

TRIP 24: LA GOMERA AND LA PALMA

La Gomera and La Palma are two of the less-visited Canary Islands, especially by the lager-seeking tourists of Tenerife and Lanzarote. Along with the other western isle of El Hierro, they are as favoured by hikers as by beach-bunnies. This is partly down to climate (more rain and wind as they are more exposed to the Atlantic) and partly down to geography (more hills and deep valleys and fewer, if any, sandy beaches). I omitted El Hierro because it was hard to plan trails that ended in somewhere to stay and because it looked a bit boring when compared with the other two. I visited in March 2019 when the temperature is a pleasant 22C or so for hiking and the spring flowers have started to appear – not that they really have a winter in the Canaries. Forget about hiking in the high summer – it's just too hot.

Places to stay are cheap by mainland European standards but I think apartments are a better bet than rooms in pensions which don't have cooking facilities. The best guides to hiking are the Discovery Walking Guides by Charles Davis (referred to as 'Davis' from now on) called 'Walk! La Gomera' and 'Walk! La Palma'. The Rother guides are good, too. These guides have good maps and a better selection of walks that suit my taste than the Cicerone guides. The Kompass 231 map 'La Gomera' (2018) and the Freytag & Berndt WKE 2 map 'La Palma' (2019), both 1:30,000, were perfectly adequate for hiking. More detail is not needed, especially with the maps in Davis.

LA GOMERA

La Gomera is not gentle walking, unless you choose your trails very carefully. It's basically a volcanic core, centred on the highest point, Garajonay, with deep valleys ('barrancos') radiating out from it down to the coast, with steep ridges in between. There's no such thing as a coastal plain; even the airport runway is perched on a shelf 200m above the shore. Surprisingly, many of the flatter trails are on the Garajonay Plateau at the top of the island – the only exceptions I know of are parts of my trails 237 & 238. My favourite place to stay was Vallehermoso – not too big and not too small and well-connected by bus. There's also a really good place to stay there: Hostal Casa Amaya – check it out online. There are hotels at Imada and Chipude (only one in each as far as I could see) and others to choose from in Vallehermoso.

My five trails take you from near the southern coast, up to Garajonay, and down to the northern coast, covering what I consider to be the best bits of La Gomera. However, there are plenty of others to look at in Davis. Here's a map showing you the location of my trails:



Photo 7: the trail goes down from Targa then up the PR LG 15 to Imada; copyright: Kompass map 231, 2018; www.kompass.de



Photo 33: San Sebastian from the ferry



Photo 35: Mount Teide and San Sebastian



Photo 39: Targa



Photo 40: flowers in Targa



Photo 41: the left turn after Targa



Photo 43: the path going down



Photo 42: the view from the top



Photo 44: the view back up to the top



Photo 46: a steep section of the paved path

However, the arduous descent is not without interest, particularly if, like me, you are new to the Canaries and their vegetation (Photos 47, 49, 52, 53 & 57).





Photos 53, 57: the top and bottom of this protuberance that you see everywhere.

Towards the bottom you cross what Davis calls a ‘canal’ (Photo 55) but not a canal as you might find in England or Venice but a shallow irrigation channel, called a ‘levada’ in Madeira. About here is where you get your first full view of the Barranco de Guarimiar, up which you have to climb (Photo 61). Also about here, the vegetation becomes more lush with many more palm trees and trees in blossom (Photos 62, 63).



Photo 55: ‘levada’



Photo 61: Barranco de Guarimiar



Photo 62: blossom



Photo 63: a lush side-valley

After a well-earned rest around the village of Guarimiar, start climbing. After about 1k, you cross the 'levada' again and come to a cliff-path which, since Davis (2013) has been protected for most of its length by a rope fence (Photos 65, 67, 68, 69, 71 & 72).



An unprotected bit of the path

The final bit in retrospect

A steeper climb follows until you reach a left turn where the map shows a view-point. The reason is that you get your first, very welcome, sight of Imada up ahead (Photo 73) and a retrospective view down the barranco towards the distant sea with the cliff-face to your right. However, this latter view didn't come out well on my camera (too hazy and distant) and anyway I preferred the view from the next corner:



Photo 73: Imada from the view-point

“Last Major Corner before Imada”

Here the distinctive Roque de Imada has come into view, completing the cirque of mountain-tops around the sunny uplands of Imada (Photo 75); across the barranco, you have the usual mixture of cacti and palms, flourishing even at 700m; the view down the barranco is cut off by the previous corner, while above you the rocky peak of Casanueva rises into the 1,000m mist (Photo 80). I had chosen to stay in Imada because of the great pictures in guide-books and its situation does not disappoint: it must be a contender for “most beautiful village in La Gomera”.



Photo 80: Casanueva from my spot



Photo 75: Imada from my spot, with Roque de Imada on the left

But don't get carried away: you may have sighted your destination but you still have 1½k to go. These proved to be the hardest of the trail for me, partly because they are surprisingly steep, partly because Imada looked so near but was frustratingly far and partly because I was very tired. I only took one photo because nothing improved on those I had already taken (Photo 81)



Photo 81: approaching Imada in the evening

However, here's one from the next day, once the morning mist and rain had cleared (Photo 92) and a picture which gives you an artistic impression of rural life in Imada (Photo 85).



Photo 92: Imada and Roque de Imada from my room



This trail is not an introduction to the delights of La Gomera. Even Davis, who seems like a strong walker from his timings, says, “In this strenuous circuit, we use two of the most impossible paths you’re likely to encounter anywhere, one dropping down (I use the phrase advisedly) from Targa into the barranco, the other climbing to Imada. Not to be missed, unless you suffer from vertigo” (p 51). That was enough to convince me to try it but it was tougher than I had bargained for.

Photo 85: picture in my room

235: Imada – Garajonay – Chipude

I thought this trail would be the highlight of my trip to La Gomera but it turned out otherwise, largely due to the pervading cloud-cover that sat on Garajonay all day. This is not unusual as Garajonay is the highest point on the island at 1484m but doesn't stick out above the frequent clouds, as does Mount Teide on Tenerife and Roque de los Muchachos on La Palma. So views were in short supply after I left the cirque around Imada, as you will see. The trail is a combination of parts of Walks 11 and 17 in Davis.



Photo 8: copyright: Kompass map 231, 2018; www.kompass.de

First off, there's a very steep climb out of Imada over the cirque of mountains seen in Photo 75 – and not over the lowest point, either (Photo 97). The slog is alleviated by wondrous views over Imada right down Barranco de Guarimiar to the coast (the sea was visible but does not show on my Photo 96). On the way, you come to “a rocky spur crossed by a metal water pipe” (Davis, p 56), which is my only spot of the day:



Photo 97: the steep climb up the cirque



Photo 96: from just above Imada

“Rocky Spur above Imada”

This spot is about two-thirds the way up from Imada and provides a panorama of the cirque and the valley below. I didn’t go to the end of the spur as it was so windy that I could hardly stand up and hold my camera steady enough to take in-focus shots and there was a perpendicular drop on one side (Photos 98, 99).



Photo 98: the spur and the valley



Photo 99: the view west

The wind from the north was so strong that I took 1½ hours to reach the top, whereas Davis came down from the top in 30 minutes. The reward for my efforts was this view from the top (Photo 104) but I didn’t make it my spot since, as I have said several times before on this website, I prefer views from half-way up mountains than views from the top – as do many professional photographers. You are now at about 1100m, above the height of the Roque de Imada at 1079m. So you are not quite half-way in height from Imada to the top of Garajonay but from now on the going will be easier.



Photo 104: from the view-point at the top of the Imada cirque

There follows a trudge – in my case a very windy and misty trudge – up to and along the road from Alajero to the bus stop at Pajarito, just to the east of Garajonay (bus stops are marked ‘H’ on the map). Why not take the bus you may ask? Do I really need to answer that question to a fellow-hiker? In case I do, that would destroy the whole point of treading the trail. At the turn-off for Igualero, the highest village on La Gomera, turn left to the first corner and then take the track on the right that climbs the ridge (Photos 105, 106).



