

# A cruising guide to the Canary Islands

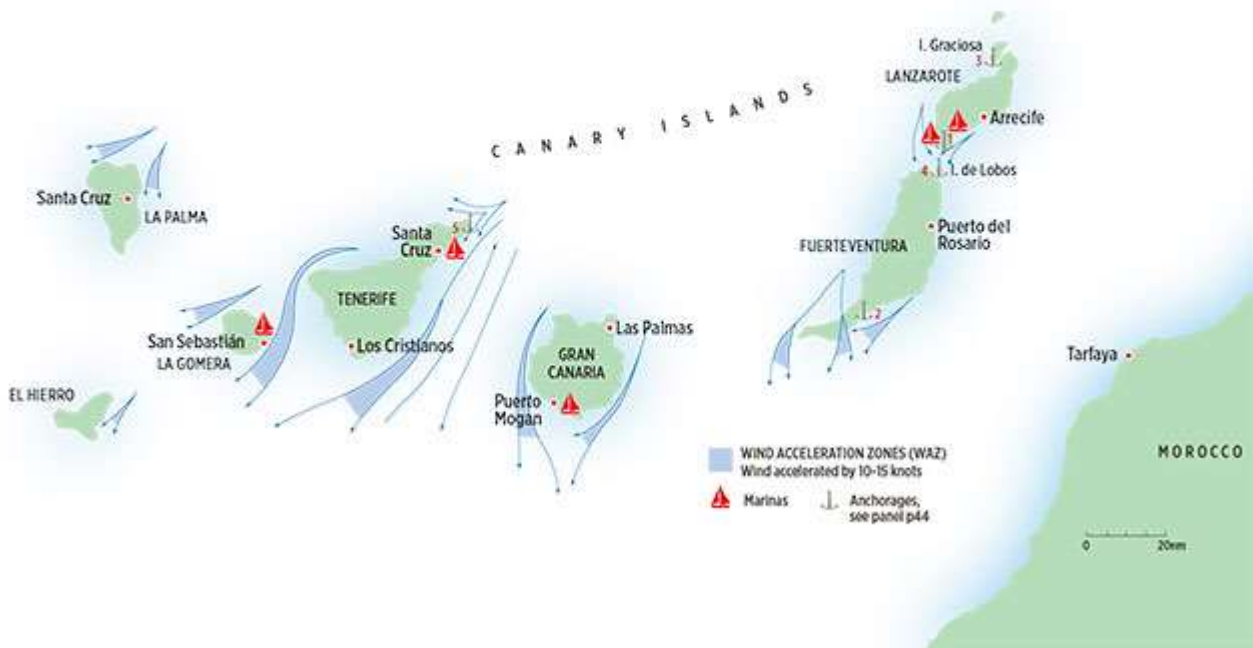
**Escape the winter, enjoy amazing food and drink, volcanic scenery and wonderful warm weather sailing, all just a few hours' flight away from the UK**



The sumptuous Playa de Los Conejos on Graciosa is well sheltered from the north

## **A cruising guide to the Canary Islands**

If you're looking for an escape from the British winter and some warm weather sailing, at the top of the list for many sailors is the Caribbean – nearly 3,000 miles away, eight hours flying time and with a five-hour time difference. Fly south for four hours, however, and you'll find a cruising ground that shares the UK's time zone but has a perfect climate, wonderful scenery and sensible prices. The Spanish Canary Islands, off the coast of West Africa, are an astonishingly well-kept sailing secret.



The Canary Islands archipelago lies just 70 miles off the Moroccan coast

In the middle of winter, we decided to take a closer look at this dramatic archipelago. The weather forecast looked promising: 22°C-plus, with perfect sailing winds of Force 3-4 and sunshine every day. In the Canary Islands, the prevailing north-east trade winds make for consistent conditions. Perhaps that's why many one-design class world championships are held in the Canary Islands archipelago?



Who cares about golf when the weather's this good for sailing?

The islands offer a spectacular cruising ground, with a varied backdrop. All of the seven main islands – Tenerife, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, La Palma, La Gomera and El Hierro – are within a day's sail of each other, yet they each have their own unique character and some even have a difference in climate. Most of the marinas and harbours have excellent facilities, improved in recent years by the influx of foreign yachts.



The ARC ensures Canarian harbours are busiest in late season. Once the fleet departs, Canarian sailors have their favourite anchorages to themselves once again

Most visiting sailors use the Canary Islands as a staging post for an Atlantic crossing, often as part of a cruise in company, such as the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC) from Las Palmas, in Gran Canaria to St Lucia in the Caribbean. Some transatlantic crews have said they wished that they'd have more time to explore the potential of the Canary Islands archipelago before sailing west over the horizon.

