

Encuentro en Tenerife 2003 – Comentarios de Christianne Fertig

The famous explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt referred to the Canary Islands as the «happy islands» when he landed on Tenerife in 1799 for a whistle-stop on his way to an expedition to South America. The Romans considered the archipelago as the «isles of the blessed», which, as legend has it, are the remainder of the mysterious lost continent of Atlantis. At his time, Humboldt was pursuing studies on distinct climatic and geologic regions as well as plant distributions, which was to become the subject of his main scientific work. He aimed at developing an “...understanding of nature as a whole, proof of the working together of all the forces of nature...”, thus laying the foundations for interdisciplinary studies in science and academia. Undoubtedly, Humboldt would have been delighted to see Tenerife to be explored once again after some 204 years – this time in April 2003 – by a group of avid adventurers otherwise known as Fulbrighters.

The visit by Humboldt comprised mainly the climbing of the island’s legendary volcano Mount Teide in the company of his revered friend and colleague Bonpland, a French botanist and good master of the Spanish language. The 5-day field trip of our group, however, consisted of ‘on-site’ learning about the island’s geological and civil history, flora and fauna as well as its mythology and traditions – an approach that, with the benefit of hindsight, even Humboldt might have preferred to his year-long studies in the libraries and archives of his resident Berlin. Hence our fortune of counting in our midst Agustín Guimerá – a native islander, historian, story-teller and excellent tour guide all in one. Keen to present his island from a perspective different to that of package holiday organisers and sun-and-beach tourists, he invited his Fulbright fellows on this, as it turned out, most marvellous and eye-opening excursion.

Our task force comprised the members and friends of the Spanish Fulbright Association as well as one American, one Italian, two Germans and – four children whose hip-height perspective and tireless curiosity were an invigorating addition to the group. Throughout our stay we took lodgings in the hotel Edén Parque Vacacional in Puerto de la Cruz – Tenerife’s principal town on the Northern coast. Although the city can appear, at first sight, as a stereotypical holiday resort it is actually a rather more tranquil place than one would expect. As a token of welcome and hospitality president of the county hall (the mayor of the town) made available a coach for the duration of our visit by means of which we were able to reach urban destinations and the wilderness in equal comfort. And just as with all good friends and loyal companions the coach was instantly bestowed her own nickname: ‘la guagua’, driven by Juan José who professionally and safely stirred her along the winding and narrow roads of villages and mountains alike.

On our first day, we had, as is custom with important delegations such as us, the honour to be introduced to the oldest dweller of Tenerife, El Drago. Measuring some 17 metre in height and being of an age ranging anywhere between 500 and 3000 years this tree has rightly so become the symbol of Tenerife, lending its name to anything worthy its fame, such as bistros, shopping malls, car repair shops and wine labels. But the health of this botanic Methusalem, who resides in the village of Icod de los Vinos some 20 km west of Puerto de la Cruz, is at stake thanks to air pollution and vibrations by the nearby car traffic as well as insufficient water supply caused by a growing urbanisation or seasonal rain shortages. The tree is part of a botanical garden where every effort is being made to copy the distinct ecosystems of the island. By now, dusk had fallen and we strolled through the old part of Icod de los Vinos somehow like

a flock of lost sheep, not quite knowing towards where to head and what to expect next. But before long, we were being shepherded into the restaurant Carmen where the Cultural Councillor of the town Jesús Royo awaited us in one of the typically decorated rooms. After a few welcoming words from his and Agustín's parts, we were given a first insight into the local cuisine when partaking of some delicious potato omelette, goat cheese and fine wine of the region.

