



Mount Teide is Spain's highest peak



Walking in the hot afternoon sun carries its own dangers

Canaries

again with the greatest of ease. I am silently thanking the guy from the sports shop (Trespass at Cork's Douglas Shopping Centre) who recommended telescopic walking poles "great for taking the pressure off your knees" and high-tech lightweight boots because "the soles will stop you slipping".

Virgin long-distance hikers, myself included, introduced to this first walk – described as a spectacular one, "middle to high" in difficulty – trail to the rear. Before signing up for the festival, participants are asked to choose four walks ranging in difficulty from easy to hard among 15 different trails covering volcanic, coastal and green tracks. Walkers come from all over Europe, and even a few from Australia and the US, seasoned long-distance rambblers among them.

Three hours into the walk, passing a jagged rock teetering on the edge of the abyss,

super-fit walkers ahead have been forced to stop. Moral of the story: if you suffer from vertigo, come prepared. A young woman is pasted to the wall, not daring to move further because of the sheer drop below.

Red Cross volunteers (who arrive in their ambulance) and capable fellows with jackets impressively labelled 'Civil Proteccion' join us at Afur, where the road ends and the trail starts snaking through gorges and over coastal cliffs. In trepidation, I enquire about the need for the emergency services accompanying us. The law apparently requires them to be present "to prevent accidents wherever crowds gather".

At regular intervals, we stop to catch our breath, guiltily wiping our brows on the pretext of photographing fabulous extra-terrestrial gorges and towering volcanic pitons. John and Martin, super-fit British retirees well into their 70s, are in the first wave of walkers. Stragglers are advised to up our tempo, lest we end up walking by nightfall.

I have come to Tenerife to discover its other side, swapping beach bed-to-bar Spanish holidays of youth with their cheap cocktails and killer hangovers for aching legs, contact with locals, their history, authentic food and great wines.

All those years ago, we used to hang out with tanned Scandinavian guys who easily drank us under the table. Now, myself and party girl Mary from Kent prop up the counter of La Zahorra in El Palmer, puddles of water dripping from our saturated clothing, with middle-aged Johan from Sweden and Erik from Norway.

Both men are throwing back whiskeys (for medicinal purposes) by noon, after our second day of hiking has to be abandoned after much of the narrow path dissolved into a raging torrent of rain water.

Tenerife is renowned for its superb climate so it came as a shock to be awoken on day two of this hiking adventure by the heavy rain pounding my hotel Valle Mar balcony on Puerto de La Cruz's seafloor.

Day one, despite the initial shock of strenuous hiking and rewarded by some of the most beautiful views imaginable, passes off amid perfect sunshine. Walkers on the opposite side of the immense volcanic cliffs and in ancient laurel forests beneath the hulking grandeur of Mount Teide, Spain's highest peak, are not so lucky.

Some dress themselves in bin bags and soldier on regardless. Only as we leave

charming Taganana's square, where a feast of tapas and local wines awaits us to toast the 16,834 steps recorded on one walker's 'Fitbit', does the rain start.

Days one and two ticked off, we move on to the last two days – my absolute favourite walks. On day three, a few of us explore Puerto de La Cruz's pleasant old town as a warm-up, moving late in the afternoon by bus to Teide National Park, whose lunar-like terrain is more suited to Martian robots than the tired legs of unfit humans.

We conclude by stargazing at one of the best spots anywhere due to the clarity of the Tenerife skies, with our astronomer insisting that the light on the horizon is celestial rather than the illuminated discos down south!

Our fourth and last day takes us on a relatively gentle seven-kilometre family hike through dramatic lava fields at Malpais de Guimar, the border between the North and South islands, sea crashing against the

rocks on one side and a vista of volcanic shapes framing the other.

A few days earlier, another lovely coastal town, Garachico – with its unseasonal tsunami-like waves pounding the harbour walls – begs a more leisurely visit next time.

Tenerife's Walking Festival was launched to offer insights into hidden corners of the largest and most varied island of the Canaries. None of us expects to be met in isolated villages with a feast of tapas and wine to celebrate our arrival. But that's what happens, and I end up raising a glass more than once with the perfect Parisian Cécile.

Walkers greet each other like long-lost old friends at a mini Mardi Gras and culinary event during the festival finale in Puerto de La Cruz's Europa Square. "I'm cancelling my internet dating fee, this is the way to go," Chris from England discreetly whispers, looking flirtatiously in the direction of Johan and Erik. ■



"The wedding of our dreams! Flawless service and atmosphere throughout the weekend."

*Lorraine and Steven
Wedding, 17th November, 2016*

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