

La Gomera



From the air, La Gomera is an impenetrable fortress ringed with soaring rock walls. Noodle-thin roads wiggle and squirm their way alongside cliff faces and up ravines, and the tiny white specks that represent houses seem impossibly placed on inaccessible crags.

Once on the ground, however, that rough landscape translates into lush valleys, awe-inspiring cliffs and stoic rock formations sculpted by ancient volcanic activity and erosion. Those white specks reveal themselves to be charming white-walled villages. And the impenetrable rock walls are actually interrupted occasionally by small coves and pristine beaches.

A paradise of natural beauty, this small round island (dubbed Isla Columbina, or Columbus Island, because of its ties to the explorer) is not the sort of place that offers golden beaches or wild tropical nightlife. It is inlaid with trails, and taking the time to explore them is, for many people, the most enjoyable aspect of a visit to the island.

While many visitors just make a day trip from Tenerife or another island, La Gomera really can't be grasped in a single day. The unforgiving relief of this tiny island means that, while it's only 25km across at its widest, any journey across it entails endless twists and turns on the narrow highways. Truly, there's no getting anywhere as the crow flies.

Agriculture and tourism vie for top spot as the motor behind the local economy. Bananas, vines, potatoes and corn are all cultivated on the steep slopes of the ravines, although increasingly farmers are turning to the hotel, restaurant or guide businesses.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the fern-filled trails of the **Parque Nacional de Garajonay** (p195), the lush *laurisilva* forest at the heart of the island
- Pucker up and join in with the Silbo experts at **Restaurante Las Rosas** (p198)
- Soak in the beauty of **Valle Gran Rey** (p202), with its plunging valleys and picture-perfect terraced hillsides
- Take a cruise to visit **Los Órganos** (p200), a rock formation that resembles a titan's set of pipe organs
- Unwind at the **Playa de Alojera** (p200), the island's best beach



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 922

■ POPULATION: 21,950

■ AREA: 378 SQ KM

HISTORY

Throughout the 15th century the Spaniards tried unsuccessfully to conquer La Gomera. When they finally managed to establish a presence on the island in the middle of the century, it was due to a slow and fairly peaceful infiltration of Christianity and European culture rather than the result of a battle. Early on, the original inhabitants were permitted to keep much of their culture and self-rule, but that changed when the brutal Hernán Peraza the younger (see the boxed text, p193) became governor. The Gomereros rebelled against him, unleashing a blood bath that killed hundreds of islanders.

After the activity of those first years, and the excitement that accompanied Christopher

Columbus' stopovers on the island, there followed a long period of isolation. La Gomera was totally self-sufficient and had little contact with the outside world until the 1950s, when a small pier was built in San Sebastián, opening the way for ferry travel and trade.

Even so, it was difficult to eke out a living by farming on the island's steep slopes, and much of the population emigrated to Tenerife or South America.

INFORMATION

Books & Maps

The 1:40,000 *La Gomera Tour and Trail* is a fairly good walking map with 70 routes described briefly in English. Offering slightly more detail, *La Gomera Walking Map* by



Goldsstadt also describes hikes. Other good maps include the 1:35,000 *La Gomera – Ile de Gomera*, published by Freytag & Berndt, and the 1:50,000 *La Gomera* by DISTRIMAPS Teles-tar. These maps are available in bookshops. The tourist office also gives out several decent free maps of the island.

Helpful hiking guides include *Rother Walking Guide Gomera*, published by Freytag & Berndt, and *Walk La Gomera*, published by Discovery Walking Guides.

ACCOMMODATION

The island has, so far, kept grand-scale tourism at bay, and most lodging is in small rural hotels, family-run *pensiones* (guesthouses), refurbished farmhouses and apartments. By far the most appealing and authentically Gomeran places to stay are the *casas rurales* (rural houses), many of which were abandoned by emigrants and have since been refurbished for tourists. For information and to book, contact **Ecotur** (☎ 922 14 41 01; www.ecoturismo canarias.com/gomera; Carretera General 207, Hermigua).

A few pleasant exceptions are San Sebastián's elegant *Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera* (p194) and the sprawling *Hotel Jardín Tecina* (p201) resort in Playa Santiago.

Reserving ahead of time is always a good idea, but it's really only necessary during high season (Christmas, Easter, August, major holidays, etc) and for those who plan to arrive on a late-night flight or ferry.

Free camping is prohibited on the island, and there's only one private camp site, *Camping La Vista* (p198) near El Cedro.

ACTIVITIES

Whether your idea of the perfect walk is strolling through a quiet pine forest, trudging up to a peak with a panoramic view, or trolling like an elf through the magical *laurisilva* (subtropical laurel) forests of the *Parque Nacional de Garajonay* (p195) chances are good that you'll find your ideal trail somewhere on the island. This is walking territory and trails of every level crisscross the island, both in and out of the park, offering enough variation to make a week-long walking or biking holiday a fantastic idea.

Regardless of their office location, the companies listed below offer guided walks or cycles across the island, and most will meet you at your hotel or a central location.

Bike Station Gomera (☎ 922 80 50 82; www.bike-station-gomera.com; La Puntilla 7, Valle Gran Rey; bike rental per day €7-14; ☹ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm)

Ökotours (☎ 922 80 52 34; www.oekotours.com; Calle Vueltas, Vueltas, Valle Gran Rey; day hike per person €25-32; ☹ 10.30am-1pm & 5.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1pm Sat)

Temocoda (☎ 922 87 24 40; www.temocoda.com; Avenida del V Centenario 11, San Sebastián de la Gomera; day hike per person incl lunch €45)

Timah (☎ 922 80 70 37; www.timah.net; La Puntilla, Valle Gran Rey; day hike per person €30; ☹ 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 6-8pm Sun)

THE ISLE WHERE COLUMBUS DALLIED

A Genoese sailor of modest means, Cristoforo Colombo (as he is known in his native Italy – Christopher Columbus to the rest of us) was born in 1451. He went to sea early and was something of a dreamer. Fascinated by Marco Polo's travels in the Orient, he decided early on that it must be possible to reach the east by heading west into the sunset. After years of doors being slammed in his face, the Catholic monarchs of Spain, Fernando and Isabel, finally gave him their patronage in 1492.

On 3 August, at the head of three small caravels – the *Santa María*, *Pinta* and *Niña* – Columbus weighed anchor in Palos de la Frontera, Andalucía, on the Spanish mainland. But before heading across the ocean blue, he stopped off at La Gomera for last-minute provisions, unwittingly giving the island its biggest claim to fame and many future tourist attractions. One of the things he picked up for the journey was goats' cheese, one of La Gomera's star products to this day.

Columbus set sail on 6 September, a day now celebrated in San Sebastián with the *Fiestas Columbina*s (opposite). His ships didn't see land until 12 October, just as their provisions and the sailors' patience were nearing their ends. The expedition 'discovered' several Caribbean islands on this trip and returned to Spain in March of the following year.

Columbus made three later voyages but died alone and bitter in Valladolid, Spain, in 1504, still convinced he'd found a new route to the Orient.

There are a few black-sand beaches around, but La Gomera is really not focused on its coast. Even so, you can take boat cruises starting from either Valle Gran Rey (see p204) or Playa Santiago (see p201), and if you want to do some exploring in the water, contact the diving school at Hotel Jardín Tecina (p201).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Any excuse will do for a fiesta. Many local celebrations feature traditional costumes, instruments and dances.

January

Fiesta de San Sebastián (20 January) San Sebastián festival in honour of the town's patron saint.

June

El Día de San Juan (23 June) The summer solstice is celebrated with bonfires all over the island.

September

Fiestas Columbinas (6 September) A week full of street parties, music and cultural events in San Sebastián, celebrating Columbus' first voyage.

Fiesta del Paso Gómeros from far and wide converge on Alajeró to celebrate this chirpy procession that dances its way down from the mountains.

October

Bajada de la Virgen de Guadalupe San Sebastián (5 October) Every five years (2008, 2013 etc) the town celebrates its patroness saint with a flotilla of fishing boats escorting the statue of the Virgin Mary from the chapel of Punta Llana southwards to the capital.

LA GOMERA FOR CHILDREN

La Gomera doesn't have any of the theme parks, zoos or water parks that make the bigger island such kid magnets. The fun here is of a less-flashy variety and depends on nature to provide the thrills.

Kids' first stop is, usually, the beach. The long, calm beaches of Valle Gran Rey (p202) and Alojera (p200), where there is a saltwater wading pool for little ones, are ideal. Keep in mind that there's more to beaches than splashing in the waves. Building sand castles and going crabbing or snorkelling can all be fun beach activities. For kids who aren't strong swimmers, pools like the one in Vallehermoso (p198) might be a better bet.

