The Canary Islands

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Tenerife
Day 2 Teide National Park and Teno Natural Park
Day 3 Gomera and Garajonay National Park
Day 4 Medano or Anaga Peninsula
Day 5/7 Fuerteventura
Day 8 Fly London

Departs
February/March and November

Focus
Birds, plants, butterflies and cetaceans

Grading
Grade A. Limited amounts of easy walking only

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code ESP15) or brochure

Highlights
- Mount Teide’s fabulous volcanic scenery ... plus endemic Blue Chaffinch & Tenerife Kinglet
- 5 endemic birds & 3 Macaronesian endemics: Berthelot’s Pipit, Plain Swift & Canary
- Endemic Bolle’s & Laurel Pigeons in Gomera’s ancient Laurel forests
- Fuerteventura Chat and Houbara Bustard on Fuerteventura
- Ferry to Gomera – and chance for whales, dolphins, Cory’s & Little Shearwaters
NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations (such as ferry timetables) can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

The Canary Islands, situated 100 kilometres from the coast of North Africa, are tremendously popular as a tourist destination but perhaps less well known for their natural history importance. A number of island endemics have evolved on this magnificent volcanic archipelago including six species of birds and more than 600 species of plants. Because of their restricted ranges, four of the six birds peculiar to the islands are listed among the 29 globally threatened bird species occurring in Europe and in addition the Canary Islands are of international significance for their seabird breeding colonies. As we tour the islands of Tenerife and Fuerteventura we will be able to see visible evidence of the evolutionary process described by Darwin, not only in the six endemic species, but also in the island forms of familiar birds such as Blue Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Chaffinch. Over a passage of time these birds have developed distinctive characteristics and appear to be completing their own transition into status as a separate species. For those interested in the Canary Islands unique flora we strongly recommend the spring departure when most of the plants will be in flower.

Day 1

Today we depart from London Gatwick (although departures from other regional airports may be available) on a direct charter flight to Tenerife’s International Airport. Tenerife is the largest of the seven islands, roughly triangular in shape with a wide range of habitats dominated by the 3,718 metre high Mount Teide and the surrounding pine forests.

Depending on the arrival time of the flight we may have time for some initial exploration on the slopes of Teide. Here, at Las Lajas, we will walk among stands of Canary Pine (Pinus canariensis), and an undergrowth dominated by Myrica faya and heather (Erica arborea). We should also encounter one of our star attractions, the pretty Canary Islands (Blue) Chaffinch. The dark breasted island race of Great Spotted Woodpecker also inhabits this forest and we may come upon a Tenerife Kinglet foraging for insects in the canopy. Taxonomists disagreed over the exact standing of this diminutive bird, with some authorities linking it with the Goldcrest and others with the Firecrest. Just recently this interesting little bird has been classified as a species in its own right. We will almost certainly come across a Canary or two singing from the tops of the pine trees. Although the song is familiar to many people the wild form of this common cage bird is perhaps not as striking as its captive bred counterparts. Another small passerine to look out for
is the plain-backed island race of Blue Tit. Four island sub-species are recognised for the Canary Islands and await possible future classification as separate species.

After an exciting start to the holiday we’ll head to our accommodation, a small hotel in beautiful hills of the Vilaflor region in the centre of the island.

Day 2

Tenerife

We will start today with a drive to the ancient cliffs of Teno Natural Park, one of the most botanically rich areas of Tenerife. Plants of interest within this area include Euphorbia aphylla, Limonium fruticans, Ceropogia dichotoma, Cheirolophus canariensis, Sonchus radicatus and Vieraea laevigata to name but a few. The birdlife here has a distinctly North African flavour and includes Barbary Partridge (rare), Rock Sparrow and one of the few pairs of Barbary Falcons. The road through this area is not for the faint hearted and can be closed at times by landslides and/or rock falls. If this is the case at the time of our visit then we will search out some of the endemic flora at some nearby locations.

