

# El Hierro



El Hierro is an island where the stark volcanic landscape, impenetrable cliff-lined shores and location in the middle of the Atlantic make it both literally and figuratively remote. It's the westernmost island of the peninsula, and was considered the end of the world until Columbus famously sailed the ocean blue in 1492. It remained the Meridiano Cero (Meridian Zone) until replaced by the Greenwich version in 1884.

Although this small, boomerang-shaped island is now connected to the rest of the planet via air, ferry and TV, it will always feel remote. Of course, that's exactly what is so addictive about this place. It's impossible not to be captured by the island's slow pace and simple style; by its craggy coast, where waves hurl themselves against lava-sculpted rock faces; by the eerily beautiful juniper groves, where trees twisted and tortured by ceaseless winds stand posed like dancers; by the desolate, yet alluring volcanic badlands that stretch out like moonscapes. The smallest and least-known of the Canary Islands, El Hierro is unique – so much so that it was declared a Unesco biosphere reserve.

Those who come to El Hierro want to escape the crowds (the biggest town has less than 2000 residents), get away from traffic (the island's first traffic light, which controls entry into a one-lane tunnel, was put up in 2005) and rest in the silence of the island's natural spaces.

Around 12% of El Hierro is cultivated land (representing about 3000 sq metres per person). Top crops are figs, almonds, vines, pineapples, mangoes, bananas and potatoes.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Drive or stroll among the towering pines in the pristine **El Pinar** (p238) forest
- For vast views of El Golfo and the Atlantic, hikers can tackle the **Camino de Jinama** (p238), one of the island's best downhill walks
- Walk among the windswept juniper trees sculpted by the wind into eerie, gnome-like shapes at **El Sabinar** (p244)
- Grab your mask and dive into the warm, calm waters near **La Restinga** (p239), the island's best diving spot
- Splash around in the natural cove of **La Caleta** (p236), a pretty swimming spot rimmed by a manicured promenade



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 922

■ POPULATION: 10,690

■ AREA: 269 SQ KM

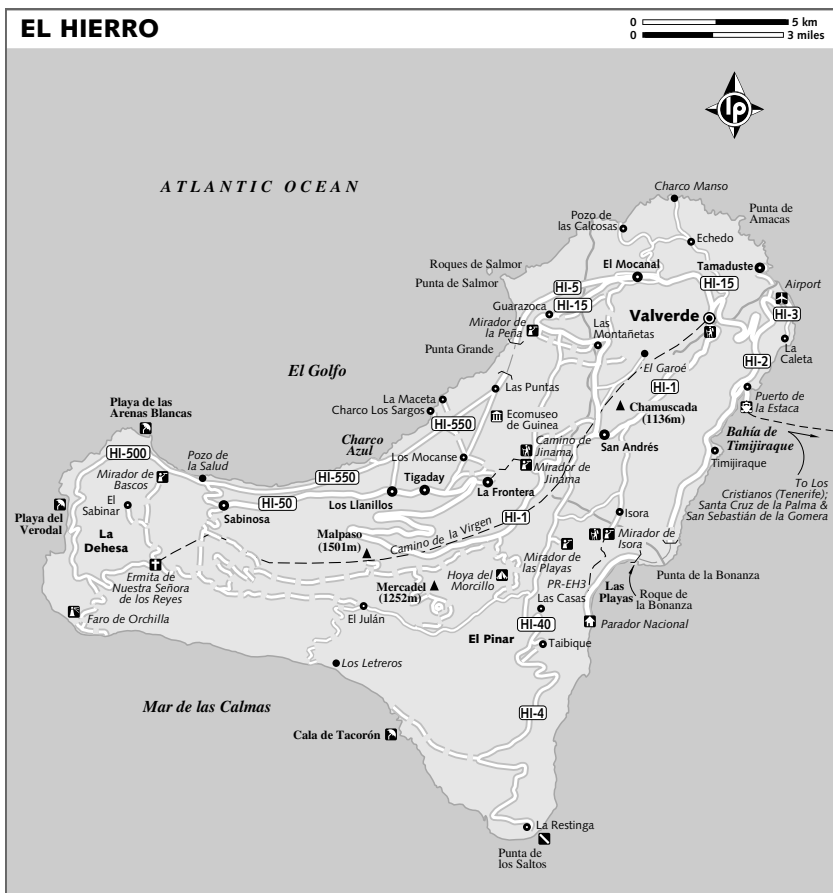
## HISTORY

Geographically speaking, El Hierro is the youngest island in the archipelago. Through the millennia, volcanic activity built up a steep island with a towering 2000m-high peak at its centre. But, about 50,000 years ago, the area was hit by an earthquake so massive that one-third of the island was ripped off the northern side. The peak and the surrounding land slipped away beneath the waves, creating the amphitheatre-like coast of El Golfo. The event would have been impressive and the ensuing tidal wave may have been more than 100m high. Although El Hierro's last eruption was 200 years ago, volcanoes are still the island's defining feature. It is littered with around 500 cones, with many more underneath the lava

flows and volcanic rocks that blanket much of the island.

The island's original inhabitants, the Bimbaches, arrived from northern Africa and created a peaceful, cave-dwelling society that depended on agriculture, fishing, hunting and gathering. They may have called the island Hero or Esero, possibly the origin of its modern name. Bimbaches have left interesting petroglyphs (geometrical etchings) on rocks and cave walls throughout the island; the most interesting is at El Julán (p240).

After the Spanish conquest in the 15th century, a form of feudalism was introduced and Spanish farmers gradually assimilated with those locals who had not been sold into slavery or died of disease. In the subsequent



quest for farmland, much of El Hierro's forests were destroyed.

In the 20th century many Herreños were forced to emigrate abroad to find work. The island's economy has since recovered and is now based on cheese, fishing, fruit-growing, livestock and, increasingly, tourism. Many emigrants have returned. The struggle now is balancing the need to conserve the island's unique, Unesco-protected natural beauty with the need for economic growth. More than 60% of the island is classified as protected land, limiting growth options. That's great for conservationists, but as young islanders are forced to move away to study and find jobs, many see it as a problem.

## INFORMATION

### Maps

In late 2003, a highway tunnel connecting Valverde with La Frontera was built, and the island changed the names of all its major highways. At the time of publication, many maps (like the detailed 1:30,000 *El Hierro* published by Freytag & Berndt) still showed the old roads. Up-to-date maps include the 1:50,000 *Tourist Map El Hierro* by Turquesa, and the satellite-generated maps given out free by the tourist office, which are sufficient for making simple tours around the island.

## ACCOMMODATION

Although booking a last-minute room or apartment isn't usually problematic, you may want to book in advance, especially at Christmas, around Easter and in August. If you're arriving on the late-night ferry from Tenerife, definitely make a reservation before you get here; 24-hour reception desks are the exception, not the rule.

