

Lanzarote unmatched in its aquatic charms

Whether lounging by the marina or exploring a lava tube, Spanish island feels a world away

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JANUARY 2, 2015



Charco de Gines is a charming inlet lined with bars. Christof Marti/Special to The Sun

LANZAROTE, Spain — It never rains in Lanzarote. At least that's what the locals kept telling us.

Despite this promise, we sailed into the marina in a heavy downpour, one of many we were to experience during our four-day stop on this small volcanic island. Rumour has it this might be another El Nino year. Marina Lanzarote, where we moored our boat, is located in Arrecife, the largest town on the island.

After four rough days at sea, we were really looking forward to a meal served on a plate with a glass of wine instead of our usual all-in-a-bowl dinner at sea.

The waitress in the charming fish restaurant near the harbour showed us pictures of the flooded patio

and dining room and collapsed awning from the storm the day before our landfall. Hard to believe how they managed to tidy it all up and serve the most wonderful fish platter one could expect.

While most of our days were filled with provisioning and buying spare parts from the local chandlery, there was time to explore the island.

Marina Lanzarote was built within Puerto Naos and protected from the waves by a massive breakwater built of volcanic rock. While the docks are finished, the adjacent shopping mall and most restaurants are still under construction.

Luckily for us, the French bakery was already selling fresh croissants every morning. Asiatico, a restaurant serving a delicious fusion of Asian food, provides the only reliable Internet connection.

The marina, unfortunately, had no charm and resembles a strip mall more closely than the quaint fishing port it used to be. A tiny plaque on the seawall confirmed the marina was sponsored by the European taxpayers, a monument to an unknown architect or perhaps an unnamed politician of Arrecife.

Despite the disappointing character of the marina, Arrecife, just a 15-minute walk away, had its charm. My favourite pastime was to sit in one of the many small bars on the inlet El Charco de San Gines, overlooking dozens of tiny fishing boats, while sipping on a Tropical (the local beer).

Some boats tugged at their anchor line, while their colourful hulls reflected on the glassy water. Others sat high and dry above the tide line, and some looked like their last voyage to sea was only a distant memory. Surprisingly, most of them are still used for fishing, I was assured.

Looking at a sole fisherman steering toward the sea, I think of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*: I picture the fisherman and his fragile boat in the blue sea, the nets cast, hoping to catch some sardines or maybe the larger *la vieja* fish, only found in the Canary Islands.

Puerto Naos in Arrecife is the largest fishing port on the island and was once home to five canneries. Sadly, overfishing led to their closure.

The island's volcanic origins manifest themselves not only in the majestic volcanoes of the Timanfay

National Park, but also in its impressive volcanic tunnels. These lava tubes were formed during the eruption of the Corona Mountain on the northern end of the island.

The Tunnel of Atlantis, part of the several-kilometre tunnel system, is the world's largest known underwater lava tube and extends for about 1,500 metres under the sea.

Los Jameos del Agua, as well as the Cueva de Los Verdes, are two areas of the lava tube accessible to tourists. Jameos del Agua is a cultural centre and place for classic concerts in a massive underground cavern. After the exertion of an ocean passage and the hectic activity of getting ready to go to sea again, enjoying the quietness of this place was exactly what I needed.

The Cueva de Los Verdes can be explored during a 45-minute tour. This portion of the lava tube was given its name by the Verde family, who was hiding there from the pirates regularly raiding the islands.

Not far from the tunnels is the Mirador del Rio, a fantastic place to look over the volcanoes in the south, the ocean and the tiny island Graciosa in the north.

For more information, visit turismolanzarote.com/en.

While I would have loved to explore the Fire Mountains of the Timanfay National Park in the south, and maybe lounge on the white sandy beaches of Playa Blanca, it was time to return the rental car and don my sailing gear again.

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