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On having it all

GRAN CANARIA

A hiker's paradise

HAVE A MAGICAL DAY!

How to do Disney

PLUS CITY GUIDES TO MALAGA, MUNICH, MILAN

Step this way

Winter sun is wonderful but the glory of walking in Gran Canaria's mountains, says **Matthew Hirtes**, is even better. Photographs by **Marcos de Rada**.

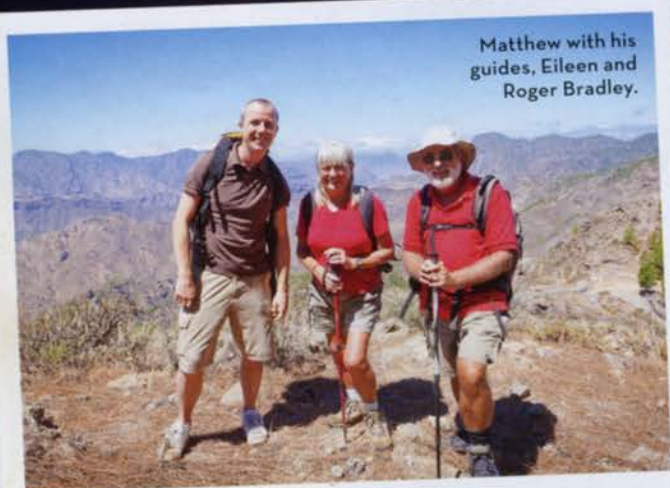


Think Gran Canaria, think sunning yourself on the beach and working on *that* tan. Think again. For, located almost 60-kilometres north of the world-famous Playa del Inglés, lies Artenara – which promotes itself as the *Cumbre de la Naturaleza* (Nature's Summit). Although, given the contrast between the dry and arid Playa del Inglés and the verdant **Artenara**, you'd assume you were in another time zone altogether.

We're here to hike, and meet our husband-and-wife guide team, Roger (aka Rambling Roger) and Eileen Bradley, outside the pretty

whitewashed *Iglesia de San Matías*, the village of Artenara's main church. Roger, author of *Don't Leave Gran Canaria Without Seeing It – 25 Great Hikes*, rebukes me gently for not wearing a hat as, despite Artenara being the loftiest village on the island, at 1,270 metres high, its sun still shines brilliantly. He's appeased, however, when I point out I've applied plenty of sun cream. We're in July after all and hiking off season – the great outdoors here is usually enjoyed during the cooler months of October though to March.

Yet when photographer Marcos and I set out earlier from Las



Matthew with his guides, Eileen and Roger Bradley.

Marcos talks of “micro-climates” and, true to his prediction, the clouds of Moya in the north of the island give way to bright light when we enter the western outpost of Artenara.

Palmas, it was raining, which prompted me to pack my mac. Not for nothing is Gran Canaria known as a mini-continent. Marcos talks of “micro-climates” and, true to his prediction, the clouds of Moya in the north of the island give way to bright light when we enter the western outpost of Artenara. Later on, Roger will tell me, “there’s as much an east-west divide climate-wise as a north and south one. Whilst the temperature is hotter in the south than the north, the west is generally clearer than the east.” This is especially true in the months of June, July and August. Summer is the season of the *panza de burro*, the donkey’s belly, an oppressive cloud which envelops the city of Las Palmas and surrounding area.

Roger explains that we’re going to start our day’s walking with his short Artenara circle, a two-hour trek which, he points out, is “actually more a figure of eight” – once a

maths teacher, always a maths teacher (Roger worked in the UK as one). During our walk and talk, Roger reveals himself to be a mine of information about the island. Using his walking stick to point out interesting sights as much as to steady his footing, he reveals: “I’m not known as Rambling Roger because I like to hike but ...” as he takes a rare pause for breath, Eileen completes the sentence for him, “... because you don’t half go on.”

“Matthew, he’s watching you,” says Roger, wheeling around and wielding his stick, high above his head, back in the direction we’ve come from. Perplexed, I turn to see a mini version of Rio de Janeiro’s legendary art-deco Christ statue. Nonetheless, it’s still tall enough to dwarf the sightseers gathering below.

TAKEAWAY

Although beer (Tropical) and local wine (full-blooded reds and dry whites) are popular beverages, the national drink is undoubtedly a *cubata*, a rum and coke. Pick up a bottle of Arehucas Carta Oro at any local supermarket or after a free tour at the Destilerías Arehucas, Arucas’s rum factory; arehucas.es.

