

‘But he told me he loved me,’ cries a plump, young English girl wearing a dress so tight she must have been born into it, ‘and I’ve just seen him kissing someone else.’ ‘Welcome to Tenerife,’ I tell her, ‘and wipe that mascara from your chins, it makes you look common.’

Situated off the coast of West Africa, and actually part of Spain, the Canary Islands group is technically the most southerly point in Europe. Tenerife is the most famous of these seven islands, but inevitably with fame comes development, tourism, and trash.

Not that litter is a problem – on the contrary, Tenerife’s beaches are some of the cleanest in Europe – it’s the people dumped in the street beside it that have given the resort such a trashy reputation. Hell-bent on hedonism, thousands of schoolchildren from Germany, Holland and especially Britain flock to the vast strip of bars in Playa de Las Americas during summer. It’s likely to be their first holiday without parental supervision, and things can get pretty messy when cats stay at home and the mice play with moonshine. Naïve enough to succumb to the offers of ‘!!Free Shots!!’ without even contemplating that they could be just a mix of aviation fuel and sugar, they eventually stumble into the streets looking for pizza and taxis and instant love. The unsuccessful usually end up in the gutter, covered in discarded chip wrappers and soaked in rejection.

I cruise along the stretch of nightspots trying to avoid tripping over such folk, and I am accosted by the whole world and his dog promising me a great time in his bar. The number of touts on this stretch of tarmac is truly incredible; it’s impossible to walk for more than five metres without being hijacked and offered ‘2 for 1’. Mouthy individuals from all corners of the globe are guaranteeing the best cocktails in Tenerife at the cheapest prices. Their creativity knows no bounds as they try every trick save kidnapping to fill their clubs full of semi-conscious half-wits. When this deception fails they resort to kidnapping.

But then I meet a tout from Liverpool who is so disillusioned with the aggressive marketing policies that he’s given up the fight. ‘Don’t come in my bar. It’s shit!’ he tells me. I’m quite tempted to go in now, just to see if he’s right. Maybe it’s one of those reverse psychology tactics. ‘I don’t want you to waste your money, mate. There’s no-one in here. It’s fucking shit! Two for one, my arse. They charge you double and rip you off. I don’t care if he sacks me, I’m leaving tomorrow anyway. I’m bored of this place. The whole island is just full of idiots wanting a scrap. I’m going to come back in winter. It’s much better.’ That’s not a bad idea – I think I’ll do the same.

Regardless of when you choose to visit, broken-hearted teenagers make up a sizeable chunk of the guests. But even though the Tenerife sun shines every day of the year, winter and summer are markedly different.

The average temperature in January is a delightful twenty two and the crowds have all but disappeared. As I hit the beach this time around it’s a lot easier to find a space for my

towel and there is no queue for the pedalos. I can swim in the sea without bumping into people, and enjoy a drink at a bar without some idiot with a whistle dancing on it. And the paella tastes so much better because I haven't been dragged in off the street by some mock Spaniards from Manchester. In fact, the normally horrific resort of Las Americas is actually quite pleasant.

But it's only when you get away from the package tour resorts that you really experience the magic of Tenerife. If you rent yourself a car and head inland, you'll realise how quiet this island can be. You can watch the scenery change from lush greens to barren reds as you drive peacefully through the clouds on the way up the volcano to the highest point in Spain. There is so much to look at from the top of Pico del Teide but you'll hardly see another soul at this time of year.

Although not terribly exciting the rocky countryside on the way down the mountain is impressive enough for me to take a photo. But a picture of just a road and a few boulders needs something more adventurous to spice it up... I remember how free I am feeling in this Tenerife winter so I set the timer on my camera, take off my clothes, and run off into the distance wearing just a baseball cap and a smile.

My timing is terrible. I hear an engine approaching but have nowhere to hide. I use the cap to spare my blushes, and wave adios with my free hand as the jeep passes slowly by. With its tinted windows it's impossible to tell whether its occupants can see the humour in all of this, so I walk, like a crab, back to my car desperately hoping that the jeep was not a government vehicle.

I decide to head to the north side of the island and check out a little resort called Puerto de la Cruz. Its beach is full of pebbles but its harbour is full of fishermen and this adds to the picture-postcard atmosphere. The old courtyard attracts a more discerning crowd and its numerous cafés create a suitably timeless feel. Open doors of closed shops reveal stout Spaniards taking siestas on stools – similar to, but much more acceptable than, intoxicated kids crashed out in nightclub doorways. A few streets away I stumble upon an old fashioned tapas bar which caters for the locals and, thankfully, isn't offering any free shots. Instead, I get a couple of delicious snacks on the house – beef in red wine, and a small fish on a stick – and I am tempted to stay for another drink, but then I spy a jeep with tinted windows and decide it's time to go.

Back in Las Americas the nightlife is much more chilled out than in those frenzied summer months. The people are older and the conversations less trivial. Heading back along the strip I hear a voice that I perhaps recognise; there's a man screaming in Scouse to a girl almost half his age. 'I'll give you two for one,' he begs. 'I don't care if you give me five for *none*,' is her reply. 'I came in your club last night and it was shit!'

Perhaps some things don't change with the seasons, but by and large, the whole Tenerife experience is very different. Strolling back to my hotel it is quite refreshing to think that I won't have to get up early in the morning to bag a sunbed. And if I should choose to drift naked in the Atlantic on a pedalo, there will be few there to disapprove.