Short boat trips are guaranteed to brighten kids' days. The Garajonay Exprés ferry (right) is a thrill in itself, but even more fun are the

real cruises. Trips to Los Órganos (p200) and half-day whale-watching cruises (p204) both sail from Valle Gran Rey and Playa Santiago.

You could also plan a stop in a recreational area like La Laguna Grande (p196), a picnic spot and playground rolled into one where kids can happily spend an entire afternoon running and playing.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The **airport** (☎ 922 87 30 00) is just 3km outside the centre of Playa Santiago. Interisland airways **Binter Canarias** (☎ 902 39 13 92; www.binternet.com) and **Islas** (☎ 902 47 74 78; www.islasairways.com) connect La Gomera to the rest of the archipelago, with several flights daily to other islands.

Boat

Several ferries and jetfoils arrive daily at San Sebastián's busy port, which is just at the foot of the town. Most people come in on the quick jetfoils from Los Cristianos, in Tenerife. **Fred Olsen** (☎ 902 10 01 07; www.fredolsen.es) makes the round trip four times daily between 7.30am and 8.30pm (€52 round trip, 30 minutes), while the cheaper and slower **Naviera Armas** (☎ 922 87 13 24; www.navieraarmas.com) operates up to four ferries a day between Los Cristianos and La Gomera, up to four ferries weekly between La Gomera and La Palma, and one weekly ferry between El Hierro and La Gomera.

The smaller company **Garajonay Exprés** (☎ 902 34 34 50; www.garajonayexpres.com) links Los Cristianos with San Sebastián (€19, 45 minutes), Playa Santiago (€22, one hour) and Valle Gran Rey (€23, 1½ hours) three times a day.

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

You can rent a car at one of several agencies at the airport or, if money is no object, take a taxi. The taxi to Playa Santiago costs just €6 to €8, but getting to San Sebastián will cost about €35.

There is a bus stop at the airport, but buses are few and far between. Bus 5 (30 minutes, up to four daily) runs between the airport and San Sebastián, while bus 6 (1½ hours, two daily) makes the journey between the airport and Valle Gran Rey.

FOOD & DRINK

San Sebastián's twice-weekly fresh market (p194) is a good place to get an overview of typical Gomeran goods. Look out for specialities like *miel de palma* (palm honey), a sweet syrup made from palm-tree sap; *almogrote*, a spicy cheese pâté made with hard cheese, pepper and tomato, and spread on bread; and *queso gomero* (fresh Gomeran goat cheese), a mild, smooth cheese made with local goats' milk and served with salads, as a dessert, or grilled and smothered in *mojo*, the famed Canary sauce that's another island speciality.

There are many great restaurants where you can try these specialities *in situ*. The very best, if you listen to the locals, is Casa Efigenia (p196), a Gomeran institution in the form of a farmhouse restaurant. Here you can often try Gomeran dishes like *potaje de berros* (watercress soup), washed down with a glass of cool Gomeran white wine.

Boat

Garajonay Exprés (p189) also runs three daily ferries between San Sebastián, Playa Santiago and Valle Gran Rey (€3.50, 40 minutes).

Bus

The seven bus lines of **Servicio Regular Gomera** (☎ 922 14 11 01; www.gomera-island.com/turismo/ingles/guaguas.htm) do a good job of covering the main destinations, though getting around the island this way will require time and patience. The aqua-coloured buses set out from the ferry terminal at San Sebastián and stop by the bus station in town before heading around the island. Get a complete bus schedule from the tourist office or the San Sebastián bus station.

Car

There are several car-rental agencies around, and any will arrange to have a car waiting for you at the port or airport when you arrive if you book ahead. Rental agencies include the following:

Cícar (☎ 922 14 17 56; www.cicar.com; Estación Marítima, San Sebastián)

Rent-a-Car La Rueda (☎ 922 87 20 48; Calle Medio 19, San Sebastián)

Rent-a-Car Piñero (☎ 922 14 10 48; Avenida José Aguiar 14, San Sebastián) Also at Estación Marítima, San Sebastián.

SAN SEBASTIÁN DE LA GOMERA

pop 8451

The capital of the island in every way – economically, bureaucratically and historically – San Sebastián has an appealing historic

centre with shaded plazas and pedestrian-friendly streets. Its main claim to fame is that Christopher Columbus stayed here on his way to the New World, and you'll learn more about the famed explorer here than you ever did at school, as his every footstep (real or imagined) in the town has been well documented for visitors.

HISTORY

On 6 September 1492, after loading up with supplies from the island, Christopher Columbus led his three small caravels out of the bay and set sail westwards beyond the limit of the known world. When Columbus was on the island, San Sebastián had barely been founded. Four years earlier, in 1488, there had been a terrible massacre in the wake of the failed uprising against Hernán Peraza, the island's governor (see the boxed text, p193). When it was all over, what had been the Villa de las Palmas, on a spot known to the Guanches as Hupalán, was renamed San Sebastián.

The boom in transatlantic trade following Columbus' journeys helped boost the fortunes of the town, which sits on a sheltered harbour and was one of the Canaries' best ports. Nevertheless, its population passed the 1000 mark only at the beginning of the 19th century. The good times also brought dangers as, like other islands, San Sebastián was regularly subjected to pirate attack from the English, French and Portuguese. In 1739 the English fleet actually landed an invasion force but the assault was repulsed.

The fate of the town was linked intimately with that of the rest of the island. Its fortunes rose with the cochineal boom in the 19th century, then collapsed with that in-

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Barbara's Bookstall (Plaza Américas; ☎ 8am-2pm Wed & Sat) Head to this English bookseller during the twice-weekly flea and fresh market.

Foto Junonia (☎ 922 87 06 24; Avenida Colón 24) Stocks books, maps and guidebooks in Spanish and other languages (mostly German).

Emergency

Police station (☎ 922 87 00 62; Plaza Américas) On the 1st floor of the *ayuntamiento* (town hall).

Internet Access

Café Internet el @mbigú (☎ 922 87 16 68; Plaza Américas 8; per hr €3; ☎ 8am-1am) All-day wi-fi is available for €1.80.

Ciber Garajonay (☎ 922 14 13 87; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 80; per hr €2; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-10pm Mon-Fri)

Laundry

Lavandería Hecu (☎ 922 14 11 80; Calle Real 76; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Mon-Fri) This tiny place will wash and dry a load of up to 4.5kg for €9.

Medical Services

Hospital (☎ 922 14 02 00; Calle El Calvario 4) On the western side of town, across the Barranco de la Villa.

Post

Post office (☎ 922 87 10 81; Calle Real 60)

Tourist Information

Tourist information kiosk (Plaza Américas; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm Sat) This small kiosk supplies maps but little else.

Tourist office (☎ 922 14 15 12; www.gomera-island.com; Calle Real 4; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Jun, 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Jul-Sep) A friendly, helpful place in the Casa de la Aguada.

Travel Agencies

Viajes Insular (☎ 922 87 14 50; www.viajesinsular.es; Avenida Centenario s/n; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri) This agency can help with all your travel needs.

SIGHTS

To get a good overview of San Sebastián, head up the road to the Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera hotel (p194), where the **Mirador de la Hila** showcases the coast, the square houses of town and the rough, dry mountains beyond.

Back in the town centre, most of the interesting sites are somehow related to Columbus

(in either real or contrived ways), and they form a route you can follow around town. Beginning at **Plaza Américas**, where you can get a juice in one of the terrace bars, cross through **Plaza Constitución**, shaded by enormous Indian laurel trees.

Just off the plaza is **Casa de la Aguada** (☎ 922 14 15 12; Calle Real 4; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun), also referred to as Casa de la Aduana or Casa Condal, since at different times it served as the customs house and the count's residence. The tourist office fills one side of this traditional Canary home, but the back of it is dedicated to the exhibit 'La Gomera & the Discovery of America', an interesting account (though all in Spanish) of Columbus' trip and Gomeran culture in those times. According to folklore, Columbus drew water from the well that sits in the central patio and used it to 'baptise America'.

Head up Calle Real to **Iglesia de la Virgen de la Asunción** (☎ usually 6-8pm), the site where Columbus and his men supposedly came to pray before setting off for the New World. The original chapel was begun in 1450 but was destroyed by a fire. The 18th-century church here today has three naves and mixes *mudéjar* (Islamic-style architecture), Gothic and baroque architectural styles. The humble **Ermita de San Sebastián** (Calle Real), which has little to recommend it other than its age (the chapel was built in 1540), is a few blocks further on.

Nearby is **Casa de Colón** (Calle Real 56), a house built on the site where Columbus supposedly stayed while on the island. It's closed indefinitely for renovations.