The next day already, la guagua had to prove a long breath and strong horse power in order to struggle up the serpentine roads that lead into the mountainous region of Montaña de Izaña. Gleaming in the dazzling sun against the azure sky, the sparkling white instruments of the Observatorio Astrofísico were signs of our morning destination in the far distance. There, the vice director of the station, Carlos Martínez Roger, told about the technical development and research activities of this internationally renowned solar observatory. The site, which was built in 1965 and resembles a park of gigantic futuristic mushrooms, was originally used for stellar observations of the night sky. Unfortunately, such studies are no longer possible since the urban expansion of near-by Puerto de la Cruz and the airport have increasingly corrupted the atmosphere. Our visit included a closer look at one of the laser-beam telescopes and the observation of the sun on a monitor.

Nevertheless, after this brief drift into the solar spheres of Tenerife we returned to our path to one of the island's most famous terrestrial treasures – the Teide National Park. A vast area enclosing some 13570 hectares the park's main attraction is the mountain El Teide, whose omnipresence in any part of Tenerife is not only awe-inspiring but at the same time a striking reminder of the geological past of the Canary Islands, which were formed in a series of volcanic eruptions around 15 (25) million years ago. The actual Las Cañadas del Teide National Park was formed by a volcanic cataclisme 180.000 years ago and posterior volcanic eruptions till 1909 (is the result of the last eruption in 1909). El Teide and, measuring 3718 m in height, is today the highest mountain of Spain. The crater is made up of different lavas and ashes that spilled out during each eruption, now making for the varied colours and texture of the rocks that create the characteristic soil and landscape. As folklore has it, only the demon Guayota who lives in the crater and who the Guanches believed would rise up one day and steal the sun, will know when the dormant giant will awake the next time. In the meantime, yet, he continues to tell his ancient story in the cinema of the visitors centre, showing off his real capacity in a video that combines computer simulation and sound technology with dramatic effects. In the botanical garden adjacent to the visitors centre a handful of Teide violets and Tajinastes as well as the odd lizard dozing on a warm rock all enjoyed the midday sun and peace.

The largest part of the National Park is taken up by Las Cañadas del Teide, which are the leftover base walls of the El Teide crater: once the magma chambers under the volcano were emptied by the eruption the upper walls collapsed, leaving behind only the lower walls. The expanse between these parts and the peak of the volcano are referred to as cañadas. One of these walls are Los Roques de García, which became a household name when lending their facet to the 1000-pesetas bills in the pre-Euro era. No other illustration of the ephemerality of banknotes and the longevity of the earth's crust could have been more emblematic. Situated at the feet of El Teide and boasting a stunning view of the latter, the restaurant El Parador De Las Cañadas provided us with a hearty lunch of particular grandeur in the form of a Canarian speciality conejo en salmorejo.

Continuing our tour westwards, we were struck with the snow-white and fluffy appearance of el mar de nubes, which was an astounding backcloth to the grey and harsh volcanic fields. At Tubo volcánico de Sámara, we entered a world of solemn darkness and apparent infinity. These underground tunnels, which were created by the volcanic lavas (gases) during eruption, looked like the entrance to the center of

the earth. Rerouting our journey to the latter destination would have seriously disrupted our schedule for the next days. Instead we preferred listening to our tour guides who narrated some ancient tales that wove around these caves. It goes without saying that we felt a certain relief when returning to the familiar comfort of our refuge la guagua.

The evening of this day, which took us to altitudes of some 2500 m, was being spent in the hotel bar on the ninth floor – not only as a measure to readjust our bodies to the sea-level atmosphere of Puerto de la Cruz but also to enjoy the joke-cracking talents of Emilio and Victor.

Higher still than the hotel bar but far lower than El Teide lies the historic town of Orotava. Situated at 335 m in the fecund Orotava valley, the beauty of the latter prompted Humboldt to fall on his knees to thank God and to write later: '(apart from) the banks of the Orinoco, the mountain ranges of Peru and the lovely Mexican valleys, I...have never seen a picture as variegated, harmonious and attractive as that offered in the Orotava Valley by the striking contrast between the greenery of vegetation and masses of rock.'

