



LIVING
AND
WORKING
ON
LA PALMA



LA PALMA

FOR MANY PEOPLE, going to work for the ING on La Palma may seem like a dream come true – a job at a prestigious astronomical institution, and a permanent holiday in the Canary Islands. Inevitably the reality is not quite so simple. Of course, there are many very real attractions to life on a little Spanish island: fantastic

scenery, warm weather, delicious locally-produced fruit and vegetables, and the challenge of getting to know a new language and culture. But there are limitations and frustrations with living on a remote island. Living in a small community away from the safety net of home demands a lot from individuals.

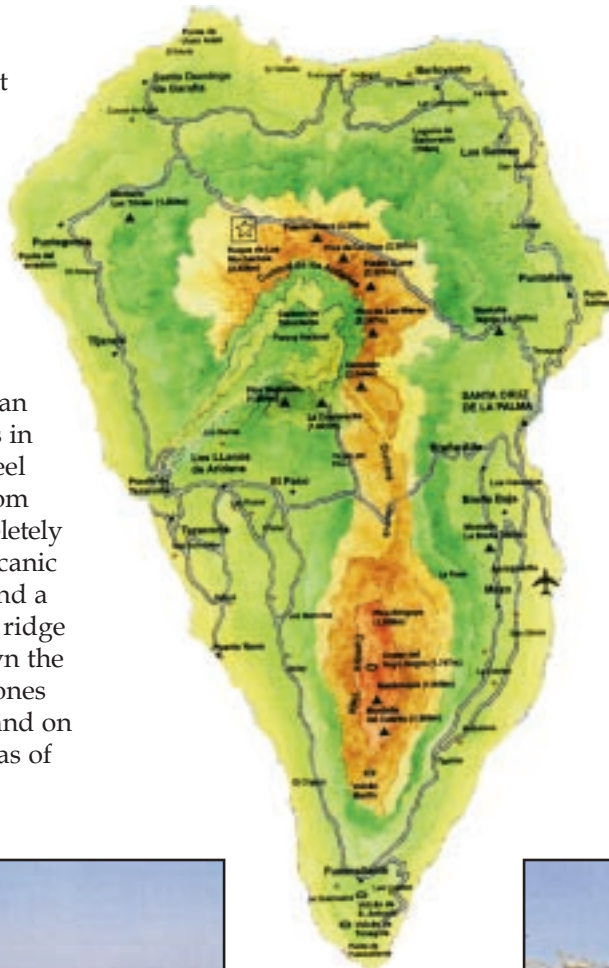


Juan M. Castro

Where is La Palma?

La Palma is a small island that lies to the west of Tenerife in the Canarian archipelago. The Canaries are an autonomous region of Spain, and are positioned around 28° latitude, a few hundred kilometres from the Moroccan coast.

Geographically, therefore, the islands are nearer to Africa than Spain, and as the plane comes in to land on La Palma you do feel you have come a long way from Europe. The landscape is completely different, with stark black volcanic rocks, abundant vegetation, and a wonderful forested mountain ridge that runs like a backbone down the island from north to south. Cones of ancient volcanoes rise up, and on the lower reaches there are seas of banana plantations.



How big is it?

The island is about 45 km long and 28 km wide, but the distance between places is not simply as the buzzard flies.

The unusual steepness of the landscape means that nearly all journeys involve roads that wind up and down and around the *barrancos* (ravines).

The population of La Palma is about 80,000, 18,000 of whom live in the main town of Santa Cruz. This is a lovely old town with cobbled streets, steeply-climbing back alleys and a modest selection of shops. It has a busy harbour that is port to many ships, including ferries to other Canary Islands and some very large cruise ships.



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*Top: The Caldera.
Centre: Map of La Palma.
Left: La Palma's main town, Santa Cruz.
Right: Traditional buildings in one of Santa Cruz's small squares.*



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THE OBSERVATORY AND THE ING

THE ISAAC NEWTON Group of Telescopes (ING) is the largest of a number of international groups working at the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory. The observatory is situated over 2,400 m above sea-level, near the highest of the peaks surrounding the Caldera de Taburiente. It is a spectacular mountain-top site, and one of the best astronomical sites in the world. It was chosen after an extensive search for a location with clear, dark skies all the year round. The remoteness of the island and its lack of urban development ensure that the night sky at the observatory is free from artificial light pollution. The sky is clear of cloud for 90 per cent of the time in the summer months.

The observatory was inaugurated in 1985. British, Dutch and Spanish work together at the Isaac Newton Group, which comprises three telescopes:

4.2 m William Herschel Telescope (WHT)

2.5 m Isaac Newton Telescope (INT)

1 m Jacobus Kapteyn Telescope (JKT)

The observatory site is reached by a winding 40 km of mountain road from the town of Santa Cruz. The journey takes about one hour and is extremely scenic, but can be quite wearing.



Above: The observatory site, with the Caldera behind it.

Sergio Socorro

The telescopes are operational every night of the year. It is necessary for some staff to be on a rota to work at night and at the weekends. A residencia at the observatory site provides accommodation and a restaurant for overnight stays.

