

Thomas Cook

November/December/January 2011/12

travel

ALONG CAME A SPIDER

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in a vintage Alfa Romeo

ALICANTE

"The best paella
in the world" -
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TUNISIA

The Star Wars
fans saving Luke
Skywalker's home

Your
essential
guide to
MADEIRA



GRAN CANARIA

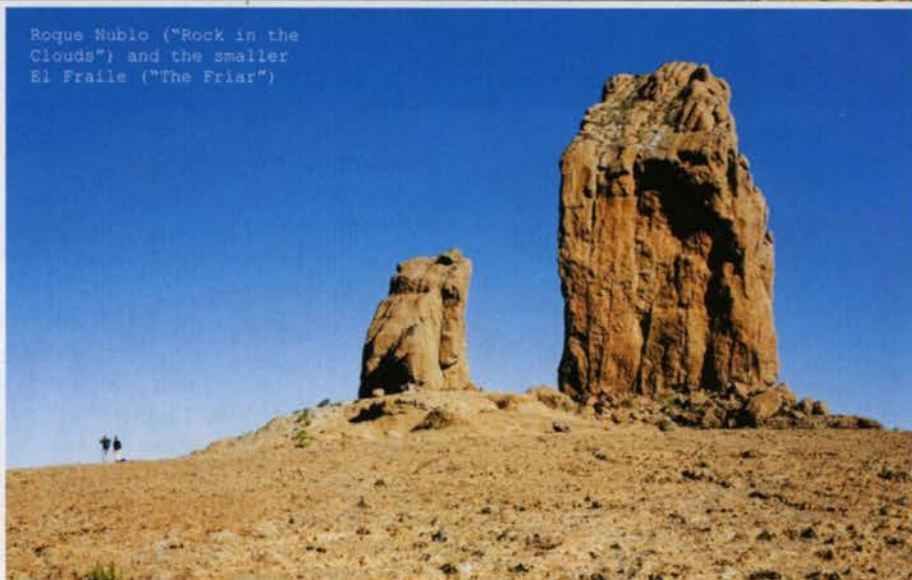
The island's incredible topography makes for world-class cycling and mountain biking



HIKING'S AN EXTREME SPORT in Gran Canaria. Well, it is if my first trekking experience here is anything to go by. Trusty rucksack nestling into my back, I'm making headway to the isolated beach of Güi-güi, an unspoiled treasure on the west of the island. Initially, the lights from neighbouring Tenerife act as guiding beacons. But with night closing in, the lower I hike, the less visible they become. At least I'm armed with a torch – which chooses this exact moment to give up the ghost.

Torchless and despairing of ever reaching Güi-güi, I begin chanting a gentle mantra: "Please be near." But as I start causing mini-avalanches with my slipping and sliding, the chant gets louder, almost building to a manic roar that could be heard all the way to Tenerife. After much trudging, I land in a crumpled heap next to a fabulous ruin overlooking the beach, relieved and exhilarated. I may be tired, but I'm basking in a sense of achievement that you just

Roque Nublo ("Rock in the Clouds") and the smaller El Fraile ("The Friar")