After stopping for lunch somewhere picturesque on the northern coast of Tenerife we will head back to the northeast and the Anaga Peninsula. Here, within the boundaries of the Anaga Natural Park we will look for some very localised plants such as the spectacular Echium simplex, the locally distributed Limonium macrophyllum and the scarce Lugoa revoluta all to be found in a most spectacular setting near the locality of Chinamada. If time allows we will have our final look for the endemic pigeons at the Pico del Inglés (Englishman’s Peak) and any other of the species occurring in the area.

This will be a most memorable day as some of the plants must rate among the rarest in the world and the accompanying scenery is absolutely breathtaking.

We will return to the hotel in the evening and after this spectacular day in the field our thoughts will change to what lies ahead, as tomorrow (depending on ferry timetables) we will be on the move to La Gomera.

Day 3

Garajonay National Park

Today we will drive to the tourist town of Los Cristianos where we will board the ferry to La Gomera. The 1½ hour crossing affords the best opportunity to see some of the many interesting seabirds which occur around the Canary Islands. Although not all the specialities are present all year round, we should have the chance to view at close quarters the majestic Cory’s Shearwater and admire its absolute control of the power of flight. Another species that we might encounter is the Little Shearwater although they are much rarer than their larger cousins. Other species that have been recorded from this ferry crossing include Bulver’s Petrel and various species of Storm-petrel. All of the Storm-petrel species are rare and difficult to see but there is always the chance of White-faced or Madeiran so we should keep our eyes and minds open.
Once ashore on La Gomera we will travel to the spectacular Garajonay National Park, which surrounds the peak of the same name, rising to a height of 1484 metres and dominating the 25 kilometre long island. This park contains the largest tract of native laurel forest in the whole Macaronesian region. The steep-sided valleys of the park are often shrouded in mist and cloud forming scenes more reminiscent of a high Andean valley than a holiday in the sun! On the way to the park we will observe the endemic Palm trees (Phoenix canariensis) and admire the geological aspect of the island. Plain Swift, Bertholot’s Pipit, Tenerife Goldcrest and Canary are all common on La Gomera but the two birds we will be particularly hoping to find are the endemic Laurel and Bolle’s Pigeons. The famous viewpoint at Mirador de El Rejo is a good vantage point to survey the forest spread out below and perhaps locate a few pigeons flying over the canopy. Views of perched birds are somewhat harder to obtain so we must be sure to note the diagnostic tail pattern which serves to distinguish the two species in flight.

There are many plants unique to this laurel forest, among them species like Ilex canariensis (Small-leaved Holly), Arbutus canariensis, Isoplexis canariensis and Convolvulus canariensis all of which we could find whilst searching for the rare and locally distributed Gomeran endemics Echium acanthocarpum and Euphorbia lambii. With agreeable weather, butterflies will be all around us and should include Canary Speckled Wood, Canary Blue, Cleopatra and Canary Red Admiral. This latter species occurs only in the Canaries, Madeira and the Indian sub-continent, a most unusual distribution! We will have our picnic lunch within the park boundaries and later in the afternoon we must wind our way back to the coast to catch the early evening ferry back to Tenerife.

Day 4

One of the highlights of our week will be our drive to the area called Las Cañadas del Teide to admire the spectacular scenery and to try and find the endemic Canary Lizard. The most conspicuous plant is the Retama del Teide (Spartocytisus supranubius) and other interesting plants we shall look for include Adenocarpus viscous, Argyranthemum tenerifae, Echium wildpretii and Pterocephalis lasiospermus. The insects and small mammals inhabiting the park have to avoid the attentions of Southern Grey Shrikes which maintain a constant watch from the top of thorny bushes and from Kestrels hovering overhead.
Day 5

Today we will take a flight from the northern airport on Tenerife, Los Rodeos, to Fuerteventura. This is just a short hop and will take about 45 minutes.

Fuerteventura is drier and rockier than the other islands and is home to a number of North African species including an endemic race of Houbara Bustard, a species that is becoming endangered over most of its range owing to the hunting activities of Arabian falconers. Fortunately the population on the Canary Islands is still healthy and Fuerteventura may well become one of the species’ final strongholds.