Set in a park just off the coast, **Torre del Conde** (☎ 10am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) is considered the Canary Islands' most important example of military architecture. Here, Beatriz de Bobadilla, wife of the cruel and ill-fated Hernán Peraza, had to barricade herself in 1488 until help arrived (see the boxed text, opposite). The fort (built in 1447) was the first building of any note to be erected on the island. It is about the only one to have been more or less preserved in its original state.

ACTIVITIES

The sandy volcanic **beach** is a nice place to relax and have a swim. It's also the site of some of the town's liveliest festivals, such as El Día de San Juan (St John's Day; see p189), when the beach is lined with bonfires. Past the port, and accessible via a small tunnel, is

WHAT A TANGLED WEB WE WEAVE...

Governor Hernán Peraza the younger had long been hated for his cruel treatment of the islanders. When, in 1488, he broke a pact of friendship with one of the Gomero tribes and, openly cheating on his wife, began cavorting with Yballa, a local beauty and fiancée of one of the island's most powerful men, the natives rebelled. They surprised Peraza during one of his clandestine meetings with Yballa and killed him with a dart, communicating the news via Silbo (whistle) all over the island. They proceeded to attack the Spaniards in Villa de las Palmas, the precursor to modern San Sebastián, and Peraza's deceived wife (the famed beauty Beatriz de Bobadilla) barricaded herself in the Torre del Conde, where she waited until help arrived.

Unfortunately, the story didn't end there. 'Help' showed up in the form of Pedro de Vera, governor of Gran Canaria and one of the cruelest figures in Canarian history. His ruthlessness was bloodcurdling. According to one account, de Vera ordered the execution of all Gomeran males above the age of 15, and in an orgy of wanton violence, islanders were hanged, impaled, decapitated or drowned. Some had their hands and feet lopped off beforehand, just for good measure. The women were parcelled out to the militiamen, and many of the children were sold as slaves. To complete the job, de Vera also ordered the execution of about 300 Gomerans living on Gran Canaria.

the smaller and prettier, though often windy, **Playa de la Cueva**. On a clear day, Tenerife seems like it's within spitting distance!

Ask about bike or boat rental at **Marina La Gomera** (Estación Marítima; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat).

North of town, at Km8.4 on the TF-711 highway, is an interesting bike trail leading into the **Dehesa de Majona**, the largely uninhabited pastureland to the north of the capital. The dirt track begins near a lookout point, venturing towards the goat-herding villages of Casas de Enchereda and Casas de Juel before winding its way towards the coast and eventually joining up with sealed local roads near Hermigua. The lonely route can be hiked in about eight hours (one way).

SLEEPING

Budget

Pensión Colón (☎ 922 87 02 35; Calle Real 59; s/d with shared bathroom €20/25) Rustic, no-frills rooms huddle around a central patio in this typical Canary-style house. Although a bit stale overall, the location is good and the price can't be beaten.

Villa Hotel Gomera (☎ 922 87 00 20; fax 922 87 02 35; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 68; s/d incl breakfast €35/45) This two-star hotel offers 16 simple rooms with terraces, tiled bathrooms and a surprising amount of space for the price. You might want to skip the breakfast though, unless stale bread and room-temperature sandwich meat are your idea of tasty.

Hotel Garajonay (☎ 922 87 05 50; www.hotelgarajonay.es; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 17; s €22-41, d €45-51) Run by the same folks who own the Hotel Torre del Conde, the two-star Garajonay is the sidekick to its sleeker big sister. A few of the small, rustic-feeling rooms have views of the tower, while others look onto a busy street. All are clean, with tiled floors and TV.

Midrange

HOTELS

Hotel Torre del Conde (☎ 922 87 00 00; fax 922 87 13 14; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 19; s €39-54, d €57-69) The rooms' canary-yellow walls (think they did that on purpose?) may clash with the blindingly gold bedspreads and curtains, but other than poor colour coordination, this is a fine three-star hotel. Best of all are the views of the Torre del Conde and the pretty gardens that surround it; ask for a room with a view.

APARTMENTS

Apartamentos Bernabé (☎ 922 14 13 87; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 80; 2-3-person apt €35-40, 4-person apt €60, 5-person apt €65-70) Located atop Ciber Garajonay, these one- and two-bedroom apartments are flooded with light and feature balconies, TVs and a bit too much street noise. The two-bedroom units provide enough elbow room for a family of five.

Apartamentos Quintero (☎ 922 14 17 44; apquintero@teleline.es; Plaza Américas; apt €47-53) The one-bedroom apartments have sofa beds, so are roomy enough for two people, and a bit of a squeeze for bigger groups. They also have a

kitchen, balcony and, in some cases, an ocean view. Though not new, they're clean, comfy and centrally located.

Villa El Liriaz (☎ 679 60 86 49; www.vallehermoso.de/en/liriaz; Playa de la Cueva; 2-person apt €75, ste €86-116; P 🚗) Perched on a cliff above Playa de la Cueva, the five apartments in this intimate stone-and-wood Canary-style villa whisk you away to another world. Large apartments with lots of light are ideal for families, although they're a 15-minute walk from San Sebastián itself. Reservations essential.

Top End

Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera (☎ 922 87 11 00; www.parador.es; Calle Lomo de la Horca; s/d €116/145; P 🚗) Built to look like an old Canarian mansion, the Parador is arguably the island's top hotel. The rooms are simply but elegantly furnished, with four-poster beds, rich wooden floors and marbled bathrooms. Most rooms look out onto the gardens, which have many examples of Canarian plants and a small pool area overlooking the ocean. The hotel is on a hill above the port; follow signs from central San Sebastián to get here by car, or walk up via the Mirador de la Hila.

EATING

Self-caterers can make a beeline for the *mercado municipal*, which is large, well-stocked and located beside the bus station.

Budget

Bar-Zumería Puntallana (☎ 922 14 16 01; Calle Profesor Armas Fernández 30; juices €1.80-2.50, sandwiches €3) A favourite Canarian species, the juice bar is a fabulous spot for breakfast, a quick lunch or a pick-me-up. The juices here, made on the spot with fresh and often local fruit, are outstanding and the cold and hot sandwiches are cheap and filling.

Midrange

Bar-Restaurante La Tasca (☎ 922 14 15 98; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 57; mains €4-10; 🚗 closed Sun) Dark and inviting, this intimate tavern serves mainland-style tapas alongside pizzas and more elaborate dishes like lasagne or grilled rabbit.

Restaurante El Charcón (☎ 922 14 18 98; Playa de la Cueva; mains €7-12) A tiny, 10-table restaurant dug out of the rock near the shore, El Charcón specialises in fish and Gomeran specialities like *almogrote* (cheese spread) and *mojos* (spicy salsa sauces).

Restaurante Breñusca (☎ 922 87 09 20; Calle Real 11; mains €7-12) Locals say this slightly greasy-feeling bar/diner/restaurant is one of the best spots in town to try simple, traditional Canarian fare like homemade fried calamari, meatballs and stews. The catch of the day is always recommended.

Restaurante Cuatro Caminos (☎ 922 14 12 60; Calle Ruiz de Padrón 36; mains €7-15; 🚗 closed Sat dinner & Sun) Stews and soups, grilled meats and Castilian specialities like *cochinillo* (piglet) are served in a tiny patio dining room where hanging plants drip from the ceiling.

Top End

our pick Marqués de Oristano (☎ 922 87 29 09; Calle Real 24; mains €8-16; 🚗 closed Sun) This 16th-century Canary house has been completely renovated to create this sprawling three-in-one eatery. The old stables are now an informal tavern where you can order drinks and tapas; the garden is a bar and grill serving lots of simple fish dishes (mains €8 to €12); and the upstairs living quarters have been transformed into an upscale 'gourmet restaurant' serving dishes like boned kid with black potatoes, and potato confit (mains €10 to €16).

Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera (☎ 922 87 11 00; Calle Lomo de la Horca; menú €29) The elegant restaurant at the Parador Nacional is without a doubt the most refined establishment in San Sebastián. Staff dress in local costume and the few, but consistently good, dishes are creative versions of traditional Canarian favourites.

DRINKING

For an informal drink and a few tapas to go along with it, head to a tavern-like Bar-Restaurante La Tasca (left) or Marqués de Oristano (above). El @mbigü (p192) is an Internet café by day, but morphs into a trendy nightspot after dinner.

GETTING THERE & AWAY To/From the Airport

Bus 5 (30 minutes, up to four daily) runs between the airport and San Sebastián.

Boat

A fun and fast alternative to tackling the hair-pin curves of La Gomera's highways is the water taxi operated by **Garajonay Expres** (☎ 902 34 34 50; www.garajonayexpres.com), which takes you to Playa Santiago (€2.50, 15 minutes, three daily) and Valle Gran Rey (€3.50, 40 min-

utes, three daily) quickly. The trip between San Sebastián and Playa Santiago takes 45 minutes by car, while the trip to Valle Gran Rey is 1½ hours, so water taxi is definitely the faster option.