These Spanish islands pose no problem for sailors arriving from other EU countries. English is spoken widely and foreign yachts are welcomed.



There are 8,500 berths in 36 ports on the seven islands

### **Undiscovered waters**

So where's the catch? Is it hugely expensive? Are berths impossible to come by? Not at all. The last 15 years have seen many marinas built, which means there are plenty of visitors' berths and long-term moorings available at a reasonable cost. Another bonus is that the Canary Islands are a duty-free zone. Working out what you save compared to a weekend on the south coast of England is guaranteed to put a smile on your face.



There are bow- or stern-to moorings, like the Med, but berths are far easier to come by in the Canaries

The big chandlers and yards are used to dealing with blue water sailors, but obtaining spare parts can be a lengthy, complex process. Administration and a different tax status to the EU means that imports go through the Spanish system, then through Gran Canaria, and then on to wherever you are in the Canary Islands.

### **Weather and tide**

Most of the year, trade winds dominate the islands' weather system, bringing a Force 3-4 from the NE. Wind acceleration zones affect this, however (see below). The trades are most dominant in spring and summer, and strongest in July. Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, only 60 miles from Africa, are also hit by the southeasterly Sirocco. This autumnal wind can create confused conditions, but generally only for short periods.



Dive into the clear blue Atlantic – Canarian waters are clean and pristine

In terms of climate, the North African influence also means Lanzarote and Fuerteventura get almost no rain. As you head west into the Atlantic, the islands become greener. Despite being nearer to the Equator than the Mediterranean, the average temperature of the Canary Islands is milder. Cooled by the Trade Winds, in July it rarely rises above 29°C. In the winter, the Canary Islands are equally temperate, with even the sea temperature averaging 18°C in January. Local newspapers print detailed weather forecasts and weather websites will give you information for all the islands.

Skippers used to sailing in the UK will have no problem coping with tides in the Canary Islands: the biggest tidal range is no more than 2.8m and tidal streams rarely get beyond three knots.



There are wind acceleration zones and exciting sailing between these mountainous islands

### **Wind acceleration zones (WAZ)**

These are areas where the wind is funnelled between islands. Wind speed normally increases by 10-15 knots. At its worst, a WAZ will cause the wind to go from near calm to Force 5 in minutes, so it pays to find out from pilot books where they are.





Perfect sailing conditions in a wind acceleration zone south of Gran Canaria

The WAZ is certainly to be respected, but with a good crew and a hand on the mainsheet, there's no need to be intimidated. YM's technical editor Graham Snook vividly recalls sailing in his first WAZ: 'With two reefs tucked in, we enjoyed a sleigh-ride sail. Grinning like fools, wearing shorts and T-shirts and accompanied by Jimi Hendrix on the stereo, we were off with 25-30 knots over the deck, bright sunshine and rock music. I never knew sailing could be that much fun, and I've been sailing for 26 years.'

'The WAZ should only have lasted the first couple of hours, but by the time we'd reached the halfway point it was still with us, and showed no signs of leaving. Closing the southeastern shore of Tenerife and after 45 miles of memorable sailing, the wind decreased.'



A charter in the Canary Islands is a good introduction to trade wind cruising

### **Passage to the Canary Islands**

If you're crossing Biscay in one leap, you need a clear weather window of several days because low pressure in the Atlantic can bring fierce weather. Thereafter, the northerly Portuguese Trades are strongest from April to September. A well-planned voyage to the islands should prove little more than a downwind ride of four to six days from Lagos or Gibraltar.

Once south of Portugal, there is the option of diverting to the islands of Madeira or Porto Santo to the north. Alternatively, the Moroccan port authorities are getting more used to visiting European yachts. Stay 30 miles off the African coast down to Agadir, one of the more popular Moroccan ports, which has a new marina. Essaouira, which is just to the north of Agadir, is another good jumping-off point and is also an attractive, traditional Moroccan town.

Some sea schools in the Canary Islands can organise the delivery of your yacht, or provide a skipper for the 750-mile crossing from Portugal or the Med.

Most yachts head straight to Lanzarote, since it is the most easterly of the islands and offers excellent marine facilities. The best time to leave Europe for the Canary Islands is between June and October, when the prevailing northerly winds are most reliable.

Southwesterlies and calms can be encountered in the spring and late summer. Between December and March, the winds are more variable in direction and strength.