On the drive south we will stop a couple of times en route both to break the journey a little and to search for new plants and birds in this different environment. We may, if we are lucky, get our first views of the endemic Canary Islands Chat, a species which we will probably see on a couple of occasions during our stay on the island. After checking-in we will visit the desert plains around the arid south-west peninsula of Jandia to look for some of the typical birds to be found here. Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Barbary Partridge and Stone-curlew are among the species which occur in the vicinity as well as the star attraction for these arid plains, the Houbara Bustard. A strange nasal call may betray the presence of Trumpeter Finches feeding among the rocks and we should also listen for the scratchy song of Lesser Short-toed Larks which share this barren habitat. Both of these species are distinct island races of the mainland forms.

Away from the desert habitat we will look in areas of scrub and cultivation for Berthelot’s Pipit, Spectacled and Sardinian Warblers, Hoopoe, Spanish Sparrow, Corn Bunting and the endemic race of Linnet. Looking skywards we should see both Plain and Pallid Swifts and a soaring Egyptian Vulture is always a possibility (although this species is in severe decline on the Canary Islands). Easterly winds can produce occasional falls of migrants on the island and if such conditions prevail we may encounter a few reminders of home such as Willow Warbler, Redstart and Pied Flycatcher.

In the evening we will check in to our hotel, our base for 3 nights.
Day 6

To the north of the island lie the towns of Tindaya and La Oliva. This is a good locality to see the handsome Canary Islands Chat if unlucky on the preceding day. Although not rare on Fuerteventura, the chat is very local in distribution and can sometimes be difficult to locate. Superficially similar to both Stonechat and Whinchat, which occur only on passage, the endemic bird shares their habit of perching at the top of prominent bushes and this should assist our search in the sparsely vegetated terrain. As we look for the chats we are also likely to encounter charming little Barbary Ground Squirrels which scurry among the rocks in fearless fashion but are always alert to any sign of danger.

Later we move to the Tindaya plains where a range of desert birds include Cream-coloured Courser, Stone-curlew, Barbary Partridge, Lesser Short-toed Lark and Trumpeter Finch. Our principal objective will be the resident Houbara Bustards which are probably easier to find on Fuerteventura than anywhere else in the world. Constantly wary, they are best approached by vehicle or observed by waiting at a suitable vantage point. If approached on foot they are adept at melting away into the stony wastes where their intricately mottled plumage provides a wonderful camouflage. It is a privilege to observe this globally threatened bird which has suffered so much persecution from Middle Eastern falconers, and we can only hope that this flourishing population continues to prosper.

Day 7

Today we will have an opportunity to look for birds in and around several freshwater reservoirs which act as a magnet for birds in this arid landscape. Nesting birds include Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Barbary Partridge, Common Buzzard, Sardinian Warbler, Blue Tit and Canary Islands Chat whilst regular visitors include Ruddy Shelduck, Marbled Duck, Night Heron, Little Egret, Plain Swift and Egyptian Vulture. A variety of waders may occur at the water’s edge and the adjacent bushes can hold a selection of migrants in suitable conditions. The spectacular Plain Tiger Butterfly is one colourful representative of the local insect community.

Day 8

A final early morning opportunity to enjoy the birds lower ecological zone of coastal Fuerteventura before flying directly back to the UK.
Grading & Focus

This tour is graded A with very easy short walks. The focus of this holiday is to visit a variety of Canarian habitats in search of many of the endemic and range-restricted species which live here – particularly birds. It is not a tour which will suit keen walkers as we tend to drive between sites by minibus, explore them, and drive on. Many other Naturetrek European holidays provide much greater opportunities for walking.

Food & Accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour. Both hotels have a swimming pool and are extremely comfortable. Please note, however, that on Fuerteventura there are no rural, family run hotels in the customary Naturetrek style that are large enough for a group so we must stay at a larger tourist-style hotel.

Flights

Tenerife and Fuerteventura have become increasingly well served by charter flights and the new low-cost carriers from regional airports. Whilst our group flights will be booked from Gatwick, if you would like a quote from a regional airport, please do give us a call. Please note however that regional flight times may not dovetail with our group flights, and you may have to consider paying for your own taxi to or from our hotel or spending an additional night on the island close to the airport.

How to book your place!

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.