There are a few upscale hotels, including the lovely but remote Parador Nacional (p237), the brand-new Hotel Villa el Mocal (p236) and the hotel-spa Hotel-Balneario Pozo de la Salud (p243). But most of what's on offer is simple and rustic. Privately owned apartments are far more numerous than the *pensiones* (guesthouses) and rural hotels that are scattered throughout the larger towns.

The most appealing lodging option is the *casas rurales*, restored farm homes that are especially suited for groups of four or more. Contact **Meridiano Cero** (☎ 922 55 18 24; [www.ecoturismo.canarias.com](http://www.ecoturismo.canarias.com); Calle Barlovento 89, El Mocal) or **Cotur Turismo Rural** (☎ 922 55 60 41; [www.coturhierro.com](http://www.coturhierro.com); Calle Las Toscas 10, Frontera) for reservations.

There is only one legal camp site – at Hoya del Morcillo (p240). Elsewhere, camping is prohibited.

## ACTIVITIES

El Hierro is perhaps best known as a scuba-diving destination; La Restinga (p239) is the sport's epicentre. Other popular activities include splashing around in the natural volcanic-rock pools, fishing off the shore and hiking.

The island is scored with hiking trails, including the long-distance GR trails (marked with red-and-white signs), the 10km-plus PR trails (marked in yellow and white) and the short and local SL trails (marked in green and white). The island's best-known path is the **Camino de la Virgen**, stretching from the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes to Valverde; this 26km historic trail is walked by thousands during the fiesta Bajada de la Virgen de los Reyes (see the boxed text, p232).

The **Tiempo Sur** (☎ 922 55 17 14; [www.islaehierro.com/webs/tiemposur](http://www.islaehierro.com/webs/tiemposur)) adventure travel company

## THE ECOLOGICAL ISLAND

Dry and rocky, El Hierro might not strike you as the most beautiful of the Canary Islands, but it is home to some of the most unusual plant and animal life, a distinction that has earned the entire island the label of Unesco biosphere reserve. Environmentalists' attention is mainly focused on protecting the marine reserve in the Mar de las Calmas (p239), the unique juniper trees in El Sabinar (p244) and the quiet El Pinar pine forest (p238), but the whole island benefits from its Unesco listing, with funds going to helping the island use its unique natural resources in a sustainable way.

In early 2007, the island took its conservationist leanings to a whole new level, launching an ambitious plan to become the world's first island to depend entirely on renewable sources (like wind, water and solar) for its energy needs. This ecological mindset is seen in other ways as well, such as the island-wide plan to promote and support organic farming.

### FIT FOR A KING

The fiesta par excellence on El Hierro is the Bajada de la Virgen de los Reyes (Descent of the Virgin), held in early July every four years (next in 2009). Most of the island's population gathers to witness or join in a procession bearing a statue of the Virgin, seated in a sedan chair, from the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes in the west of the island all the way across to Valverde. Her descent is accompanied by musicians and dancers dressed in traditional red-and-white tunics and gaudy caps, and celebrations continue for most of the month in villages and hamlets across the island.

You don't have to wait for the fiesta to make this iconic walk across the island. The ancient 26km Camino de la Virgen trail stretches from Valverde to the *ermita* (chapel), cutting through farms and forest on its journey across the spine of the island. Expect the well-marked walk to take eight hours.

can arrange activities and outings ranging from horseback riding to rock climbing, caving, mountain biking or paragliding. Call or email for prices and schedules.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

### April

**Fiesta de los Pastores** (25 April) This feast day is celebrated with a religious procession that carries the Virgen de los Reyes (Virgin of the Kings), the island's patroness saint, out of her current home in the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes to the cave where she was first kept.

### May

**Fiesta de San Isidro Valverde** (15 May) If you're in Valverde, be sure to get a look at the *lucha canaria* (p33) showcase in the afternoon.

### June

**Fiesta de la Apañada** Farmers gather in San Andrés for a livestock sale, with the smartest extracting the best prices.  
**El Día de San Juan** (24 June) Marking the longest night of the year, it's celebrated with bonfires and firecrackers throughout the island.

### July

**Fiesta de la Virgen del Carmen** Honouring La Restinga's patroness saint, the festival is celebrated on the weekend closest to 16 July with a town dance and dinner on Saturday, and a religious procession on Sunday.

### August

**Fiesta de la Virgen de la Candelaria** (15 August) Come to La Frontera to see a religious procession and a showcase of *lucha canaria* (p33) followed by a lively dance in Tigaday's Plaza Vieja.

### December

**Fiesta de la Virgen de la Concepción** (8 December) Celebrated in Valverde, the night before the festival is marked with fireworks and a lively town party, while the

day itself is devoted to religious celebrations, concerts and various cultural acts.

## EL HIERRO FOR CHILDREN

Let's be honest, this island is not exactly the kind of place most kids' dreams are made of. But if your kids are the kind who can get hours of entertainment out of making sand sculptures, going crabbing, fishing off the craggy shores, splashing in the Atlantic waves and running downhill along the wide trails that slice through El Hierro's southern pine forests, then this could be the island for you.

The self-catering *casas rurales* are perfect for families and give you the freedom to make all the noise and run around as much as you want.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

The island's small **airport** (☎ 922 55 37 00) is 12km outside Valverde. Interisland airways **Binter Canarias** (☎ 902 39 13 92; www.binternet.com) connect El Hierro to the archipelago with 46 flights a week to Tenerife, 20 to Gran Canaria and four to La Palma. At the airport you'll find car-rental offices, a bar and a shop selling maps and local products.

### Boat

El Hierro's spiffy new Puerto de la Estaca (p237), built courtesy of the European Union, gets little traffic. The **Fred Olsen** (☎ 922 62 82 00; www.fredolsen.es) ferry (€47, two hours) runs between Los Cristianos in Tenerife and El Hierro. It arrives at 12:30pm and departs at 4pm every day, except Saturday.

Specialising in cargo though also accepting passengers, **Naviera Armas** (☎ 922 55 09 05; www.naviera-armas.com; Muelle de la Estaca

s/n) makes sporadic trips to Tenerife (€22, twice weekly), La Palma (€22, weekly) and La Gomera (€17, weekly). The prices are good, but the travel times are inconvenient, with frequent middle-of-the-night arrivals and departures.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The easiest way to get to and from the airport is your own four wheels; car-rental agencies (see below) are happy to have a car waiting for you at the airport if you call ahead. **Taxis** (☎ 922 55 11 75) are a simple but pricey way to move about; it will cost about €12 to reach Valverde.

## Bus

The island's buses, which cost €1 per trip, no matter where you're going, are run by the **Servicio Insular de Guagua** (☎ 922 55 07 29; fax 922 55 14 96). At the time of research, new bus routes and timetables were being created, so the travel times in this chapter could change. Ask at a tourist office or bus station for a complete, up-to-date bus schedule.

