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THE VERY FORTUNATE ISLE OF GRAN CANARIA



Over the last decade, Gran Canaria has shed its tawdry tourist reputation to emerge as an oh-so-cool island retreat for heritage, wellness, and gastronomy.

I'm sitting in a chic tapas restaurant with my dear friends Angie and José. It's one they've wanted to try out for a while, and I'm all too happy to be their excuse for a night out and a catch up. It's the last day of my trip and we're reminiscing – over some local *vermút* – about when I first arrived on the island. 'That means we've been friends for 15 years,' I say as we snack on *jamón croquetas*. Back then, I was a shy, fresh-faced 20-year-old with a smattering of Spanish, yet desperate for adventure. Like many before me, I'd come to improve my language skills via the Erasmus scheme, choosing to teach English with the British Council at a high school. That's where I met Angie, one of the English teachers, and her husband, José, who took me into their family immediately. At that time, I'd never even been on holiday to the Canary Islands, yet there I was, armed with just my suitcase, to start a new life on this enchanting Atlantic archipelago. I say enchanting, because that's what it did to me, and it's the reason that I'm back now.

During lockdown, I found myself ordering old guidebooks of Gran Canaria to see how perspectives and the island itself have changed. On the plane over, I read *Brown's Madeira, Canary Islands, and Azores* (1915). My favourite line: 'It is unnecessary to cement friendship by asking an acquaintance to put his legs under the household mahogany.' It's a sentiment that seems to encapsulate all of my experiences in Gran Canaria: one of informal, embracing friendliness and acceptance.

There's a warmth to this island, and not just from the sun. It's a feeling I get every time I drive the motorway from the airport to the

island's capital, Las Palmas (or Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, to give it its full name), the inky-blue ocean to one side and the ochre-red mountains to the other. There's a particular bend in the road where the shimmering capital city suddenly comes into view, bathed in sunlight and seemingly floating on top of the sea. A warm, comforting surge instantly rushes through my body. I know I'm home.

Las Palmas is the ninth most populous city in Spain, and yet it is often overlooked by visitors and tourists in favour of the sun-drenched beaches of the south. I don't blame them, as the island's microclimate means the capital's weather is changeable. While the south enjoys near constant sunshine, the central volcanic peaks are cold, and the north slopes are lush and verdant. But the city is where I'm starting my adventure this time.

As I head through the *afueras* (outskirts), I see that the world-famous port has expanded again, with multi-coloured shipping containers stacked like *Lego* bricks waiting to be loaded onto ships heading to the Americas. It's something that's happened here for centuries in some form or another, ever since Columbus set sail from the old port in his quest for the New World. He finally made land in The Bahamas in 1492. But more on that later.

It's time for me to check in. I've decided on a new boutique hotel in the city's old town, Triana. Housed in an old *palacito* (literally 'little palace', but actually a sort of grand townhouse), the *Hotel Cordial La Peregrina* lies just a few streets from where I used to live, and I can't wait to wander the cobbled *callejones* (alleyways) and see what's changed – and what delightfully hasn't.



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VEGUETA SEEMS THE BEST PLACE TO START, AS THAT'S WHERE THE MODERN CITY WAS FOUNDED IN 1478, by Juan Rejón. But the island didn't officially come under Spanish rule for another five years, because the original inhabitants (most often referred to as Guanches) put up a fierce fight to protect their homeland from the colonisers. The original port has long since disappeared and the land reclaimed for the main coastal road, but most of the historical district remains, including the imposing Cathedral de Santa Ana. In a familiar pattern for Spanish cathedrals, it was never completely finished. I decide to climb the bell tower to get a bird's-eye view over the city – a sprawling kaleidoscope of colours helped along by the painted houses of the San Juan district on the nearby hillside.

