

The Canaries – La Palma in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Santa Cruz, La Palma.
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- Day 2 – 7** Wildlife/botany excursions and whale-watching tours from Los Cancajos.
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- Day 8** Fly UK.
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Departs

March

Focus

Whales and dolphins, flora, birds, insects, and other natural history.

Grading

Grade A with gentle wildlife walks and whale-watching boat trips

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP54) or brochure

Highlights

- Bryde's Whale & Short-finned Pilot Whale found in La Palma's waters
- Atlantic Spotted Dolphin & Rough-toothed Dolphins seen regularly
- Look for Berthelot's Pipit, Bolle's Pigeon, African Blue Tit & Atlantic Canary
- Many endemic plant species including *Echium webbii* and *Aeonium nobile*
- Canary Blue, African Grass Blue, Monarch & Canary Speckled Wood butterflies
- Enjoy spring sunshine & gentle daily wildlife excursions



From top, Rough-toothed Dolphins, Atlantic Canary, West Canaries Lizard



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Introduction

The Canaries, a Spanish archipelago, lie just over 60 miles off the coast of north-west Africa and about 680 miles south-west of mainland Spain. At their western extremity stands the beautiful and unspoilt island of La Palma. About half the size of Greater London, it is one of the lesser known Canary Islands, mostly visited by those on walking holidays in search of tranquillity. La Palma boasts a remarkable variety of habitats in a relatively small area and a rich accompanying flora and fauna that has been relatively little explored by visiting naturalists. Like the other Canary Islands, it is entirely of volcanic origin, resulting in the waters dropping off rapidly to depths of more than 1,000 metres within a few miles of land, and this attracts a wealth of marine-life, including cetaceans. On this new 8-day holiday we will explore the special land and marine-life of La Palma, making leisurely day walks, and boat trips, in search of dolphins, whales, birds, butterflies, wild flowers and other wildlife, against a backdrop of dramatic volcanic scenery and deep blue Canary Island seas.

Our holiday begins with a direct flight to La Palma. We will base ourselves in Los Cancajos, a small and relaxed holiday resort on the island's east coast that comprises a long, black sandy beach dotted with palm trees and bordered by a restaurant-lined boulevard. Our hotel in Los Cancajos will provide a base from which to explore the mixture of endemic, European and North African species that characterise the island's fauna. Species we hope to encounter around the hotel and on our excursions include Plain Swift, Berthelot's Pipit, Canary Island Chiffchaff and Atlantic Canary, whilst Cory's Shearwater, Bottlenose Dolphin and Short-finned Pilot Whale are regularly seen offshore around the island. We also hope to be able to see a range of butterflies too, with Canary Blue, African Grass Blue, Canary Red Admiral, Canary Speckled Wood, Canary Skipper and Monarch all possible.



Beautiful volcanic valley at Caldera de Taburiente

During our stay on La Palma we will aim to make boat excursions on two days, weather permitting, from the western port of Tazacorte in search of whales and dolphins. By basing ourselves on the relatively remote and undeveloped island of La Palma, we will avoid the large-scale, largely unregulated scum of whale watching operators that is, sadly, now a feature on some of the other Canary Islands. The deep, food-rich and unpolluted North Atlantic waters that envelope La Palma support Bottlenose Dolphins and Short-finned Pilot Whales, as well as such charismatic species as the petite and playful Atlantic Spotted Dolphin. Rough-toothed Dolphins are found in the waters around La Palma throughout the year, as are Loggerhead Turtles, and we may see the larger Bryde's Whale as well as the possibility of other species.

On land, La Palma is home to more than 870 native plant species, as well as a wealth of other endemic and Macaronesian endemic species and sub-species amongst its flora and fauna! We will explore its semi-desert, lava flows, scrub, wetlands and native pine woodland in search of such gems as: La Palma Pansy, La Palma Bugloss, La Palma Brimstone and Canary Large White, and birds including the La Palma subspecies of African Blue Tit, Bolle's Pigeon, Laurel Pigeon, Barbary Falcon (now considered a subspecies of Peregrine), the endemic subspecies of Canary Islands Chaffinch and several other Macaronesian endemics. There are many areas of the island largely unexplored, and few naturalists regularly record the fauna and flora here. Las Salinas, in the south, gives the opportunity for some waders, Berthelot's Pipit and Spectacled Warbler, and the sea watching is good here, too.



