



STAR ATTRACTION

It may be best-known for its year-round sunshine, but after dark the Canary Island of Tenerife shines just as brightly

Words: Tristan Rutherford



The Mount Teide National Park has an otherworldly quality, and the observatory is stargazing central

here aren't many places in the world where stargazing takes place by royal appointment. However, last year, the King of Spain – Felipe VI – inaugurated eight giant telescopes at the Mount Teide Observatory,

rendering it the largest solar viewing complex on Earth. The reason for his regal intervention? Few other places marry science and magic in one magnificent landscape like the island of Tenerife. So spectacular are its skies that it's not only royalty that has paid a special visit: even Neil Armstrong and



Buzz Aldrin, the first men to walk on the moon in 1969, have journeyed here, with Armstrong describing the volcanic terrain of the Mount Teide National Park as "the closest thing to the lunar landscape I've ever seen".

For those of a more earthly persuasion, it can be just as eye-opening to visit →

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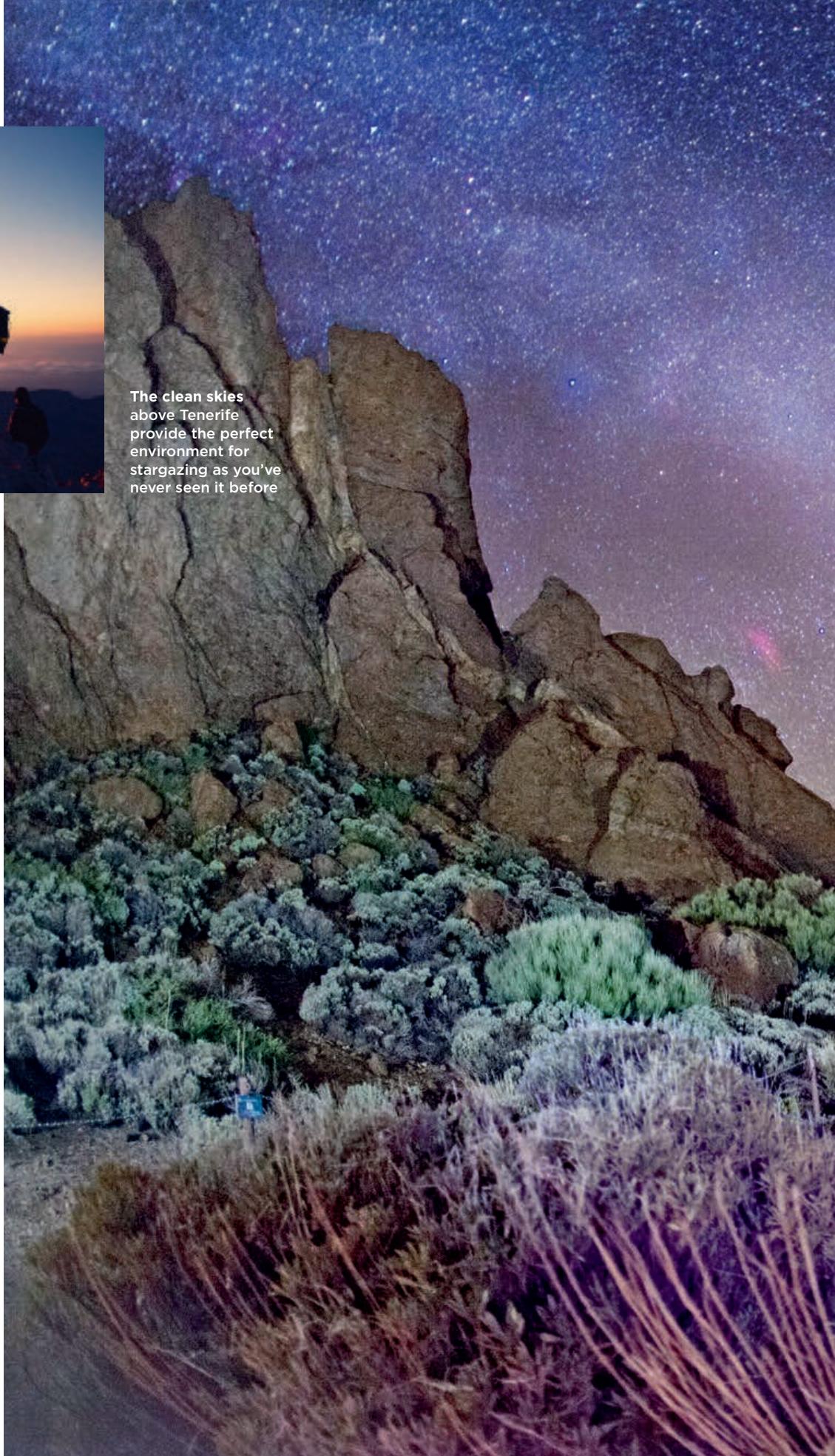