Photo 105: the start of the ridge



Photo 106: the ridge enters the mist

When you come to the track that goes round beneath the top of Garajonay, don’t take it, especially if it’s cloudy as you won’t see anything and it’s a long way round to reach the two access points to the top. Instead, give yourself a mild adventure and turn left for about 50m and take the path forking right diagonally up the hillside (Photos 107, 108). Davis calls this “a broad trail climbing through mixed woodland” (p 75) but I’d suggest adding “that turns into a narrow path through mixed undergrowth” (the difference between 2013 and 2019). Judge for yourself with some flowers on the way (Photos 111, 113, 114, 115 & 116).



Photo 107: the start of the path



Photo 108: a bit further along



Photo 111: quite a common flower

Photo 113: the biggest dandelion you ever saw? (my 3ft walking pole for comparison)



Photo 114: dense undergrowth on the path



Photo 115: another common flower



Photo 116: probably the densest bit of (flowery) undergrowth on the path

After half an hour feeling like a Victorian explorer in the jungle, I reached the higher access point for Alto Garajonay, the very top of the island. Wooden steps guide your way to the top, accompanied by some different flowers (Photo 117). Several other hikers were milling around the top platform, waiting for a cloud-clearance but there was only one while I was there (20 minutes) and it was so brief that I didn't get my camera out in time. Anyway, here's the proof that I was there, featuring some faintly interesting prehistory (Photos 120, 121 & 122).



Photo 117: by the path to the top



Photo 120: the top platform

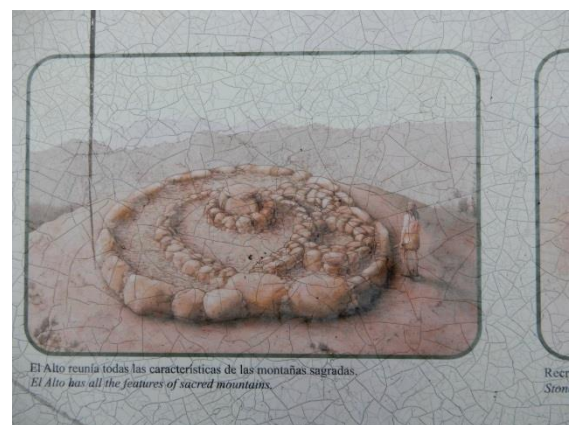


Photo 121: how it may have looked



Photo 122: how the original Gomerans may have used the place

Now you can take the easy access route down on a paved track at the opposite side of the top from where you entered. This takes you to the track that goes round beneath the top of Garajonay, where you turn left, although Chipude is not mentioned on the signpost (Photo 123). After about 100m, Chipude is mentioned and you fork right on a continuation of the paved track. This paving stays with you, intermittently, down to a cross-roads beneath Cruz de Maria (Photo 125).



Photo 123: the left turn for Chipude

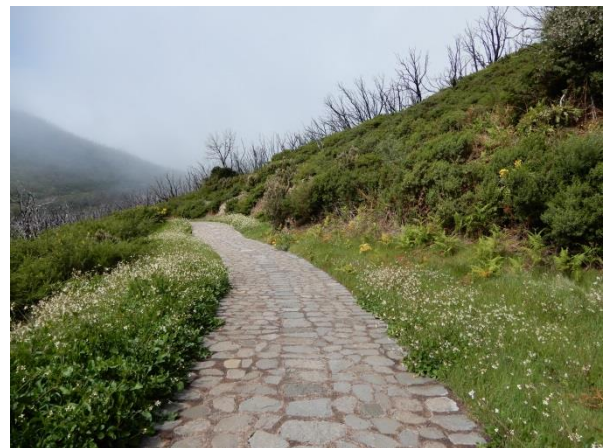


Photo 125: the paved track

This area of the Parque Nacional de Garajonay is being regenerated after an extensive fire a few years ago and the undergrowth is coming along nicely (Photo 126). A butterfly, similar to the one I was chasing during trail 221, Nivolet, alighted just in front of me (Photo 130).



Photo 126: regeneration of the undergrowth



Photo 130: obliging butterfly

At the Cruz de Maria cross-roads, things get tricky due to inadequate signage. The Kompass map, and Davis, both show a path from the cross-roads down towards Chipude via Casas de los Manantiales. I couldn't see this path and turned left on the road, signposted Chipude. After about 200m, I came to another choice-point where a track turned backwards on the right, signposted "Chipude 1.8". Clearly, the road also led to Chipude by a different route. I still had a little energy left so I chose the Chipude 1.8 track, guessing that it led to the Manantiales path, which it did round the first corner, except that Chipude was now 2.6 ! This is not the first time signs seem to have been put in the wrong place (it also happens on the Targa-Imada trail).

Predictably, at the end of my day, the Manantiales path turned out to be harder than I had bargained for: the track soon deteriorated into a path on a downward traverse across a hillside above a valley of terraces. Some of the rocky steps were between 6 inches and 12 inches deep. Anyway, here are the photos as I emerged from the cloud-cover (Photos 131, 133, 143, 135 & 136). The only thing to watch out for is to take the paved path by the rather fetching village sign in photo 133.



Photo 131: the downward traverse



Photo 133: village sign



Photo 143: coming down to Los Manantiales



Photo 135: arty composition



Photo 136: Los Manantiales from below

Then you climb a ridge diagonally (Photo 137) and I cast a frustrated look back up the valley into the cloud-cover (Photo 138). The path is now liberally sprinkled with little lilac flowers (Photo 139). At the top of the ridge, you get your first sight of Chipude on the next ridge (Photo 140). Crossing the intervening cultivated valley, I noticed this poppy in a wall, judiciously protected by wire netting (Photo 141). The descent into Chipude on another paved road vouchsafes a splendid view of La Forteleza, Chipude's tutelary mountain (Photo 142).



Photo 137: going up the ridge



Photo 138: looking back up the valley



Photo 139: lilac flowers on the path



Photo 140: first sight of Chipude



Photo 141: protected poppy



Photo 142: La Forteleza from Chipude

So, all in all, this trail was a disappointment after the top of the Imada cirque but on a clear day, I'm guessing it would be majestic. Of the Garajonay –Chipude trail, Davis says, “the route is exposed, so can be a bit hot and dusty, but by the same token the views are consistently good” (p 74). If only....

236: Chipude – Vallehermoso

This is a long trail across the highlands just outside the Garajonay National Park through three villages, then up into woodland around the watershed of the island and down a ridge into the Vallehermoso Valley – about 12k on the map but probably more like 14k with all the ups & downs and twists & turns not shown on the map. I advise setting out early so that you can take your time with the taxing descent from the watershed ridge at 1100m down to Vallehermoso at 200m. The whole route is on the GR131, a long-distance trail from San Sebastian to Vallehermoso Beach.



Photo 9: copyright: Kompass map 231, 2018; www.kompass.de

Starting from Chipude's main square (Photo 144), you cross a shallow valley (Photo 177) to El Cercado (Photo 178). Then you cross a much deeper valley, more of a ravine, with a great view down into Valle Gran Rey (Photo 150). Some respite is provided by a fairly level walk into Las Hayas with some pleasant scenes by the path (Photos 152, 153 & 154).



Photo 144: Chipude Square from my room



Photo 177: Chipude and La Forteleza



Photo 178: El Cercado



Photo 152: the path into Las Hayas



Photo 150: Valle Gran Rey



Photo 153: flower by the path



Photo 154: a garden in Las Hayas

Finding your way out of Las Hayas, you climb into what I'm guessing is the much-touted laurasilva forest in the Garajonay National Park (Photo 156) with glimpses of farmland to your left (Photo 155). Now there's a 2½k slightly uphill walk through woodland to the road which runs along the watershed ridge; you pass a handy set of picnic tables at Las Creces. If you want, you can catch a bus to Vallehermoso from here but there are only two buses a day at about 8.30 and 14.00 (line 4).