Back at street level, I head for the Canario Museum. It's not changed much in 15 years – a lack of funds, I would imagine – but it is the best place to learn about the Guanche people, their lives, and their brutal demise. It's thought that these original inhabitants were Berber tribes from North Africa who arrived on the island around the 5th century BCE and lived in relative isolation for nearly 2000 years before the Spanish arrived. If you visit the museum, don't miss the macabre anthropological room containing hundreds of Guanche skulls and skeletons.

Nearby is the Casa de Colón, or Columbus

Museum, where you can learn all about the explorer's voyages. I pop into the gift shop and buy a pop art-style print of the other end of the city, where its two beaches (Alcaravaneras and Las Canteras) almost kiss. I've always loved the architecture of the Colón Museum – the geometric yellow-and-white patterns, a nod perhaps to Guanche tribal symbols called *pintaderas*, and the balconies made of Canarian pine wood with their intricate privacy screens influenced by the Islamic Arabic customs of North Africa. The midday sun is taking its toll, so I take soothing respite in the Atlantic Centre of Modern Art, or CAAM, a strikingly stark contrast to the historical heart of the city.

IT'S TIME FOR LUNCH, AND I'M GRATEFUL AS I STROLL BACK DOWN THE GRAND TRIANA HIGH STREET that my favourite spot is still here, *Allende*. I order the *huevos estrellados con chistorra* and a glass of local Malvasia wine and sit in satisfied stupor. Then I amble down Calle Castillo, a wide avenue that runs the length of the city, following what would have been the route of 'La Pepa', the steam-powered tram that carried passengers before the *guaguas* (motor buses) came. Las Palmas was for a long time considered to have the best climate of any city in the world, thanks to its year-round temperate conditions. The streets have a quiet lull at this time of the day, with many still taking a siesta or enjoying long lunches before starting work again when the mercury has dropped. This all changes as I enter Parque Santa Catalina.

Once housing the warehouses for merchants for the nearby Puerto de La Luz, the square and buildings have now been turned into a science and technology museum as well as an events space.

This open public space is famous as the home of the Womad music festival and the heart of the island's annual carnival celebrations – the biggest outside Rio – where they crown no fewer than four carnival queens. Across the way, a giant cruise ship is in port, and the passengers are happily getting lost in the grid of streets between the port and Las Canteras, my next stop.

I can think of very few cities that can claim spectacular beaches, but Las Palmas is one of them. Las Canteras is a more than two-kilometre-long stretch of both golden and black volcanic sand protected by a natural rocky reef, meaning the water close to shore takes on a salty swimming pool-like quality. The northern end is still home to fishermen, while the southern tip near the Alfredo Kraus Opera House is popular with surfers who enjoy the frequent easy swells. On a clear day, you can see the peak of the Teide volcano – Spain's highest mountain – on the neighbouring island of Tenerife. While the two islands share many similar characteristics from geology to gastronomy, Gran Canaria always seems more intense, possibly due to its more compact size – it's about 500 square kilometres smaller – and Tenerife more extreme – it's a few million years younger and still volcanically active.

The beach is busy as I make my way along, passing elderly gentleman deep in conversation over a *cortado* (a short coffee with a little milk) or *leche y leche* (a cortado with condensed milk), ladies strolling the promenade arm in arm, children having their legs dusted of sand by sun-kissed parents, and table after table of people enjoying drinks and nibbles al fresco.

About halfway along, I veer off to the left to stumble out onto the city's main shopping street,

Mesa y López. This rather grand tree-lined boulevard has all the big brand names as well as two *El Corte Inglés* (the famous Spanish brand) department stores on either side of the road. I'm delighted to see that it's become more pedestrianised with a wonderful central walkway. I've been told the street behind has also had a similar treatment and is now a hub for restaurants – something that this part of town was always lacking – and waiters vie for my attention as I stroll down Calle Ruiz de Alda.

I can't dawdle too long, as I'm meeting friends for drinks on the rooftop of the *Hotel Santa Catalina*, one of the oldest and most-storied hotels in the archipelago. So, I head back down Calle Castillo and up the impressive driveway to the hotel. Originally designed by the British in 1890, the hotel has welcomed everyone from monarchs to Hollywood royalty. The grand dame has had a makeover in recent years, and I'm excited to be back and see what's been done. It's spectacular, with several new restaurants, including the *Michelin*-starred *Poemas*, a spa, and perhaps the coolest rooftop bar in the city – ideal for sundowners and nightcaps.

