

EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN TENERIFE, SPAIN

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Abstract

Sustainability is no longer an extraordinary challenge nowadays for the service providers in Tenerife; this has become a habit for several years. Gradually, they try to instill in tourists care and respect for compliance with the rules that sustainability implies. The hotels have resorted to various ways in which they can carry out their activity in a sustainable way, trying to inform their tourists very well about them. Destinations on the island - regardless of their profile (cultural, coastal, ecotourism, rural, gastronomic, etc.) - are role models for other tourist areas of the world, both through sustainable development and promotion solutions, and by locals' hospitality and openness to everything that is new. The article explores experiences in the south of the island, which highlight the above.

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Introduction

One of the best Spanish destinations is, without a doubt, the island of Tenerife. With a surprising biodiversity, an extremely varied relief and a perfect climate, the island offers a wide range of forms of tourism for practically all segments of tourists. But more than that, it offers a model of sustainable development.

Tenerife is a spectacular destination in many ways. Its uniqueness from a geographical, climatic and tourist point of view gives it a special charm. At the same time, the service providers on the island each have their own personality, trying to shape unique experiences for tourists.

With about 5 million foreign tourists annually until the Covid-19 pandemic, Tenerife is the largest island in the Canary volcanic archipelago and is one of the top destinations in Spain. It has two international airports, which makes it relatively easily accessible from Western Europe - two, a maximum of four hours away. The average annual temperature is 22 degrees and is almost constant, with virtually no off-season. It also records the highest altitude in all of Spain, respectively 3718 m in the famous and wonderful volcanic peak El Teide.

Together with several colleagues from the FIJET Romania Tourism Press Club and from FIJET Spain, at the invitation of the local tourism employers, we had the opportunity to experience directly the destinations in the south of the island, but also the professionalism of local entrepreneurs and some of the sustainable development models.

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The visiting program was intense and included various destinations, demonstrating the multitude of tourist activities offered by the island. Even though the image is primarily a seaside destination, there are other types of attractions promoted and included in this presstrip: amusement parks (including the new Siam Park, an Asian-inspired water park and rated by Tripadvisor as the best in the world), El Teide National Park, for scientific tourism and ecotourism, small towns along the mountain valleys where traditions are promoted, including the local gastronomy, but also wines (such as Orotava, Icod de los Vinos, Arafo, Santiago del Teide), golf clubs, harbors for tourist boats, protected natural sights (most related to the volcanic structure of the island, but also to the specific flora and fauna). Obviously, we could not ignore the beauty of the coasts (Costa Adeje, in the south) and the beaches that concentrate a large variety of accommodation units, in terms of comfort or architecture (which remains, however, under the cultural dominance of the island).

Sustainability in all forms

Tenerife tourism advances every day, with a firm and determined step, towards a real and consolidated sustainability. Putting into practice strategies that make it possible to reduce the footprint that tourist activity leaves on the environment and being well aware that respect for the environment must be a philosophy that permeates the entire sector and, obviously, the island as a whole.

Tenerife will become an international benchmark for tourism sustainability as of the summer of 2021 because it will be the first destination to apply the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) after the restart of tourism activity once the Covid-19 pandemic will be controlled. Some months ago, the local administration has presented an economic-strategic plan, with a total budget of more than 23 million euros, which will start in 2021, to reinvent Tenerife as a tourist destination based on digitization and sustainability. Other joint plans of local authorities, La Laguna University, Segittur (“La Sociedad Mercantil Estatal para la Gestión de la Innovación y las Tecnologías Turísticas”), the Institute of Responsible Tourism and other public or private institutions, have in mind the implementation of a methodology for developing the island as a smart tourist destination, through governance, innovation, technology, accessibility and sustainability. The plans under discussion included an important component - inclusive of the budget - for the economic and social reactivation of the island and more specifically for the rehabilitation of the tourism system.

For this purpose, the fact of making Tenerife a benchmark for sustainability will imply two realities that must go hand in hand: “The vision of public policies on the application of the SDGs must be unified, but participation of companies, which are, after all, the providers of the experiences that tourists will live in Tenerife” (Hosteltur, 2020).