Photo 156: laurasilva forest (I think)



Photo 155: high farmland (over 1000m)

Davis covers the rest of the trail in the same direction as me (Walk 27). Of the first few hundred metres, he says, "After strolling along a level path through lichen-frosted laurel with fine views over Vallehermoso..." (p 108). Well, there's only one view now, right at the start (Photo 158), then it's paths on a ledge with no views for a while (Photo 160). At one bend, I stopped for a rest and a butterfly came and landed on the brim of my cap. As I got out my camera, it flew away, of course, but I caught it against the sky (Photos 161, 162).

After a lot of downward steps on steep hairpin bends, you reach a notice-board that explains about 'La Meseta de Vallehermoso' (the Vallehermoso Plateau) that you are walking through. My photo is in the direction of Alto de Garajonay and shows what the uplands of the National Park look like (Photo 164).



Photo 158: Vallehermoso from the start of the trail down from the watershed ridge



Photo 160: ledge path with no views



Photo 161: butterfly



Photo 162: butterfly close-up



Photo 164: Garajonay upland plateau

Then it's more steep downhill slog until you reach the respite of a brief level ridge. There are lots of cacti (mainly prickly pear) by the path but also some outsize succulents when compared to those on offer in the UK (Photo 165). After more tortuous descent, you are allowed another view of Vallehermoso (Photo 167) just before reaching a crucial choice-point (Photo 168).



Photo 165: large succulent



Photo 168: crucial choice-point



Photo 167: second view of Vallehermoso with Roque Cano now more prominent

The signpost points right for the GR131, which has been re-routed from the path shown on my 2018 map, and says 'Vallehermoso 3.8k'. The track to the left is the previous route for the GR131, now signposted 'Vallehermoso por Lomo del Corte 2.6k' on a separate, less obvious, signpost. No contest in my state of exhaustion so I turned left down the winding track with, mercifully, no steps. You pass cultivated terraces (Photo 170) before joining a proper road at Los Chapines. I was glad I didn't turn right as I was told later that the new GR131 has an initial steep descent and then actually goes uphill again after passing a reservoir.

The road into Vallehermoso provides ever-changing views of Roque Cano (Photo 171) and Vallehermoso itself (Photo 173) and a retrospect up to the highlands (Photo 172).



Photo 170: terraces from the track down



Photo 171: Roque Cano from the road down



Photo 173: Vallehermoso from the road



Photo 172: back up to the highlands

I was struck by some old terraces on a very steep hillside showing the tenacity of what were once subsistence farmers (Photo 175). No spots on this trail for reasons obvious in my description. The best spot was journey's end in the main square of Vallehermoso (Photo 179) but for a more mundane reason: relief at having made it after almost 9 hours on the trail.



Photo 175: steep terraces



Photo 179: square in Vallehermoso

237: Vallehermoso – Epina

After straining my knees, calves and thighs coming down to Vallehermoso from the watershed, I wanted to go up something. So I reversed my plan to catch a bus to Epina and walk along to Arguamul and then down to Vallehermoso. The climb up from Vallehermoso to Arguamul was surprisingly easy (relatively speaking) with only one ball-breaking stretch where you can see zig-zags on the map.



Photo 12: the coast is off to the left; copyright: Kompass map 231, 2018; www.kompass.de



Photo 181: bamboo on the path



Photo 182: big fat palm tree

Setting off at dawn (7.00 am), as my bus from Epina was at 14.00, I had the trail to myself. There's not a lot to say about the climb to Arguamul that my photos don't show. It's the first part of Davis, Walk 29, if you want directions or unnecessary details. Here are the outstanding moments from my perspective (Photos 180, 181, 182 & 183).



Photo 183: large succulents in a wall

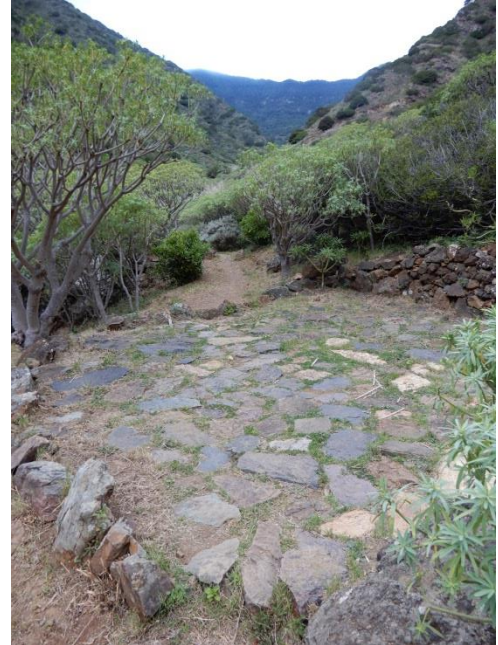


Photo 180: a 'threshing floor'

After the steep climb, according to Davis, "the trail levels out alongside wooden railings, from where we have superb views of the coast and Tenerife" (p 114). Here's the view in question: down towards Playa de Vallehermoso but no Tenerife, still clouded over at 9.30 am (Photo 184) – and the railings, since 2013, have been replaced by a stout fence. In fact, workers were working on the steep part of the path as I was passing but they had parked their cars at the top of the path and walked down. Said top is a small plateau, graced or disfigured, according to your point of view, by the Ermita de Santa Clara (Photo 185), from where you get great views along the coast to the west (Photo 186).



Photo 184: down to Playa de Vallehermoso



Photo 185: Ermita de Santa Clara



Photo 186: view along the north-west coast from Ermita de Santa Clara

It was not difficult to find my preferred spot:

“By the Fence next to the Barbecue Hut behind the Ermita de Santa Clara”

The open-sided barbecue hut has picnic tables beside it and a sandy ridge just above it with a wooden fence. From there you get the best all-round views (Photos 188, 194). The shaded tables are the obvious place to take a prolonged break after your sweaty efforts climbing up from the valley floor.



Photo 188: looking south



Photo 194: the barbecue hut & picnic tables

Davis says, “The track NE to Chiguere leads to a dramatic descent: it also leads to some of the driest land on a dry island and a dull slog up the Playa de Vallehermoso road” (p 114). Didn’t much like the sound of that - I could see the terrain on the way up - and anyway I wanted to catch the bus down. Fortunately, a balcony track going south 200m below a high ridge separated me from the bus stop.

By now the weather had perked up a bit so the views down to the coast were terrific and I even got glimpses of El Hierro to the south-west. However, La Palma to the north-west was covered in cloud all day. The first part of the track, as far as the turn-off for Tazo (about 2k) is easy, slightly downhill walking with good views of the Baja de los Roques (Photo 198), the fern-covered slopes by the track (Photo 199) and the ridge leading down to the Punta del Peligio (Photo 206).



Photo 198: Baja de los Roques



Photo 199: slopes by the track



Photo 206: Punta del Peligio



Photo 205: lichen by the track

As you round the big corner below Montana de la Caldera, you get your first view of the stunning landscape that will accompany you for the rest of the trail. The views are even better at the next corner:

“Second Bend in the Track above Tazo”

By now the whole landscape has opened up below you all the way to Alojera (Photo 212), together with views up to the ridge (Photo 215) and ahead to your destination (Photo 216). This was my favourite view in La Gomera, so much so that I took a bus ride down to Alojera later on to have a closer look.



Photo 212: Tazo is below right and Alojera is in the centre distance



Photo 215: tufty mounds and ridge above



Photo 216: trail ends on 2nd hill from right



After the Tazo turn-off, the remaining 4k are steadily uphill, but not unpleasantly so (Photo 218), especially with slowly changing views of the landscape just shown. As you round the last corner, you can see down the valley in which Epina rests, past two wind turbines to the coast around Playa de Alojera (Photo 219).

