

SAILING BY: The Sea Cloud Spirit in full sail as it tacks around the Canaries.



ISLANDS IN SUN

Jenny McBain sails around the Canaries on the Sea Cloud Spirit, spotting whales, tasting wine and stargazing from a mountain top



Tender boats carry passengers between the cruiser and ports of call.

Lanzarote presents a dark face to the world. Coal-black rocks of cooled volcanic rage glisten in the sunlight.

On September 1 1730 there was a major volcanic eruption there, and another occurred in 1824. These caused people to move off the island.

Now, much of the landscape lies within the boundaries of a national park. People live there once more and nature has made a spectacular comeback.

Around 800 organisms are presently established on the island. They range from large vultures to hardy succulent plants and tiny beetles measuring just 1mm, and ravens do their bit for the local ecology by spreading seeds around the landscape.

When the days begin to lengthen at home in Scotland and birdsong announces the arrival of spring time, yet the weather remains windy and cold, it is only natural to dream of sunnier climes.

So it was that my attention turned to the Canary Islands.

The archipelago is part of Spain, but it is closer to Morocco than Madrid and always a good bet for a bit of warmth and relaxation. I was therefore all too happy to accept an invitation to cruise around the islands

on a luxurious windjammer called Sea Cloud Spirit.

Joining the ship was a little nerve-racking when technical issues struck the vessel and all passengers had to take an extra flight to Lanzarote instead of leaving as scheduled from Las Palmas, the capital of Gran Canaria.

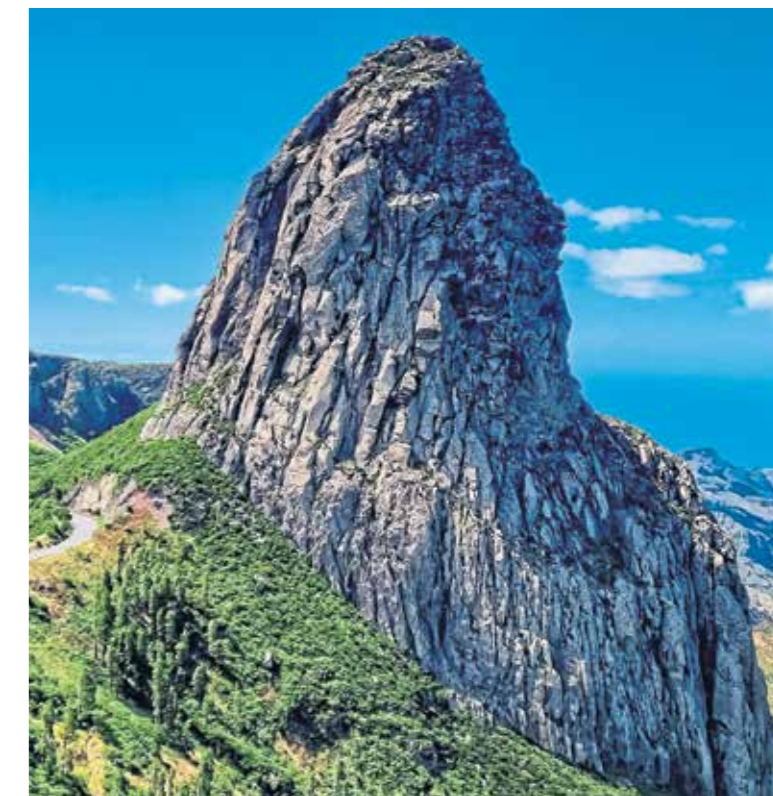
However, everyone was assigned a tour while we waited for the problem to be fixed. Mine was a panorama of the national park, concluding in wine tasting.

Everywhere we looked from the windows of our coach there was evidence of lava flows. Black rocks are used to create terraces for horticulture and there are bubble-type formations which have been converted into beautiful, organic shaped buildings.

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A panorama of Tamaduste, a little port on El Hierro where larger cruise ships are unable to berth.



The giant Roque de Agando, formed by a lava cone on La Gomera.



Some gentle yoga is among the activities on board.



Cool drinks on deck as the sun sets over the islands.



The restaurant serves buffets and more formal dinners.

The wine we tasted was delicious, and it seemed miraculous that it could be produced in a place with no ground water.

One way of ensuring the plants stay moist is to surround them with chips of black volcanic rock which condense the morning dew.

This island is so dry that at times in its history water has commanded a higher price than wine.

Next, we docked in La Gomera. The landscape of this island is verdant with lots of different species of trees and plants. Some of them have trailing fronds which capture moisture.

I went on a whale-watching trip and was fortunate enough to see three pilot whales, their curved, black shapes easily discernible above and below the waves.

On returning to the ship, it was time for a demonstration of a form of communication called El Siblos. It is a special kind of whistling which can spell out the sounds of any language. Two young women demonstrated how it works.

One went out of earshot while an object was hidden by a guest. On her return she was given directions in whistles and swiftly found it. For a finale they whistled Happy Birthday.

Sea Cloud offers an experience for travellers who most likely do not like mainstream

cruises. Not for them the floating cities which double the local population when they berth, or indeed eclipse it. There were only around 60 passengers on board with me. It can accommodate a maximum of just over double that number.

When the sails were hoisted, I could feel the tug of the wind. It all added up to something reminiscent of a more elegant era.

We settled into a routine of delicious food, informative lectures and adventurous excursions.

The state cabin I was assigned had an en-suite bathroom complete with bath tub. There was a couch and two single beds in the bedroom and a small balcony with deckchairs.

The weather was much windier than it is normally in spring, so the captain had to alter the itinerary and more time was spent in port.

We did get to visit the tiny island of El Hierro. Larger ships cannot put into port here.

We went on a hiking tour, stopping off to explore a beautiful restaurant designed by the renowned Spanish architect Cesar Manrique.

Built into a cliff and cantilevered out above a sharp drop bordering a crater, it is a stunning structure indeed.

Our next stop was Tenerife, which proved to be a bit of a culture shock. It is

much more developed than the previous islands on the itinerary.

To get our nature fix, a few of us hired a taxi and went up into the mountains to watch the sunset and to stargaze.

There was a sliver of moon in the shape of a smile alongside many familiar constellations.

Throughout the trip the Sea Cloud Spirit was a wonderful base. Meals alternated between lavish buffets and more formal sit-down affairs. There was an onboard spa and a resident pianist.

The great benefit of cruising is that you only need unpack once and the scenery shifts as you relax.

The Canary Islands are situated along a subsea fault line where tectonic plates meet. So future eruptions cannot be ruled out.

Meantime, it is a fascinating and peaceful holiday destination within about five hours of Scotland.

TRAVEL FACTS

Accommodation: Sea Cloud has three ships and offers many different routes internationally.
Price: Starting from £3,035 for five nights
Visit: www.seacloud.com

