

By Laura Miller

AS WE come in to land at Fuerteventura's airport, I'm intrigued by what's in store. From the air, it looks barren: arid, rust-coloured, rocky and mountainous, with the occasional pyramid-shaped peak.

Martian landscapes come to mind, which seems at odds with this popular holiday island's promise of golden beaches and turquoise waters. But as I'm to discover, Fuerteventura's scenic diversity means it appeals to a range of people.

Surfers and parasailers take advantage of the island's strong winds and rolling Atlantic waves; nature lovers come to spot barbary falcons, Egyptian vultures and the ubiquitous chipmunks; hikers and cyclists follow craggy trails through stony terrain; and, yes, winter sun-seekers who don't do much at all.

Oh, and the A-list film stars.

Over the past decade, Fuerteventura has been used as a filming location for some big-budget movies. Think Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods And Kings*, starring Christian Bale, as well as Brad Pitt in Marion Cotillard's Second World War drama *Allied*, where the island doubled as North Africa.

Plenty of these exalted actors checked in to a popular hotel during filming – which just happens to be where I'm staying.

A few years ago, Bahia Real Resort & Spa was dubbed as 'el hotel de las estrellas', or 'the hotel of the stars'. It's a 242-roomed, honey-hued building which sits along a stretch of sand on the north-east tip of the island in the seaside town of Corralejo.

Hopefully Pitt and the gang were just as impressed as I am with its stylish bars and restaurants, a well-equipped spa and wellness area, and a beautiful outdoor pool set amid lush trees and plants.

YOU can dine on anything from high-end sushi to delicious local cuisine. Happily, for this carb-lover, this includes the island's signature dish of *papas arrugadas* – small, skin-on boiled potatoes, served with garlicky *mojo rojo* dipping sauce, as well as fresh fish.

And now, thanks to British Airways' first, and newly launched, route from Gatwick, it's easier than ever to get here.

I'm keen to understand the island's history and geology, and set off by car through the twisty, precipitous roads that wind through the interior and along the steep, dusky hills to meet Antonio Gallardo, director of the Fuerteventura Biosphere Reserve.

Because of its diverse ecosystems and marine life – from dolphins to turtles – the island was given Unesco recognition in 2009.

We meet outside the small village of Vega de Rio Palmas to start the Barranco de la Penitas walking

trail, which follows the bed of its long-dried-up namesake Palm River.

'Fuerteventura is the oldest of the Canary Islands,' says Gallardo. 'The landscapes were formed by volcanic activity up to 30million years ago.' The 'newest' part, it transpires, is in the north, where volcanoes last erupted a mere 50,000 years ago. And the island's hot climate is

because it's closer to Africa than to Spain.

Fuerteventura, he adds, is also one of three designated Starlight Reserves in the Canaries because of its lack of light pollution. The best



**CLAIM TO FAME:** The landscape ranges from bright flora, left, to dramatic crags, top. Below: One of its many resident chipmunks

time for gazing is between January and March.

After our walk we drive south to the fishing village of Ajuy, into whose rugged coastline are deep caves. Hidden behind a headland is a natural stone arch at the ocean's edge called Arco del Jurado.

Then there's another contrast, as Gallardo steers us to a path lined with towering palm trees. It leads to Madre del Agua, the tributary of a bubbling natural spring covered in bright green algae – something rare on this island where most usable water has to be desalinated.

The next day I head for the Calderon Hondo,

a perfectly circular and long dormant volcanic crater which has a depth of 230ft. The wind whips around me as I scale the slippery stone, but the views are sensational – rolling red mountains and cone-shaped hills, with the ocean just beyond.

I choose the ocean road back to the hotel, driving through the wind-blasted dunes of Parque Natural de Corralejo.

Legions of surfers and parasailers are gathered along the shore to take advantage of the conditions. It's a beautifully wild, untamed scene. Celebrities may have come here, but the real star of the show is Fuerteventura itself.

●Gatwick to Fuerteventura from £53 one-way ([ba.com](http://ba.com)). British Airways Holidays offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Bahia Real Resort & Spa from £1,559pp, for January 2024, including return flights from Gatwick, checked bag in the hold and car hire ([ba.com/fuerteventura](http://ba.com/fuerteventura)). For more information, go to [visitfuerteventura.com](http://visitfuerteventura.com).



# Star quality

## A pastel parade to bring some winter cheer

THE hexagon-shaped pill box has long been stripped of its weaponry. Gazing through the narrow slits in the weathered concrete, I find myself looking, not at potential German invaders, but at a lost Essex that feels light years removed from brassy Southend. 'If you keep to the dyke you'll be alright,' said a character in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows And Amazons* series. 'But the saltings is treacherous... I've lost more'n one pair of boots myself.'

The adventure story was set here, amid what is now Hamford Water Nature Reserve, a torn saline ribbon of marshes, islets,



**WALTON ON THE NAZE Essex**

tidal mud flats and pill boxes. Take care in sticking to the paths and be aware of the tidal schedule. But balm is at hand from the wilds in Walton on the Naze. Its pier is one of the more rickety left



standing off Britain's coastline. Today the front section is fenced off but the view is a beauty, taking in the glorious coastline – a humble congregation of pastel-coloured

chalets and a dozen seafront shops and houses.

Walking along Walton's beach takes me to the 'naze' of its name (old English for promontory) –

**COLOUR COLLAGE:** Traditional chalets sit on the Walton on the Naze waterfront

where in 1720 the octagonal Naze Tower was built. Long out of use as a lighthouse, it's now open to anyone who fancies a vertiginous climb where the full panorama of biscuit-coloured cliffs and the marshes is revealed.

The 'Naze' is a blue-skied coastal respite from the grey of winter.

**Where to stay:** Regency House, with great views and breakfasts. Doubles from £90 B&B ([regencyhouse.inn.fan](http://regencyhouse.inn.fan)). The village can be reached from Liverpool Street with return fares from £39. More information at [visitessex.com](http://visitessex.com).

**Rob Crossan**