Photo 218: the track comes up the hill to the right



Photo 219: view down towards Playa de Alojera, Epina to the left

Then you reach a tarmac road on the ridge where the way ahead is not clear from the map or Davis's description: if you want to walk down to Vallehermoso, turn sharp left on a track; if you want to walk to Epina for some reason, turn right; but if you want a drink at Chorros de Epina bar (and restaurant - Photo 221), turn left on the road overlooking the Vallehermoso Valley (Photo 220) and turn right at the junction about 200m along.



Photo 220: Vallehermoso Valley



Photo 221: Chorros de Epina bar

After a beer and an ice-cream, I realised that, instead of catching the line 4 bus back to Vallehermoso at 14.00 from outside the bar, I could catch the line 5 bus at 13.50 to Playa de Alojera from the junction and go straight back to Vallehermoso from there. So I did and here are the photos, all taken from the bus so quality is variable (Photos 226 – 249).



Photo 226: Alojera



Photo 229: in the middle of Alojera



Photo 237: Playa de Alojera



Photo 238: Playa de Alojera



Photo 239: overview of Alojera



Photo 240: typical house - I liked the colours

I loved the ‘balcony trail’ from Arguamul to Epina and the trail up to Arguamul wasn’t so bad either. It was definitely my favourite La Gomera trail as it had everything I wish for: a bit of effort to start with in pleasant and varied surroundings, rewarded by a scenic stroll with fantastic views all the way and a handy bar at the end of it. So it goes into my ever-expanding

‘pantheon of heavenly hikes’ and I recommend it as the ‘must-do’ trail out of those I did on La Gomera.



Photo 245: Alojera looking south



Photo 249: Epina with Chorros de Epina top right

238: Agulo to Hermigua

This short trail was an ‘optional extra’ on my last day in La Gomera, fitting conveniently between two buses from Vallehermoso to San Sebastian. It’s only 3k but has a lot of interest along the way and made a change from the hilly terrain I had explored so far. The trail goes along the GR132 from Agulo to Santa Catalina but I continued up the road into Hermigua. It was an overcast day so I’ve had to brighten my photos by 20%.



Photo 13: copyright: Kompass map 231, 2018; www.kompass.de

Starting from the bus stop in Agulo (Photo 269), find your way through the old town down to Calle del Pintor Aguiar. I turned left to continue downhill to a junction but Davis (Walk 30) approaches this junction from the opposite direction (Photo 270).



Photo 269: Agulo through the bus window



Photo 270: turn right here (signpost hidden)

Turn right to begin a steep descent past apparently disused terraces (Photos 272, 273, 274 & 275). Parts of the path are on poorly cobbled surfaces which I found difficult.



Photo 272: flower by the path



Photo 273: back to Agulo with papaya? tree



Photo 274: the terrain of the trail



Photo 275: difficult steps

Once you reach the bottom, there's relief in a flat-ish stretch across the valley floor (Photo 277) before you climb more steps into the village of Lepe. Perhaps in contrast to the rigours of the descent, I found Lepe very attractive (Photos 278, 279 & 280).



Photo 277: the route zig-zags down the ridge and across the terraces



Photo 278: back-street of Lepe



Photo 279: further along the same street



Photo 280: house and garden



Photo 285: bench and backpack

I surprised myself by choosing a spot in the middle of the village square:

“Lepe Village Square”

Here I’m breaking my rule (see Introduction to this website) of not choosing spots that you can drive to – for two good reasons: there was a welcome bench after my painstaking descent and, more importantly, there were pretty views all around, except for a mainly hidden, litter-strewn yard (Photos 285, 286, 288).



Photo 286: view ahead from the square



Photo 288: the prettiest house on the square

By comparison with what you have just done, the rest of the trail is a doddle. The road down from Lepe leads to Playa de Hermigua (Photo 292) which is bordered by extensive banana plantations (Photo 293). Many of the bananas were bagged up in plastic but some were visible and it’s incredible to me how many bananas there are in a bunch on a small, bedraggled tree (Photo 296).



Photo 292: Playa de Hermigua



Photo 293: banana plantations



Photo 296: big bunch, small tree

Then you walk along the bleak and stony beach – this is no holiday resort - (Photo 297) before climbing the road up into the Hermigua Valley (Photos 298, 299).



Photo 297: beach, looking back



Photo 298: the Hermigua Valley



Photo 299: looking back to Santa Catalina



Photo 309: San Sebastian from the bus

From the main road, you can catch a bus to Agulo, Vallehermoso or San Sebastian (Photo 309) but I'd recommend walking up the road into Hermigua which has quite a pleasant centre and a shady park by the bus stop near the Tourist Office and pharmacy (Photos 302, 305).



Photo 302: marquee in town centre



Photo 305: in the park

That's it for La Gomera. I loved the scenery but not the relentless ups and downs of most of my trails. Give yourself plenty of time to enjoy the former and tackle the latter. I knew what to expect from friends who had stayed in Valle Gran Rey many times but the steepness and the many steps on the paths were more than I had bargained for: an experience to be savoured in retrospect but not to be repeated.

LA PALMA

If La Gomera is all up and down, La Palma is even more so. It goes up to 2426m, whereas La Gomera's highest point is at 1484m. More than this, La Palma is the more spectacular with two outstanding features that La Gomera does not have: an obvious volcanic caldera – the Caldera de Taburiente – centre north, and a line of obvious volcanoes, centre south. Topographically, it's very similar to La Gomera, with deep valleys (barrancos) separated by high ridges (lomos). The vegetation, however, is somewhat different, especially the pine trees that feature at higher levels.

Enough geography; where are the good trails? From the selection in Davis and Kostura, Walk! La Palma, Discovery Walking Guides, 2018, I chose four that I hoped would minimize the ups and downs I had to do on La Gomera, the first along the rim of the caldera (Walks 27 & 29), the second in the heart of the caldera (Walks 34 & 33), the third down the line of the volcanoes (Walk 8) and the fourth finishing off the volcanoes to the southern tip of the island (Walk 10). It didn't quite work out as planned....



Photo 469: AA Road Atlas, Spain; copyright Editorial Planeta, S.A., 2006; www.theAA.com.

Interlude: Roque de los Muchachos

I had intended to walk from the Roque via Fuente Nueva and Pico de la Cruz to Pico de la Nieve along the rim of the caldera. This would mean taking a taxi from Santa Cruz (the capital on the east coast) up countless hairpin bends to the Roque and arranging another one to pick me up at the parking place below Pico de la Nieve (no public buses go up there). As I had no idea how long it would take me and the taxis cost 40 euro an hour (the journey to the

Roque takes about 1½ hrs and 1hr from the Pico), it would be a complicated and expensive day's walking. I was also tired from a late night ferry crossing and didn't feel like hiking so I gave this trail a miss. However, I noticed a leaflet for 'Natour' in my hotel and one of their coach tours was the next day "To the Crater Rim of the Caldera", which included stops at Mirador de los Andenes and Roque de los Muchachos. Much as I dislike coach parties, this was ideal for me: I got to see the rim of the caldera and the north-west of the island without having to worry about taxis or having to walk very far, all for 42 euro.



Photo 16: copyright Freytag & Berndt WKE 2 'La Palma', 2019; www.freytagberndt.com.