The arguments of this local vision are, first of all, related to the natural wealth with which the island was endowed. Beyond the determination and professionalism of local officials and entrepreneurs, and the current trends in the development of global tourism based on the principles of sustainability, Tenerife has all the natural advantages to become a model of sustainable development for any form of tourism.

Costa Adeje – a model of sustainable seaside tourism

Seaside tourism is the first form of tourism that contributes to the Tenerife destination brand. Costa Adeje, due to its privileged location, in the southwest part of the island, has more than 3,000 hours of light and more than 300 days of sunshine a year. With a temperature of 27 degrees in summer and 23 degrees in winter due to the trade winds, which like a gentle fan, keep temperatures constant, Adeje is the preferred destination throughout Europe. The climate in Costa Adeje is mild, temperate and moderate. There are no seasons of extreme cold or suffocating heat, for that reason any time is perfect to visit it. Adeje has 17 beaches in which one can choose between sand of all colors that relax and sunbathe or water sport. Costa Adeje can proudly say that has the most modern hotel facilities in Europe. 75% of all establishments have been created in the last two decades. The effort to maintain quality fittings makes installations and hotels refurbishing and upgrading constantly.

A good example of a sustainable destination in Tenerife is Costa Adeje, internationally renowned since 2016 for its initiative to reduce the effects of greenhouse gases. The public administration has an inventory of emissions and assesses the risks of climate change. They have also developed an action plan for climate and sustainable energy. In Adeje, several measures have already begun to be taken, such as: use of a special irrigation system for crops and gardens, use of plants that desalinate water, ordinance on protection of the urban environment against vibrations and noise, efficient public lighting, intelligent irrigation of public parks, parking lots and smart beaches, implementation of a plan for the Barranco del Infierno nature reserve. (Centro de Desarrollo Turístico, 2019)

Sustainable hotel industry: GF Victoria Hotel

However, the concerns for sustainable development have reached the big hotel companies on the island, and their experiences have already become models for other international hotel chains. The "GF Victoria" hotel in Santa Cruz is one of the models to follow in terms of promoting hotel sustainability. GF Victoria is a hotel in which environmental responsibility is essential. All spaces in the hotel are large, open, bright, and full of decorative plants.

The GF hotel chain took the responsibility of the wellbeing of the present and future generation. It has ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and EMAS certifications and the Class "A" Energy Rating, certification for having the maximum range of energy efficiency. Moreover, the GF hotel chain is the first in the Canary Islands to join the "United Nations Global Impact", the world's largest company sustainability initiative - in fact a call for companies to align strategies and operations with universal principles of human rights, labor, the environment and anti-corruption and to take measures to promote the objectives of society. Thus, the company "GF Hoteles" assumes its involvement in promoting responsible, sustainable and ecological tourism.

To maintain these certifications, the GF Victoria hotel has implemented some specific objectives for the organization, environment and people, such as: promoting local economic growth, using services and products from locals to mitigate the CO₂ emissions from the transport of the materials to the destination; the diminishment of single-use plastic by replacing them with aluminium bottles; responsible paper use; installing intelligent irrigation systems (as well as in all of the chain's hotels), use of biomass boilers to reduce the smoke emissions, using energy efficient laundry service. (Sustainability, 2021)

Ecotourism on the island

Almost half of Tenerife's land is under kind of protection. With more than 50 endemic species, Tenerife is part of Macaronesia (the four volcanic archipelagos in the North Atlantic Ocean), one of the richest biological areas in the world. Island ecosystems are the most vulnerable to the pressures of population growth, which is why more than 50% of Tenerife is protected and the other 50% is forest and agricultural land.

Tenerife also has the greatest endemic biodiversity in Europe, being the only place in the world with its own section of flora in its botanical garden.