Canary Bellflower with La Palma Brimstone inside

This is a Canary Island getaway that offers peace, tranquillity and some of Europe's best whale-watching, combined with an enjoyment of the island's other rich flora and fauna. The green north-east of the island benefits from the moisture that is brought by the prevailing trade winds, in the islands' famed warm and pleasant spring sunshine. The volcanic landscape and wonderful deep blue of the sea add to La Palma's wildlife attractions and should make this a most enjoyable holiday.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, especially with the boat trips, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Travel to Los Cancajos

We depart today on an early morning flight from Gatwick bound for La Palma's airport near the capital Santa Cruz de la Palma. We are due to arrive in the late morning / early afternoon and having collected our luggage will drive the short distance to our hotel, to the region of Los Cancajos on the Eastern side of the island. Here, we will check into our comfortable hotel on the shores of Atlantic where we will be staying for the duration of the tour. An afternoon excursion to explore our surroundings or a sea watch from the hotel may be activities for this first day.

Day 2

Laurel forest then Dragon trees

For those early risers in the group there may a pre-breakfast optional foray to search for the local bird and insect inhabitants with access from the hotel to the rocky shoreline. To get us in the mood for our

sea trips we will spend a little time sea watching for target species such as Cory's Shearwater, Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull, Short-finned Pilot Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin.

La Palma is home to some of the most biologically important laurel forests in the world, supporting for example the largest population of Laurel Pigeons of all the Canary Islands with around 600 pairs. After breakfast we will travel to the north-eastern part of the island to visit prime laurel forest habitat. We will walk the trail to Cubo de la Galga, a heavily forested gorge. The trail goes through beautiful laurel forest and is an excellent locality for specialist forest birds including the endemics La Palma Blue Tit *Cyanistes teneriffae* subsp. *palmensis* and the Canary Islands Chaffinch sub-species *Fringillae canariensis* subsp. *palmensis* (the species being split from Common / Eurasian Chaffinch in 2023). Several other special birds occur such as La Palma / El Hierro Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* subsp. *ellenthalerae*, Bolle's Pigeon and of course Laurel Pigeon. Other species we may see include endemic/highly range restricted races of familiar birds such as Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Blackbird and Blackcap. The gorge is good for butterflies too and we may encounter Canary Speckled Wood, Canary Blue and La Palma Brimstone amongst others. The chief tree here is Stinkwood (*Ocotea foetens*) with Azores Laurel (*Laurus novocanariensis*); ferns such as Chain Fern (*Woodwardia radicans*), Kidney-leaved Fern (*Adiantum reniforme*) and Mule's Fern (*Asplenium hermionitis*) grow lushly, and *Aeonium canariense* var. *palmense*, *Cryptotaenia elegans* and the pink 'daisy' *Pericallis papyracea* occur. We will also look for the beautiful Canary Bellflower (*Canarina canariensis*).



Dragon Trees

In the afternoon, we will have a chance to visit another area of laurel forest at Los Tilos, where we will have our picnic and explore some of the old water channels and their associated flora and fauna. We then drive further north to La Tosca, where there is a native population of the iconic Dragon Tree, some several centuries old. La Palma is a stronghold of these ancient trees of Macaronesia, which can live for 600 years or more. Although these spectacular trees grow anything up to 12 metres tall, taxonomically, Dragon Trees aren't trees, but are classified in the same order (Asparagales) as garlic and asparagus, although they look nothing like each other.

Day 3 Whale-watching boat trip and Barranco de las Angustias

This morning we will head west to the Puerto de Tazacorte, the only port on the west coast of the island. The port comprises a modern marina, but this belies the antiquity of the place and its rich history. The Spanish Conquistadors landed here in the 15th Century and built the island's first church San Miguel Arcángel, which is just inland in the Villa de Tazacorte. Weather permitting, we will embark from the marina on our first organised cetacean-watching trip out into the crystal-clear Atlantic waters. (Please be aware that there is always a swell, even on a calm day.) The trip will hopefully last some three to four

hours, giving plenty of time to track down a number of the specialities of the area. At this time of year, we will stand a good chance of seeing Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Common Bottlenose Dolphin, Rough-toothed Dolphin and Bryde's Whale, whilst a range of other species are possible including Atlantic Spotted Dolphin and Short-finned Pilot Whale, and Loggerhead Turtles. We expect to see Cory's Shearwaters which are common in the area, and will watch out for any other Shearwaters and Petrels, although we may be rather early in the season for them. By