The ING also has a sea-level office in Santa Cruz. This is the normal place of work for those staff whose actual presence on site is not required.



Above: The William Herschel Telescope.



Travel

The journey from the UK is a full day's travel (taking into account the time needed to make connections), which makes the island feel remote. There are no direct flights from the UK to La Palma, so an intermediate stop is necessary either on one of the other Canary Islands (usually Tenerife) or in mainland Spain. Flights from the UK take about four hours to reach Tenerife, and from there an onward flight to La Palma takes half an hour.

Sports

La Palma offers an outdoors life with different levels of exertion and excitement, from lounging in the sun to paragliding. For those who like walking, there are many wonderful routes to explore in the forests, mountains and volcanic areas. There are facilities for the usual sporting activities, such as tennis, swimming, football and basketball, and of course being one of the Canary Islands there are watersports available. You can scuba-dive, body-board, swim or simply sunbathe.



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There are a few beaches which are good for body-boarding.

Families

Your experience of La Palma will be quite different depending on your family circumstances. The majority of employees have a partner, and many have children. For families with children, La Palma offers the benefits of an outdoors life, with beaches and forests to play in. A climate that is warm all the year round is definitely a blessing for children – no bundling them up in coats for months on end, they can wear shorts and T-shirts for much of the year. There are some drawbacks of course. You do have to take care with the strong summer sun, especially with very young children, and the sea is not always suitable for children to swim in as some beaches are steeply-shelving and the waves are often rough.

The winter months remain mild compared to the UK, averaging 15°C in January at sea-level, but the weather can be wet and windy. When the weather is bad there is not much provided to entertain little children. There are no parks or playgrounds, and no covered shopping areas. All the swimming pools are outdoors, and when the weather cools down they are too chilly to swim in.

For partners who are used to working, La Palma doesn't offer many employment opportunities. Many people take the opportunity to study through distance



The beach at Puerto Naos, on the west coast of the island. All the beaches on La Palma have black sand.

learning courses whilst on La Palma. Unless you speak Spanish, there aren't many ready-made jobs available, but if you have the right skills and are prepared to put some effort into finding work then it isn't impossible. Outside the observatory, teaching English and involvement in the tourist industry are the most likely areas of work for partners.

Social Life

The observatory community is very sociable, and an observatory club organises events and get-togethers from time to time. The Palmeran people are very friendly and it is easy to make casual acquaintances. It is more difficult, however, to make close friends and to be accepted into their close-knit family-orientated society. A number of staff have met and married locals however, so it is possible!

For most people, socialising on La Palma revolves around eating and drinking in the many bars and restaurants. Barbecues are also extremely popular, both at people's houses and at the many barbecue sites on the island. On the cultural front, there is a small theatre in Santa Cruz that holds music events, and occasionally drama. Larger bands and orchestras sometimes come to La Palma from abroad. There is a three-screen cinema, but all the films are dubbed into

Spanish. There are one or two discos, but these do not offer much by way of sophisticated night-life.



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Above: A Carnival scene on Powder Night.

Left: Some of the outdoor bars have panoramic views.



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One of the highlights of the year is the week-long Carnival, which is held in February. This typically Spanish event involves lots of dressing-up, drinking, dancing on the streets and throwing talcum powder – a custom which no-one seems able to explain, but should definitely be experienced! There are also many other small local fiestas throughout the year in the different towns and villages of La Palma.

Schools

Children of British staff attend one of the local schools on La Palma, and most attend a school in Santa Cruz. Educational support is available to help children integrate into the school, to help parents liaise with their children's teachers, and to provide extra lessons to keep up the British children's standard of English reading and writing. There are many extra-curricular activities available, such as basketball, chess and music lessons.

For the early school years the curriculum and standards are generally thought to be fairly similar in La Palma and Britain. Apart from the language, the differences are mainly stylistic – teaching is more formal and traditional on La Palma. Most parents have found that up until the age of about fourteen, children transfer back into the British system without much trouble. Thereafter the systems start to differ more and some parents prefer to send their children to boarding school in the UK.

The long modern building with orange blinds is the school attended by most ING children.



Schooling on La Palma is, of course, conducted in Spanish. Children under the age of about eight are young enough to pick up the language fairly easily, but after that it is more difficult for them. Children who start young enough quite quickly learn to speak Spanish like a local.

Medical care

There is a closely-linked combination of state and private medicine on La Palma. Most appointments are made with private surgeries, with financial support from the ING. Medical care on La Palma is basically good, although doctors' styles are inevitably different to those in Britain. The hospital is reasonably well-equipped, but sometimes it is necessary to go to nearby Tenerife for tests or treatment. The ING provide assistance in making medical appointments and an interpreter to accompany you on visits to the doctor, dentist or hospital.



View over the Breña Alta area, just inland from Santa Cruz.

Cost of living

The cost of living on La Palma is surprisingly close to that in Britain. Some things are cheaper, for example alcohol, petrol, cars and eating out. Most imported goods are more expensive, such as clothes, food that isn't produced locally, nappies and toys.