## Car

There are many car-rental firms in Valverde and if you reserve ahead they'll have a car waiting for you at the airport or port when you arrive. In addition to the large chains renting throughout the Canaries (see p262), local companies like **Autos Bamir** (☎ 922 55 01 83; Calle Doctor Quintero 27, Valverde) may work out cheaper (around €25 per day), though their cars are likely older.

Be sure to fill up the petrol tank before leaving Valverde, as there are only three petrol stations on the island! One is in the

capital, a second in La Frontera and a third on the highway towards La Restinga.

## Taxi

Taxis are an expensive way to get around the island; a ride from Valverde to La Restinga will cost around €35. The phone number for a taxi in Valverde is ☎ 922 55 07 29.

# VALVERDE

## pop 1630

The only landlocked Canary capital, Valverde is a rather unremarkable town set atop a windy mountain ridge overlooking the Atlantic. Its low white houses aren't as scenic as those historic, balconied mansions of the other capitals, but when clouds don't interfere, the town offers some pretty valley views. On rare clear days you can see Tenerife's El Teide and La Gomera perfectly from the town centre. Even if you don't stay here, you'll probably have to pass through, as it's the island's centre of commerce and services.

A stroll around the town centre can be pleasant if the windy weather doesn't interfere; a strong breeze is nearly always blowing, making for a chilly day even when the sun is out.

## HISTORY

Though Jean de Béthencourt conquered the island in 1405, Valverde only really came into being following a devastating hurricane in 1610. Many of the islanders fled to this small inland hamlet seeking shelter, beginning a relative boom that would eventually see the town become the seat of the *municipio* (town council) that covered the whole island. In 1926 the island's first *cabildo insular* (local government) was established here.

## ORIENTATION

You'd have to try hard to get lost in diminutive Valverde. Two main one-way streets, one heading north and the other south, cut through town. Coming in from the airport or port, you'll simply follow the signs towards Valverde to reach the town centre and most of the important services, including the tourist office.

## FOOD & DRINK

Food on El Hierro is simple, but as long as you respect its limitations, you'll eat well. Fresh local fish, local meat and local vegetables are often available at restaurants, especially to those who know to ask for it! Specialities on El Hierro include *queso herreño* (local soft cheese). Dried figs are another favourite. The fruity white wine from Tigaday is quite good and is sold and served widely on the island.

## INFORMATION

### Emergency

**Police station** (☎ 922 55 00 25; 🕒 8.30am-2pm & 3.30-9.30pm, closed weekend afternoons in summer)  
Situated inside the *ayuntamiento* (town hall).

### Internet Access

The transient nature of internet cafés meant that at the time of research there were none in Valverde. The situation could change; ask at the tourist office for the latest.

### Medical Services

**Hospital** (☎ 922 59 29 97; Calle Santiago) The area's new hospital is just outside the town centre and boasts the only elevator on the island.

### Post

**Post office** (☎ 922 55 02 91; Calle Correos 3)

### Tourist Information

**Tourist office** (☎ 922 55 03 02; www.elhiero.es; Calle Dr Quintero 11; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm Sat) Get maps and information about a few island attractions.

## SIGHTS

The lure of the island lies in its natural spaces, not here in town. Still, a short stroll around (allot a morning at most here) can be rewarding. Start on pedestrian-friendly **Calle Dr Quintero**, home to shops and bars, before ducking down to the sprawling **Plaza Quintero Nuñez** (known locally as the Plaza Cabildo), which acts as a splendid welcoming mat for the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción**. The church itself is a simple three-nave structure built in 1767 and crowned by a bell tower with a railed-off upper level that serves as a lookout. Inside, the polychrome *Purísima Concepción* is the town's most prized piece of artwork.

Some day the Island Museum will open beside the church, but there's no completion date in sight. For now the town's only museum is the **Casa de las Quinteras Centro Etnográfico** (☎ 922 55 20 26; Calle Armas Martel; admission €3; 🕒 9am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Sat), where exhibits about rural island life are displayed in a small stone house.

## SLEEPING

Accommodation in Valverde is largely limited to simple, budget  *pensiones*  and hotels; the island's best offerings are elsewhere.

**Pensión San Fleit** (☎ 922 55 08 57; Calle Santiago 18; s/d €18/28) The cosy rooms at this  *pensión*  near the hospital don't get any points for style, but they're well-kept and cosy. A small diner of the same name is just next door (see below).

**Hostal-Residencia Casañas** (☎ 922 55 02 54; Calle San Francisco 9; s/d/t €28/35/46) Walk up to the 1st-floor reception of this two-star  *pensión* . The sparse but tidy rooms (some with balcony and all with TV and bathroom) make it the best deal in town.

**Hotel Boomerang** (☎ 922 55 02 00; fax 922 55 02 53; Calle Dr Gost 1; s/d/t €40/53/59) A two-star hotel rather inconveniently located at the bottom of a steep hill, this quaint, family-run hotel represents Valverde's best lodging, with smallish, clean rooms and a restaurant. This is also the place to get information about Apartamentos Boomerang (p237) in Tamaduste.

## EATING

**La Taberna de la Villa** (☎ 922 55 19 07; Calle General Rodriguez y Sánchez Espinoza 10; mains €5-12) Good, simple food (pizzas, pastas and tapas), a friendly atmosphere and extras like free wi-fi have made this the most popular spot in town. It morphs into a pub from midnight until 2am at weekends.

**Brasero San Fleit** (☎ 922 55 08 57; Calle Santiago 18; mains €5-14) Get tasty sandwiches and fresh fish from this casual diner where food is served on long wooden picnic tables and locals come to shoot the breeze at the bar.

**Brisas de Asabanos** (☎ 922 55 12 50; Calle Jesús Nazareno 1; mains €9-12; 🕒 closed Mon) Set above a pharmacy, with picture windows looking down onto the main street, this is Valverde's finest dining experience. Specialities include steak with local cheese, and the fresh catch served in burgundy sauce.

**La Mirada Profunda** (☎ 922 55 17 87; Calle Santiago 25; menú €12) At this stylish bistro you don't have much of a say in what you eat, you just get to enjoy whatever the chef has prepared – soups, fresh fish and local fare with an international twist.

## DRINKING

It doesn't get much more humdrum than Valverde, and during the week everyone heads home early. Weekends, the action (if there is any) is centred around La Taberna de la Villa (above) and the **Tasca El Chavelazo** (☎ 607 57 29 96; Calle General Rodriguez y Sánchez Espinoza 8) next door. End the night at **La Piedra** (Calle

Dr Quintero 2), the closest thing Valverde has to a *discoteca*.