The *Hotel Santa Catalina* resides in Ciudad Jardín, one of the first developed parts of the city. It's now surrounded by houses and offices, but 100 years ago it would have been the biggest building in the neighbourhood. Across the street are the offices of the local council, which sit on the site of a former hotel where crime writer Agatha Christie is said to have penned more than one of her novels. Stepping out onto the hotel rooftop, I can see how residential the surrounding streets have stayed. To the right is the Pueblo Canario, a typical square inspired by classic Canarian architecture. There are folk concerts and dances here every week,



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with musicians often playing the *timple*, a small five-stringed guitar. Behind the hotel is the Parque Doramas that's named after a famous Guanche warrior. It's a serene urban garden with waterfalls, ponds, and palms.

There's live music tonight, the air is warm and fragrant, and I order a vermouth until my friends arrive, which comes with a little plate of nuts, corn, and jelly babies. The noise level increases at the arrival of my friends – mostly teachers I once worked with. Canarians are naturally friendly people, and a plethora of hugs, kisses, and backslaps ensues. After much nostalgia and several bottles of wine, I saunter back to my hotel in Triana. The streets are alive even nearing midnight. This island knows how to party, and people live their lives outside on the streets with friends and family.

IT'S SUNDAY, AND I'M IN THE CAR HEADING TO TEROR, A SMALL VILLAGE IN THE NORTH OF THE ISLAND where there's a weekly market around its enormous church dedicated to the island's patron saint, Nuestra Señora del Pino. It's busy with people buying fruit and vegetables, locally produced cheeses, and the town's famous *chorizo* – a soft pâté-like spread laced with paprika. I indulge with the locals, all of us trying to get our mouths around giant *bocadillos* (rolls) filled with the bright orange chorizo and *queso tierno* (soft, creamy fresh cheese).

There are a number of towns here dotted around the mountains that see their populations multiply on weekends, such as San Mateo and Arucas, where I'm bedding down for the night.

The *Hacienda del Buen Suceso* is an old, converted farmhouse retreat right in the middle of a banana plantation. Bananas have been grown on the island for more than a century – and it's due to the fruit cargo ships that docked in London that Canary Wharf got its name. I'm meeting Maria, a local tour guide at the hotel who's going to show me the island's new Ruta del Vino – a wine route that's a collaboration between vineyards, bodegas, restaurants, and bars to develop the island's oenological credentials.

We jump in the car with our driver, Fran, and head south to the Telde *barranco* (ravine) before climbing high onto the hillside to reach the family-run Señorío de Cabrera vineyard. Once known as Canary Sack or Malmsey, Canary Island wine was big business in the 16th century but then fell out of favour for a few hundred years. Thankfully, it's back in a big way, and many small producers, such as the affable and hospitable Cabrerias, are growing local or native varieties. Their semi-sweet Malvasía-Moscato blend is packed with exotic fruit flavours. They serve it to us with plates heaped with local hard cheese and bread. It was never their intention to start a vineyard, but they had a small plot of land and started growing vines alongside avocado trees and other tropical fruits, and it just kept going. Finally, the Cabrerias decided to start selling their wine commercially – before then, they had only ever made it for themselves, neighbours, and friends. Maria tells me to drink up, as we're off to our next stop, the Bodega San Juan.

I remember visiting the Bandama crater when I first moved here. It's an enormous dish of a volcano covered with vegetation – very exciting for geology and geography geeks like me. We're not here for the volcanoes, though. Instead, we're here for the vines, and we pull into the driveway of the Bodega. It's one of the oldest on the island, established in 1912, and on our tour we see the small museum with artefacts and photos of those early days of wine production. As we sit down on a sun-drenched terrace with a glass of vibrant red Listán Negro-Negramoll, I mention to Maria that I'm planning to cross the centre of the island tomorrow to do some hiking and end up in the arid south, which is more popular with tourists.