Ecotourism is largely present on the island. One spectacular and unique destination is El Teide National Park. Surrounded by a unique landscape, this mighty volcano towering 3,718 m high is the heart of the National Park that bears its name, and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007. The landscape in the National Park is truly unique, almost moon-like, and can be explored on foot along a variety of trails. For example, the Ucanca Valley is particularly magical; all around its plains, the volcanic ground is decorated by lava in unthinkable shapes and unimaginable colors.

At the foot of the volcano, there is a modern cable car that will take you to the top, just 200 meters from the peak. To reach the summit, you'll have to finish the climb on foot, but only after obtaining permission from the Park's offices in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Every day, hundreds or even thousands of people climb here to admire the snow-capped peak and the sea, where you can see other islands in the archipelago.

Santiago del Teide is a municipality in south-west Tenerife that ranges from the coast of Puerto Santiago to the pine forests of Mount Teide, with a difference in altitude of 1,000 m. The weather here is stable all year round, which adds to the beauty of its landscapes and the pleasant temperature of the water, making Santiago del Teide a great place to spend time in the countryside and by the sea. Up in the higher parts of the municipality, the scenery reveals a contrast between volcanic landscapes, vineyards, almond and fig trees. The Chinyero volcano, in the Special Nature Reserve of El Chinyero, was responsible for the Island's latest eruption, which took place in 1909. Although today the economy in Santiago del Teide is largely reliant on the service sector, it was traditionally based on farming and pottery, as well as fishing. The destination offers special ecotourism experiences, through organized programs that include both circuits in natural areas, as well as bed and breakfast at farms, with participation in various agricultural or craft activities.

Other protected natural areas also offer spectacular landscapes and experiences. For example, Los Gigantes, the rocks that guard the southwest coast, near the municipality of Puerto Santiago, have attracted the interest of tourism promoters since the 1960s. The city has a marina and a very popular black sandy beach that has been awarded a European blue flag for its clear waters. A weather station was set up there and was used to measure a variety of aspects relating to the area's climate and sea and the conclusion was that it has some one of the best weather conditions in the world. Its wonderful coast welcomes several species of cetaceans like whales and dolphins to live in its waters, and visitors have the chance of seeing them on special boat trips.

Sustainable Aquapark: Siam Park

Siam Park has been named the best water park in the world for the fourth consecutive year according to TripAdvisor. With its fifteen spectacular attractions, its incredible beauty inspired by Thai culture and its luxuriant vegetation, it represents a real revolution among leisure parks. It offers a spectacular fun for all tastes and ages: the Tower of Power, a water slide that supplies sheer adrenalin, with a 28-metre, almost vertical, free fall which ends in an aquarium stocked with sharks and manta rays; El Dragón, an attraction which simulates the sensation of zero gravity; the Lost City or Sawasdee - a real water jungle with four different attractions, where the kids can have lots of fun; and the best water attraction in the world: La Singha, a spectacular roller coaster which offers a unique experience full of adrenaline with its fourteen changes of direction, incredible speed and its over 200-metre route, one of the best-loved attractions at Siam Park.

The uniqueness of Siam Park is a special infrastructure, dedication to the environment, which can be seen at every stage of the park. The existing facilities are considered some of the best in the world because they use innovative technologies. Despite these, environmental responsibility is not enough, exceeding the limits of their facilities and new ways of producing energy are being studied. (LoroParque, 2013)

The management of the Siam Park has some principles to respect: compliance with applicable laws and regulations, internal regulations and customer wishes; to lead to pollution prevention through sustainable use of resources, mitigation and adaptation to climate change and to provide a service that meets expectations; adequately training of all employees, providing ongoing training for staff through courses or training programs on the principles of sustainable development and quality management; to provide information on the principles of sustainable development and quality management, to ensure the awareness and the involvement of others; to take care of the conservation of biodiversity; encourage reuse, waste recycling, respecting the environment; reducing the consumption of critical natural resources, paying more attention to the consumption of electricity and water; creating an integrated management system, with its own suppliers and subcontractors; regular updating of objectives, communicated to employees, visitors and stakeholders; periodic review of environmental liability policies and their modification when necessary to meet the characteristics of the recipients. (SiamPark, 2020)

Cultural tourism - between ancient tradition and sustainability

Tenerife has an ancient and rich history. The island was inhabited by the Guanches, an aboriginal population genetically and culturally linked to the Berbers of North Africa, an indigenous community that lived on the island before the Spanish conquest in 1496. Customs such as the Canarian fight, the game of “palo” or even typical dishes of its gastronomy such as “gofio” are still preserved.