Roger is on a mission to help boost Gran Canaria’s status as a hiking destination for the Brits and their neighbours across the Irish Sea, arguing that if the Scandinavians and Germans come over in great numbers as eco-travellers, why shouldn’t those from the UK and Ireland too. In the introduction to his walking book,

Roger claims, “the great attraction of hiking on Gran Canaria is the tremendous variety of walks on such a relatively small island”.

He believes the interest in hiking is due to a shift in what tourists want. “People are retiring earlier. They’re able to engage in more active breaks. Lying on a beach all day soon gets tiresome, so they want to see more of what the island offers.”



We're walking along one of the *caminos reales*, made just wide enough for a farmer to be able to travel with his donkey and cart.

The heart of Gran Canaria remains an unexplored oasis for most visitors. Roger shares the story of a successful Irish businessman who had been coming to the island for his holidays for 20 years. He was unaware of the hiking routes until he went on a tour with Roger and Eileen. It was a real eye-opener for him and he has become what they call in the trade "a repeat client".

Roger delights in showing me new signposts: "If we were here twelve months ago, you would see the area was less hiker-friendly as they simply didn't exist." We're walking along one of the *caminos reales*, royal pathways built after the Spanish invasion of the late 15th century. They were made just wide enough for a farmer to be able to travel with his donkey and cart. The paths were also used to make pilgrimages. Today, like the more famous one in Galicia, Gran Canaria boasts its own 60-kilometre *Camino de Santiago*, extending from Maspalomas to Galdar, and taking in the shrine of Santiago in Tunte.

We head off the beaten track,

Top, the Artenara circle walk along a section of the *caminos reales*; centre, a lone sheep encountered on the descent; left, the mountain peaks are visible in the distance.



however, for our first water break. A clearing opens out into a natural *mirador*, or viewing point. It's easy to make out the emblematic **Roque Nublo** (Rock in the Clouds) and the beautifully preserved **Tamadaba** pine forest.

The avuncular Roger turns history professor. "See *Roque Bentayga* there. That's where *Bentejui*, the last of the *Guanartemes* (aboriginal kings) retreated to with his men. They threw stones and boulders over the advancing Spanish soldiers. But when the soldiers kept on coming, they withdrew southward to the crags of Tirajana. Here they launched themselves off the cliffs rather than surrender."

The lecture continues: "Matthew, what do you think that large white building with the pink roof is?" Momentarily lost for words, I can't even hazard a guess. Roger answers for me: "It's a school. Contrary to what many people say, the dictator Franco wasn't all bad. He built many rural schools because he felt education should be available to all. Now he might have wanted people to be able to read more so they could better understand his propaganda, but most children in such isolated areas had gone uneducated before Franco."

Before we return to the *camino real*, Roger wants to point out one last thing. "Look down there, those

EAT AT ...

El Puertillo (0034 928 62 75 37; Paseo Marítimo del Puertillo 12) located above the beach of the same name on the ruggedly charming north coast is a popular draw – not least for the welcoming hospitality provided by the Hormiga family. As well as the freshest fish, there are any number of vegetarian dishes including *croquetas de gofio y berros*, toasted cornflour and watercress croquettes, *paella vegetariana* and *papas arrugadas*, boiled baby potatoes cooked in salty water served with *mojo*, a piquant sauce typically prepared with cumin, coriander, parsley and olive oil.

When in Triana, the main shopping street in Las Palmas, make your way to **La Alquitara** (0034 928 38 49 59; Calle Domingo J Navarro 9). Ignore the tacky Chinatown-style pictures of food which "adorn" the restaurant's exterior. The tasting menu, lovingly crafted by head chef and owner Emilio J Cabrera López, is one of the most imaginative on the island and if you

can't find a decent wine to accompany it, you're obviously not looking hard enough – given that there are 1,200 labels to choose from.

STAY AT ...

The four-star rural hotel **La Hacienda del Buen Suceso** (0034 928 62 29 45; Carretera Bañaderos, Km 1), despite its location next to a working banana plantation, provides a chance to get away from it all. Unless they're hosting a wedding that is, which tends to disturb the tranquillity like somebody rippling the water of a fishbowl. With just 18 bedrooms, the Hacienda combines comfort and elegance to winning effect.