She explains the best route to take to see the main sights, such as the Roque Nublo – a huge monolithic rock that was sacred to the Guanches. I ask more about them, and on our way back we stop at Cenobio de Valeron, a warren-like grain store carved out of the volcanic rock. It was originally thought to be a burial site or catacombs, but modern thinking believes these caves were used as a community granary. I remember the story vaguely from visiting the Cueva Pintada Museum along the north coast in the town of Gáldar. This museum houses a perfectly preserved painted cave from the Guanche people. If you continue even further, you'll reach the Guanche burial ground of Maipés near Agaete, which provides a fascinating insight into Guanche culture.

An easy 1.5-kilometre trek leads to Roque Nublo from the main road at Degollada, and I'm glad I've chosen to get up early to avoid the midday sun. On a clear day you can see the peaks of Gran Canaria and Tenerife and look down into volcanic craters. But the *calima* (hot dusty winds that blow in across the ocean from the Sahara) can make visibility difficult, and as I see the haze roll in, I decide to head back down after marvelling at the surprisingly green landscape to go for lunch at the famous *Parador Cruz de Tejeda*. This



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hotel is a classic starting point for hikers, mountain bikers, ramblers, and cyclists looking to test their mettle on the diverse terrain around these parts. In recent years, Gran Canaria has become a training ground for many of the world's top athletes, thanks to the climate and terrain.

Like a phoenix, the *Parador* has risen from the ashes following several devastating forest fires over the past two decades, the most recent in 2019. What's miraculous is that the Canarian pine tree has evolved to resist fire, and the forests are flourishing again. I don't deliberate much over the menu as I sit at the neatly white-tableclothed table overlooking the mountain view, because I'm desperate to try the local specialties. First, the *gofio escaldón* (toasted flour mixed with fish stock and served with red onion 'spoons' and mint), and then *baifo* (slow-cooked goat shank).

Suitably sated, I take to the road again to drive the winding mountain roads towards the south. Thankfully, there are some small stopping points to snag photos and take in the majestic views – this is what they mean by the word 'breathtaking'. There are views for miles, and each way I look appears to be a painted landscape rather than a real one, even though I know the rust-coloured mountains and rock faces here are a natural as it gets.

As I drop in altitude, the traces of urban life start to creep in, and it's not long before I'm in the modern resorts of the south. The coast here is dotted with family-friendly beach spots that attract the majority of the island's nearly two million annual visitors. Many

of them flock to Maspalomas, one of the most famous sights on Gran Canaria, thanks to its undulating desert-like sand dunes. Go back before the 1960s, and those dunes were pretty much all you would have seen around here, apart from the elegant lighthouse that still stands on the seafront today, albeit surrounded by high-end hotels, restaurants, cafés, and bars.

Over the past 60 years, the resort has blossomed and now stretches from Meloneras in the west to Bahia Feliz in the east, and it's easy to see why. The swathes of golden sand are paradise for all sorts of travellers, from families wanting safe, clean beaches to thrill-seekers searching for adrenaline-pumping watersports. The area is also popular with LGBTQ+ travellers, and one of the biggest gay pride parades happens here, with celebrations centred around the Yumbo Centre in Playa del Inglés.

I park at the iconic *Hotel Riu Palace Maspalomas* that seems to hug the dunes, as I'm interested to take a walk through the hills of sand on the new dedicated walking routes. The Canarian government recently brought in strict new sustainability measures to stop the destruction of this natural ecosystem while still allowing visitors to enjoy the area. It'll take me about an hour to reach Meloneras, so I've stocked up on water, because the late afternoon heat can be intense.