Until the Spanish conquest in the 16th century Orotava formed part of Taoro, the richest of the nine Guanche kingdoms of Tenerife. The town was settled mainly with Andalusian families whose Arabic influence reflects in the form of Moorish arches or beautiful arabesques adorning a number of buildings. Orotava is famous for its celebrations at Corpus Christi when religious pictures made of volcanic earth are created on the paving stones of the main plaza. The nearby La Casa Zárate-Cólogan combined elegant interiors of decorative rooms with tasteful antique furnishings and a picturesque outside garden prided itself with araucarias and drago trees. Sadly however, the landlady Antonia spoke of her wrangle with the Orotava authorities in her attempt to preserve that unique garden, which is currently facing threats of demolition. It is to be hoped that reason will eventually win over too tight budget restrictions and ill-considered decisions.

A home of an altogether different style was the finca of Agustín's family in El Sauzal. Never before in its existence had this secluded residence received a group of 42 'Japoneses', who marvelled at orchards and vineyards and tasted the unforbidden fruits of níspero and pitanga trees. With the Atlantic Ocean making for a gorgeous backdrop this idyllic place seemed only moments away from paradise. The actual temptation however was lurking in La Casa de Vino of near-by La Baranda. Whilst the museum of the place informed about the wine making on the island the visitors shop offered a wealth of regional wines bearing illustrious names, such as Humboldt, Las Cuevas del Rey, Crater, Viña Norte or Bodegas Presas de Ocampo. Needless to say that this whistle-stop also included a wine-tasting, which was kindly organised by the director of the museum and which whetted our palates for the luncheon to come in Tegueste. Here, the curtains fell in the restaurant El Masón del Drago where an unmatched feast of puchero canario made us feel like the Spanish king and his entourage who stopped at this very place on a visit to the region only previously. Against the saying *plenus venter non studet libenter* we yet continued our tour to La Laguna whose University of San Fernando is the only alma mater in the Canary Islands. Opened in 1920s (1701) it is today the seat of La Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País de Tenerife. This institution emerged from the zeitgeist of enlightenment at the end of XVIIIth century when the idea of the modernisation of Spain and promotion of both its intellectual and economic resources was a revolutionary concept. The society encouraged in particular craftsmanship and agriculture on the island as well as the improvement and expansion of its trading activities with India and America. However, the importance of the society waned toward the end of the 18th century, when the foundation of other – in some measure more modern – institutions and public organisations took over large parts of its initial role. Since then its focus has been on political issues and, more recently, on cultural and advisory functions. A special mention deserves the

archive library, which hosts two copies of the Encyclopaedia by Lambert and Diderot, testifying the society's eminence and importance not only for the archipelago but in equal measure also for the Spanish mainland of the time. Nowadays, La Laguna is Tenerife's second most important town still having retained large parts of its essentially Spanish character. This is even more noteworthy as tourism and modern developments have taken their toll by ridding a great many number of regional towns and villages of their original characters. Even so, regional and religious customs are still alive as we were able to witness on (the Thursday of) Jueves Santo. That day, the locals took to the streets in order to visit and worship the holy treasures that were festively set out in every church. Hosts of polished sterling silver created a genuine atmosphere of celebration and religiousness. Alas, the continuous rain in most areas of the island throughout the afternoon did not allow the traditional processions to take place in many towns.

Notwithstanding the ongoing rain, our cheerful brigade followed the call of the wild to the Anaga Hills the next morning. Covering the north part of Tenerife, these mountains are in geological and botanical terms the oldest zone of the island. They essentially encompass two principal ranges of hills thought to have, at one time, been separate islands that were later linked with one another by a volcanic eruption. As a consequence of this event, Tenerife can be divided into two entirely different climate zones, that is the substantially less dry north with its lush and abundant vegetation and the rather arid south with a flora typical of desert regions.