Loggerhead Turtle

using a relatively small vessel, we should be able to get some close encounters if the animals co-operate. We will take our picnic lunch onboard the vessel and should get good views of the rugged coastline and of the volcanoes that made this very beautiful island, including the one that erupted in 2021. You should not be put off by the somewhat touristy nature of the trip, the skipper and his guides are first class observers and passionate about conservation and sensitive to avoid disturbing animals, whilst dolphins often can be seen bow-riding the banana boat if it is deployed! There is a really excellent glass bottom on the boat that we use.

After our boat trip we will head a short distance north-east to visit the large and stony valley that is the Barranco de las Angustias, walking up the track towards the Caldera de Taburiente (although we will not be going that far!). Plants here include the Silk-vine *Periploca laevigata*, the La Palma subspecies of Canary Islands Lavender (*Lavandula canariensis* subsp. *palmensis*), La Palma Bugloss (*Echium webbia*) and the rosettes of the rare red-flowered *Aeonium nobile* and *Aeonium palmense*. Overhead we will watch for Barbary Falcon, and we may see or hear Laurel Pigeons, surprisingly in the Canary Islands Pines (*Pinus canariensis*).

Day 4

Juan Mayor & Mirador de la Concepcion

Today, we will explore the barranco of Juan Mayor, a Site of Scientific Interest situated on the outskirts of Santa Cruz de La Palma. Here a minor road which becomes a track leads through old fields and into thermophilic woodland with plant species such as Canary St. John's-wort (*Hypericum canariense*), Canary Island Holly (*Ilex canariensis*), La Palma Sow-thistle (*Sonchus palmensis*) and Canary Cistus (*Cistus symphytifolius*). Tenerife Geckos and La Palma Lizards live in old stone walls, the area is usually rich in butterflies, and dragonflies include Island Darter. Red-billed Chough gather over the fields, while Canary Island Chiffchaffs abound. We will carry our picnic and spend the day walking gently through this delightful habitat, taking our time to enjoy its varied wildlife and retracing our steps when the path becomes too rocky and steep.

Afterwards we may take the opportunity to visit the nearby hilltop Mirador de la Concepcion, with its views down over Santa Cruz and along the coast. When it is sunny, this popular viewpoint is a good spot for well-grown La Palma Lizards, as well as both common and Canary Red Admiral butterflies, while Red-billed Choughs and the West Canary Islands race of Kestrel are often overhead.

Day 5

Fuencaliente: Volcanoes and Salt-pans

This morning, we will drive to the Fuencaliente lighthouse and salt-pans located at the southern tip of the island. Here, there a series of shallow, man-made pools established in the late 1960s where sea salt is still produced in the traditional way. Water levels are artificially regulated as part of the salt production process creating a variety of differing water levels. A variety of waders occur here each spring. The lighthouse area nearby can be good for sea watching with passing whales, dolphins, shearwaters and other seabirds. Plants here include two different species both known as Canary Samphire: *Schizogyne sericea* and *Astydamia latifolia*, the white *Echium breviflorum*, and Dwarf Sea-lavender (*Limonium pectinatum*). La Palma Lizards (*Gallotia gallotia* subsp. *palmae*) are frequent, and from here you can see 'Los Volcanes de Teneguía', which erupted in 1971.

In the afternoon we will visit the 'Volcan San Antonio'. The visitor centre explains the volcanic origins and activity of the island, and we then walk round the old crater. Birds are thin on the ground in the surrounding sparsely vegetated landscape, but specialities may include Barbary Falcon, Plain Swift and Spectacled Warbler. On our way back along the eastern side of the island we will visit Los Dragos Gemelos, the pair of entwined Dragon Trees believed to be the oldest on the island.

