



ISLAND CAPITAL

Santa Cruz has a reputation as a quiet city, but as Ross Clarke discovers, life under the radar means it's Tenerife's best-kept secret

IMAGE: GETTY

>>

I'M STANDING ON THE BOW OF A FERRY AND FEEL A FAMILIAR RUSH START TO SURGE UP FROM MY FEET

as I approach the city of Santa Cruz de Tenerife — to give it its full name.

It's either that the hour-and-40-minute sea crossing from neighboring Las Palmas de Gran Canaria is having an unwelcome effect or it's that nervous excitement that comes with arriving at a city by water. That beguiling feeling of seeing a city in its panoramic splendor.

From out at sea, the capital of Tenerife looks small, dwarfed by the vertiginous purple-red mountains that flank its north side to form the Anaga Rural Park, and disappear behind it up to the peak of Mount Teide volcano — Spain's highest mountain — in the island's center. Santa Cruz isn't a large city, with a population of a little over 200,000, which is perhaps why I've been told by people on the ship that it's "too quiet for a youngster like you" and that I should head straight to other parts of the island. I'm only planning to be in the city for 24 hours to catch up with an old friend, so I'm sure I can find enough to occupy me for a day.

As we pull into the port, I'm struck by the sight of an enormous, shimmering, brilliant white something. Roman helmet? Armadillo? I'm not quite sure, but the building is certainly impressive, with a gravity-defying, scorpion-like tail over its roof. It seems like a good place to begin, but thanks to the early start I'm in desperate need of caffeine. After disembarking, I make my way across a large square with a neck-achingly tall monument dedicated to the fallen of the Spanish Civil War. Combined with the 1930s-style architecture of the surrounding buildings, I realize there's a definite Latin American vibe to Santa Cruz; perhaps unsurprising given the Canary Islands were the last fueling port before ships sailed across the Atlantic to the Americas — going as far back as Columbus.

I idle up Calle Castillo — the main shopping street — passing a few touristy-looking restaurants before a café covered in vintage-tiled advertisements catches my eye. Palmerita Café is busy, but I'm ushered

Clockwise from top left: Typical architecture of Santa Cruz; Playa de Las Teresitas; Auditorio de Tenerife; fishing boats, San Andrés
Previous pages: View of a beautiful beach, San Andrés, Santa Cruz de Tenerife

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// PEOPLE ARE
PRACTICING TAI CHI
AS I SEEK SHADY
SOLACE UNDER
MATURE TREES

Rainbow lorikeet,
Puerto de la Cruz
Left: Iglesia de la
Concepción

to an empty table outside. I scan the menu looking for the Tenerife delicacy that I know will perk me up. “*Un barraquito*,” I proffer; moments later I’m presented with a thin glass balanced on a saucer. Inside are five glorious brown-ombre layers: condensed milk, Licor 43, espresso, hot milk and milk foam, dusted with cinnamon and topped with a little slice of lemon peel. It’s potent, but just what I need.

I then head through the oldest part of the city – the first place to be colonized by the Spanish when they captured the island from the native Guanche people. The classic bell-tower of Iglesia de la Concepción dates from the 16th Century. Following the main road – itself hugging the coastline – I approach the Auditorio de Tenerife.

There’s obviously a precedent set for imposing opera houses on waterfronts, but I’d hazard this could go toe-to-toe with Sydney’s offering. The ‘tail’ is one of those bits of design that would make an engineer sigh. I don’t know how it can be suspended there. I stop at the box office to find I’m just in time for one of the daily guided tours.

We’re ushered up the flight of outside steps to the main level (the scorpion’s back, if you will) by our guide Marta. She tells us the building was designed by Spanish-Swiss

// THIS IS WHERE LOCALS EAT, DRINK AND DANCE INTO THE WEE SMALL HOURS

architect Santiago Calatrava and opened in 2003 after spending more than 30 years in the planning stages – nothing is rushed in these parts. Up close, I realize the bright shimmer I saw from the ship comes from mosaicked white tiles. I ask Marta what the spike is supposed to represent. “Whatever you see it as. I think it’s like a crashing wave, no?” We head into the main hall, which looks like the inside of a cathedral spire, and learn that the organ pipes project from both sides to surround the audience with sound. Marta tells us about the stars who have performed here and the various community projects in place as we admire the architecture and the expansive views from the terrace over the ocean.

