

Hoopoe Calling

We are in Tenerife for a winter sun break and to top up our vitamin D.

I sit on our veranda overlooking the swimming pool and gardens with my breakfast, a bowl of muesli with slices of banana and a mug of coffee with crispy buttered toast.

This is our fifth year at this same rather special little enclave of four independent apartments enclosed by a high wall, hidden away in a world of our own. Prior to discovering this gem, we stayed in a variety of hotels strung out along the shore of Costa Adeje. Nowadays, self-catering suits us better. Here we can potter entirely at our own (slower) pace, avoiding the need to wear smarter togs and jostle for buffet food.

Later this morning, we will saunter out to one of our favourite morning coffee stops then mosey onwards to choose a place for a light lunch snack, usually arriving back here at mid-afternoon having completed around 10,000 steps or more. I then swim twenty lengths of a twenty metre pool, shower, retire to bed to read and snooze until it's time to open a bottle of wine and think about food again. Most evenings we also eat out or cook light meals for ourselves.



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Back to my morning bird spotting vigil.

The blackbirds are feeding, worming the lawn, silent. When they are fed, they will compete with their songs and dive bomb each other trying to command the best singing perches.

It is dawn, around seven o'clock, still gloomy. It is still cool but soon I will sit in glorious sunshine as the temperature rises to around 24 Celsius by afternoon.

As yet unseen, a hoopoe is calling three notes in rapid succession:

Hoop-hoop-hoop. Hoop-hoop-hoop. Hoop-hoop-hoop. Hoop-hoop-hoop.

On Tenerife we see the smaller version of the hoopoe (*upupa epops*), about the size of a British Blackbird. In France and Spain the European hoopoe is much larger¹.

A few minutes later the Collared Doves will take over, providing a continual background lilt with their incessant melodic cooing.

Cooo-cooo-cooooo—coo. Cooo-cooo-cooooo—coo. Cooo-cooo-cooooo—coo.



There are literally thousands of these beautiful birds here, outnumbering the occasional small flocks of Feral Pigeons which tend to inhabit public areas. Like Wood Pigeons in our garden in Bearsden, Collared Doves here are overtly amorous. How many broods do they raise in a year, I wonder.

¹ Here is a link which gives the background.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoopoe>

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Later, usually around four o'clock of an afternoon, high above us we will see dozens of swifts. These are 'Plain Swifts' who live here all year round.

Throughout each day there is an intermittent chatter of small birds, often cavorting in small flocks flitting in our trees, presumably eating insects. Moving at high speed, most of these tiny visitors are hard to identify.



Years ago, near the coastal walkway, I spotted two brightly marked sparrows, much more colourful than ours in Bearsden. From Google I learned these birds were Spanish Sparrows², indigenous to many Canary Islands.

² Here is a link to a Maisie Kaywood story based on Tenerife entitled 'Spanish Sparrows'.

<https://www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk/updates/2024/02/spanish-sparrows---a-novel-75000-words-a-long-read/>

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So far we have yet to see or hear the Atlantic Canary, generally accepted as the symbol of the Canary Islands.



Another bird we have yet to see is the Canary Island Warbler although I feel sure we have probably heard it serenading us.

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Nearby to our accommodation we have a huge drainage gully called a 'torrente'. Although from time to time these torrente channels will flood with water spilling from the hills above us, most of the time they are dry and overgrown with thick bushes which provide ideal nesting sites for many birds. (See later section on hydrology for explanation.)

The mountain in the distance is Rogue el Conde elevation 1001 metres (3,284 feet) .

For comparison, Mount Tiede which dominates Tenerife, is 3,715 metres (12,188 feet) making it the highest point in Spain.

Watching the same bird species we see in our garden flying to and from this torrente, I feel sure this sanctuary provides an ideal nesting site for birds and a superb habitat for other animals such as lizards (which are everywhere) and the other species of amphibians and reptiles³ (seldom seen) which are ideal food prey for larger birds such as the very handsome Tenerife Kestrel.

³ Link to Amphibians and Reptiles of Tenerife
<https://www.herpsafari.nl/trip-reports-eu/2024-4-canary-islands/>

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An issue for all birds and wild animals living along the Costa Adeje is the apparent lack of fresh water. To some extent this lack of rivers and lakes is compensated for by the irrigation system which runs mainly at night, providing water to maintain public and hotel gardens.

To our great surprise, we have witnessed collared doves drinking from our swimming pool!

To explain, there is no smell of chlorine from our pool and my Google research suggests that fresh water open air swimming pools such as ours are disinfected using silver and copper ions. From experience of my daily swims, there is no discernible smell. The water is warm (from a heat pump) and perhaps a little 'silky' in the mouth but not unpleasant.

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Mount Tiede dominates Tenerife

Hydrology of Tenerife

From my Google research, I find the hydrology of Tenerife most surprising.

Apart from a green coastal strip of gardens and public spaces watered by overnight irrigation, on casual inspection, most of the inland landscape looks like a crumbling lava field, an alien moonscape, mostly barren and dry as dust.



'Desert' landscape of Southern Tenerife

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However, it turns out that Tenerife's ground is highly permeable on the surface, while at lower levels, out of sight, there are hidden lagoons of fresh water which percolates from above. Although we have not yet seen any, there are many natural springs which leak water which in turn soon leaks away into the dry ground. Presumably these springs are visited daily by thirsty birds and animals⁴.



Semi-tropical landscape of the Northern Hills and valleys of Tenerife.

⁴Perhaps on our next visit to Tenerife we might discover a few of the fresh water springs which spill over from the hidden underground lagoons and verify my assertion these aquifers are indeed an oasis for birds and other animals.

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By percolation, the frequent rainfall and mist which condenses on higher ground around Mount Tiede and the northern hills of Tenerife does not run to 'waste' but is stored in these many lagoons from which it is pumped out, treated and transferred into the water distribution mains. Only during periods of very high rainfall akin to longer lasting tropical storms, do the torrente riverbeds flow vigorously⁵.

Google reports that these huge subterranean pools guarantee Tenerife's population a source of fresh water providing around 80% of the island's current needs.

In addition, Tenerife has five large desalination plants, which transform seawater by reverse osmosis. This method, which filters seawater through membranes under high pressure, removes most pollutants but also removes minerals essential to human health, such as calcium and magnesium. To make the water suitable for consumption, these minerals must be reintroduced in a process known as remineralization.

Tenerife is a horticultural island. High quality bananas are grown under cover and outdoors. These 'banana farms' can be seen when landing and taking off from Aeropuerto Tenerife Sur.

In the north of Tenerife, on lower inland hillsides, the climate year round supports a more specialised horticulture which yields a wide range of tropical and subtropical fruits such as avocado, mango, papaya, pineapple, custard apple, guava, mamme apple, starfruit and lychee and many other soft varieties, including some that are still relatively unknown in Europe.

Although we have visited this area on a 'safari' bus, looping and diving past what looked like tiny isolated and possibly abandoned homesteads, we were unaware of the scale of this profitable horticultural endeavour.

Tenerife, often dubbed 'The Island of Eternal Spring', is full of surprises.

⁵ During our visit last spring (2024), we had intermittent rain on three days, once for nearly three hours when the heavens opened and everyone scuttled for cover. Within an hour of the clouds had moved on and the streets were dry under bright sunshine. However, despite this short but heavy inundation, there was no sign of water in our local torrente.