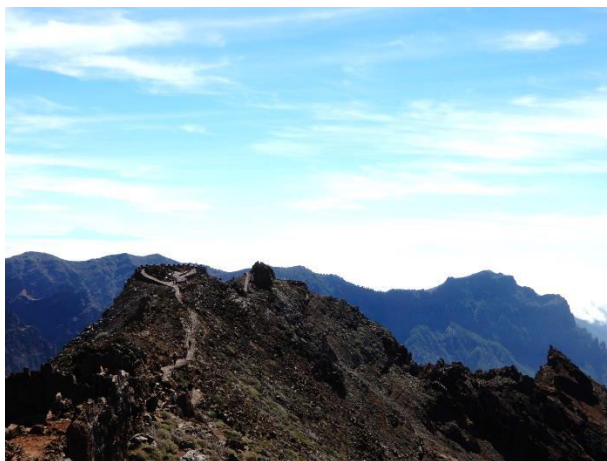


Photo 323: path to the viewpoint at the Roque Photo 325: looking down from the viewpoint

I'll spare you the details of the almost constant commentary of the guide and just show you the photos with a few interesting tit-bits thrown in:



Photo 315: from the Mirador de los Andenes – the distant volcano is the first in line of the southern volcanoes



Photo 324: from the viewpoint at the Roque de los Muchachos; the path is to a further viewpoint which I didn't have time to visit, unfortunately; note the clouds pouring over the rim of the caldera in the distance

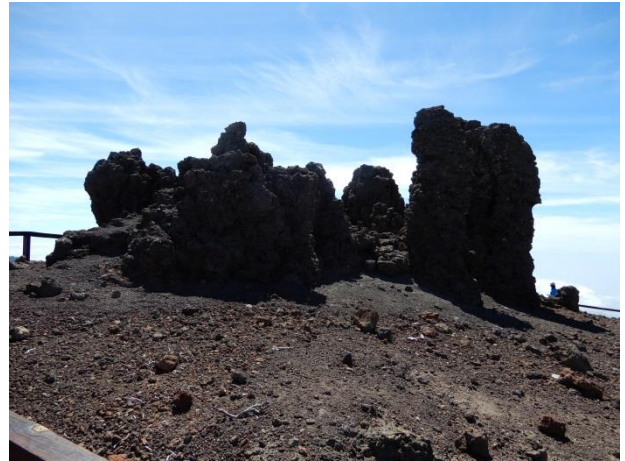


Photo 327: from the viewpoint back to the Roque Photo 331: the actual Roque de los Muchachos, which means ‘the Rock of the Young Lads’; it stems from an ancient rite of passage whereby young boys had to climb up to here from sea level to prove their ability to look after animals on the steep slopes of La Palma and be considered as men.

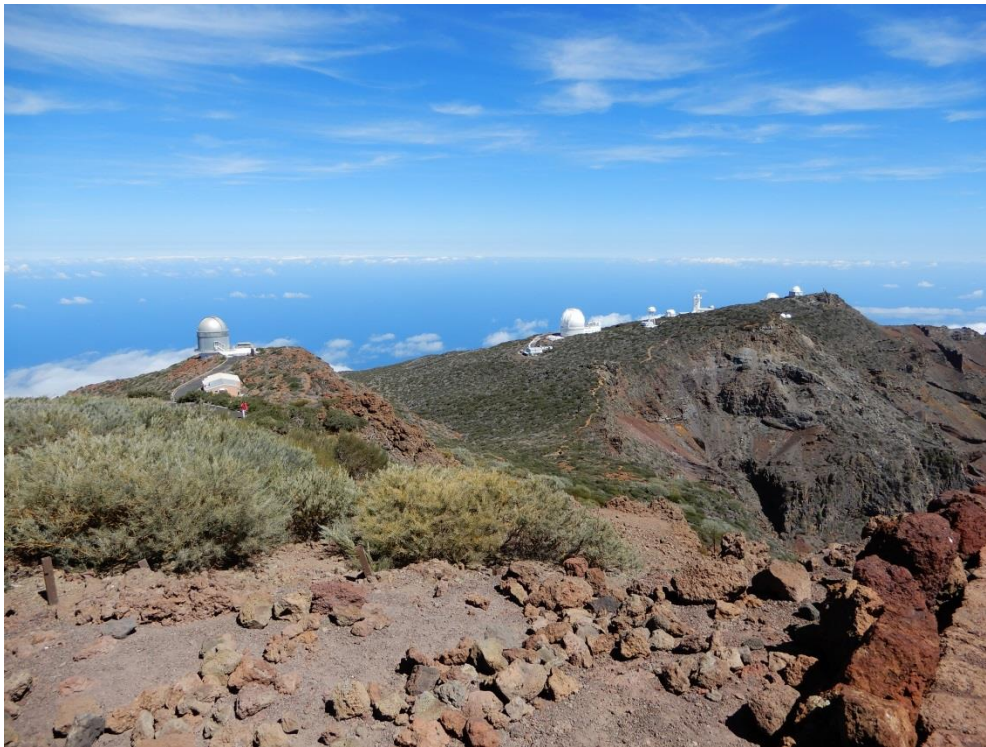


Photo 330: a line of national telescopes around the Roque – each nation has to have its own, it seems – the British one was the biggest, a great source of pride in a coach full of other nationalities (sarcasm intended)

As luck would have it, the coach was returning to Santa Cruz via my next resting place, Los Llanos de Aridane in the centre west of the island (Photo 334) so I got dropped off near the apartment I was staying in and was well rested for the next trail....



Photo 334: Los Llanos from the Mirador del Time with Pico Bejenado to the left and the clouds pouring over the rim again; Barranco de las Angustias in the foreground

239: Los Brecitos and the Barranco de las Angustias

Again no buses to the start of the trail so I took an early taxi to Las Hoyas (standard fare 15 euro) where there's a shuttle service (8.00 to 13.00) to Mirador de los Brecitos (standard fare 51 euro per car). I wanted an early start as the trail is long for me (14k) and I am slow so I didn't wait in case others turned up to share the cost of the taxi.

There's nothing much at Los Brecitos except a platform and the view (Photo 337). I had feared a tortuous descent to Playa de Taburiente in the heart of the caldera but the path turned out to be exactly the kind I like: along cliff edges, with a gentle downward gradient, hardly any steps, in shade and with views most of the way. The 6k took me 2 hrs, 20 mins, which is quick for me going downhill but then it's only 250m of descent (Photos 338, 341 & 344).



Photo 337: view from Los Brecitos



Photo 338: the path near the start



Photo 21: Las Hoyas is 'P' bottom left; los Brecitos upper left centre and Playa de Taburiente top right; copyright Freytag & Berndt WKE 2 'La Palma', 2019; www.freytagberndt.com.

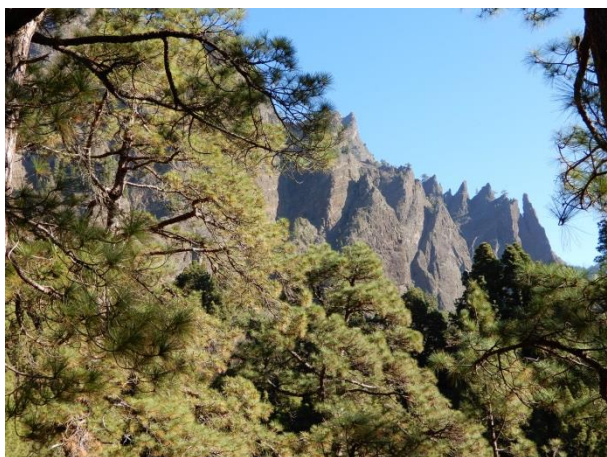


Photo 341: pointy peaks en route



Photo 344: a shady section of path

After an hour or so, I came to my only spot on the trail:

“By the Bridge at Barranco de las Piedras Redondas”

This translates as ‘the valley of the round stones’ but should really be ‘the round rocks’ as you can see (Photos 349, 357, 351 & 355). I preferred this spot to the mirador further along because of the atmospheric rocks and because there were plenty of seats to choose from.



Photo 349: bridge and round rocks



Photo 357: more round rocks and a cave

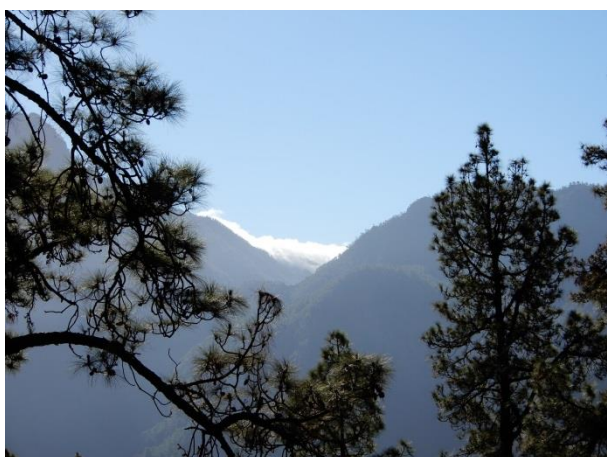


Photo 351: those clouds again



Photo 355: those pointy peaks again

The Mirador de Lomo de Tagasaste is 10 minutes down the path and here you get your first extensive views of the caldera rim (Photo 359) and down into the heart of the caldera (Photo 361).

