

# El Hierro

## The Quiet Canary by John Collins.

Mention to people today that you have just been to El Hierro and most will immediately reply 'where's that?'. A few hundred years ago, however, any traveller worth his salt would certainly have known of the smallest Canary Island. From ancient times, when Ptolemy declared El Hierro to be the 'edge of the world', it was considered to be the last point on the 'flat' world, right up to the middle ages. The zero meridian of Longitude was established at Punta Ochilla on the western tip of the island and retained this title right up to the mid-nineteenth century. The Greenwich of it's day, as it were. Since then, however, this beautiful island has slipped quietly into obscurity.

It has even managed to escape the mass development of its neighbours, Tenerife, Lanzarote and Gran Canaria. The mountainous terrain and lack of big beaches has proved to be its saviour. The result is an unspoilt haven on land and sea. A UNESCO biosphere reserve now, its rugged beauty has been recognised and recently protected. Approaching the island after the 4 hour ferry trip from Tenerife, you would not think so. From afar, it appears little more than a rocky, windswept island in the middle of the Atlantic.

Driving away from the ferryport however, closer inspection reveals a unique landscape. Spectacular cliffs falling over 1200 meters and the distorted shapes of lava formations contrast with the green hills of the central plateau. Here, 1500m above sea level, the land is fertile and the small holdings are reminiscent of the west of Ireland - complete with stone walls.



The coasts are rugged and often pounded by strong waves on the north, the direction of the prevailing winds. The south coast on the other hand, in the Mar de las Calmas, or Sea of Calms, offers unrivalled conditions for diving.

For this reason, the village of La Restinga on the southernmost tip of the island tends to be where most diving is based. The sea area here has been a marine reserve since 1996. If you have dived before in Tenerife or Lanzarote, you will find El Hierro a very pleasant surprise.

### First Impressions

I had travelled to El Hierro at short notice, which was well timed as I had just taken delivery of an N10 housing for the F100. Here was an excellent opportunity to give it a run and soak up some winter sunshine to boot.

Despite being virtually



unknown in the diving travel scene, El Hierro is a firmly established favourite among Spanish divers, their best kept secret.

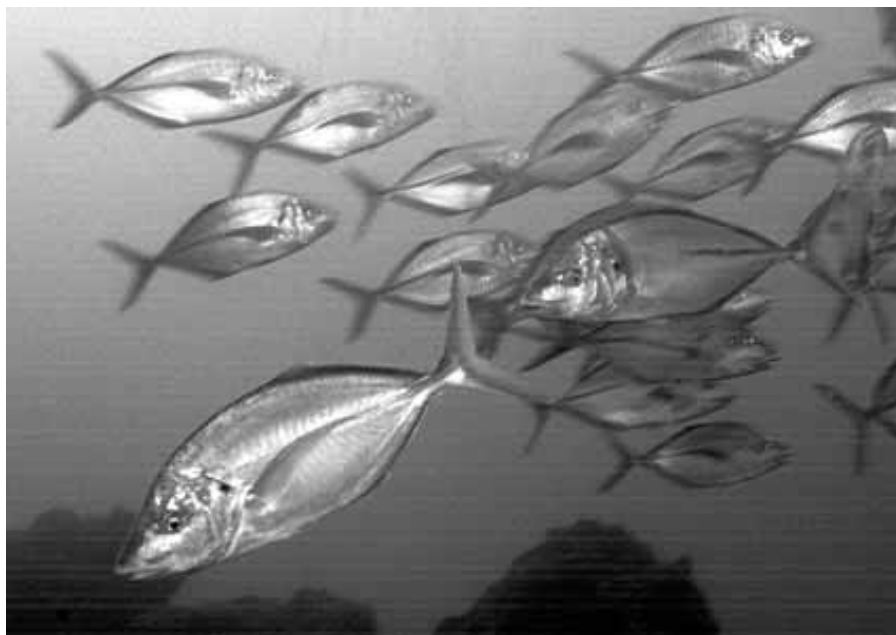
It is the site for the annual underwater photographic championships

[www.openfotosub.com](http://www.openfotosub.com) - a great week in October by all accounts, open to all.