There are so many cultural values on the island and it is hard to remember them all. In the Icod de los Vinos municipality, The Millenary Dragon Tree is probably the most symbolic landmark. A visit to the tree is a must, as is a walk around the cobbled streets and lovely squares with fountains in the heart of the municipality. You will also find one of the world's largest volcanic cave in this municipality, in Cueva del Viento. The historic quarter in Icod de los Vinos is tightly packed and very well-preserved, having been declared an Objective of Cultural Interest. Its history dates back to the late 15th century when its first buildings were erected, and it has grown gradually since then. The sound of the water flowing from the fountain in Plaza de la Pila is mesmerizing.

La Orotava village is another magnificent place on the island, with its Casa de los Balcones. Built in roughly 1670 with the help of some of the finest carpenters of that time, this house's most notable feature is its large Tea wood balcony on the third floor. The patio comprises two L-shaped open verandas and an impressive wooden wine press. Casa de los Balcones now houses the traditional craft centre of La Orotava, selling craft goods and showcasing the traditional methods that are still used today to create unique objects. Next to it is the house of Jiménez Francy, built in 1632, which contained the Farris school in the 1940s. It now houses the Museum of Flower Carpets and the Wine Guild's headquarters. Just a few yards away are Casa Molina and Casa del Turista (the Tourist House), which helps to disseminate the town's traditional events that take place in the other buildings mentioned above.

Sustainable wine tourism: Arafo Winery, Valle de Guimar

The Island's climate and geology confer it with singular qualities to produce a rich and exquisite variety of wines. Ever since the first designation of origin was awarded to Tenerife's wines in 1985, the unique quality and character of these wines harvested from volcanic soils have earned it four more such recognitions. Shakespeare was a big fan of the Tenerife wine, making more references to them in several of his plays.

The quality of the wines produced on the Island, in its many wineries dotted all across the land, is guaranteed by international protection seals known as Designations of Origin. The label is borne by the finest wines from the regions of Abona, Tacoronte-Acentejo, Valle de Güímar, Valle de La Orotava and Ycoden-Daute-Isora. The crops in these regions benefit from the richness of Tenerife's volcanic soils, its Atlantic climate and the great care and professional effort of those who make them.

Arafo Winery on the beautiful Guimar valley try to use local products and encourage the local community to work together for creating a brand. To develop a responsible community, the local wineries collect the wine produced and offer it to local entrepreneurs who would later sell it under a common brand, specific to the area.

Also, for the winery visitors, they involve local people to cook (this is also a good idea for promoting the local gastronomy), to interact with them and feel more comfortable.

Sustainable Gastronomy – La Orotava

Being part of the international network Cittaslow, La Orotava is a perfect place to enjoy slowly a local meal. The best meat dish is the ‘salmorejo’ rabbit with a special sauce, which is made unique by each chef and which is especially rooted in Orotava. Also famous are: canary stew, chickpeas, chorizo, juicy beef and pork stew, corn plates, potatoes, zucchini ... As a dessert, the best known in La Orotava is "huevos moles" (egg with syrup and cinnamon), "frangollo", milk with raisins, ground almonds and egg yolks, "leche asada" (milk, sugar, eggs, cinnamon and lemon peel) and also 'quesillo' (caramel cream). (LaOrotava, 2020)

Apart from these examples of sustainable approach to the tourism development and promotion in the southern part of the island, Tenerife has many other destinations and experiences to offer to international tourists. Even a short visit makes you understand why it is one of the most desired European destinations. But the most impressive is the understanding and acceptance by the population of the need for sustainability, as we rarely meet in the world.

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