GETTING AROUND

Plan on using your own or feet to get around the town; San Sebastián is very walkable, and is so small that buses merely pass through, not really connecting points of interest within the town centre.

The only reason you might need a car is to move between the centre and the Parador Nacional Conde de la Gomera, which is a short (though steep) walk or drive away. Car rental agencies are listed on p190.

Ring for a taxi on ☎ 922 87 05 24. The taxi stand is on Avenida Descubridores.

THE CENTRE

PARQUE NACIONAL DE GARAJONAY

A jungle of nearly impenetrable green that dominates the heart of La Gomera, the Parque Nacional de Garajonay encompasses one of the last vestiges of the ancestral *laurisilva* forests that were once spread throughout the Mediterranean. This wonderland of lush vegetation contains the island's best hiking and cycling trails, and it is a must-see sight for anyone visiting the island.

A universe of organisms has forged out a life in this damp, dark forest, which covers a full 10% (around 40 sq km) of the island's surface. As many as 400 species of flora, including Canary willows and Canary holly, flourish, and nearly 1000 species of invertebrates make their home in the park; insect lovers will have a field day. Vertebrates here include mainly birds and lizards. Relatively little light penetrates the canopy, providing an ideal landscape for moss and lichen to spread over everything.

Up here, on the roof of the island, cool Atlantic trade winds clash with warmer breezes, creating a constant ebb and flow of mist through the dense forest, something called 'horizontal rain'. The best place to see this in action is at the peak of the park, the Alto de Garajonay (1487m), where a single pine tree planted by the park rangers serves as an example of how the forest works. The

dripping tree, which sits in a puddle of water that it has collected, acts like a sponge, trapping moisture in its green boughs. The pines' role in feeding the island's springs is one of the reasons why conservation here is so important.

The frosty fingers of the last Ice Age didn't make it as far as the Canaries, so what you see here was common across much of the Mediterranean millions of years ago. Humans have done more damage on the islands than has ice, but in this case, at least, we've acted to protect a good chunk of unique land before it was too late – Garajonay was declared a national park in 1981 and a Unesco World Heritage site in 1986.

Lighting fires in the park is forbidden, except in a few designated areas. Free camping is also prohibited. It can get cold here, and the damp goes right to your bones, even when it is not raining. Bring walking boots, warm garments and a rainproof jacket.

Information

Get maps, hiking guides and park information at the **Juego de Bolas visitor centre** (☎ 922 80 09 93; <http://reddeparquesnacionales.mma.es>; La Palmita-Agulo Hwy; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm), which is actually located well outside the park and is difficult to access unless you arrive from the north.

Here you'll find piles of information on the park and the island in general, including a very informative guidebook to the park and a 20-minute video. In the centre's gardens and interior patio flourishes a microcosm of La Gomera's floral riches, and a small museum shows off island handicrafts and explains the park's geology and climate. The centre offers guided tours of the park on Saturday; call ahead to reserve a spot.

Walking

Walking is the best way to revel in the natural beauty abounding here, so park the car or get off the bus and set out to explore the park on foot. Many of the trails that crisscross Garajonay have been used by the Gomeros for hundreds of years as a means of getting around the island, and few are strenuous.

Although several guiding companies (see p188) lead convenient, transport-included hikes in and around the park, it's certainly not necessary to use their services. The

park's many and varied access points make it simple to plan a journey on your own if you have a good walking map or the *Self-Guided Paths* booklet available from the Juego de Bolas visitor centre.

One popular self-guided walk begins in **La Laguna Grande**, a recreation and picnic area just off the TF-713 highway. The *laguna* refers to a barren circle of land – now used as a recreational area – that has always held an air of mystery. Islanders say it's a mystical place and that witches once practised here. If you don't have much time to explore, you can take the easy, 20-minute loop that serves as a decent, if too brief, introduction to the park. This route is a good place to view the park's famous laurel trees.

A longer walk (2½ hours one way) heads to the **Alto de Garajonay** (1487m), the island's tallest peak. The walk begins behind the restaurant at La Laguna Grande and sets off towards **El Cercado** (a town known for its pottery production), then bears left towards Los Llanos de Crispin before winding its way through native vegetation and heading northwest to the Alto. From here, cloud permitting, you can enjoy jaw-dropping, 360-degree views around the island and can even spot Tenerife, La Palma, El Hierro and Gran Canaria in the distance.

From the Alto, you could return to La Laguna Grande (there is an alternative trail so that you don't have to completely backtrack) or continue 45 minutes downhill to Pajarito, where there is a bus stop. Bus 1 (€4, around one hour) comes by four times a day weekdays and twice a day weekends; it will take you towards either San Sebastián or Valle Gran Rey. For those arriving by bus, or looking for an easy parking spot, Pajarito is also a good starting point to begin a short hike up to the Alto.

Around 15 minutes north of Pajarito is El Contadero, where another track, signposted **Caserío de El Cedro**, leads northeast through a beautiful valley forest. This mostly descending trail (2½ hours one way) winds its way towards the hamlet of El Cedro (p198), famous for its waterfalls. You can grab a bite to eat at **Bar La Vista** (☎ 922 88 09 49; ☎ 9am-7pm). It's possible to continue hiking to Hermigua, two hours away, where you'd need to have transport waiting. Or, you could return to the Pajarito bus stop via Tajaqué (three hours).

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **Casa Efigenia** (☎ 922 80 40 77; www.efigenia.natural.com; Carretera General; menú €10) Make a point to take a short detour to the town of Las Hayas, on the southern border of the park, where this local institution serves family-style meals at long communal tables. You eat whatever is on the menu for the day, and it's sure to be hearty, home-style Canarian fare. Efigenia also rents rooms (double €35) and a few rural houses (€40) in the area.

Getting There & Away

Unlike some other protected parks, Garajonay is extremely accessible. In fact, you won't be able to avoid it if you move much about the island, as the park exists at La Gomera's major crossroads.

The TF-713 highway cuts east to west right through the park until it meets the TF-711 at the park's western extremity. Though wheeling through in your own car is certainly the quickest and most comfortable way to move about the park, Bus 1 (€4, around one hour) runs four times daily weekdays and twice on weekends between the capital and Valle Gran Rey. The route runs along a southern secondary road, branching off shortly before Alto de Garajonay and continuing westwards along a decidedly tortuous route, stopping in towns like Igualero, Chipude and El Cercado before branching north again to rejoin the main road at Las Hayas.

A minor sealed road connects the national park visitor centre in the north of the island to La Laguna Grande, about midway along the TF-713, between the park's eastern and western boundaries.

THE NORTH

If you have just one day to spend in La Gomera, think about spending it in the verdant north, where dense banana plantations and swaying palm trees fill the valleys, cultivated terraces transform the hillsides into geometric works of art and white-washed houses make the villages seem like something from another era. The resulting landscape is postcard-worthy at every turn, but these well-manicured terraces represent back-breaking work by the local farmers –

the steepness of the slopes means most work here has to be done without machines.

The curvy TF-711 highway running 42km between San Sebastián and Vallehermoso is the artery connecting the towns here, and it's pocked with *miradores* (lookout points) offering gorgeous views. The highway eventually meets up with the TF-713, allowing ambitious day-trippers to loop the northern half of the island and end up back in San Sebastián in time to catch the last ferry off the island.

HERMIGUA

pop 475

A popular home base for those on walking holidays, the sleepy town of Hermigua, 16km outside San Sebastián, is absolutely dripping with that authentic Gomeran feel. The town itself is strung out along the bottom of a lushly green ravine, its houses like beads on a chain running down the middle.

At the heart of the original village, to the right as you enter from San Sebastián, are the 16th-century **church** and **convent of Santo Domingo**, with an intricately carved *mudéjar* ceiling.

To your left sits the **Molino de Gofio** (☎ 922 88 07 81; Carretera General; adult/child €2/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun), a reconstructed windmill where *gofio* (see p51) was once ground. The quick tour leads you around the museum and mill. Afterwards, you can taste *gofio* accompanied by sweet wine. There's also a good restaurant here.

Further down the ravine you'll find the modern town, centred around the **Iglesia de la Encarnación**. This church was begun in the 17th century and not completed until the 20th, partly due to the fact that the original construction crumbled in the early 18th century. A public park, complete with a Lucha Canaria ring (see p33) is on your right.

Hermigua winds down to a captivatingly blue ocean where the crushing waves are a bit too rough for swimming (although they're occasionally used for surfing competitions). There is a big **saltwater public pool** down here, but it was closed indefinitely at the time of writing.

