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The Milky Way spangles the sky over Tenerife's Teide National Park.

For Heavens' Sake

Worshipping the stars on Spain's volcanic islands.

BY JEN ROSE SMITH

DAYLIGHT FADED AS I drove upward through Tenerife's misty pine forests, fado music crackling over the car radio. The air – along with the mournful tunes – went suddenly clear when I left the trees and entered Teide National Park. Below me, a skirt of clouds spread to the horizon; high above, stars framed the triangular profile of El Teide volcano, Spain's tallest peak.

Alluring beaches have long drawn European sun seekers to Spain's Canary Islands. Scattering westward from Morocco's coast, the volcanic archipelago (Tenerife is its largest and most populous island) basks in African sunshine through the winter. But I'd come for a nighttime show – the Canary Islands are among the finest places on earth to watch the sky.

"You have very high mountains surrounded by the ocean," says Héctor Socas, a researcher at the Canary Islands Institute

HOWARD LITHERLAND/ALAMY

Great Outdoors

of Astrophysics, whose futuristic white observatory sprawls over Teide's flank. "That gives you ideal conditions to make observations." High-altitude stargazing means less atmosphere to distort the view, while marine weather reduces the air turbulence that can have a blurring effect. Scientists come from across the globe to look at the stars here, and, in recent years, they've been joined by stargazing travelers.

At a trailhead near Teide's lower slopes, I met with a star guide who'd set up high-powered telescopes for the evening's group. We followed him down a path lined by volcanic rock formations, jagged teeth rising to an unbroken swath of stars. To my right, I spotted the dim freckles of the Pleiades, and the guide pointed out the North Star's steady light above the far horizon. In summer, he said, we'd see the Milky Way sweeping past in a luminous band; locals call it the Camino de Santiago, named for the pilgrimage footpath spanning northern Spain.

Bundled against the mountain air, our group took reverent turns at the telescopes. Venerating the skies is nothing new in the Canaries. Archaeologists have found temples here with architecture fine-tuned to celestial rhythms, pointing to a cult of star worship. One such site, on the neighboring island of Gran Canaria, is Risco Caído, a troglodyte settlement that joined the UNESCO World Heritage list last year. There, in a temple known simply as Cave Six, sun rays and moonlight enter an ancient sanctuary through a carved tunnel, painting shadows across the interior walls.

As stars arced past Teide's summit, the guide adjusted the telescope a final time, focusing on the pale smudge of the Andromeda galaxy. The nearest major galaxy to our own, it's still 2.5 million light years away, the most distant object that can be seen with the naked eye.

It's easy to imagine Tenerife's ancient inhabitants on a night as clear as this one, watching the faraway galaxy against a velvet-dark sky. Thousands of years later, the view retains its power. I looked a final time, then moved aside as another stargazer took my place at the telescope. He drew in a quick breath when Andromeda came into sudden focus: "My god!" he said.



Daytime adventures in Teide National Park.

TIP

"When people think of the Canary Islands, often the resorts of Tenerife are top of mind. But travelers who venture farther across this volcanic archipelago are rewarded with four stunning national parks boasting diverse landscapes, from Spain's highest mountain to desertlike dunes and tropical beaches rivaling those of the Caribbean."

— Sarah Lang, *Virtuoso* travel advisor, San Francisco



The village-style Bahía del Duque.

STAY

White stucco architecture and red-tiled roofs evoke a traditional Canarian village at **Bahía del Duque**, a resort that wraps around a sheltered bay on Tenerife's sunny southern coast. The property's 288 rooms and 58 suites spiral through lush gardens and cascading pools, with eight restaurants that range from modern Basque to beach-club casual, plus a wellness center with a thalassotherapy circuit. After dinner, meet the property's resident astronomer at an on-site observatory for a sparkling nightcap of stars. *Doubles from \$286, including breakfast daily and one lunch for two.*

MORE DARK-SKY DESTINATIONS

The show begins when the sun goes down.

CANADA

See constellations reel over the Canadian Rockies at the 442-room **Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge** in **Jasper National Park**, the world's second-largest Dark Sky Preserve. At the hotel's on-site planetarium, astronomy experts lead virtual tours of constellations and train the Canadian Rockies' most powerful telescope on the night sky. Watch for flickering tongues of purple, green, and blue light, too, as the aurora borealis makes flash appearances above Jasper from August to April. *Doubles from \$367, including a welcome gift, breakfast daily, and a \$100 hotel credit.*

NAMIBIA

Even in full sunlight, the **Namib Desert** resembles something from another planet, with its Martian-red plains grazed by spiral-horned kudu. At night, it's the dark skies that dazzle in NamibRand Nature Reserve. An International Dark Sky Reserve renowned for stargazing, the wildlife sanctuary is also among the largest private nature preserves in Africa. **Ker & Downey's** private, customizable, eight-day fly-in Namibia safari includes two nights in the nature reserve at the recently renovated and Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, where an on-site observatory and resident astronomer help

guests make the most of the starry abundance overhead. *Departures: Any day through 2021; from \$9,000.*

IRELAND

Coastal hills on the Iveragh Peninsula along the Wild Atlantic Way frame twinkling night skies in the **Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve**, the first such reserve in Ireland. Locals have long kept an eye on the heavens here: Some 6,000 years ago, the peninsula's Neolithic people aligned their stone monuments to celestial events. Now, moonless nights reveal hosts of galaxies, nebulas, and shooting stars. At the gateway to the peninsula,

the 72-room **Sheen Falls Lodge** offers falconry, outings on horseback, and salmon fishing on a private stretch of river within the 300-acre estate. *Doubles from \$427, including breakfast daily, a bottle of wine, and an excursion in the hotel's 1936 Buick. VI.*

A starry night over Kerry.



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