Idleness and boredom during the two-hour coach journey were kept at bay when Agustín read from Los Sabandeiros' *La Cantata del Mencey Loco* – a literary heritage from the conquest in the 15th century – and explained the history and role of the Anaga National Park. On board of the *guagua* were also the park director, Cristóbal, and two of Agustín's siblings, Charo and Malule, who all excelled themselves in their roles as tour guides of this day. Charo (Malule), a teacher herself, commented on the schooling situation of this region, which faces particular difficulties caused by the remoteness and thin population in this area. For example, internet access, which is no longer only a modern comfort but already a bare necessity in many urban households, is still the exception here. Or, the common practice of one-classroom teaching due to the small number of children per age group.

Nowadays, the Anaga National Park comprises an extensive protected area of high ecological value. Large parts are still relatively unexplored allowing the preservation of vulnerable ecosystems and small villages with their traditional features and customs. A botanical rarity, the natural forest of *laurisilva* is an important water and timber source of the region. It is home to the rare Anaga violet, which defends its habitat in this dense jungle of laurel trees, epiphytes and lichen. To our delight, we were able to spot, right beside our path, this most unobtrusive of flowers, whose delicate countenance was instantly copied onto numerous photographic films or flash card memories.

Having climbed La Cumbre de Chinobre we also fulfilled our mission to encounter the horizontal rain, a phenomenon created by the north-trade winds that sweep the coastal rain toward the inland. Leaving the cloudy and humid heights of this isolated place we took to the main road again that followed the winding crest of the hills in sleek meanders. Each turn produced an even more spectacular view of the lush ravines and coastline below, with the hamlet of Taganana in the far distance. The road tunnel of the same name, which was built in the 60s (70s) and runs across the entire ridge, is an example of the infrastructural development of the region.

Meanwhile in Taganana, a handful of kitchen staff were industriously preparing some four dozens of fresh cod fish each of which exceeding a dinner plate's diameter in length, steaming a multiple of *papas arrugadas*, stirring and seasoning the necessary amounts of various *mojos* and counting the bottles

of red and white wine needed to accompany a meal that had to satisfy a bus load of hungry caterpillars. Eh voila! An unparalleled lunch was sizzled up in perfect time when we arrived at the idyllic restaurant Xiomara. It took a while to eat our way through this masterpiece of rural cuisine during which we enjoyed the company of a few local residents. This was the chance for us to engage in a lively discussion on ecological and economical issues concerning Anaga in particular as well as Tenerife in general. Everyone agreed that the number of tourists visiting Anaga will have to be controlled just as it is common practice in any other national park if the fine equilibrium between man and nature is to be preserved. The promotion of a cultural tourism would help to boost knowledge and awareness about this region beyond the boundaries of the Canary Islands. The local residents mentioned with regret that over the last decades the Anaga region has suffered a marked population exodus towards the urban zones. This process has entailed an aging of the population and will definitely provoke a gradual set back of traditional activities in the not so distant future. One participant of the debate summarised the uniqueness and importance of Anaga for the whole of Tenerife aptly with the words: *El que no ha visto Anaga no ha visto Tenerife*.

Inspired and grateful for this excellent opportunity to exchange views with members of the local community we then went on to visit the picturesque village of Taganana. The church Santa Maria de las Nieves hosts a valuable triptych by the 16th-century Flemish artist Marcelus Cofferman, which was once used as a payment for sugar by an Antwerp dealer. The close-by beach of La Playa del Roque de las Bodegas, with its landmark rocks resting majestically just off the coast, were the ideal stop for a leisurely afternoon walk over black sand and pebble stones fields. The somewhat rough sea, however, was only little enticing to venture out any further. Nevertheless, the ultimate beach experience for the true enthusiasts among us was only as far as the next day!