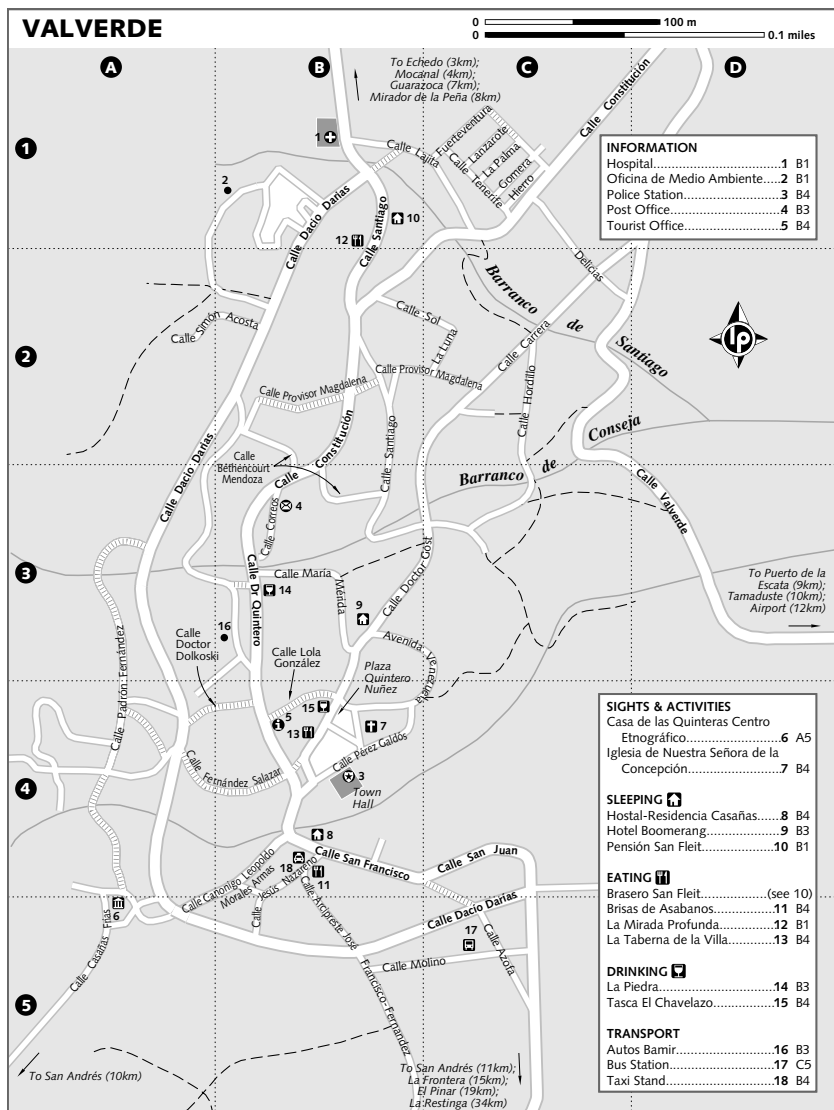
## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** (Calle Molino) is at the southern end of town, and routes do a good job of covering the island. From Valverde you can reach destinations including Frontera (€1, 30 minutes,

up to three daily), Tamaduste (€1, 15 minutes, three daily), El Mocanal and La Restinga (€1, one hour 10 minutes, up to four daily).

## GETTING AROUND

You'll find a **taxi stand** (Calle San Francisco) just in front of the island transport co-op (Sociedad Cooperativa de Transportes del Hierro).









to see much-weathered Bimbache rock carvings on a rock face by the shore but, sadly, they were accidentally destroyed when the waterfront was reconstructed.

If you want to stay, the best option is the ocean-front **Apartamentos Boomerang** (☎ 922 55 02 00; Calle El Cantil, Tamaduste; 2-/4-person apt €58/65), which has 'wow' views over the Atlantic and balconies to let in the breeze.

Grab a bite to eat – fresh local fish, tapas and meats in various sauces – at the family-run **Bar-Restaurante Bimbache** (☎ 922 96 90 14; Calle Los Cardones, Tamaduste; mains €7-12; ☹ closed Tue).

A bus connecting Valverde with the port stops three times daily in Tamaduste (€1, 15 minutes) and La Caleta (€1, 20 minutes).

### Puerto de la Estaca & Las Playas

The island's only ferry port, **Puerto de la Estaca** (☎ 922 55 09 03), becomes the centre of attention twice a day when it greets the ferries coming in from Tenerife. Otherwise, this place is so sleepy it borders on comatose. Four buses (€1, 50 minutes) daily link the port with Valverde.

Past the port, the highway curves around the coast towards Las Playas, 10km further on, slicing through a no-man's-land of rocky shores and rockier hillsides. You'll pass the little town of **Timijirque**, where there is a small beach (watch the undertow here) and the homey **Casa Guayana** (☎ 922 55 04 17; Carretera General; mains €8-15), where tasty local fish is served in a cosy dining room with a handful of tables and red ruffled curtains at the window overlooking the ocean. Above the restaurant are a few no-frills rooms (per person €12-15). Each has a toilet but shares a shower.

Further along, just past a highway tunnel, look offshore to see the famed **Roque de la Bonanza**, a rock formation that soars 200m out of the water and has become a symbol of the island.

Nearby, in front of a quiet pebbly beach, is the rustic, home-style eatery **Bar-Restaurante Bohemia** (☎ 922 55 83 80; Carretera Las Playas 15; mains €7-14; ☹ closed Wed), serving flame-grilled meats and local fish.

**ourpick Parador Nacional** (☎ 922 55 80 36; www.parador.es; Las Playas; s/d €122/135; P ♿ ♿) is where most who make the trek out here end up. Sitting on the edge of a rocky beach, this is the island's top hotel and rooms are lovely, with hardwood floors, cool blue décor and balconies (ask for one with an ocean view), though

the best thing they offer is the lullaby of the crashing waves. The *parador's* restaurant (menú €29) is elegant as well, with big picture windows looking onto the ocean and creative takes on traditional Canarian dishes.

### Mirador de la Peña

Just outside the agricultural hamlet of Guazoca is one of El Hierro's top sites – the Mirador de la Peña, designed by famed Lanzarote-born artist César Manrique (see the boxed text, p131). Get your camera ready; mist permitting, this *mirador* affords sweeping views of the valley, the gulf coast and the Roques de Salmor (p242). Wander around short paths leading to several vantage points, then dine at the elegant **restaurant** (☎ 922 55 03 00; mains €10-15; ☹ closed Mon & dinner Sun), with its elegant dining room dominated by a huge window looking out over El Golfo. The menu is focused on creative ways to use local ingredients, with results like Herreño pineapple stuffed with shellfish, or fish with Herreño cheese sauce. There's an informal café as well.

### Las Montañetas

The stone houses of Las Montañetas, one of the island's oldest towns, were slowly abandoned over the years as farmers sought easier sustenance elsewhere, and today the sheep population far outnumbers the human one. A few years ago, however, locals began converting the town's empty houses into *casas rurales* for tourists eager for a peaceful retreat. To stay here, contact **Casa Espinel** (☎ 922 55 00 71; casaespinel@elhierroinfo.com; Las Montañetas), a breezy, fully furnished, traditional-style house with a garden, heating and awesome panoramic views.