The clean skies above Tenerife provide the perfect environment for stargazing as you've never seen it before

“From Mount Teide it's possible to cover the whole sky visible in the northern hemisphere, plus an important part of the southern hemisphere too”

the largest Canary island and try a spot of stargazing – and thanks to the observatory and comprehensive astronomic tour guides, the only things visitors need bring are a warm jacket and a pair of sunglasses. Sunset is the best time to ride the cable car up Mount Teide, Spain's highest peak. Ancient lava flows and fields of fire-red volcanic dust litter the landscape below, and the view from the 3,718m summit is utterly unique. In 2014 the Starlight Foundation commended Teide as a Starlight Destination, the only UNESCO World Heritage Site to achieve the accolade.

As the light fades and the stars emerge one by one there's a sensation of total isolation, mixed with a universal togetherness. If you're feeling emotional →





THREE ALTERNATIVE TENERIFE ADVENTURES



The waters around Tenerife are so inviting that some dolphin and whale species don't even migrate. Pilot whales are visible alongside 25 other species on a catamaran tour from Puerto Colon on the Costa Adeje.

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At 17km, Cueva del Viento is the longest lava tunnel in Europe. It brims with 27,000 years of history, from its use as a Stone Age burial chamber to the remains of now extinct giant lizards.

cuevadelviento.net



The Masca ravine is one of Tenerife's lesser-known spots. Bizarre geological formations have sculpted a five-hour hiking trail that winds through bamboo, palms and creeks down to a remote Atlantic beach.

mascalosgigantes.com

“To be able to see the Moon, Jupiter, Venus, Mars or Saturn through a telescope is a rare and wonderful experience”



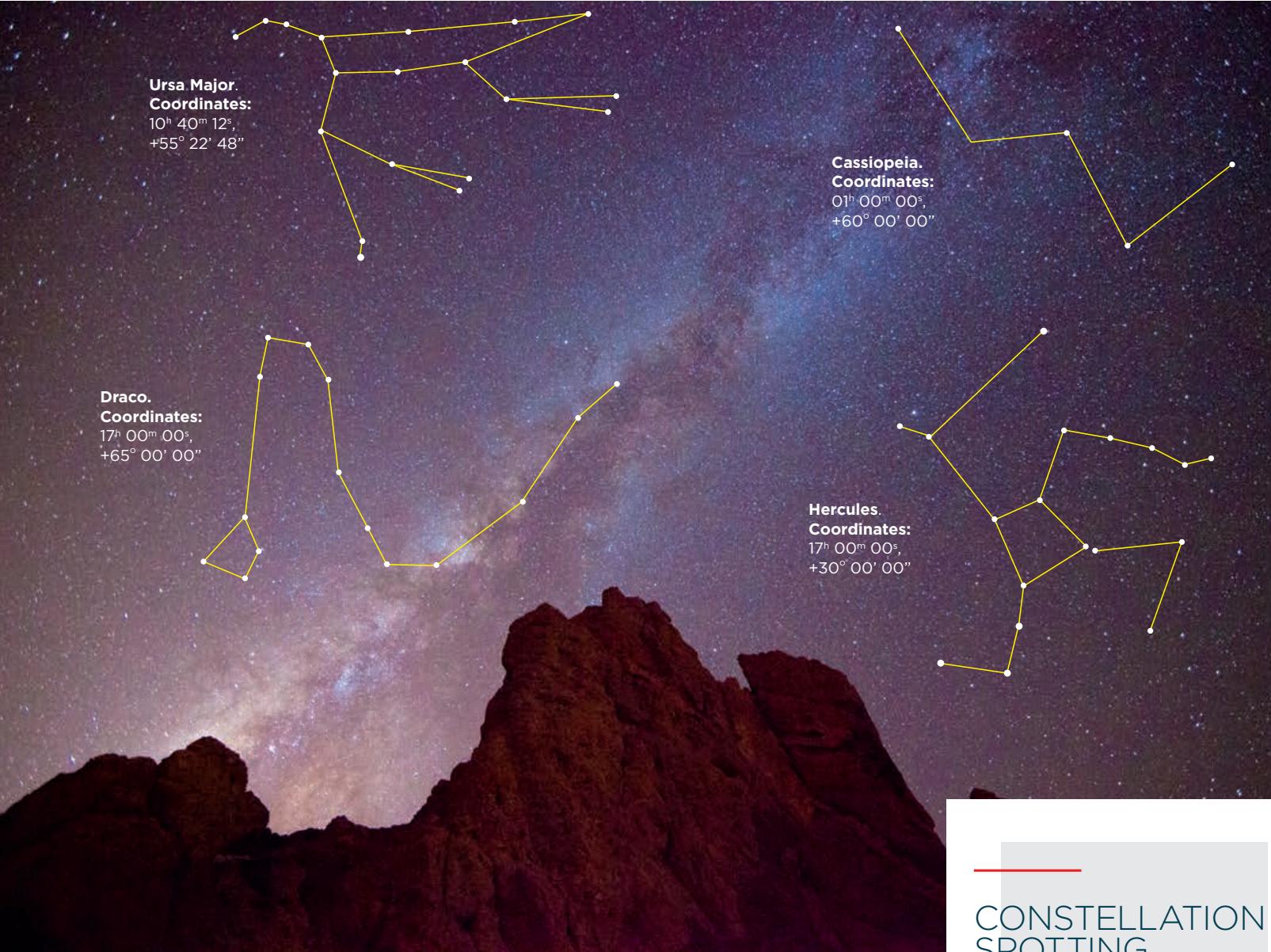
Even before dark, the journey up Mount Teide by cable car is a spectacle. The area was named a Starlight Destination in 2014 by the Starlight Foundation