Housing

Most ING staff and families live either in Santa Cruz or in the country areas nearby. Accommodation in town is in flats, which are usually spacious and have the advantage of being near the shops and the most popular school. Some people feel more integrated into the community by living in town, and like to be able to step out into its bustle and noise.

Out of town, staff live in houses which are mostly in little hamlets or estates in the hilly countryside surrounding Santa Cruz, about a fifteen minute drive from Santa Cruz. Families with children tend to prefer living here, where most houses have the benefit of a garden and some have private swimming pools.



Accommodation in Santa Cruz is usually in spacious flats in apartment blocks such as this one.

There are buses to get around La Palma, but if you live out of town, or you want to see anything of the island's beauty, you really need to be able to drive.



Above: A typical ING house, in the popular residential area in Breña Alta.

Right: The ING sea-level office building in Santa Cruz.



Life on La Palma

La Palma has not been heavily developed for tourism, especially in comparison with other Canarian Islands. This minimal tourism has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on your point of view. Local culture is very different to north European culture and, whilst catering for some foreign tastes, on the whole La Palma has retained its own preferences. In practice this means that you can buy most things you need, but the selection (most crucially of food and clothing) is much more limited than it is in the UK, and imported goods cost a lot more.

The local people do not generally speak much English, and facilities are often several years behind what you are probably used to. Restaurants tend to offer local *tipico* dishes, of simple grilled meat or fish and potatoes, and there aren't many foreign or vegetarian foods on offer. But all these things are gradually changing. On the plus side, the island has a refreshing lack of commerciality and, apart from streets in the main towns of Santa Cruz and Los Llanos, the roads are still wonderfully free of traffic.

A Bejeque Noble, a species endemic to La Palma.



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Los Balcones - traditional-style houses in Santa Cruz.



Language

The Spanish conquered the Canaries during the 15th century, hence the Palmerans speak Spanish. However, in many ways (such as vocabulary and pronunciation) La Palma is closer to Latin America than Peninsular Spain. Emigration has long been a tradition on La Palma, especially to Cuba and Venezuela, creating strong links with Latin America.

The working language of the ING is English, although in some departments local employees are in the majority and Spanish is the commonly-used language. Outside the

observatory few local people speak English, so for daily life in La Palma you have to pick up at least some Spanish in order to get by in the shops and restaurants.

Climate

La Palma has a sunny climate with year-round moderate temperatures, rather cooler than perhaps would be expected given the latitude of the island. Average sea-level temperatures vary from 22°C in August to 15°C in January. At the observatory site there is greater seasonal variation of temperature, from 18°C in summer to 3°C in winter. There are usually spells of extremely bad weather on the mountain-top during winter, nevertheless the telescopes aim to be operational 365 nights of the year.

La Isla Bonita

There are hundreds of beautiful and fascinating walks on the island, with much to see of geological and botanical interest. Like the rest of the Canary Islands, the origins of La Palma are volcanic. There have been a number of volcanic eruptions in recent history, most recently Teneguia in 1971. These volcanic origins have created

dramatic scenery with unsubtle contrasts – bright green vegetation against stark black lava flows and cinder fields, with blue skies burning overhead.

La Palma is known as La Isla Bonita – the beautiful island – because of its extraordinary natural beauty. In comparison with the arid easterly Canary Islands, La Palma is green and has abundant vegetation. Large areas of the island are forested. Because the Canaries, and La Palma in particular, developed in relative isolation there are many endemic plant species. One forested area is protected by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve.

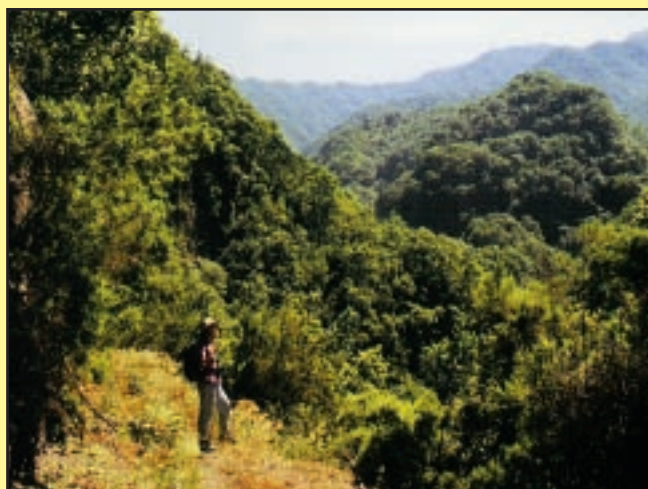


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The most important geological feature of La Palma, and the most spectacular place on the island, is the Caldera de Taburiente. This is a large depression, 5 km across and 2 km deep, with an area of 30 sq km. It was formed first by volcanic activity and subsequently by erosion, and is one of the largest and most impressive erosion craters in the world.

Left: There are many impressive walks in stark volcanic areas.

Below: The verdant mountainside of Los Tilos is part of the biosphere reserve on La Palma.



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