### San Andrés & Around

Gain insight into the culture of the Bimbaches by visiting the site of their ancient holy tree, **El Garoé** (☹ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-3pm Sun). According to legend, the tree miraculously spouted water, providing for the islanders and their animals. Today we know that it's really no miracle – mist in the air condenses on the tree's leaves and gives fresh water. The tree itself is rather unremarkable, especially taking into account that the original, a variety of laurel, was felled by a hurricane in 1610; the one here today was planted in 1949. There's a small visitor centre near the tree and pretty

walking trails leading to various freshwater pools. Get here along one of the two 2.7km dirt tracks that branch off the highways heading towards San Andrés. Both routes involve rocky, steep drives.

Several walking trails set off from here. Take the PR EH 7 3km to El Mocanal or 6km down to the Pozo de las Calcosas (p236), or take the same trail 3.5km in the other direction to San Andrés.

The agricultural centre of this part of the island, San Andrés is made up of a few buildings scattered on either side of the highway; one of them is **Casa Goyo** (☎ 922 55 12 63; mains €6-12), a simple, no-frills diner serving up filling local fare on green-checked tablecloths. Several *casas rurales* operate here as well. In a particularly lovely setting is the **Casa El Valle** (☎ 922 55 18 24; www.ecoturismocanarias.com; 1-2 people €50-55, 3 people €58-63), located near the village. A lush garden overlooking the valley surrounds the stone house, which boasts a huge terrace with sun lounges, a rustic style and absolute peace and quiet.

Four buses (€1, 20 minutes) daily link San Andrés with Valverde.

About 3km southwest of San Andrés, turn onto the H-120 towards the **Mirador de Jinama** for soul-satisfying views over the mammoth amphitheatre that is El Golfo. Of course, depending on the day, you could be looking over a big pot of cloud soup. There's also an excellent (although windy) picnic spot and a small chapel. The H-120 highway continues on its narrow, curvy path towards the Mirador de la Peña (p237), making it one of the island's most scenic byways.

From Jinama, you can strike out on the rocky but well-marked **Camino de Jinama**, an old donkey track that should take about 2½ hours to hike down to La Frontera and 3½ hours to return. The reverse route begins near the Plaza de la Candelaria in La Frontera.

## Isora

The cheese-producing village of Isora is a short drive (or hike, if you're up for it) from San Andrés. On the far southern side of town, perched high on El Risco de los Herreños ridge, is the **Mirador de Isora**, where the mountain falls away at your feet to reveal the smooth coast of Las Playas. The 3.5km downhill trek from the *mirador* to Las Playas is a popular hike with awesome views over

the coast; the descent should take two hours and the round trip about five.

If you're driving, follow the signs (just northeast of San Andrés) to Isora off the HI-4 highway. If you're walking, the PR EH 4.1 trail to Isora starts in Las Rosas neighbourhood of San Andrés.

Four buses (€1, 30 minutes) daily connect Isora and Valverde.

## EL PINAR & THE SOUTH

The serene El Pinar pine forest covers a long swath of the southern half of the island, casting cool shade over the volcanic terrain and providing an excellent destination for a day hike or a scenic drive. The lonely highway that cuts through El Pinar connects the eastern rim of the forest with the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes (p244), on the western side of the island; countless trails branch off the main road.

Further south, the pines drop away and raw volcanic rock formations dominate the landscape as you descend towards La Restinga, the island's scuba-diving capital and its major tourism centre.

## The HI-4 Highway

Heading south on the HI-4 highway, you'll come to a turn-off (the HI-402) for the **Mirador de las Playas**, where there is a spectacular view of the coast below.

Continue a few kilometres more and you'll pass **Las Casas** and **Taibique**, two small towns built along the steeply descending highway. Although they're technically independent, it's impossible to tell where one town ends and the other begins. While not a destination in its own right, this is a good place for self-caterers to buy supplies. The main attraction is the **Mirador de Tanajara**, with lovely views and a small **ceramics shop** nearby, open whenever the owner is home. Find it just west of Taibique's town centre.

Those needing a place to stay will find the two-star **Hotel Pinar** (☎ 922 55 80 08; www.elhiero.tv/hotelpinar; s €36-46, d €44-62) on the main highway in Taibique. The appealing rooms have private bathroom, TV and phone, and some have balconies. Just below the hotel, **Restaurante Luis El Taperio** (mains €8-12) is a friendly bar and restaurant with cheap lunches and tapas in addition to the hearty main dishes of fish and grilled meats.

## Cala de Tacorón

Halfway between El Pinar and La Restinga, you'll pass the turn-off to Cala de Tacorón. The road winds through a harsh volcanic landscape to reach a rocky coast with calm, lake-like waters. This is a great area for swimming and diving (many of the La Restinga-based companies come here) and it's popular with kayakers. After enjoying the water, have lunch at the rustic, covered picnic area, made with logs and branches, á la Swiss Family Robinson.

## La Restinga

Quickly becoming El Hierro's tourist hot spot, the once-sleepy fishing village of La Restinga is now a busy resort thanks to the dozens of scuba-diving outfitters that have set up shop here. All take advantage of the underwater marvels provided by the **Mar de las Calmas** (Sea of Calm), the warm, still waters that surround the island's southwestern shore. For nondivers, there are two volcanic beaches right on the port, where the ocean is as still as bath water, if none too clean. The town itself is a hodgepodge of apartment buildings, with several good seafood restaurants and a slew of diving outfitters, but not much activity.

The road down to La Restinga rambles through volcanic badlands. Take time to look at the funny lava shapes, ranging from *pahoehoe* or *lajial*, smooth rock that looks like twisted taffy, to hard, crumbling rock that looks like wet oatmeal. The gleaming sea stretches out before you as you descend into the town, and you can clearly make out the line between the glassy Mar de las Calmas and the windblown open ocean to the west, which is rough and choppy. Part of the sea is a marine reserve, and both fishing and diving are restricted in an effort to provide fish with a safe place to breed.

### INFORMATION

The new **tourist office** (☎ 922 55 71 88; Avenida Marítima; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri) has maps and information about the area. Wash clothes at **Lavandería La Ola** (☎ 922 55 80 08; Avenida Marítima; ☎ 9am-1pm), run by the nearby Apartamentos Arenas Blancas.