A modernist triumph nestling in a natural mountain setting, the five-star **Sheraton Salobre** (0034 928 94 30 00 Urbanización Salobre Golf SN, Maspalomas) offers a respite far from the madding crowd. Aloe vera is native to this island and widely considered to be a wonder herb for its healing properties. The Aloe-vera wrap is the signature treatment at the Sheraton's spa.

DANCE AT ...

Vegueta is the oldest part of Las Palmas but at night it attracts the young and the young-at-heart who flood its numerous bars and clubs. For a more relaxed option, head out of town to **Las Brujas** (lasbrujas.net) in Barranco Seco, a converted 16th-century mansion, which is a joy to tour – drink in hand.

Dress to impress at Ibiza's finest export, **Pacha** in Playa del Inglés (pachagrancanaria.com), haunt of the beautiful people. Open until daybreak, it's the hippest club on the island and the place to hear the latest and greatest banging house tunes.

WALK WITH ...

Headwater offers week-long walking holidays from January to April, exploring the mountainous interior of Gran Canaria. For rates, contact 01 295 8901; headwater.com.

For guided or independent walking holidays, **Island Adventures** runs week-long holidays in Gran Canaria, from £569pp, including accommodation, meals and transport. 0044 208 123 3917; island-adventures.co.uk.

ESCAPE



At a glance

CLIMATE An all-year-round resort, there's no bad time to visit Gran Canaria, which explains why it's also known as the "Island of Eternal Spring". Summers (from May to November) are hot and dry with average temperatures in the mid-20°C (mid-70°F), while the Sirocco blowing in from the Sahara can push temperatures up to 30°C (80°F). Winters (from December to April) are slightly cooler and more showery, and temperatures average 22°C (70°F). Gran Canaria attracts scores of visitors from Northern Europe in the months leading up to and following Christmas.

BEST TIME TO WALK Guides Roger and Eileen Bradley advise: "The south of Gran Canaria is best walked in the winter, roughly November to Easter, the north is best walked from February to June, when there is an abundance of blossom and wild flowers."

WHAT TO WEAR Conditions can be changeable, so pack a hat, sunblock, a map, water, a snack, and wear sturdy walking shoes.

are the **Acusa** caves. Now they formed a settlement in the year 500 AD. That's 500 years before William the Conqueror."

We come across some fruit trees gone wild. "Fig," says Eileen. "Avocado?" I venture. Roger corrects me: "I thought so too. It's actually walnut. Took me ages to get my hands clean after cutting it in half. No wonder it makes such an effective wood stain."

We end up above Artenara, literally on top of its celebrated cave houses inhabited by modern-day Flintstones, albeit with all mod cons. "We're walking on people's bedrooms here," Roger says. "Traditionally, the living quarters were built at the front and the sleeping areas at the back under where we are now."

Stopping for lunch next to the **Ermida de la Virgen de La Cueva**, a chapel dug into a cliff-face 400 metres above the village centre, I make a *faux pas*, not my first false step as I'd wobbled a few times on the descent, but my first verbal one. "Would anyone like a beer?" "No, I never do on the job, Matthew," says Roger. He then tells an anecdote about a Scandinavian couple he hiked with who shocked him and Eileen by removing smoked salmon and champagne from their rucksack as part of an al fresco banquet.

Our next detour takes us past **Panaderia Artenara**, a

bakery specialising in the local *pan de papas* (potato bread) and to the state-run **La Silla** for a loo break. "It's the toilet with the best vista in the world," says Roger. After making our way through the unlit cave entrance, we reach a beautiful sun terrace. And I can confirm the loo is certainly a room with a view.

Next, we head to **Barranco Honda** (*barranco* means ravine) and more cave houses built into the side of a ravine. Our tour ends outside the *barranco's* small ethnographical museum, an attraction Roger and

Eileen claim never to have seen open – unlike the quaint tourist information office in Artenara where "you're free to summon Jenny away from her computer in the cave during office hours". Eileen gives us a leaving present of plums from the garden of their Fataga *finca* that we eagerly devour, as much to rehydrate as anything else. This hiking lark is thirsty work. 🍷

To order Roger's book, *Don't Leave Gran Canaria Without Seeing It - 25 Great Hikes*, or to get a quote for a guided tour, log onto ramblingroger.com.

BEST MAP?

According to walking guide Roger Bradley, the best visual guide to walking in Gran Canaria is the map by Kompass, No 0237, which covers the whole island, with a scale of 1:50,000. £8.50 at mapsworldwide.com.



Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Las Palmas Tue, Thurs and Sat and from Belfast to Las Palmas on Mon and Fri.