By now, I had been passed by at least half a dozen other hikers so my advice is, if it's a fine day, wait for others to arrive to share the cost of the taxi to Los Brecitos (only taxis are allowed up the road).

The rest of the descent to Playa de Taburiente is more of the same, except that towards the bottom the cliffiness of the path abates (apart from one vertiginous section) and the pine trees get bigger (Photo 366).



Photo 359: caldera rim from Mirador de Lomo de Tagasaste



Photo 361: down from the mirador



Photo 366: bigger, fatter pine trees

Playa de Taburiente turns out to be a stony wasteland rather than a beach (Photo 369) – in fact, it's a mainly dried-up stream-bed with a few trickles to cross. Passing a campsite and an information centre, you start a very steep descent to the Rio Almendro Amargo and ultimately the Barranco de las Angustias. This involves numerous hairpin bends and some dramatic views into the Barranco de Almendro Amargo (Photos 371, 375). Many of the steeper hairpins are paved with flat stones, thus obviating the need for huge steps, which I have complained about elsewhere on this website. Surely it is as easy to construct such surfaces as to build the huge steps that are the norm elsewhere. Anyway, hats off to the path-builders of Taburiente (Photos 378, 379).



Photo 369: the caldera rim from Playa de Taburiente



Photo 371: just liked the contrasts here

Photo 375: down into the Barranco de Almendro Amarga

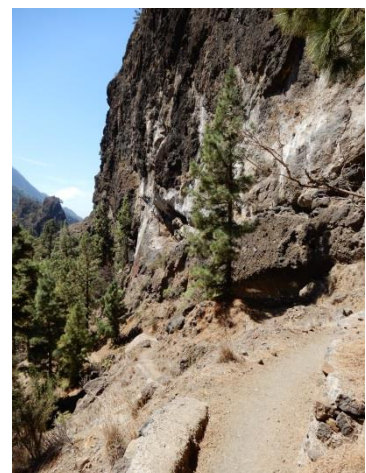


Photo 378/9: paved hairpin (not as steep as it looks) & cliff

Halfway down you get a good view back up the barranco (Photo 380); then you reach the turn-off for the Cascada de Colores, a much-photographed waterfall that usually sports a trickle of water over some orange and green-striped rocks 500m off the trail. As I was tired after the steep descent and still had 5½k to go, I chose not to add on an extra 1k to my trail. To show you what I missed, here's a postcard (Photo 391).

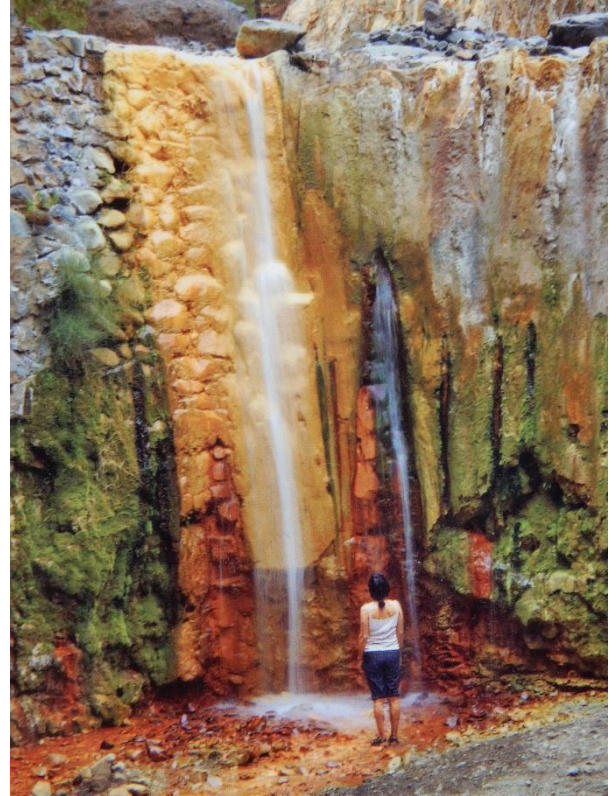


Photo 380: Roque Idafe Photo 391: Cascada de Colores; copyright www.edicionesam.com.

This turn-off is where the Barranco de las Angustias begins from the meeting of several tributaries. First, you come to the confluence with the Rio Taburiente, called Dos Aguas, where there's another stony wasteland and a concrete rampart. There's no way to cross without getting your feet wet (or in my case, my boots, as I didn't trust my bare feet on what looked like a slimy stream-bed).

Barranco de las Angustias means 'valley of the anguishes' and has acquired that name because of what happens after rain when the stream-bed becomes a torrent and very difficult to travel along – in fact, people have been known to be washed away so the valley is sometimes closed after heavy rain.

From here on, it was a case of following the stream-bed by repeatedly criss-crossing the stream without even getting my boots wet. In one place about halfway down, you have to leave the stream-bed unless you are very intrepid but the signposts often direct you away from the stream-bed unnecessarily – I took a few of these detours and regretted it as the path was clearly harder than the stream-bed once you were on it. The worst offender was right at the end where a sign directs you over a steep-ish ridge rather than along the easy stream-bed.

I'd say there are two main features of the Barranco de las Angustias: occasional ravines and the colours of the stream itself. The latter are somewhat similar to the colours of the cascada I missed, except that there are fewer oranges, but their shapes are even more beautiful in my opinion (Photos 381 – 388).



Photo 381: from near the start of the barranco



Photo 382: from the same spot the other way



Photo 383: colours and shapes of the stream



Photo 386: ditto



Photo 387: ravine



Photo 384: ditto



Photo 388: looking back on the most difficult section of stream-bed from the path above

At the parking area of Las Hoyas, I was in time (16.30) to hitch a lift back to Los Llanos (there were lots of cars still there, most of their occupants having done the out and back trail up the Barranco de las Angustias).

Did the Barranco live up to its name? Not really, as the descent from the turn-off for the Cascada de Colores was gentle, if somewhat tricky with all the criss-crossing of the stream. It would have been even gentler, had I not made the mistake of following the signs away from the stream-bed on a few occasions.

Despite the dearth of spots, I'd recommend this trail strongly for something completely different. There are also various extensions available, if you feel so inclined – two going steeply north from Playa de Taburiente (see Davis and Kostura, Walk 34, for one of them) and one going a long way round below the eastern rim of the caldera to a road-end at Cumbrecita. Anyway, Caldera de Taburiente – done. Now to those volcanos....

240: Ruta de los Volcanes

'The Route of the Volcanos' – sounds enticing, doesn't it? In common with many others, I felt this was the trail I had to do on La Palma. It's 19k according to Davis and Kostura, 17.8k according to the local signposts. Anyway, it's long for someone like me: mainly uphill for the first third, mainly downhill for the second two-thirds. However, that's not the whole story....

Try not to choose a hot, sunny day as the trail is very exposed in the middle third and take as much water as you feel able to carry: I took 1.8 litres on a 23C day and needed it all. I've divided my map into two to make it more legible.



Photo 22: copyright Freytag & Berndt WKE 2 'La Palma', 2019; www.freytagberndt.com.

You start at Rifugio El Pilar (taxi required) and spend the first hour or so going uphill through forest wondering where all these volcanos are – you pass one, Pico Birigoyo, but don't see anything of it. Instead, you see lots of Canarian pine-trees (Photo 400) and, if you are lucky, some (almond?) trees in blossom (Photo 401). Through gaps in the trees, you also get views north to the Caldera de Taburiente (Photos 399, 403).