### ACTIVITIES

There's no shortage of diving companies offering their services to divers and diver

hopefuls, and everyone is offering pretty much the same thing – a €28 to €30 dive around the Mar de las Calmas, where you can expect to encounter colourful coral, majestic rock formations and a wide variety of marine life. Courses and speciality dives are also available. The companies' opening hours change daily, according to the weather and the number of dives planned. Companies include **Arrecifal** (☎ 922 55 71 71; www.arrecifal.com; Calle La Orcilla 30), **El Hierro Taxi Diver** (☎ 922 55 71 42; www.elhierrotaxidiver.com; Avenida Marítima 4) and **El Submarino** (☎ 922 55 70 75; www.elsubmarinobuceo.com; Avenida Marítima 2).

### SLEEPING

To be honest, this isn't the island's most charming place to stay, but divers are practically obliged to, since there's an 800m to 1000m altitude difference between sea-level La Restinga and the towns up the highway – it's necessary to remain near sea level for at least 12 hours after a dive.

The accommodation options are nearly all apartments, most of them newish and with enviable locations overlooking the port. But not a single one of these apartments has an elevator; keep that in mind as you fill up those suitcases!

**Casa Kai** (☎ 922 55 70 34; Calle Varadero 6; d €23) Full disclosure: this place is only listed because it's the only cheap *pensión* in La Restinga. It gets a plus for its location on the waterfront, but a major minus for the cramped, musty rooms.

**Apartamentos Rocamar** (☎ 922 55 70 83; Avenida Marítima 20; 1-2-person apt €33-36) They're not fancy, but these sunny, airy apartments overlooking the port make a central and welcoming home base.

**Apartamentos Bahía** (☎ 617 61 46 19; www.apartamentosbahia.info; Avenida Marítima 12; 1-4-person apt €35-48) These spic-and-span two-bedroom apartments are ideal for families. The open-plan kitchen and living area looks out over the blue waters of the port. The furnishings are simple, but with a view like this, who needs more decoration?

**La Marina** (☎ 922 55 90 16; Avenida Marítima; 2-person apt €42-45) Enjoy morning coffee and great ocean views on the balconies of the ocean-side rooms, while inside you'll find cosy rooms, a small, stocked kitchenette and unremarkable, though clean, furnishings.

**EATING & DRINKING**

Delicious, fresh seafood is the main attraction at most restaurants here. Self-caterers can shop at the Spar supermarket in town.

**our pick Casa Juan** (☎ 922 55 71 02; Calle Juan Gutiérrez Monteverde 23; mains €6-12; ☹ closed Wed & Jan) Hearty portions of fresh fish, soup, salad, *papas* (potatoes) and grilled meats are served up at this friendly place popular with locals. Warmly recommended.

**El Refugio** (☎ 922 55 70 29; Calle La Lapa 1; mains €7-10; ☹ closed Mon) Serving fresh fish and seafood (the restaurant has its own fishing boat), this is one block up from the waterfront. To get here, follow the sounds of the singing bird which lives in a cage outside the restaurant.

**Disco Pub Canario** (☎ 922 55 70 63; Calle El Lajial 6) One of the few nightspots in La Restinga, this is a laid-back spot for a drink.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

The HI-4 highway dead-ends in La Restinga; there's no missing it. There are frequent bus services (€1, one hour 10 minutes, up to four daily) between Valverde and La Restinga.

**Hoya del Morcillo & Around**

From the HI-4, take the HI-40 highway towards **Hoya del Morcillo** (☉ 9am-9pm), a shady recreational area in the heart of El Pinar. With a football field, a playground and a picnic area, this is the perfect spot to rest among the pines. Don't miss the large-scale map of El Hierro, made with logs. A severe fire in September 2006 altered this area, and now it's a great place to marvel at the hearty Canary pine. Their blackened trunks are proof of the fire's wrath, but the fact that they stand here today, as green as ever, shows how remarkable these trees are.

Nearby is the island's only **camp site** (per person €4.30). It has space for 300 and is well equipped, but you must request permission at the Hoya del Morcillo information booth, at the tourist office (p234) in Valverde, or at the **Oficina de Medio Ambiente** (Environment Office; ☎ 922 55 00 17; fax 922 55 02 71; Calle Trinita 1, Valverde). If you send in your request ahead of time, the Environment Office will fax you a permit before you even leave home.

Continuing into the El Pinar forest, you come across **El Julán**, where a trail heads down to one of the island's most important cultural sites, **Los Letreros**. Here, a scattering of inde-

cipherable petroglyphs was scratched into a lava flow by the Bimbaches. The hike is a long one that leaves behind the pine forest and heads into dry, volcanic territory. At the end (or sometimes along the trail) a guide may ask you to show your passport. Ask the guide to point out the carvings; if you don't know where to look you may pass right by the faded etchings and not know it. At the time of writing, a road-side information centre was under construction.

Continuing west, 6km past El Julán, is a dirt road on your right that leads you up to the foot of **Malpaso** (1501m), the island's highest peak. The 9km of rough dirt track make for slow going, but the ride is an adventure. The track is suitable for almost any vehicle (carry a spare tyre just in case).

**EL GOLFO**

An amphitheatre-shaped depression dominating El Hierro's northwestern flank, the green Golfo is, like the rest of the island, largely rural, with banana plantations filling the low-lying coastal areas. A string of quiet hamlets, some with tempting swimming holes, are laid out along the coast, while inland, growing commercial centres like La Frontera and Tigaday serve as the economic engines of the western half of the island. To the south, a rugged mountain ridge looms like a wall hiding the rest of the island, while to the north, a desolate volcanic wasteland tempts with its peculiar beauty. More than 90% of the terrain on this part of the island is protected as some sort of reserve.

Thanks to the highway tunnel built a few years back, El Golfo is just a 10-minute drive from Valverde on the HI-5 highway. But for those who love a good scenic drive (and don't get car sick) coming in the old way, on the HI-1, snaking down over the towering mountain ridge flanking El Golfo, is rewarding.

**Las Puntas**

After the tunnel, the first town you come across is Las Puntas; take the HI-55 turn-off to head down to this coastal town. Sitting right on the water, though offering no access to it, this small hamlet exists purely for the tourists who come to relax here. Its main attractions are the view and the sound of the roaring waves.

From here there is a clear view of **Los Roques de Salmor**, an important nesting spot

### ISLAND VOICES: THE ORGANIC FARMER

On Pedro Cabrera's farm in El Golfo, chickens (not pesticides) keep pests away from banana plants, sheep (not herbicides) keep fields weed-free, and crops – yams, potatoes, onions, green peppers or yucca – are rotated every season. Cabrera, 43, is one of El Hierro's 57 organic farmers. He's a minority among the estimated 1000 farmers on the island, but Cabrera is convinced that other *Herreños* will soon see the light and cross over to the organic side.

'On El Hierro we've developed the culture of the monocrops,' he says. 'Farmers grow just one crop, which makes them dependent on big multinational companies for sales. But that leads to failure, because where there's no biodiversity, insects and plagues can get out of control. Organic farming is a bit more work, but it gives much better results.'

