

It was all thanks to Roger my eyes were opened to island gems

The Great Escape

By Frank Corless

I DIDN'T take long for a former Birmingham maths teacher to give me the right equation to help make a holiday spring to life.

Roger Bradley, pictured, and his wife Eileen settled in Gran Canaria in 1995 but it was only five years ago that he took up walking. Since then, he has become a sure-footed expert and has published a book of what he regards as the island's best walks, all fully itinerarised.

Taking parties of walkers on hikes that can last as long as nine hours has become a way for life for him.

And it's all thanks to Roger - now known locally as Roger the Rambler - that the real beauty of Gran Canaria opened up to me during a remarkable nine-hour tour of places that most tourists would not take the time or trouble to see.



We headed for the biggest 'treasure chest' in the centre and north where craggy peaks are interspersed with forests and meadows, awesome volcanic craters and ravines.

Some mountains stretch to the sea, but most descend to green slopes and verdant valleys where farmers grow everything from avocados and bananas, to almonds, plums, pears, papayas, mangoes and coffee - and lots more besides.

With Roger, 60, at the wheel of his 4x4, we zigzagged through dirt tracks and along roads with precipitous drops, where white-washed villages clung to mountain sides. The craggy 'wonderland' was a joy to see. At one stage, I wrongly thought the best of it was behind us, but Roger quickly put me right. "Everything up to now has been great, but it

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Scenic: It's easy to see why Roger Bradley left his life in Birmingham for the sunnier climes of Gran Canaria with scenery like this.

was just the B-movie. Now we're going into the best of it," he said. And so it proved.

In the next few hours, I gazed in awe at pinnacles such as the 5,914ft high Roque Nublo (Rock in the Cloud), and the amazing 4,632 ft high Roque Bentayga.

It was a last place of refuge for the Guanches, the island's original inhabitants, before they were wiped out by the invading Spanish conquistadors. Roger's favourite place is Artenara, where restaurants and coffee bars line a 'balcony' facing superb mountain views. At 4,167 feet, it is the highest located village on the island and the centre of a cave-dwelling culture dating back to the Guanches.

Many of the caves are still inhabited, with some of them fully

equipped with solar panel heating and all mod cons.

We rounded off the day at the Guinegueda restaurant, in the village of Utisca, where we ate mini black puddings coated in a mounds, complete with Canarian 'winkled' potatoes covered in 'mojo yicon', a spicy paprika sauce. With four coffees, the bill came to just 10.70 euros. What a bargain!

I was so thrilled with Roger's tour that, next day, I jumped on a Number 18 bus from near our hotel and did a similar 80-odd kilometre route, ending at the island's vibrant and historic capital, Las Palmas.

In parts, the journey was akin to being on a roller coaster, and definitely not for the faint hearted. But, for just over 17 euros, including the ride from Las Palmas to a stop near to my hotel, it was yet another

example of terrific value for money. The different climates and variety of landscapes make Gran Canaria something of a mini-continent which is protected by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve.

In parts, its barren terrain give it a Wild West 'dry gulch' feel. But when my odyssey finally came to an end, my overwhelming feeling was that the island is a place of spectacular beauty, boasting a rich culture.

My wife and I stayed at the Hotel Rio Palace Maspalomas on the island's south-east coast, the main centre of tourism, which enjoys the best of an excellent climate.

Built in Colonial style, and set amid lush gardens and palm trees, the 368-room hotel oozes style and excellence. We enjoyed kindness and courtesy at every turn, and the varied cuisine

was exceptional. In all honesty, we couldn't find a fault.

The hotel also boasts a spectacular location on the edge of the famous Maspalomas sand dunes, another of the island's natural wonders. Access to the dunes, a specially protected area, is limited to people and - as you might expect in a Sahara-style environment - camels.

We later took less demanding bus journeys to check out resorts near to ours. Apart from busy, cosmopolitan Playa del Ingles, we saw San Agustin, renowned for its crystal clear waters, Playa Meloneras, and Puerto Rico, which is popular with families.

Our favourite was the small, but perfectly formed Puerto Mogán where lovely narrow streets, garlanded with exotic bougainvillea, lead to the banks of canals linked by Venetian-style bridges. It was a sheer delight, but I

would caution against going on market day. We found it extremely busy and difficult to get transport back to our hotel. Queues are so disorganised and haphazard that we saw holiday-makers, some of them very elderly, tussling and arguing as they tried to take their seats.

I doubted that few of these would ever dream of leaving the bars, sunbeds or shops, for a trip into the wilds, a fact that Roger also laments. He says: "It does make me sad that a lot of people spend two weeks around a pool and then say they don't like the island."

That's why his book is aptly titled 'Don't leave Gran Canaria without seeing it.'

You could visit his website, www.ramblingroger.com to see many more magnificent views of Gran Canaria.