Even better is **Playa de la Caleta**, 3km southeast down the coast; follow the signs from the waterfront. It's one of the prettier black-sand and pebble beaches in the north of the island.

Sleeping

Apartamentos Los Telares (☎ 922 88 07 81; www.apartamentosgomera.com; El Convento, Carretera General; 1-2 person apt €25-36, 2-3 person house €40-71) The owner, Doña Maruca, is one of the island's best-known residents (she also runs the Molino de Gofio). Her apartments, which sit on either side of the main highway coming into town, aren't unlike so many others on the island, with simple wooden furniture, lots of sunshine and balconies overlooking banana plantations. Telares also rents small houses near the coast, featuring a similar unfussy décor, generous terraces and fabulous ocean views. Across the street from Los Telares' reception office is an artisan shop under the same ownership, where you can buy local crafts and visit a small loom museum. At the time of research, Doña Maruca had plans to open a rural hotel as well.

Hotel Villa de Hermigua (☎ 922 88 07 77, 600 52 69 25; www.gomeraturismo.com; Carretera General 117; s/d incl breakfast €45/63) This little stone house on the main road is a maze inside, with scattered small but tasteful rooms where wrought-iron bedposts and all-white linen give a touch of rustic elegance. A common kitchen and terrace add to the charm. If the owner isn't in when you come by, ring him on his mobile phone.

Ibo Alfaro (☎ 922 88 01 68; www.ecoturismocanarias.com/iboalfaro; s incl breakfast €56, d incl breakfast €75-90) Even better than Villa de Hermigua, the 17 romantic rooms here have gorgeous mountain views and an aroma of wood polish coming from the floors, ceilings and elegant furniture. The friendly German owner also runs the hotel restaurant. To get here, follow the signs up the unnamed rural road from beside Hermigua Rent-a-Car.

Apartamentos Jardín La Punta (☎ 922 14 60 97; www.residencial-la-punta.com; Carretera General; 3-person apt €45; (P) (♿)) Located on the highway that winds out of town, and giving enviable, sweeping views of the Atlantic, these 15 stylish apartments have been decorated with colour, flair and a contemporary touch.

Eating

El Silbo (☎ 922 88 03 04; Carretera General 102; mains €9-15) The best place for typical Canarian cuisine like tuna with *mojo*, fried rabbit or *chipirones* (tiny squid). A covered terrace with bright tablecloths and an abundance of hanging plants makes for a pleasant, if slightly junglelike, dining experience.

Restaurante Vasco Iratxe (☎ 922 88 07 40; Carretera General; mains €10-20; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) Widely hailed as the best eating in town, this dark little Basque restaurant serves up fabulous cod and other Basque specialities.

La Casa Creativa (☎ 922 88 10 23; Carretera General 56; mains €15-20; 🍷 closed Sun; 📺) Upstairs, a quirky café serves fresh juices, homemade pies and pastries and an ever-changing array of tapas (vegetarian options are always available). For dinner, the formal downstairs restaurant serves slightly overpriced Canarian and international fare. The German owners also rent out a few apartments and arrange occasional yoga classes.

Getting There & Away

Bus 1 (€4) runs four times on weekdays and twice on weekends between San Sebastián and Vallehermoso, stopping in Hermigua along the way.

EL CEDRO

Southwest of Hermigua, and on the national park border, El Cedro is a rural hamlet set amid farmed terraces and laurel thickets. The ravine and waterfall known as **Boca del Chorro** are beautiful, and the simple chapel, **Ermita de Nuestra Señora de Lourdes**, is a 1km wander out from the hamlet.

In El Cedro itself are three rustic stone **cottages** (☎ 922 22 97 94; www.apartamentosgomera.com; 2-person cottage €47) for rent by Doña Maruca. The minimum stay in high season is five days.

Here too is **Camping La Vista** (☎ 922 88 09 49; per person €2; 🍷 year-round), the island's only camp site. A friendly place, it has a bar and restaurant.

To walk to El Cedro from Hermigua, ask in town for the way to the *sendero* (trail) to El Cedro and be prepared for a two- to three-hour hike. If you're not up for walking, follow the signs to El Cedro, off the main highway south of Hermigua. By car, you can get within a 15-minute walk of El Cedro's cottages and camp site.

You can also reach El Cedro from El Condatado on the Caserío de El Cedro trail in Parque Nacional de Garajonay (see p196).

AGULO

A spectacular 5km drive north of Hermigua, Agulo is one of the island's most picturesque villages. Founded early in the 17th century, it squats on a low platform beneath the steep,

rugged hinterland that stretches back towards the Garajonay park.

The elegant **Iglesia de San Marcos** dominates the centre of Agulo. Built in 1912, it's a simple temple with a high ceiling and a few interesting pieces of art. Get a quick and shockingly cheap meal at **Bar Mantillo Los Chocos** (☎ 922 14 61 66; Calle El Mantillo s/n; mains €4), which specialises in roasted chicken, lentil stew and local seafood.

LAS ROSAS

Continuing past Agulo on the main highway, next you'll come to Las Rosas, which sits at the foot of the national park. Just before the town centre is the turn-off for the park's Juego de Bolas visitor centre (p195).

The town's claim to fame is being the home of the Fred Olsen-owned **Restaurante Las Rosas** (☎ 922 80 09 16; Carretera General; mains €7-10), a tourist magnet on the main highway. Although the food (overcooked tuna fillet, various meats in overpowering sauces, watery soups) is not very good, you won't regret a meal here because this is one of the few spots on the island where you can hear a live demonstration of Silbo Gomero (see the boxed text, opposite). Don't miss the opportunity. Reservations are recommended because the restaurant packs out with the tour-bus crowd.

For a more authentic dining experience, head high above Las Rosas to **Restaurante Roque Blanco** (☎ 922 80 04 83; Cruz de Tierno; mains €6-12; 🍷 closed Mon), a casual family restaurant perched above a gorgeous green valley. Enjoy the view and the grilled meats paired with *papas* (potatoes) and local wines.

VALLEHERMOSO

pop 1540

This truly is a 'beautiful valley', as its name translates. Small mountain peaks rise on either side of the deep gorge that runs through town, and the green, terraced hillsides dotted with palm trees complete the picture.

Like Hermigua, this makes a good base for exploring the island on foot. The heart of town is **Plaza Constitución**; bars, services and much of the budget accommodation is around here. Take time to search out the stone **Iglesia de San Juan Bautista** behind the town centre.

Just outside town towers the volcanic monolith of **Roque Cano** (650m), a town

SILBO: FOR THE BIRDS

The first time you hear Silbo Gomero you might think that you're listening to two birds having a conversation. Alternately chirpy and melodic, shrill and deeply resonating, this ancient whistling language is as lovely as birdsong. Silbo, once a dying art, but now being brought back to life, is steeped in history and boasts a complex vocabulary of more than 4000 whistled words that can be heard from miles away. It's definitely not for the birds.

In pre-Hispanic Gomera, Silbo developed as the perfect tool for sending messages back and forth across the island's rugged terrain. In ideal conditions, it could be heard up to 4km away, saving islanders from struggling up hill and down dale just to deliver a message to a neighbour. At first, Silbo was probably used as an emergency signal, but over time a full language developed. While other forms of whistled communications have existed in pockets of Greece, Turkey, China and Mexico, none is as developed as Silbo Gomero.

Modern conveniences have all but killed the language, but in the past few years Silbo has gone from being La Gomera's near-forgotten heritage to being its prime cultural selling point. In 2006 Silbo was proposed as a candidate for Unesco Oral Heritage status. If it makes the cut it will mean a hefty budget increase, more notoriety for its promoters and a big morale boost for *silbadores*. Silbo has been a mandatory school subject on the island since 2000, and a Silbo school for adults (and possibly even tourists) is on the horizon.

icon visible from just about everywhere. It looms tall like an age-old big brother keeping watch. Head past the *roque* down to the **Playa de Vallehermoso**, a beautiful strip of sand pounded by waves and hemmed in by tall cliffs on either side. Also down on the waterfront are a **public pool** (admission €2; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sun) and the informal **Restaurante Parque Marítimo** (right).

A short signposted walk or drive north-west from the waterfront is **Castillo del Mar** (☎ 922 80 04 97; www.castillo-del-mar.com; Parque Marítimo; ☎ 11am-sunset Tue-Sun), an old banana-packaging factory that's been converted into a beautifully rustic and windblown cultural centre hosting concerts, exhibits and a tapas bar.

Sleeping

Bar-Restaurante Amaya (☎ 922 80 00 73; Plaza Constitución 2; s/d €11/20) Don't expect anything fancy, but if all you're after is a central place to get a night's rest, this is your spot. Ask for one of the rooms with a private bathroom, which offer a TV and views of the town. The busy restaurant (mains €6 to €8) downstairs is a congenial place for nonelaborate dishes like cuttlefish, octopus or roast chicken.