then Spain's highest public telephone (together with its highest public toilet) are just a short stroll away. And as darkness falls it only gets better. “From Mount Teide it's possible to cover the whole sky visible in the northern hemisphere,” explains Miguel Ángel



Pérez, a Starlight guide who leads astronomical and observatory tours. “Plus an important part of the southern hemisphere too.” Each evening Pérez’s multilingual team of astronomical experts greet guests at the cable car base. These Starlight Foundation-certified guides use powerful laser torches to highlight constellations in the night sky. The 18-starred zodiac sign of Scorpio proves an easy spot. Its shining heart is Antares, the galaxy’s 15th-brightest star, some 600 million light years away. The Milky Way – a solid bar of 100,000 million stars – illuminates the volcanic wilderness en-route.

The silent surrounds of Teide’s cactus scrub only add to the drama of discovery. The guides carefully calibrate a line of →



human-sized telescopes to peer further into the abyss, pointing out the Summer Triangle formed by Vega and the Cygnus constellation. As Mount Teide rises a full 7.5km from the seabed, the mountains on the moon seem almost close enough to touch from this height. Hardy viewers can stargaze for a full three hours, but when hunger strikes they are invited to amble through the fragrant darkness to the cable car station for a Canarian feast of seafood croquettes and baked *queso asado* goats cheese. Dinner is accompanied by sparkling wine from Tenerife's Altos de Trevejos vineyard. At 1,300m it is one of the highest wine

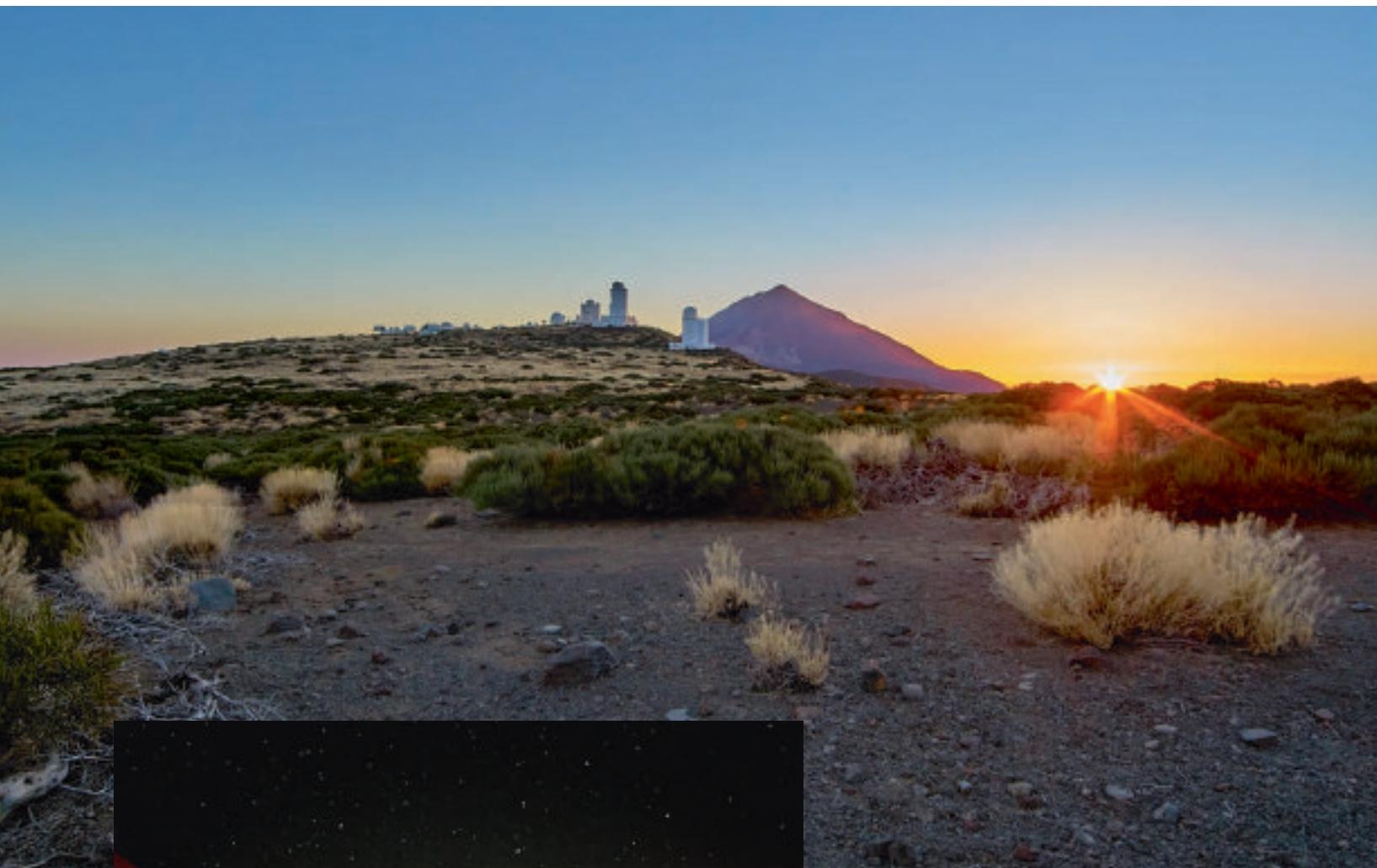
“Here, we are able to reproduce Galileo’s observations from over 400 years ago”