Photo 400: base of a pine-tree



Photo 401: blossom on the path

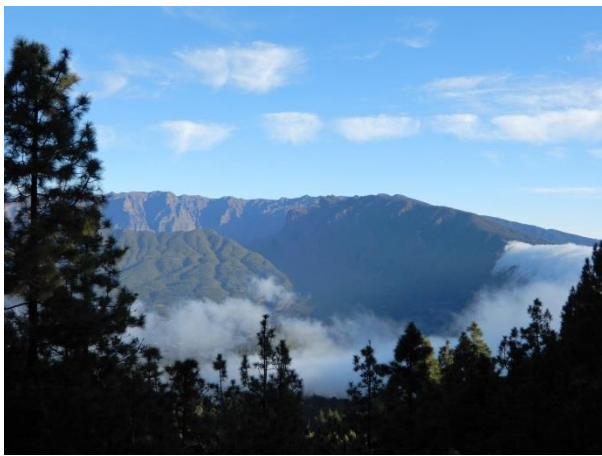


Photo 399: caldera and clouds pouring over

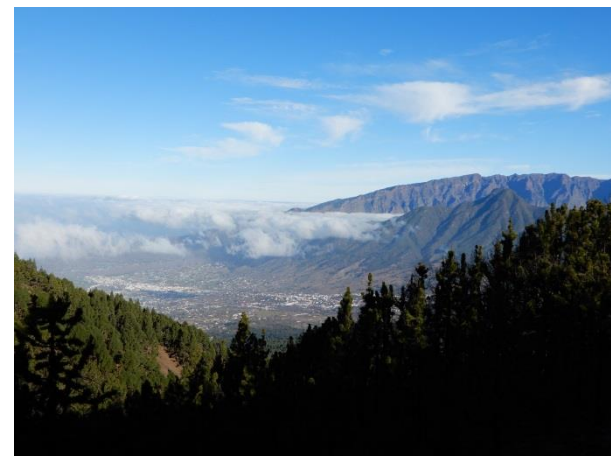


Photo 403: Los Llanos and the caldera

In between forest trails, you encounter the ‘picon’ for the first time (Photo 404). This is the Spanish name for the volcanic ash that you will be seeing lots more of on the rest of the trail.



By the way, the signposting is very good so you don’t need to worry about direction-finding – and where there’s not a signpost, there’s a red and white cross telling you this is the wrong path.

Photo 404: path across the ‘picon’

Your first sight of a volcano comes after about 3k: Pico Nambroque (Photo 406). As you climb towards it, you can see behind you for the first time the three volcanos you have already passed (Photo 407). As with most of the volcanos you pass, there's the optional extra of a detour to the top of Pico Nambroque – needless to say, I didn't take any of them.



Photo 406: Pico Nambroque



Photo 405: fungus on a pine-stump



Photo 407: looking back over three volcanos to the caldera

One thing I noticed on this first stretch is that Davis and Kostura, as with most guide-book writers, often play down or omit the difficult bits of the trail, e.g. on p 44 they say “After climbing a short rise, we descend slightly.....a long level stretch skirts....”, omitting the longer uphill before the short level stretch. Why do they do this? In conversation with another walker, I suggested “they want us to think it's easier than it is”. But why? We are not children.

As you leave Pico Nambroque behind, you pass right by a huge hole in the ground, the Crater del Hoyo Negro (Photos 408, 409). This provided all the ‘looking into the crater of a volcano’ I needed for the rest of the journey but I was flabbergasted when two walkers sped past it without even a glance (the view into the crater is 5m off the trail). Maybe they suffer from vertigo.



Photo 408: approaching Crater del Hoyo Negro Photo 409: looking into the crater

Next, you come to what I consider the best part of the trail: passing Volcan de la Deseada. You saw it first in the distance in Photo 408 above; then you see it from woods (Photo 410), and then from its lava field (Photo 411). As you approach it, you cross the Lavas la Malforada lava flow stretching away to the east (Photo 413).



Photo 410: Volcan de la Deseada from woods

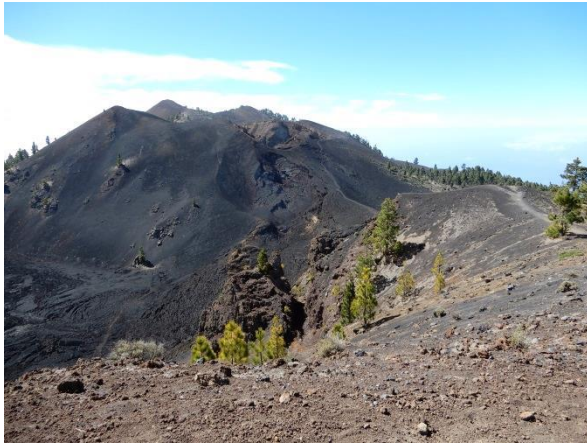


Photo 411: from its lava field



Photo 413: the Lavas la Malforada

You can choose to go over the top of Volcan de la Deseada or round it at a lower level. I suggest that going over the top might be easier (and shorter) than going round as going round involves a horrendous climb up a steep, slippery slope where the ‘picon’ has become so fine that it is like trudging uphill through sand. Maybe the ground over the top is firmer. Until you reach this hill, the path round Deseada is attractive in a bleak kind of way (Photos 417, 414).



Photo 417: path round Deseada – steep hill in the distance

Once you reach the top, the highest point of the trail at about 1940m, you have it all to do again going down the other side (Photos 418, 419). I found this the hardest part of the trail. At the bottom, a man asked me, “Do you need any help?” I said, “What are you going to do – carry me?” before politely reassuring him that I was OK and thanking him for his concern.



Photo 414: pine sapling in the ‘picon’

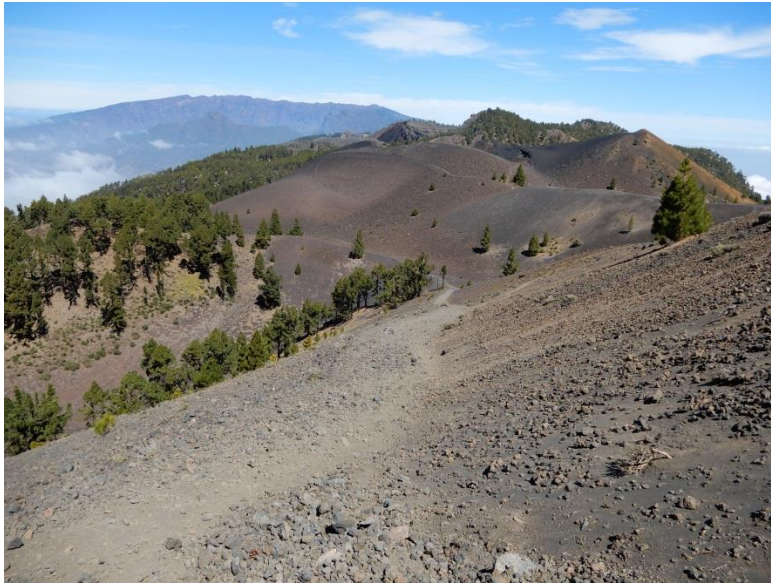


Photo 418: looking back down the steep, slippery slope



Photo 419: looking ahead down the next steep, slippery slope; Volcan Cabrito, Caldera del Bucaro and Volcan Martin in the distance

I forgot to say that there's a great view from the top that I was too tired to appreciate. You can see it in Photo 419 taken from the Mirador de las Deseadas. Davis and Kostura say there's an information board here but there isn't any more – and all the other information boards they mention have disappeared, too.

From Deseada to Volcan Martin (the next 4k), you have to contend with soft, sandy picon on the path, making it a tough trail, unless you are in the first flush of youth, as most of the people I saw on the trail were. I was worried that I'd pull a muscle as my boot slipped in the picon. It sometimes helps to walk just off the path where the ground may be firmer. The terrain you cross is varied, however, compensating somewhat for the difficulties underfoot (Photos 421, 422 & 423).