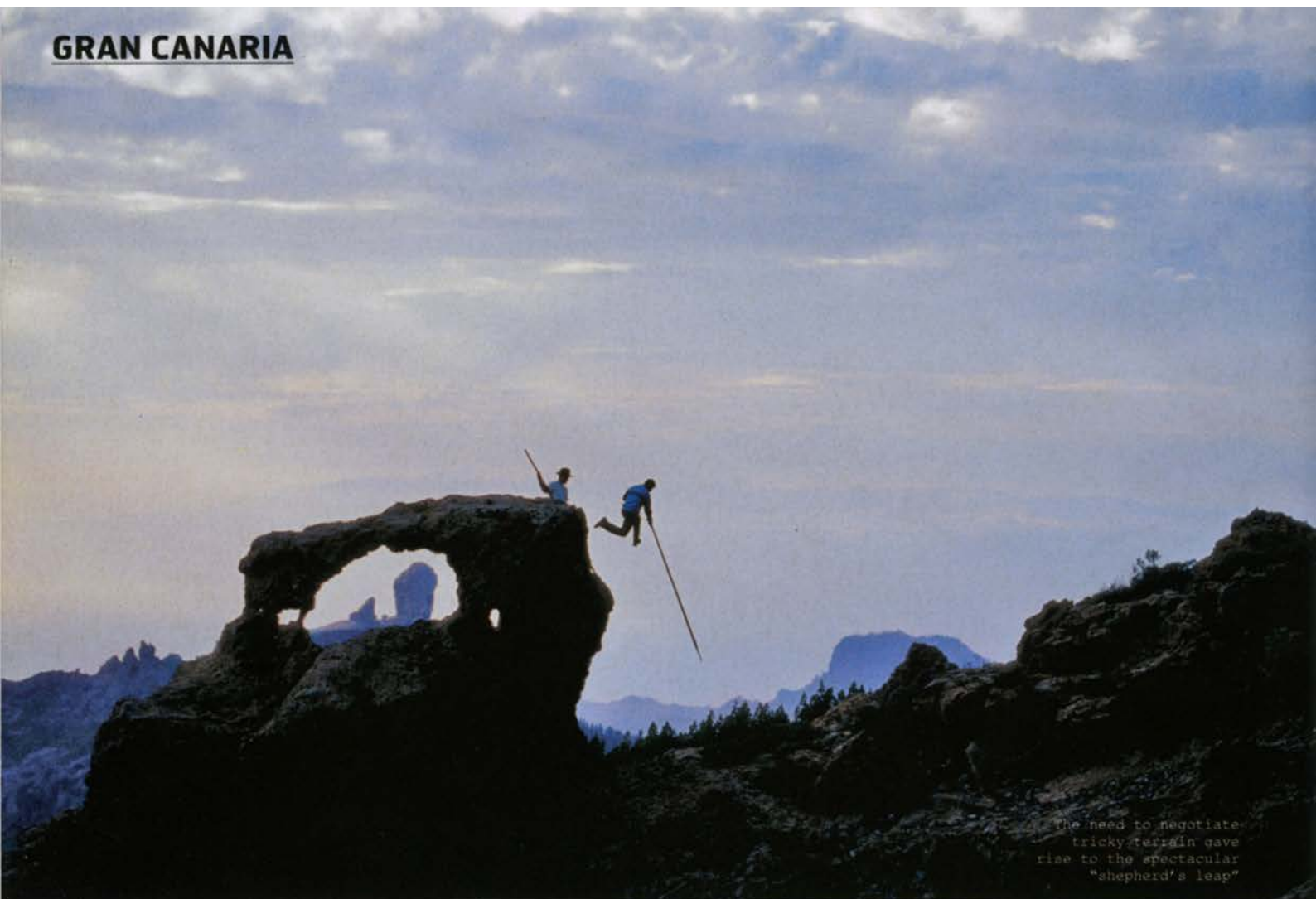


don't get from topping up your tan, flat on your back. I've ticked off the first of my five challenges – hiking, mountain biking, paragliding, kayaking and the mysterious "shepherd's leap" – to experience Gran Canaria the extreme way, earning my "man of action" stripes.

The next time, I'm much better prepared – or at least my guide, Roger Bradley, is. Rambling Roger

and I are walking his short Artenara circle, a two-hour trip in and around Artenara, Gran Canaria's loftiest village at 1,270m above sea level, found just under 60km north of Playa del Inglés. Heading off the beaten trek, a clearing opens out into a natural *mirador* (viewing point). From here it's easy to make out the mighty Roque Nublo (Rock in the Clouds) – the

GRAN CANARIA



The need to negotiate tricky terrain gave rise to the spectacular "shepherd's leap"

island's most iconic landmark; a gargantuan natural monolith – and the beautifully preserved Tamadaba pine forest. It's an unforgettable view – to see it with your own eyes, visit ramblingroger.com to book a guided tour or to order his essential *25 Great Hikes – Don't Leave Gran Canaria Without Seeing It*, available as a book, CD or PDF.

I return, on bike, to Artenara with photographer pal Marcos, a keen mountain-biker – and not just to pay tribute to the Virgin of the Little Cave, the patron saint of Gran Canaria's cyclists, at the Ermita de la Virgen de La Cuevita, a beautiful chapel cut into the cliff face 400m above the centre of the village. Artenara boasts plenty of *caminos reales* (royal roads), just as popular if travelling on two wheels rather than two feet. Marcos takes me on the 10km route connecting Arucas to Teror's Pico de Osorio in the north of the island – helpfully

pointing out caves that can be used for shelter in the (unlikely) event of a downpour.