Cabrera got into organic farming with help from the island government, which ceded him land to get started until he'd earned enough to buy his own plot. Now he works his own land, with help from his wife and two kids (aged 18 and 22), and he's building a modest house near his sheep pen. The 45 sheep, in addition to keeping his fields fertilised and weed-free, give him milk, cheese and meat.

'I was born here in Frontera. Growing up, my parents did organic farming, but that was nothing special, it's all there was!' he says. 'When I was 15, I went to the Americas, and when I came back 10 years later the island – and the way it was farmed – had changed so much. But I decided, though, to continue with the kind of farming I'd known as a kid, when each family had a few sheep, a few hens, a few different crops and they used what they needed and sold what was left over. You can still make a good living farming this way.'

for various bird species and the last stand of the primeval *Lagarto del Salmor* (Lizard of Salmor), which now only survives in captivity (see the boxed text, p242).

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Apartamentos Las Casitas** (☎ 659 85 32 10; 2-person apt €36-45; 🏠) Off the highway and away from the waterfront, these bright, roomy (50 sq metres) apartments have two balconies with expansive views, and ample living areas.

**Hotel Punta Grande** (☎ 922 55 90 81; s/d incl breakfast €46/57) Las Puntas' most famous lodging, this intimate spot was once listed in the Guinness World Records book as being the smallest hotel in the world. An old stone port building, it's perched on a spectacular rock outcrop and has comfortable rooms. The family feel, accentuated by the close quarters and lively common room and dining area (mains €13) make this a memorable place to stay. Call ahead to reserve a table.

**Bungalows Los Roques de Salmor** (☎ 922 55 90 16; r up to 4 people €55-67; 🏠) This series of small, white-walled bungalows on your left as you enter town are an excellent option. New and well-kept, they have tiled roofs, stone detailing and tasteful décor.

**Tasca** (☎ 922 69 81 40; Calle Punta Grande 3; mains €7-10) The only spot to eat or drink close to the water, this cheery tavern gets lively on weekend nights. At meal time, come to enjoy tapas, grilled meats and seafood.

**Restaurante Las Puntas** (mains €7-11; 🏠 closed Tue) Get a hearty meal downstairs from Apartamentos Las Casitas. It serves everything from pizza to paella, with a few local specialities thrown in.

### La Maceta & Charco Los Sargos

For a swim, head down to **La Maceta**, a series of natural saltwater pools built along the coast. At high tide, the ocean swallows the pools, making swimming dangerous. At other times though, taking a cool dip here is a dream.

**our pick La Maceta** (☎ 922 55 60 20; mains €8-13, 🏠 closed Wed), one of the best restaurants on the western side of the island, is just up from the beach. Get a variety of local fish (unlike most restaurants on the island, all the fish here is fresh) on the breezy terrace or in the stylish dining room.

From the main highway, follow the signs to La Maceta, turning down the HI-550 and taking the first sealed road to your right.

Just up the coast is **Charco Los Sargos**, another swimming spot with calm pools that buffer the crashing waves. It's similar to La Maceta but with less fanfare. There's a small beach

## THE GIANT LIZARD

Imagine the Spaniards' surprise when they began to explore El Hierro and, among the native birds, juniper trees and unusual volcanic rock, they discovered enormous lizards as large as cats. Greyish-brown and growing up to 45cm in length, the lizards aren't venomous or harmful, though according to one early chronicler they're 'disgusting and repugnant to behold'.

By the 1940s, these giant lizards were almost extinct, all but snuffed out by human encroachment on their habitat, introduced predators (such as cats) and climatological factors. A few survived on the Roques de Salmor rock outcrop off the gulf coast (giving the species its name, 'Lizard of Salmor'), but before long, those too had disappeared.

Then, in the 1970s, herdsmen began reporting sightings of large, unidentified animal droppings and carcasses of extra-long lizards that had been killed by dogs. To the delight of conservationists, a small colony of the giant lizards had survived on a practically inaccessible mountain crag, the Fuga de Gorreta. One herdsman was able to capture a pair of the reptiles, beginning the species' journey back to life.

In 1985 the Giant Lizard of El Hierro Recovery Plan was put into place. These days you can see it in action at the Lagartario at the Ecomuseo de Guinea (below), where the lizards are bred in captivity and released into a supervised wild area. At the Lagartario you can spy on a few specimens in their glassed-in cages as they soak up the sun or snack on vegetation. A guide explains the recovery efforts and the history of the giant lizard.

shack that keeps erratic hours. From the HI-550, the turn-off is just 300m north of the turn-off for La Maceta.

## Ecomuseo de Guinea

The island's premier cultural site, this interesting outdoor **museum** (☎ 922 55 50 56; admission €7.50; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sat, with entrance every 30min, tours 10.30am, noon & 1.45pm Sun) is really two centres in one. The Casas de Guinea, which encompasses a fascinating route through volcanic caves and 20 ancient houses (four of which are visitable), represents islander lifestyles through the centuries. The Lagartario is a recuperation centre for the giant lizard of El Hierro (see the boxed text, above). You can only visit with a guide (tours available in English), so be sure to arrive at least an hour before closing.

## Tigaday

pop 1231

The nerve centre of the La Frontera municipality, Tigaday is a commercial hub (in El Hierro terms at least) strung out along the highway. There's not much to see in the centre, but as El Hierro's second town, Tigaday is the only place on the island with shops and services to rival the capital. It even has one of the island's three petrol stations! Most shops, bars and services are along Calle Tigaday.

On Sundays a small artisan and fresh-food **market** (☎ 8am-1pm; Plaza Vieja) sets up shop on Tigaday's main plaza.

Log on at **Comunicación Sin Fronteras** (☎ 922 55 59 05; Calle La Corredera 5; internet per hr €1.50; ☎ 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-11pm Mon-Sat). Wash clothes at **Lavandería Mijúcal** (☎ 922 55 51 14; Calle Cruz Alta 16).

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Pensión Guanche** (☎ 669 07 32 91; Calle Cruz Alta 1; s/d €15/21) Rather worn and quite cramped, but at this price you can't complain. Rooms have a tiny bathroom and shower stall, quilts that have seen better days, and pretty views.

**Apartamentos Frontera** (☎ 922 55 92 46; Carretera General 19; 2-person apt €35) These simple, narrow studio apartments all overlook a lush central patio and offer generous-sized balconies.

**Bar-Restaurante Andrómeda** (☎ 922 55 50 41; Calle Tigaday 21; mains €8-13; ☎ closed Sun) Though low on atmosphere, this simple diner serves tasty versions of staples like pork chops, pan-grilled steak and the local speciality *carne fiesta* (chopped pork with grilled peppers and onions).