Photo 421: I think that's Monte Bermejales



Photo 422: this pine-tree looked weird



Photo 423: Caldera del Bucaro in the distance



Photo 425: first view of Volcan Martin

At the end of it all, the view of Volcan Martin from the Mirador de Montana Cabrito makes it all worthwhile (Photo 425, 428).



Photo 428:and then the clouds cleared

Going round Volcan Martin, you cross the bleakest terrain of the whole trail (Photo 430). Then the rest of the trail, about 6k, becomes rather boring – and that’s not just because I was by now very tired. You see a few mountains but you wouldn’t know they are volcanos (perhaps they are not) and you pass through lots more pine forest. The blessing is that the first 4k are gently downhill on a reasonably firm footing, most of the time (Photo 434). As usual, I distracted myself from boredom by taking photos of what was near at hand (Photos 432 – 437). As I descended this stretch, I passed a couple who were returning from the end of the trail and must have passed me on their way down. The man doffed his cap and said, “Respect”; the woman said, “Only 5k to go”. I much prefer this response to my infirmity than the earlier “Can I help you?” !



Photo 430: bleak path round Volcan Martin



Photo 434: a typical part of the trail here



Photo 432: lichen on the path



Photo 433: lichen on the path

And then, as you pass Montana del Pino, the path deteriorates markedly: it becomes rocky and stony with some irregular steps, just when you don’t want it to with 2k to go. All the rocks are knobbly and unpleasant (hard to find somewhere to sit and take a breather) and it’s hard to place your pole safely if you need to put weight on it as the ground is friable and the rocks unstable. Added to which, the first ½k is steeply downhill – it took me 35 minutes of hard graft (ignore this if you’re still sprightly). The last 1½k are better but not much better, taking me 1 hour.



Photo 435: a sprouting pine-tree



Photo 437: took this for the bark

Finally, you get your first sight of Los Canarios (Fuencaliente), the end of the first part of the Ruta de los Volcanes (Photo 438). You can complete the Ruta by hiking down past two more volcanos to the southern tip of La Palma at Punta de Fuencaliente but that's for another day – or not, as the case may be.



Photo 438: almost journey's end: Los Canarios with Volcan San Antonio

What to make of this famous trail (famous for hikers visiting La Palma, that is)? Well, as you can tell from my account, it's not all it's cracked up to be: while there are some good views, as my photos show, there's a lot of difficult trudging in between. Also, don't be deceived by the postcard photos which are more dramatic than what you see from the trail (Photo 471). The clincher for my rather downbeat appraisal of the Ruta is that you are subject to dust from the picon for much of the way, me more than most as the whole trail took me 11 hours, about double what Davis and Kostura reckon. The dust meant that I was coughing up dust-coloured phlegm for the next 3 nights and days. So, all in all, I'm glad I did it but I wouldn't do it again.



Photo 471: postcard looking south from the top of Volcan Martin, Los Canarios in the distance, top left; www.santosaul.com

Coda: Los Canarios

I had intended to complete the Ruta de los Volcanes by doing the 12k there and back to the Punta de Fuencaiente. However, the trail turned out to be very dusty and steeply downhill (600m in about 5k because Los Canarios is on a sloping plateau before the steep descent starts). Moreover, I was still suffering from the first part of the Ruta so I settled for Volcan San Antonio which is only 1k from Los Canarios (Photo 439).

When I reached the Visitor Centre, I was asked to pay 5 euro for the privilege of going up it and viewing an exhibition. Such blatant exploitation of nature is everything I hate. I wouldn't mind a charge for the exhibition, which actually costs something, but to fence off the volcano itself, that's unforgivable (all the other volcanos are free to climb). So I turned away and did a little 2k walk to the south of Los Canarios (Photo 440).



Photo 439: Volcan San Antonio



Photo 440: Los Canarios from the south

Even this stroll prompted aches and protests from my leg muscles and I could see that the rest of the trail would have added insult to injury by putting more dust in my lungs. So I settled again, this time for a bus ride down to and back up from Punta de Fuencaliente, hoping to see Volcan Teneguia and the lava flow from its 1971 eruption. Here are the photos but you don't see much of Teneguia itself from the bus (Photos 442 – 446).



Photo 442: lava below Teneguia



Photo 444: a strange plant waving in the wind



Photo 445: this may be Teneguia + lava



Photo 446: Playa Nueva

To finish off with, I'm going to include my favourite postcard of the Ruta de los Volcanes, which is in fact the photo of which Photo 471 is the close-up (Photo 477).

While I trod more trails on La Gomera, I preferred La Palma for its greater variety of landscapes and for its two unusual and fairly dramatic trails. I must be a bit of a masochist because I chose some of the harder trails on both islands. I don't know where the easy trails are on La Palma – it has a reputation as the steepest island in the world - perhaps the GR 130 which circumnavigates the island, mainly along contour lines, but it looks kind of boring to me, in and out of villages past endless terraces. However, I'd forgo the up and down trails from the coast unless, like the 'muchachos' climbing from the coast to 2426m, you have something to prove. For myself, I'm going to heed my own advice and head off to a much less steep trail: the Anglesey Coast Path in North Wales.

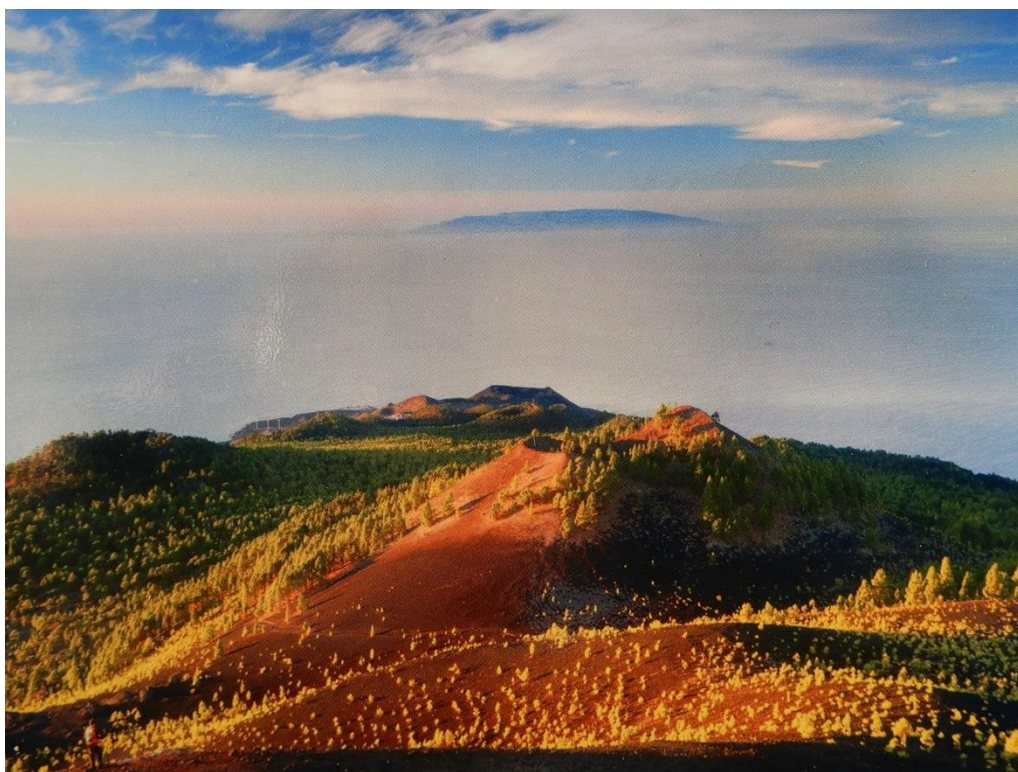


Photo 477: postcard looking south from the top of Volcan Martin; that must be El Hierro in the distance; www.santosaul.com