The island's off-road trails offer boneshakers galore. In central Gran Canaria, inhale the scent of fresh pine as you whizz down serpentine tracks. As Gran Canaria is like a miniature continent (with its distinct climate), you'll be able to switch landscape backgrounds as you would screensavers. Head south to San Bartolomé and follow the volcanic craters which lead to Risco Blanco (White Cliff). Cycle Gran Canaria (cyclegrancanaria.com), run by retired Irish mountain bike pro Raymond Leddy, offers a range of guided rides, handily accessible from its Maspalomas base.

Before Gran Canaria became a tourist hotspot, residents relied on agriculture to earn a living. The island's goatherds and shepherds came up with a novel way to cross the ravines which

dominate the landscape – the *salto de pastor* ("shepherd's leap"). You take a long wooden pole known as a *lanza* or *garrote* and then add metal tips (*regatóns*) to the end for extra grip. Imagine pole-vaulting – the technique involved is not dissimilar. I'm keen to have an afternoon session – with Victor from Mojo Picon Aventura (mojopiconaventura.com) – but my heart's in my mouth when I attempt the dead-drop which is essentially a leap of faith: you jump and then jam your *garrote* on the rapidly approaching ground below your feet before sliding down the pole like a firefighter or lap dancer.

From its practical origins, the shepherd's leap has developed into a sport – think parkour with a stick – with regular competitive events held across the Canaries. But despite Victor's excellent tuition, I still reckon I'd be more likely to pick up the wooden spoon prize than the



Sunset on Las Canteras, "one of the world's great urban beaches"

gold medal. Note to self: eat more *gofio* – the toasted cornmeal which is reputed to be the secret ingredient behind your average Canarian's Herculean strength.

Below, a crowd gathers on one of the world's great urban beaches – Las Palmas' 2.8km stretch of golden-brown sand, Las Canteras – their necks arched skywards. What's caught their collective eye? Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a paragliding tourist, an almost guaranteed sight on this beach. I opt instead for a tandem parachute jump with my seasoned pro of an instructor, Juan Cano (parapentegrancanaria.com). After fitting what feels like the lightest

backpack I've ever worn, I'm more strapped in than Houdini, but Juan ensures me that I won't feel restricted when we take off from the airstrip in Los Giles above Las Arenas shopping centre (also known as Centro Comercial, or CC for short).

What a flight of freedom it turns out to be. Señor Cano is carrying both the canopy – in layman's terms, an inflated kite – and doing the steering. It's only my second "taxi" ride in which I fear for my life – the first was in the rough and ready San José part of Las Palmas, when I realised the man behind the wheel was drunk – but my apprehension quickly subsides:

Juan's close enough for me to smell he hasn't touched a drop of alcohol and his reassuring manner kicks my premonition of plummeting like a rock into touch. After a smooth landing in the Plaza de la Música next to Las Palmas' iconic concert hall, Auditorio Alfredo Kraus, we're enjoying a restorative *cubata* (rum and coke) in the square's Marea Baja (Plaza de la Musica, tel: +34 666 54 73 77).

If you want more from water sports than just splashing about in the sea, there's always kayaking. I get in touch with Canaria Ventura (canariaventura.com), which organises kayak hire – and not just for team-building exercises – in the Presas de Chira y de las Niñas reservoirs. I plump for the postcard-pretty Presa de Chira, also a popular carp-fishing destination (canarycarpcrew.net), 850m above sea level.

Having canoed with my children in Devon, I'm used to capsizing. But with no offspring to blame this time, I can only acknowledge my complete ineptitude with a two-bladed paddle in hand. Indeed, I enter the drink so many times, I'm nicknamed *Perro de Presa* – The Reservoir Dog. Although the temperature of the water is a more agreeable than England's south-west, a warm-up mug of hot coffee still timbers my shivers while I contemplate my next adventure.

But for now, having hiked my way to the Rock in the Clouds, cycled past volcanic craters, taken the shepherd's leap, flown like an eagle and ended up in the water enough times to grow gills, I've completed this personal pentathlon. I reckon I've well and truly earned the title of Gran Canaria's Action Man, not Reservoir Dog. 🐕

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