chateaus in Europe.

The scenery is just as spectacular the following morning. At dawn, Teide casts a vast triangular shadow over the ocean, plus the tiny Canarian islands of La Palma, La Gomera and El Hierro in the distance. Despite sharing a latitude →

CONSTELLATION SPOTTING

An impressive 83 of the 88 constellations recognised by the International Astronomical Union are visible from Tenerife. Opposite Ursa Major – the Great Bear – is Cassiopeia, named after a queen who was banished to the night sky for boasting of her beauty. Astride the Milky Way stands Hercules, which is the fifth-largest constellation of all. Draco, the diminutive dragon, roars nearby and can be seen year-round. Thanks to Mount Teide’s height, stargazers may also see the Southern Cross.



The sun sets in the Mount
Teide National Park as keen stargazers make their way to the summit for an evening spotting constellations

with countries like Iran and Mexico, Tenerife's peak is snow-capped several months a year.

Back down the mountain, it's a 20-minute drive from the cable car station to the Teide Observatory visitor's centre. The route meanders through volcanic badlands strewn with blown craters, flowering cactus and red rock outcrops that whistle in the wind. Movies

like *Clash of the Titans* and *One Million Years B.C.* were filmed in this unearthly spot thanks to its Martian-like landscape, and the domed white telescopes of the Teide Observatory rise like alien vessels on a forbidden planet. The Sky Law passed by the Spanish government in 1988 ensures that radio-electrical imbalances, artificial light and overflies are kept to an absolute minimum in this magical corner of the Canaries. Along with Chile and Hawaii, it's the best star-spotting place on Earth.

"To be able to see objects such as the Moon, Jupiter, Venus, Mars or Saturn through the eyepiece of a telescope is a rare and wonderful experience," says Alfred Rosenberg from the Canary Islands Institute of Astrophysics, who works inside the Teide Observatory. →

Thanks to the Sky

Law, artificial light is kept to a minimum. And at dawn, Teide's shadow stretches over the ocean (right)

“What you see is unique. It offers a direct view of the sun through a dedicated solar telescope”

“Here, we are able to reproduce Galileo’s observations from over 400 years ago”. The guided walking tour leads to the IAC 80 Telescope, which was the piece of equipment that first revealed that the sun has its own frequency that beats, like a heart, every five minutes. The first brown dwarf – a substellar object that floats freely in space – was also discovered here, and was subsequently named Tiede-1.

Tours then lead on to THEMIS, the world’s third-largest solar telescope. Professor Stephen Hawking himself has peeped through its lens in recent years, and observatory visitors can take a look too. “What you see is unique,” continues Rosenberg. “It offers a direct view of the sun through a dedicated solar telescope.” That means you can gaze into the very same veritable ball of fire that blesses Tenerife with 4,800 hours of sunshine each year, making it the sunniest spot in the whole of Europe. And it’s just as incredible to experience it up here as it is on the beach. ■

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