Cuello Aparthotel (☎ 922 80 07 17; Calle Guillermo Ascanio 17; s/d €40/55) Built in 2004, these spare, bare-bones studio apartments are set around a sunny central patio laden with ferns and hanging plants. Some rooms don't have a bathroom. It's one of the few spots

on the island offering a high-speed internet connection for those toting a laptop.

our pick **Hotel Rural Tamahucho** (☎ 922 80 11 76; www.hotelrtamahucho.com; Calle Hoya 20; s/d incl breakfast €47/66; (P) (Q)) Just outside town (it's a little hard to find; follow the signs towards Valle Gran Rey and it will be perched atop a hill to your right), this little B&B-style hotel is a real find. Built right into the hillside, Tamahucho climbs in a series of staircases and terraces, so don't plan to bring much luggage. Rooms, with dark wooden floorboards and wood-beam ceiling, are done in a Canary colonial style.

Hotel Triana (☎ 922 80 05 28; Calle Triana 13; s/d incl breakfast €40/69) Old and new come together in perfect harmony at this boutique hotel near the town centre. The original stone walls of this old Canary house lend rooms a rustic air, while the minimalist décor sets it firmly in the 21st century.

Eating

Agana (☎ 922 80 08 43; Avenida Guillermo Ascanio 5; mains €6-11) Head to this tavern for tasty Canarian dishes, including specialties such as *potaje de berros* (watercress soup) and *almogrote*, served to you at small wooden tables.

Restaurante Parque Marítimo (☎ 922 80 15 61; menú €9) An informal bar and restaurant by the beach, where you can get paella, local fish and shellfish while squinting at the shimmering ocean.

Self-caterers can find some fresh produce at the tiny **mercadillo** (☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Sat), beside the town hall.

AROUND VALLEHERMOSO

Los Órganos

To contemplate this extraordinary cliffscape (something like a great sculpted church organ in basalt rising abruptly from the ocean depths), 4km north of Vallehermoso, you'll need to head out to sea. Boats making the trip actually set out from Valle Gran Rey (p202) and Playa Santiago (right) in the south of the island. The columned cliff face has been battered into its present shape by the ocean.

Alojera

This sleepy settlement sits in a fertile valley that stands out as an oasis of green amid dry hills. Past the town itself, at the end of a nausea-inducing, seemingly endless series of hairpin curves, you reach the reward: the breathtaking **Playa de Alojera**.

Arguably the prettiest beach on the island, this place is no secret, but it's rarely crowded. A sweeping, silty black beach with calm waters is ideal for swimming, while the cliffs, rock formations and natural pools offshore represent some of La Gomera's best photo ops. You can eat (in your bathing suit if you like) at the beach-side **Brisas del Mar** (☎ 922 80 04 73; Playa de Alojera; mains €7-8), where the menu is basically a rundown of every species of Canarian fish, all served in fillets.

Stay at **Apartamentos Azul** (☎ 922 80 02 17; 2-person apt €36), no-frills flats with a spacious kitchen and sitting area, small bedroom and constant sea breezes. The best thing about this place is, naturally, the location.

Chorros de Epina

One kilometre past the turn-off for Alojera is the **Restaurante Los Chorros de Epina** (☎ 922 80 00 30; Carretera General del Norte, Km50; mains €6-8), where grilled rabbit, kid, pork chops and steaks are served in a dining room where the only décor is the panoramic views over the hills and to the piercing blue ocean beyond.

Just off the highway, a trail branches off towards the **Chorros de Epina**, a series of seven small natural springs. Ask locals about the romantic legend associated with this spot.

THE SOUTH

The sunniest part of the island, the south is endlessly changing, from dry sunburnt peaks to lush banana-filled valleys, and from stern rocky coasts to silty black-sand beaches. This is where you'll find the island's two resort areas – the modest Playa Santiago and sprawling Valle Gran Rey.

PLAYA SANTIAGO

pop 560

Playa Santiago is small ocean-side hamlet with calm waters, a drowsy town centre and no real beach to speak of; grey stones and pebbles line the shore. But the view, especially in the morning when a magnificent sunrise spreads glitter and sparkles over the water's surface, just about makes up for the town's lack of sandy beaches.

Until the 1960s this area was the busiest centre on the island, with factories, a shipyard and a port for exporting local bananas and tomatoes. But the farming crisis hit hard, and by the 1970s the town had all but shut down, its inhabitants having fled to Tenerife or South America. In recent years, tourism has brought new life to town. A huge luxury-hotel complex owned by Fred Olsen is doing more than its fair share to bring visitors this way, and the port has traded bananas for passengers and is now a stop for the Garajonay Expres ferry boat.

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 922 89 56 50; www.gomera-island.com; Edificio Las Vistas, Avenida Marítima; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Sat summer, 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat winter) is on your right as you enter the town centre.

All the town's services, including the post office, petrol station, laundrette, pharmacy, post office, police station and medical centre, are clustered around Plaza Playa Santiago in the heart of town.

Activities

In Playa Santiago itself, splashing in the waves, rambling along the rocky shore and marvelling over the peaceful ocean view will likely take up most of your time. To get out on the water, you can hop on a cruise boat to Los Órganos (left) or to go whale-watching (see p39 for information about

whale watching). Tour companies include **China Morales** (☎ 628 66 24 26; excursioneschinemorales@hotmail.com; 3hr boat ride per person €40, 4hr fishing trip per person €90) and **Tina** (☎ 922 80 58 85; www.excursiones-tina.com; day cruise adult €33-40, child €20). Most trips include lunch and a swim.

There's a small **diving school** (☎ 922 89 59 02; www.gomera-dive-resort.com; single dive €25-32) set up below the Hotel Jardín Tecina (below). You can also buy tickets for various other excursions here.

If the rocky beach in town doesn't satisfy, you can head east, past Hotel Jardín Tecina, to three smaller beaches, Playas de Tapahuga, del Medio and de Chinguarime, which have some sand mixed in with the rocks. The three lie at the end of a bumpy gravel track and are known as hippy hang-outs.

The new 18-hole **Tecina Golf Course** (☎ 922 14 59 50; www.tecinagolf.com; Lomada del Tecina, s/n; 9/18 holes €45/61), yet another Fred Olsen initiative and the island's only golf course, is just outside town.

Sleeping

Casanova (☎ 922 89 50 02; Avenida Marítima 6; 2-person apt €30) Near the town centre, Casanova rents out a few simple apartments with kitchenettes and views of the ocean. The owners also run the restaurant downstairs.

Apartamentos Tapahuga (☎ 922 89 51 59; www.tapahuga.com; Avenida Marítima; 2-person apt €43-60; 🚗) At the far end of the *avenida*, these spacious apartments boast beautiful wooden balconies and marble floors, well-equipped kitchens and a rooftop pool. Make sure you get an exterior apartment, as a few open onto a cheerless and dark interior patio.

Apartamentos Santa Ana (☎ 922 89 51 66; www.gomerarural.com; Finca Santa Ana s/n; 2-/3-person apt €75/85; 🍷 🚗) A quiet retreat, these 14 apartments sit atop a cliff at the southern end of town, overlooking Playa Santiago (a 3km drive away). The all-wood construction lends a rustic air to the charming rooms, where the simple décor is pleasant enough but the real appeal is their amazing setting.

our pick **Hotel Jardín Tecina** (☎ 922 14 58 50; www.jardin-tecina.com; Playa Santiago; s/d incl breakfast & dinner €69-135 per person; 🍷 🚗 🚗) Sprawled above a cliff above town (a lift goes down to the beach), this is the nicest hotel on the island, with bungalowlike rooms scattered throughout a green, well-kept landscape. All have balconies and many have ocean views.

The hotel's restaurants – three of them – are noteworthy too (see below).

Eating

La Cueva (☎ 922 89 55 68; Avenida Marítima; mains €7-15) Tucked into a natural cave beside the port, where plants dangle from the ceiling and low lighting creates a cosy atmosphere, La Cueva serves fresh local seafood, such as tuna, *vieja* (parrot fish), *lapas* (limpets), *chocos* (cuttlefish), along with grilled meats, all served with *papas arrugadas* (wrinkly potatoes) and a tangy red *mojo*.

Restaurante Junonia (☎ 922 89 54 50; Avenida Marítima; mains €8-10) A local favourite with a porch out front and a welcoming, farmhouse style, Junonia serves fresh local fish and other Gomeran specialities on blue-and-white-checked tablecloths.