Day 6

Roque de los Muchachos

La Palma is one of the three most important astronomical observatories in the world and today we will visit the area of the astronomical observatory at the Roque de los Muchachos. The observatory, with its fleet of international telescopes, sits at the highest point of La Palma. We will travel from the coastal African vegetation belt of succulent and drought-resistant shrubs, including Canary Island Spurge (*Euphorbia canariensis*) through the Mediterranean zone, with Canary Palms (*Phoenix canariensis*), then the



Roque de los Muchachos

Laurisilva, the cloud forest. This gives way to the Temperate zone of Canary Pines (*Pinus canariensis*) and we finally reach the summit scrub, dominated by Sticky Broom (*Adenocarpus viscosus*). We will be too early in the year to see this area in its flowering glory, but we may see La Palma Violet (*Viola palmensis*) and the leaf rosettes of the dramatic La Palma Bugloss (*Echium perezii*), with summer-flowering spikes of over two metres tall. From the summit the views of La Caldera de Taburiente National Park and La

Palma are fantastic, and Spectacled Warbler and Raven occur in the vicinity. At over 2400 metres above sea level, it will be decidedly cooler than on the coast, but we should be above the clouds and enjoying the strong sunshine.

There is a new visitor centre which explains some of the astronomical significance of this location, and we hope to make a visit there.

Day 7 La Cumbrecita; Llano de las Cuevas farmland; sunset cruise

In the morning we hope to visit the south side of the caldera at La Cumbrecita. Access is restricted and depends on the availability of timed slots due to limited parking. However, in the morning the views are beautiful, and time permitting, we hope to walk the track leading to another viewpoint, through the Canary Island Pines (*Pinus canariensis*). We then visit the nearby visitor centre which has a delightful little botanic garden of endemic plant species, also much appreciated by insects and birds! We move on to explore some of El Llano de las Cuevas, the surrounding plain with its mosaic landscape of traditionally farmed fields bordered by stone walls. Plants here include bushes of the white Tagasaste (*Chamaecytisus prolifer* subsp. *palmensis*) and yellow *Genista sericea*, along with the endemic Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus campylocladus* subsp. *hillebrandii* and the fragrant-leaved *Micromeria herpyllomorpha*. Cultivated species present in this area include Prickly Pear, Fig and Almond. It is also a classic location for specialist farmland birds including the residents Red-billed Chough, Barbary Partridge and the endemic race of Common Kestrel. Stone-curlew does occur here but is a rare species, which we would be extremely fortunate to see. The area is good for farmland butterflies with Small Copper, Common Blue, Brown Argus, Dappled White, Small White, Clouded Yellow, Meadow Brown and Cardinal present.

This afternoon, we will aim to have an early evening boat trip to look again for Cetaceans and enjoy the evening light on the coast. We may visit the "Cueva Bonita", where we may admire the games of lights and colours on the cavern walls. We will probably return before the sun sets, but we will enjoy that from the shore, where we will probably have dinner in one of the little shoreline restaurants in Tzacorte. We will drive back in the dark, maybe stopping en route to enjoy the famous dark skies of La Palma. This will be a long day, but hopefully a very enjoyable one.

Day 8 Fly London

Depending on flight times, we may have a chance this morning to spend some more time wildlife watching before our late morning flight home to London.

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A, with gentle wildlife walks and whale-watching boat trips. The focus of this holiday is the whole environment of La Palma: whales and dolphins, the island's flora, birds, insects, and a wealth of other natural history, including a healthy percentage of endemic species and subspecies. Some of the paths are steep and stony, and although we won't go to sea if the conditions are unsuitable, you must

be prepared for a degree of Atlantic swell. Some days may be long, as roads, while generally well-maintained, are often narrow with numerous bends, as we explore all parts of the island.

Weather & Clothing

Temperatures are likely to be warm at sea level (18°C in the east, 20°C in the west), but colder at altitude (as a rule of thumb, the temperature drops by 1°C per 100 metres elevation), and cloud and rain are possible, as are north-easterly trade winds, which can be chilly. Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly.

Food & Accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included. We will stay at a comfortable 3-star hotel in Los Cancajos, La Palma. All rooms are en suite and have a sea view. The hotel is large complex, it is difficult to find the small family run hotels on La Palma Naturetrek like to use, though this means use of the hotel facilities which includes a heated swimming pool so please bring your swimwear!

Flights to La Palma

London Gatwick is used for the group flights. A flight option from Manchester may also be possible and we have found historically that the Manchester flight times work very well with the group flights. Please let us know at the time of booking should you wish to use Manchester flights.

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 flights, at the time of booking.

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© Naturetrek July 25
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin (adult)



Monarch Butterfly