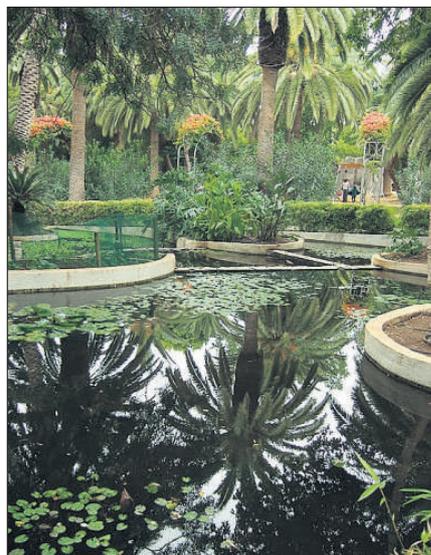
If I'd known that Tenerife had such a big February carnival, we would have extended the Valentine break to include that too. Santa Cruz's clubs of singers, dancers and clowns get together all year to socialise and plan their elaborate and colourful carnival routines. They were practicing hard.

By February, excitement is at fever pitch, and come the actual carnival, the island goes mad. This year's theme was Frankenstein, and the monster (clad in a ballet tutu) was leering from posters all over town. The shops were full of elaborate costumes and props, ranging from plastic caveman clubs to fantastic

red devil outfits suitable for naughty boys.

As for us, we had to content ourselves with observing the preparations and wondering what fancy dress would have been appropriate if we could have stayed. The King and Queen of Hearts seemed like a good idea, so right now we're thinking about preparing red noses and red hearts in time for next year...

The park at Santa Cruz.



FACTFILE

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