The Country

The 7 large islands and 6 smaller ones are all actually peaks of a huge volcanic mountain range, adrift in the Atlantic just 106km west of the African continent. The highest peak, ‘Teide’ towers up from Tenerife to a height of 3718m. It’s therefore not just Spain’s highest mountain but also the world’s third tallest volcano, the two highest being in Hawaii. Craters and lava-fields are still this landscape’s distinguishing features. The last eruptions took place only a couple of centuries ago – a geologic blink of an eye – so erosion’s had precious little time to leave its mark. Although these volcanic soils are all very fertile, there’s a marked difference in vegetation between the humid western islands like La Palma and La Gomera, and particularly dry islands like Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. Added to this, a micro-climate with a pronounced north-south split prevails. The north – where clouds empty onto the higher mountain faces and pine trees extract moisture from the air via their needles – is a beautiful lush green. In stark contrast, the southern halves of the Islands are mostly barren and dusty.

One thing that all have in common though is a unique flora and fauna (half of which only exist in the Canaries) due to the isolated position of the archipelago. In order to find a comparable biodiversity, you’d have to go as far as Hawaii or the Galapagos Islands.

The Climate

With 300 days of sunshine a year, the Canaries are blessed with an eternal spring; back in Roman times, the Canaries were known as “The Happy Islands”. Average winter temperatures are mild at around 19ºC, they’re around 24ºC in summer (which is pretty chilly considering the Islands are situated between 28° and 29° north, the same latitudes as Miami or Cairo). This is due to the relatively cool North Atlantic Current (18 to 22ºC). Plus the prevailing north-easterly trade wind has a similar effect; it’s also responsible for the low levels of rainfall, especially in summer. That’s why you won’t find any rivers or lakes on the Islands, and water has to be extracted from the sea by means of expensive desalination. If you see a dark sky above the Islands between April and September, it’s probably the Sirocco blowing off the Sahara Desert. This wind happens very rarely – just once or twice a year – but when it does it brings a 40ºC hot veil of dust over the islands. While locals complain about the “Calima” and tourists wish they had cancellation insurance, wind- and kitesurfers get all excited about the chance to sail that very rare south-easterly on the remote south and south-west coasts.