Hotel Jardín Tecina (☎ 922 14 58 50; www.jardin-tecina.com; Playa Santiago; menú del día around €20) The three restaurants at this hotel are warmly recommended. Though each has its own style – grill, traditional or international – all serve tasty, creative dishes in beautiful open-air settings. It's a good idea to book ahead.

Self caterers will find all the basics at **Supermercado El Paso II** (☎ 922 89 55 66; Calle Anton Gil).

Getting There & Away

Bus 3 (€4, 30 minutes, up to five daily) links Playa Santiago with San Sebastian. Much easier are the water taxis of **Garajonay Exprés** (☎ 902 34 34 50; www.garajonayexpres.com), which take you to San Sebastián (€2.50, 15 minutes, three daily) and Valle Gran Rey (€2.50, 20 minutes, three daily) more quickly.

Call a taxi on ☎ 922 89 50 22.

ALAJERO & AROUND

pop 325

The palm trees outnumber the residents in this peaceful oasis situated on a ridge high above the ocean. The only sizable village outside Playa Santiago is in the southeast of the island, Alajero boasts the modest 16th-century **Iglesia del Salvador** and is a good starting point for several **hikes**. The long-distance GR132 trail passes through town as do the shorter PRLG 15 and 16. The latter heads to downhill to Playa Santiago or, more challengingly, up to **Benchijigua**, a tiny settlement amid steep green slopes. Information plaques outlining the walks are near the church. Another option is to take an 8km loop trail to Magaña, along

the Lomo de la Montaña and past the island's oldest **drago** (dragon tree; see the boxed text, p42) before returning to Alajeró. Allow 2½ hours for the journey.

If you're driving, you can see the *drago* tree by taking an unsigned left turn, 1.25km north of Alajeró, as far as an old farmhouse, from where a trail drops steeply. If you're on the bus, get off at the Imada stop and turn left down a cobbled track to join this side road. Either way, allow a good 1½ hours for the round trip.

Bus 3 (€4, 40 minutes, up to five daily) runs between town and San Sebastián, stopping at Playa Santiago on the way. The bus stop is on the main highway.

VALLE GRAN REY

pop 3440

Bet you can't make it all the way down to the shore without stopping at one of the lookout points to sigh at the natural beauty of the 'Valley of the Great King'. A deep, green gorge running down to meet the island's longest beach, this is La Gomera's tourist epicentre. If you speak German you'll feel right at home, as most services here are geared towards the many Germans in search of sunshine and nature.

Before you descend into the valley, you could stop at the **Ermita del Santo** in Arure, where a tiny chapel is built into the rock face and is surrounded by a recently built *mirador* showing off the southern landscape.

Also worth a stop, the **Mirador César Manrique** enjoys incredible views of Valle Gran Rey's gorge and the mountains that loom around it. The **restaurant** (mains €8-14; ☒ closed Sun dinner) serves Canary fusion food, like king prawns with curry.

A few kilometres further on is another of the area's many road-side chapels: the best feature of the **Ermita de San Antonio** is the view from the plaza outside.

Orientation

Valle Gran Rey is really a collection of little hamlets with a grand name. The high part is known as La Calera. From here the road forks to descend to La Playa and Vueltas. Both have small beaches and plenty of accommodation, and Vueltas also serves as the area's harbour.

La Playa, the newest area, is in constant development, with new hotels and apartments being built as you read this. It's still a far cry from luxe, but the area is doing its best to spiff itself up, with newly sealed streets, a nice new ocean-front promenade and increasingly good restaurants.

Information

EMERGENCY

Centro Médico Hispano-Alemán (☎ 922 80 61 91; Residencial el Conde, Charco del Conde; ☒ 9am-3pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 9.30-11am Sat)

LOCAL VOICES

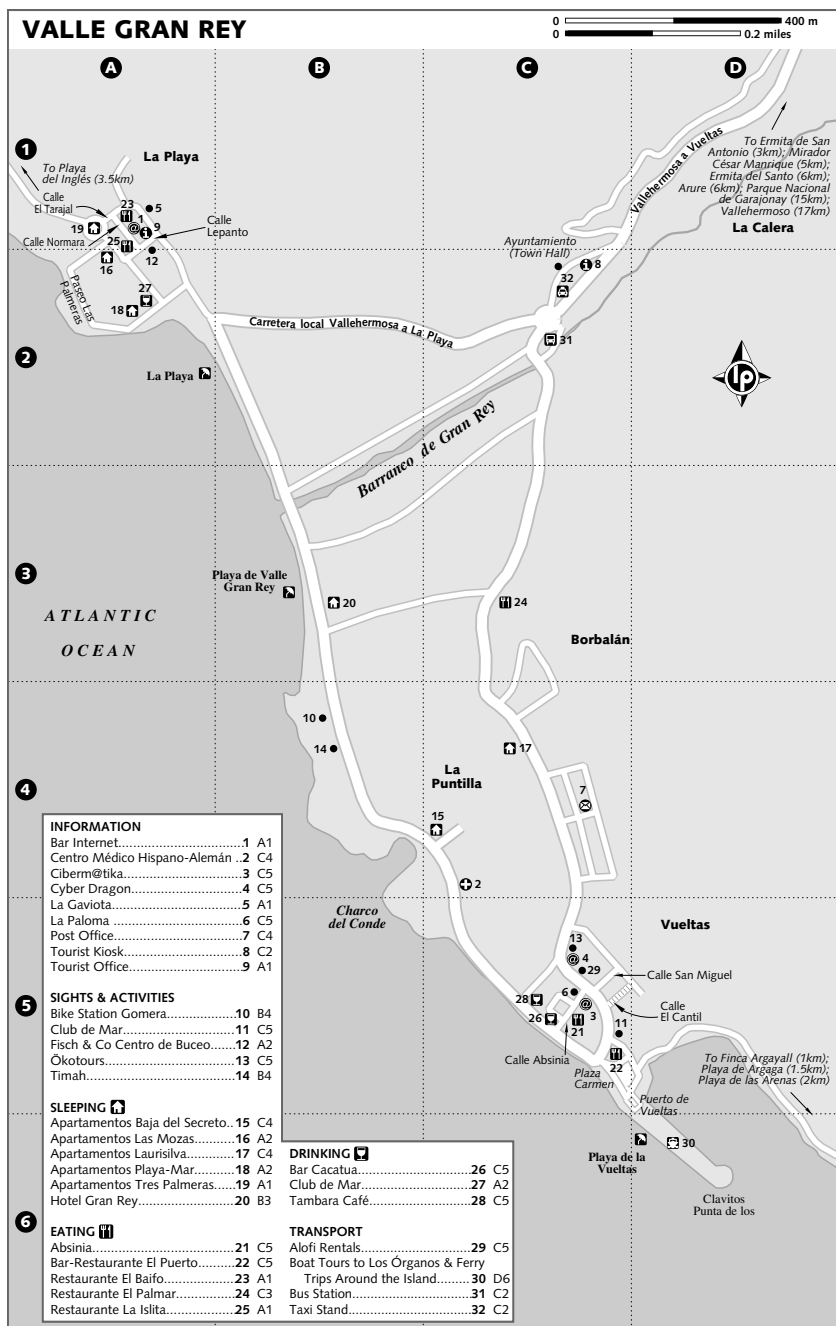
Ayoze Rodríguez, 15, is one of La Gomera's youngest Silbo experts. He's whistled all over the Canary Islands in special exhibitions, and he's even travelled to the mainland to help spread Gomeran culture. In 2006 he whistled for the King of Spain himself when Juan Carlos I paid a visit to the island. Rodríguez knows he's a minority – most of his friends would rather play video games than practice whistling – but he's a firm believer in the importance of Silbo.

'Silbo helped our ancestors survive, and thanks to them we're all here. It's ours, and it's worth recuperating,' he says. 'Working together, we can save our heritage. Now, young people are learning it, and in six or seven years there will be a lot more people using Silbo.'

After going to his grandfather to learn whistling techniques – like how to use his hands to direct the sound and where to place his fingers in his mouth to get certain pitches – Rodríguez later perfected his Silbo in school classes in San Sebastián, where he lives. In his daily life, he uses Silbo occasionally to call to his Silbo-speaking friends or to practice.

Silbo isn't something you can learn 'in a day', Rodríguez says. 'You need two or three months just to learn to make the sound with your fingers and your tongue.' To be able to recognize and reproduce words as whistles requires years of practise.

Eugenio Darias, a Silbo teacher and the coordinator of Silbo classes across the island, explains Silbo like this: 'When you whistle a song, you're whistling the tune of the song. But when you speak Silbo, you're whistling the words themselves. It's what we call an articulated language, though reduced to only the four consonants and two vowels we can distinguish in a whistle.'