Santa Cruz was the destination of the following morning when we started our day's programme at the elegant Hotel Mencey. The courtyard surprised with water features and handsome gardens whilst the inside impressed, among others, with a number of oversize wall paintings by Martín González. (More works of the same artist decorated the stairs assembly room of the town hall to which we paid a visit later in the morning). Guided by Agustín we started our sightseeing walk in a residential colony of Bauhaus-style homes that dated from the period of modernism. Further on, beautiful villas in Belle Epoque style along the leafy streets leading toward the Plaza de los Patos mirrored the days when an affluent middle class and bourgeoisie prospered in Santa Cruz thanks to the thriving industries of banking, commerce and early tourism. The latter developed in the 19th century, when Europeans first arrived and began organising expeditions to the archipelago starting from Santa Cruz or La Palma in Gran Canaria. Owing to their proximity to the ports, which were the sole means of entry at that time, both towns were chosen as the sites for the first tourist hotels. Since then, the tourism industry has become the driving force behind the growing economy of the archipelago. Today, both cities are the administrative capitals of the Canary Islands with an alternating presidency every four years. Each island has its own *cabildo insular*, which corresponds to the county hall of other territories (municipal authority of other cities).

A stroll through the older quarters of the city, during which Agustín talked about the numerous seaborne raids of Santa Cruz in the 15th century and the attack by the British admiral Nelson in 1797, brought us to El Museo de la Naturaleza y el Hombre. An example of modern ambitious design within the neoclassical building of the old municipal hospital, the recently reopened museum is a rich source to study the wildlife, geology and anthropology of the island. The superb displays of the extensive collection along with impressive multi-media simulations made this visit a particular experience. The paintings of another famous artist Jose Aguiar were decorating the assembly room of the county hall which we paid a visit later on.

By now, the spirits of the aquatic division of the group had risen as high as the sun in the zenith while the palates of the culinary unit were longing for a fine lunch in one of the pleasant restaurants in the tree-lined streets of Santa Cruz. The former party left the town for the beach of Las Playas de las Teresitas where they spent the afternoon swimming in the Atlantic Ocean and sunbathing on Saharan sand. To create this the biggest man-made beach in the world, a total of four million sacks of sand were shipped from Africa in 1975. The still unspoilt hillside behind the beach is currently the object of debate between tourism entrepreneurs and the ecological lobby of the region. Certainly, it was the absence of apartment buildings and hotels that bestowed this spot its very own natural charm.

Reunited in Santa Cruz later in the afternoon, we visited the Casino de Tenerife whose elegant Salón de Fiestas provided the venue for the closing session of our five-day excursion. The secretary of the casino addressed us with a few welcoming words and Mariano, in his capacity as chairman of the Spanish Fulbright Association, made an entry in the guest book on behalf of the group. In an emotional and reflective discussion we exchanged our thoughts and feelings about the events and impressions of the past days and likewise voiced our opinions about the ecological and cultural importance of Tenerife today and in the future. We unanimously agreed over our responsibility as both members of the Fulbright Association and individuals, towards raising and widening public awareness and knowledge about the island in order to protect its unique biodiversity. We also reminded ourselves of the wide scope of possibilities and means we have at our reach to contribute in our own ways to the realization of our ideas. We were grateful for this opportunity of getting to know Tenerife in so privileged a way, which provided us with a comprehensive insight of the island as well as valuable encounters with some of its committed residents.

A casino of a different kind was the Casino Taoro in Puerto de la Cruz, where we enjoyed the definitely most glamorous culture bite of the week. Situated in the upper parts of the town this former first-class hotel offered a spectacular view over the coast so that it was hard to tell whether the scattered lights were those of the town by night or the reflections of the illuminations inside above the countless gambling tables and roulette wheels. And if any one of us had harboured doubts about his or her credits and credentials a quick computer passport check upon entering the establishment would have immediately remove any uncertainties. Reassured of our unblemished civil standing we took pleasure in a long and entertaining night in this most successful of Spain's gambling businesses - watching the acrobatics of a hot-blooded Brazilian dance group or putting on sevillanas, paso dobles or salsas ourselves. We grasped the real meaning of 'rien ne va plus' only the next day when taking off in the plane and watching the island fade away in the distance.

Christianne Fertig, Alemania.