### **Five great Canarian anchorages**



Volcanic badlands and crystal clear anchorages at the spectacular Montana Amarilla on Graciosa, an islet just north of Lanzarote

### **Playas de Papagayo, Lanzarote**

A series of perfect sandy beaches with crystal-clear waters. Protected from the prevailing northeasterly winds. Around the point to the south, you find some of the Canaries' famous black sand beaches, many small and uncrowded.

### **Costa Calma, Fuerteventura**

Take your pick of a number of bays on this well-named coast, sheltered from the winds but open to an ocean swell at times.

### **Playa Francesca, Isla de la Graciosa**

Crystal-clear waters and a sandy bottom, but it can get busy here in the summer. Graciosa, just north of Lanzarote, is a marine reserve and boasts some of the most unspoilt beaches in the Canaries. Exposure to the Trade Winds mean great sailing here, too.

### **Playa de Lobos, Isla de Lobos**

The islet of Lobos is a mile north of Fuerteventura. The beach is a sandy expanse making a neat cove, well protected from the north and north-east but subject to local winds. Idyllic nonetheless. Lobos's famous turquoise lagoons are a short walk away.

Bahia de Antequera, Tenerife

Sailing north from the capital, Santa Cruz, you'll find high cliffs and a sheltered bay just south of the island's north-east tip, part of a national park and protected from all but southerly winds.

### **Pilot books for the Canary Islands**

Atlantic Islands

By Anne Hammick, published by RCCPF/Imray at £45

Cruising Guide to the Canary Islands

By Oliver Solanas Heinrichs and Mike Westin, published by Imray at £29.50 (first edition due in 2017)

Atlantic Crossing Guide

By Jane Russell, published by RCCPF/Adlard Coles at £45

### **Guide to the islands**

LANZAROTE

Highlights

- Has two of the archipelago's most popular marinas, both on the protected south coast: Puerto Calero and Marina Rubicon
- Incredible landscapes of barren lava inland
- Strict building controls mean it's relatively unspoilt
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Be aware

- Big Atlantic swells on the west coast
- Sand intermittently blown from the Sahara

FUERTEVENTURA

Highlights

- African feel with sand dunes, cacti, palm trees and wide plains
- 152 beaches
- Year-round sunshine due to proximity to Africa

#### Be aware

- Uncomfortable seas where the one-knot Canary Current meets the tide or contrary winds
- Marine facilities are more low-key than Lanzarote

#### GRAN CANARIA



ARC yachts leave Muelle Deportivo marina, part of the Puerto de la Luz in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria

#### Highlights

- The marvellously varied coast – from the banana plantations of the north to the sand dunes of the south

- The Vela Latina, an indigenous dayboat design raced in large numbers over the summer
- Many ports and harbours allow easy provisioning and shelter

Be aware

- Las Palmas offers shops aplenty, but it does have an urban sprawl, like any major city
- Mass tourism in the south

## TENERIFE



Tenerife's towering coast offers challenging sailing

### Highlights

- The 3,718m (12,000ft) snow-capped peak of Pico de Teide, a useful navigation mark
- Colourful South American influence

Be aware

- High cliffs and steep shores cause strong downgusts

- The Pico (mountain) strengthens the Trade Winds to around 25 knots on the east side. Coupled with an adverse current, this makes it uncomfortable to sail in any direction but clockwise

## LA PALMA

### Highlights

- Springs give the island lush vegetation
- The largest volcanic crater in the world (16 miles across)

### Be aware

- Volcanoes are still active, having erupted in 1949 and 1971
- Volcanic rocks and debris make anchoring difficult
- The Canary Current is strongest here, reaching 2 knots at times

## LA GOMERA



San Sebastian's black sand beach is right next to La Gomera's historic harbour

## Highlights

- The history – Columbus set off from San Sebastian in 1492, to discover America
- Known as the 'most Canarian' of the islands, with a friendly atmosphere
- The black-sand anchorages on the south coast

## Be aware

- Strongest tidal streams in the Canaries, up to three knots at times
- High peaks inland mean big variations in coastal winds

## EL HIERRO





Rocky Punta Orchilla at the western end of El Hierro was for years the end of the known world

### Highlights

- The most unspoilt island by far gives a real 'end of the world' feel
- The staggering 1,000m (3,280ft)-high cliffs (once a volcano's lip) around El Golfo

### Be aware

- Tidal rip off the southern point, La Restinga
- Not many facilities

Interested to go sailing around the Canary Islands? Send us an inquiry

[info@gofunsailing.com](mailto:info@gofunsailing.com)

[www.gofunsailing.com](http://www.gofunsailing.com)