INTERNET ACCESS

Bar Internet (☎ 922 80 51 22; Edificio Normara 15, La Playa; per hr €2.75; ☎ 10.30am-3pm & 5-11pm Mon-Fri, 5-11pm Sat & Sun)

Cibern@tika (☎ 922 80 61 71; Calle Vueltas, Vueltas; per hr €2.50; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat)

Cyber Dragon (☎ 922 80 70 29; Calle Vueltas, Vueltas; per hr €3.50; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-8pm Sun) This groovy music store also offers high-speed internet.

LAUNDRY

La Gaviota (☎ 629 90 22 87; La Playa s/n; wash, dry & fold per 1kg €2; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat)

POST

Post office (☎ 922 80 57 30; Urbanización La Palomera)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist kiosk (☎ 922 80 50 58; Carretera General; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) This small wooden hut is off the main highway on your right as you head towards Vueltas.

Tourist office (☎ 922 80 54 58; www.gomera-island.com; Calle Lepanto, La Playa; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Jun, 9am-2pm Mon-Sat Jul-Sep) Pick up a map and local information here.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

La Paloma (☎ 922 80 60 43; www.gomera.de; Calle Absinia, Vueltas; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Fri) Helpful, though aimed at German travellers, this agency offers assistance with air fares, ferry tickets and other travel needs.

Activities

Though the lush valley itself is perhaps the best the Valle Gran Rey has to offer, most people head straight to the shore. The beaches here are among La Gomera's prettiest, with calm waters and lapping waves. The beach at La Playa is a long, sandy thing, with bars and a waterside boardwalk nearby. Heading towards Vueltas, the Charco del Conde is a quieter place to splash and swim. The Playa de las Vueltas, beside the port, is the least agreeable of the bunch.

Scuba enthusiasts can head to **Fisch & Co Centro de Buceo** (☎ 922 80 56 88; www.fischco.com; Calle Lepanto, La Playa; dive with equipment €38; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Sat-Thu), which offers dives throughout the day.

The motorboat **Tina** (☎ 922 80 58 85; www.excursiones-tina.com; adult €33-40, child €20) cruises daily around the south and west of the island, towards Los Órganos (p200), a weird rock

formation visible only from the water. The day-long trip could include some spontaneous whale or dolphin watching, as well as a little tuna fishing.

To learn more about whales and dolphins, contact the **Club de Mar** (☎ 922 80 57 59; www.club-de-mar.org; Puerto de Vueltas; boat cruises €32; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat). This is both a marine-life investigation centre and a whale-watching outfitter with daily cruises that normally include the presence of a marine biologist, so that you can truly learn something about local marine life. All the cruises set sail from the Vueltas port.

Landlubbers will be pleased to know that Valle Gran Rey is the starting point for an endless array of hikes and cycling trips. Outfitters are listed on p188.

Sleeping BUDGET

Apartamentos Playa-Mar (☎ 690 21 66 60; La Playa; studio/1-bedroom apt €25/40) Choose either a simple studio apartment or a larger one, with balcony looking onto the ocean and a big bedroom. Both are within spitting distance of the beach and the waterfront promenade, so light sleepers should bring earplugs.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Gran Rey (☎ 922 80 58 59; www.hotel-granrey.com; La Puntilla; s €46-73, d €65-96; (P) (♿) (♿)) The area's only major hotel, it's just across from the beach. Rooms here are smallish but comfortable, with tiled floors, nice linen, a marbled bathroom and gorgeous views of either the mountains or (for a little extra) the ocean.

Apartamentos Las Mozas (☎ 922 80 61 01; lasmozas@telefonica.net; Carretera Playa del Inglés s/n, La Playa; 2-person apt €41-61, 4-person apt €65-81; (P) (♿)) Right on the waterfront in La Playa, these spic-n-span apartments aren't what you'd call stylish, but with views like these who needs adornment? The spacious kitchenette, simple wooden furnishings and lots of light make this a cheery place.

Apartamentos Laurisilva (☎ 902 50 06 69; www.solvasa.com; Borbalán s/n; 2-person apt €46-70; (♿)) A total of 108 tidy townhouse-style apartments are clustered around a pretty pool and garden area in this holiday complex several blocks inland from the waterfront. You might want to brush up on your German before you strike up a conversation with the families lounging around the pool.

Apartamentos Tres Palmeras (☎ 922 80 57 93; www.trespalmeras.com; La Playa; apt €48-54; (P) ♿) A modern-looking hotel complex with a salt-water pool, apartments here have balconies (most with ocean views) and are spacious and well-equipped.

Finca Argayall (☎ 922 69 70 08; Valle Gran Rey waterfront; studio apt per person incl 3 veg €65-80, r €48-76, huts €48-65, tents €42-53) This is no ordinary hotel. A rural estate a 15-minute stroll outside the tourist bustle of Valle Gran Rey, the *finca* (rural estate) is a tranquil ocean-side centre focused on communal, alternative and ecofriendly living. For lodging, guests can choose between modern rooms and apartments or the more rustic 'garden huts' and 'luxury tents'. Most staff live on the premises, offering near-daily meditation, yoga, massage and other therapies and activities. Organic food comes from the *finca's* own garden.

Apartamentos Baja del Secreto (☎ 922 80 57 09; www.bajadelsecreto.com; Avenida Marítima s/n, Charco del Conde; 2-/3-/4-/5-/6-person apt €51/57/64/71/82; ♿) A charming, fortresslike building in traditional Canarian style, apartments here include fully equipped kitchenette, phone, TV and a generous terrace with a view. The rooftop pool is great, but who needs it when the Charco del Conde is just across the street?

Eating

Absinia (☎ 922 80 58 93; Calle Absinia, Vueltas; mains €6-10; ♿ closed Sun & Jun) A cheery sidewalk terrace is the perfect spot to enjoy the house specialities – *viejas*, tuna fillet with *mojo*, and *papas* with everything.

Restaurante La Isleta (☎ 922 80 61 61; Calle La Playa s/n; mains €6-13) This convincingly Italian eatery serves just what you'd expect – a variety of pasta and pizza dishes with plenty of tomato, basil and oregano. The daily special is sure to please.

Bar-Restaurante El Puerto (☎ 922 80 52 24; Puerto de Vueltas; mains €6-15) Specialising in – what else? – fresh fish, this too-bright (the fluorescent lights lend it a bit of a fast-food air) place by the port is one of the best spots in town to try local delicacies such as grilled *peto* and *medregal* (local fish).

Restaurante El Palmar (☎ 922 80 53 32; Borbalán s/n; mains €8-11) Hidden among banana trees, a stone's throw from the main highway, it would ease to drive right by the Palmar, so keep an

eye out for the road sign. Both the food and the atmosphere are comfy and welcoming. Try the *cazuela* (thick fish stew) and be sure to have a chat with the friendly owner.

Restaurante El Baifo (☎ 922 80 57 75; La Playa; mains €8-14; ♿ closed Fri; (V)) For something different come to this Malaysian-French restaurant, where woks and curries are served in a dining room with touches of Asian décor. Vegetarians will find lots of options, which is something rare around here.

Drinking

Club de Mar (☎ 606 53 91 46; Paseo Las Palmeras, La Playa; ♿ 11pm-5am) Occasional live music, theme nights and dance classes make this one of the liveliest nightlife options on the island.

Tambará Café (☎ 646 51 13 96; Calle Vueltas, Vueltas; ♿ 5pm-1am Thu-Tue; (V)) By day nibble on the vegetarian-friendly tapas menu (€5 to €10) and by night sip cocktails at this friendly bar, where the sound of breaking waves wafts over the breezy terrace.

Bar Cacatua (Calle Vueltas, Vueltas; ♿ 10am-2am) Open all day, this relaxing place serves drinks, salads and sandwiches (€2 to €7) to a mixed crowd. There's a small bar area indoors, and outside is a large, shady patio with a few scattered tables.

Getting There & Away

Bus 1 (€4, 1¼ hours) connects with San Sebastián several times a day and leaves from the bus station located beside the large traffic circle at the entry to the resort. To get to Vallehermoso you can get off at the Las Hayas stop and wait for bus 4 (€5, one hour to Vallehermoso, twice daily Monday to Friday).

The easiest way to move around the southern half of the island is to hop on the **Garajonay Exprés** (☎ 902 34 34 50), a water taxi heading to Playa Santiago (€2.50, 20 minutes, three times daily) and San Sebastián (€3.50, 40 minutes, three times daily). The ferries leave from the port.

Getting Around

If your own two feet can't do the job, **Alofi Rentals** (☎ 922 80 53 53; Vueltas; ♿ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) rents out bikes, scooters and motorcycles.

Call a taxi on ☎ 922 80 50 58. There's a taxi stand near the town hall.

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