With an hour or so to kill before lunch, I head back towards the city center via the bone-dry *barranco* (literally ‘ravine’ – but here, it’s the water channel that runs from the mountains out to sea). The sun is strong

Clockwise from top left: Mercado de Nuestra Señora de África; Playa de Las Teresitas; Calle del Castillo; view of the Auditorio de Tenerife



IMAGES: 40RNNRS; GETTY; SHUTTERSTOCK; ALAMY





// TENERIFE

and I need shade, which thankfully comes in the form of the Museum of Nature and Archaeology. Set in a grand building, its cool balconied inner courtyards provide welcome relief from the heat. I feel as if I've been let in after hours, as the exhibits — from the origins of the island's flora and fauna to some rather eye-opening mummified remains of the Guanches — are blissfully quiet. The curator asks me where I'm from and kindly gives me a useful tip: apparently, I should visit the TEA library and arts space next door.

In stark contrast to the museum, the TEA is a huge gray concrete box of a building. I enter a vaulted reading room with an enormous glass wall looking onto a living garden wall. Teardrop pendant lights are suspended over long bright white reading tables busy with students on laptops. If my university library had been like this, I might have been inspired to study a bit more. I head up a spiral staircase, out onto the street and across the bridge to the city center.

I find the restaurant I'm looking for, CORTXO Gastrobar, in a quiet residential plaza. The interior is tiny, walls and ceiling covered in wine corks, tables spilling onto the square where a mix of people in business suits and more casual attire are laughing and drinking wine or espresso. The cheery waiter clears a table at lightning speed. I opt for homemade *almogrote* (a spiced strong cheese spread from neighboring island La Gomera) with warm bread, followed by salt cod fillet served with baked sweet potato and a toasted garlic foam — all washed down with a glass of chilled dry Malvasía Volcanica white wine from Lanzarote.

It's siesta time as I walk up the incline to the city's green lung, Parque García Sanabria, and the narrow streets are peacefully quiet. The park seems the ideal place to enjoy the late afternoon sun and walk off my lunch. It played host to an international art exhibition back in 1973 and as a result is littered with sculptures. Standing tall towards the southern entrance is a monument dedicated to

Above from left: Library, TEA; spiral staircase, TEA



Evening life at Puente Serrador
Left: Two cañas with olives on a terrace

// ESSENTIALS



When to go: Anytime due to the year-round temperate climate. February is one of the busiest months due to the carnival celebrations

Currency: \$1 = 0.83 Euro

Language: Spanish

Getting around: Santa Cruz is a very walkable city but buses, taxis and the metro are all clean, modern and offer good value. Titsa buses will take you to all parts of the island. Car hire is inexpensive and plentiful, although Santa Cruz can be a touch difficult to navigate by car.

former city mayor García Sanabria, who gave permission for the park's construction in the early 1920s. More intriguing, and rather beautiful, is a Francisco Borges Salas' sculpture of a voluptuous nude female entitled *La Fecundidad* (Fertility). A few people are practicing tai chi on the sunken lawn as I seek shady solace under some trees. I come across a stone archway with a pair of menacing cat's eyes — *Monumento al Gato* by Óscar Domínguez.

I'm meeting my friend at a bar called *Level Wine & Tapas* in the *Plaza del Principe de Asturias*, a handsome square with a bandstand, surrounded by ornate buildings, including the *Museum of Fine Arts* and the *Círculo de Amistad XII de Enero* with its duck egg-blue facade, and overlooked by the tall bell tower of the *Parroquia de San Francisco de Asís*. *Level* is casual and *Carolina* orders two *cañas* (small beers) of the local brew, *Dorada*. Later, she suggests we go on a tapas bar crawl. A few streets over and we're at *La Chachi*, a gastrobar that opened at the end of 2019. It's just one of a

range of modern tapas joints that focuses on using local ingredients in innovative ways. The interior is cool, with a distinct industrial edge. We opt for pan-fried scallops served with local *mojo rojo* (garlicky paprika sauce) butter and a glass of *Marba Tinto Barrica* red produced no more than 15 miles away in the north of the island.

It's only a short walk down to *La Noria* — the sleepy old part of town I visited earlier — and I wonder if I'm in the same place. It's now buzzing with people. This is where locals come at night to eat, drink and dance into the wee small hours. Our evening comes to an end at *La Concepción* — a cozy bistro that's little more than a door fronting the church's main square. We order the local rum and discuss tomorrow's plans: an early dip in the ocean at the stunning *Playa de Las Teresitas*, followed by a fresh seafood feast at *Mercado de Nuestra Señora de África* before I hop on the metro to *La Laguna*.

I think I might finally understand why everyone says Santa Cruz is sleepy — I'm ready for bed. □

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