## La Frontera

Although La Frontera is the name of the large municipality that extends over the entire gulf coast, it's also the name of a small settlement perched on the hillside behind Tigaday, though it's hard to tell where one town ends and the other begins. The most important thing here is the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria**, a 17th-century construction that was redone in 1929. Inside, the three-nave church has two



rows of pretty stone columns and an ornate golden altar. It sits on the **Plaza de la Candelaria**, a charming square with benches and a fountain. Behind the church, you can walk to the empty **stone chapel** perched on the hill. It's a short but steep climb and, from the top, the gulf valley spreads out before you like a patchwork quilt of fields and banana plantations.

The **Camino de Jinama** (p238) begins (or ends, depending on your route) near the plaza.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**our pick** **El Sitio** (☎ 922 55 98 43; www.elsitio-elhierro.com; Calle La Carrera 26, La Frontera; r €38-56; ☎ reception 11am-1pm & 6-7pm Mon-Sat) Close your eyes and say *ommm*. Tucked away above the Frontera town centre, this 'centre for well-being' is a unique B&B and activity centre in one. Rooms are in a cluster of renovated stone farm buildings, and activities like yoga, massages, hikes or bike excursions are available to guests and nonguests alike.

**Hotelito Ida Inés** (☎ 922 55 94 45; www.hotelitoida.ines.com; Hoyo Belgara Alta 2; s/d incl breakfast €62/76) There are just 12 rooms in this quaint hotel, all clean, with floral bedspreads, TV, phone, in-room coffee and tea, sparkling bathrooms and balconies with splendid views.

**Villa La Hiedra** (☎ 609 94 63 11; www.villalahiedra.com; villa for up to 5 people €120; P ♿ ) A luxurious house overlooking the gulf, this modern villa offers a large terrace and garden, amazing views, elegant décor and all the conveniences.

**Joapira** (☎ 922 55 98 03; Plaza de la Candelaria 8; mains €5-8) Just in front of the church, this is a bar with a covered terrace that also serves simple food like tapas, roast chicken and the house speciality, *carne fiesta*.

**Bar-Restaurante Candelaria** (☎ 922 55 50 01; Calle de la Candelaria 1; mains €5-12) Across the street and slightly more upscale, the Candelaria's walls are covered with knick-knacks and local paintings. Star dishes include the grilled surf-and-turf plate, *arepas* (Venezuelan meat wraps) and baked chicken.

## Los Llanillos & Sabinosa

There are two routes leading to the western end of the island: the flat, ocean-side HI-550, and the gorgeous but tortuously curved HI-50. Those who set out on the latter are rewarded with a beautiful drive along a mountain ridge. The hairpin curves can be challenging, though, especially if you're tempted to admire the scenery of the ocean

laid out below and the surrounding rugged volcanic mountains.

The small town of **Los Llanillos** hugs the HI-50 highway a few kilometres out of Tílagay. Although the town itself won't detain you for long, there is a good restaurant here: **Asador Artero** (☎ 922 55 50 37; Calle Artero 2; mains €6-12). A cosy yet busy place, it's popular with locals who crowd in for the tasty grilled meats and chicken. In Los Llanillos, take the turn-off for **Charco Azul**, a natural cove with calm pools for swimming.

The highway grows steeper and curvier as it leads to **Sabinosa**, Spain's westernmost town. This remote little village feels as though it's at the end of the world. There is not much here to see, but the scenery nearby is breathtaking.

If you take the coastal highway, you'll quickly reach the famed **Pozo de la Salud** (Well of Health) and the hotel-spa **Hotel-Balneario Pozo de la Salud** (☎ 922 55 95 61; fax 922 55 98 01; s/d €51/61; P ♿ ). They'll be on your right, at the end of the HI-500 highway. You can walk down to the small *pozo*, with its waters said to cure a variety of ills, but it's all closed up and there's not much to see. You could do as the Herreños do and bring an empty jug to fill up for free in the hotel (between 8am and 4pm only).

The hotel is a stately building that seems out of place in the rustic wilderness of western El Hierro. Rooms have views of either the ocean or the mountains and are slightly hospice-like but comfortable. The **spa** (☎ 9am-8pm) offers a variety of water-based treatments, as well as standards like massages and algae facials, and the prices (€54 for a rejuvenating facial, €17 for a 30-minute antistress massage, or €50 for a hot volcanic-stone treatment) are better than what you'd find in mainland Europe. Anyone can get treatments here, but guests have priority.

Just west of the hotel, down the HI-500, is **Playa de las Arenas Blancas** (White Sands Beach). Take a short road down to the coast, where indeed there are a few whitish grains of sand. They quickly melt into volcanic rock at the water's edge though, and the beach is unremarkable even if remote and often deserted.

## LA DEHESA

West of Sabinosa, the island is practically uninhabited and wild volcanic landscapes dominated by fierce-looking rock formations,



hardy shrubs and wind-sculpted juniper trees are the main attractions. This part of the island is called **La Dehesa** (The Pasture), and is only accessible via the arching highway that cuts through volcanic badlands where only a few low shrubs dare to survive.

Stop for a swim at the **Playa del Verodal**, a curious red-sand beach that backs up to a majestic rock cliff. The beach itself is 1km off the main highway (follow the signs) and is often deserted, leaving you with your own private paradise.

As the highway nears the southern coast, you'll reach the HI-503, the turn-off for the **Faro de Orchilla** (Lighthouse of Orchilla), the most southwesterly point in Spain. Long ago robbed of its status as Meridiano Cero by Greenwich in the UK, the lighthouse is still an island icon. West of the lighthouse is a commemorative monument, and at the time of research, a small museum was being planned for the site.

### **Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los Reyes**

Back on the main highway, tackle a few more curves to reach this pretty white **ermita** (chapel), made all the more interesting because of the history and tradition behind it.

The chapel contains the image of the island's patroness saint, Nuestra Señora de los Reyes (Our Lady of the Kings) because local shepherds bought her from foreign sailors

on Three Kings Day, 6 January (1545). The people attribute several miracles to the Virgin, including ending droughts and epidemics.

Every four years (2005, 2009 etc) the Virgin is taken out of the chapel in a lively procession around the island (see the boxed text, p232).

### **El Sabinar & Beyond**

From the *ermita*, continue north up wind-swept El Sabinar, named after the *sabinas* (junipers) that grow up here in very weird ways. Along one part of the road the way is lined with *sabinas* – though beautiful, these are not as spectacular as the wind-twisted trees further down the road at El Sabinar, which have become the island's symbol. You'll pass a turn-off to the left at a signpost indicating El Sabinar. Park here and wander among some of the most unusual trees you'll ever see. They have been sculpted by nature into wild shapes that look frozen in time.

Wear long pants if you want to hack your way through the brush and get close to the trees, which are scattered on the hillside. These wonderfully weird *sabinas* are part of the reason that Unesco declared the entire island a biosphere reserve.

Once back at the fork, you could curl north for a further 2km to reach the **Mirador de Bascos**, a spectacular lookout that's unfortunately often cloaked in cloud. If it's a clear day, prepare for a breathtaking view. If not, don't bother.