There's something incredibly mystical about the dunes, the wave-like patterns in the sand, the craggy mountains I've just driven from in the distance, and the clusters of hardy desert plants defying the terrain. I reach the lighthouse and my legs wobble as I set foot on the solid pavement. Being this close to the sea means only one thing for lunch: fish. I order classic Canarian dishes, including *puntillas de calamar* (baby squid), pan-fried *cherne* (a local fish that's a bit like cod), and *papas arrugadas* (salty potatoes in their skins) with *mojo picón* (peppery, garlicky sauce). With the first slick of sauce on my taste buds, I'm 20 years old again and trying it for the very first time. It's nice to be home.

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Juan Carlos and Jonathan Padrón (aka Hermanos Padrón) are much-celebrated Canarian chefs. They grew up in Tenerife with cooking in their blood, as the sons of chefs Carlos Padrón and Ina León. Following the success of their two-Michelin-starred *El Rincón de Juan Carlos* on their native island, they decided to partner with *Barceló Hotels & Resorts* to launch *Poemas* at the *Santa Catalina*, a *Royal Hideaway Hotel* in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

Why did you decide to open your restaurant *Poemas* on Gran Canaria?
We'd worked with the *Royal Hideaway* brand on Tenerife for a while, and just before the pandemic, we moved our *El Rincón De Juan Carlos* restaurant to its *Corales Resort* property. When the brand took over the *Santa Catalina* hotel, it approached us to create a brand-new concept for the hotel, and we jumped at the chance – and *Poemas* was born.

While your food is international, you believe in using many local products to create your dishes. How do you come up with the menus?
While it's true that we don't cook or serve typical Canarian cuisine, we use many products from the islands as well as from other origins. We think our cuisine is unique; it's ours. All of our dishes are products of whatever comes out of our heads that we think is going to be interesting. Above all, what's important for us is the flavour, and using ingredients of the best-possible quality.

You're both from Tenerife, but you've spent a lot of time in Gran Canaria. What do you love about the island?
We like the vibe of the city of Las Palmas a lot. It probably has one of the most interesting and exciting culinary scenes in the country right now. While the city has a great cosmopolitan feel, with a beach like Las Canteras, you have the best of both worlds. The quality of life here is great. Plus, nature and the coast are both on your doorstep. We love walking along Las Canteras and also visiting the centre of the island, such as the towns Gáldar and Tejeda – and not forgetting the great beaches of the south.

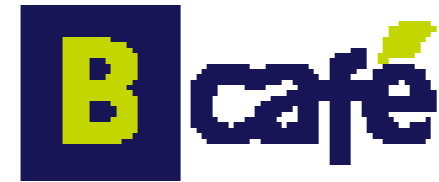
Where do you go to eat in Gran Canaria?

We love *1890 La Bodeguita*, which is also in the *Hotel Santa Catalina*. Also, *Tabaiba* by chef Abraham Ortega. It serves forward-thinking food with a sustainable ethos. Oh, and *De Contrabando*, a 1920s-styled spot that serves a fusion menu mainly of South American and Southeast Asian food with a zero-kilometre philosophy.

Are there any exciting new restaurants/bars/café that you want to visit?
There are always new places opening, but we're keen to try *Pikza*, a cool new pizza-and-wine place in Las Palmas. *Triciclo* in Vegueta has also been on our list for a while. It serves creative tapas dishes and has been really popular since opening.

How do you think Gran Canaria and Las Palmas as a gastronomic city have changed over the last few years?
They've certainly developed hugely. The city and the island have achieved such a good level in variety, quality, and service over the last few years. We always enjoy being in the city and on the island. There's always a surprise, something different, a new space or concept. It's a joy to see how all the restaurants and bars fill up every day with people wanting good food and drink.

What's next for *Poemas*?
A restaurant like *Poemas* never stops evolving. At this level, if you don't evolve, you can die. In 2023, we're going to introduce new dishes to our tasting menu, as we do each year, but we don't want to give the game away yet about what you can expect. We believe that a restaurant should maintain the element of surprise as much as possible for each guest who comes to enjoy the experience. So, you'll have to visit to find out!



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