In the water, the first thing you notice is that the water here is a good 2 degrees warmer than say, Lanzarote, at about 23 degrees centigrade (in November). This gives a very 'cosmopolitan' mix of



marine life. There are some fish that are familiar from diving at home, others that you would recognise from the Mediterranean and some tropical critters that you would associate with coral diving. Add some dramatic rock formations, an intense blue water, typically with 30 metre visibility and you have a recipe for some nice diving. There are about 15 dive sites within a 10 minute RIB journey from the small harbour of La Restinga - some are a mere 3 minutes away. Being volcanic islands rising from great ocean depths, there is no continental shelf around these islands and the water within a half of a mile from shore plunges to thousands of metres deep. This means that seeing pelagic species - the big boys - is a real possibility, particularly on the sites further from shore. This diving is adventurous with sheer walls dropping to great depth and strong currents and so recommended for experienced and fit divers. Inshore, the diving is very pleasant, 10 - 30 metre rocky bottoms and very easy going. The rocks themselves are covered in plant life and sponges, giving them a grassy green colour and it is this aspect alone that differentiates El Hierro from coral diving. With so much sunshine a clear water however, the algae grow really well and gives rise to the large range of species to be seen.



### El Bajon

This is the classic offshore site on the southern end of the island. Just half a mile from La Restinga harbour, this pinnacle rises from great depth to just 9m from the surface. There are two permanent moorings set by local dive centres and once the boat is tied up the current is gauged by observing for a few minutes. The currents are oceanic and affected by wind and other variables and so not predictable like tidal streams. Almost always, there will be some water movement, so listening to the dive brief and following the plan is

a must. You might think that when the current is strong, it is not worth diving but it is the current that brings the beasties. On a circuit of El Bajon, you are likely to see large schools of amberjack, tuna and bonito. Occasionally, turtles and manta are seen here.

The trick is to keep an eye on the blue, which is not always easy there is so much happening on the reef itself. Particularly decompressing, the top of the rock is a delight with small fish everywhere, from brightly coloured parrotfish to the strange trumpetfish, more familiar in coral waters. El Bajon is worth at least two dives.



## El Archo

The Arch is a deep dive to 40m. The mooring is in much shallower water (as is the case with many sites), so there is a bit of a swim to get to it.

Pacing your finning will give you better air endurance, so it is worth taking your time rather than racing down to depth. The arch itself is impressive, a stark shape contrasting with the blue background. It is covered in black coral - which appears green underwater - and is generally home to a school of gully jacks. These are large silver fish that just hang out in the shadow of the rock as if sheltering from the sun. The swim back up the reef is very pleasant, finishing the dive in about 6 - 8 metres.

## Baja Bajarones

These are two underwater 'mountains' as the guides call them, a bit like coral bommies in the Red Sea. After a swim from the mooring, you reach 25m and the two pinnacles are easily seen. There is a lot of fish action here, and plenty of moray in their lairs, enjoying some cleaning from small lady scarlet shrimp.

## La Restinga

The inshore waters near the harbour are remarkably good, given where they are. This is largely

due to the fact that some 750 hectares here are a marine reserve. Of the several sites Punta Restinga is one the most enjoyable. These sites are generally the second dive of the day, so not as deep and certainly not as prone to current. You will commonly see grouper from a modest 30cm size to huge sheep size ones. These are very curious and will come to investigate divers. They seem particularly interested in their reflection in the glass dome of camera housings, coming right in until the bounce back ! Other exotic fish more characteristic of the tropics that can be seen here are unicorn fish and porcupine fish, the latter, of course known for blowing up into a ball in defence. It is seriously bad form to try to harrass these fish into doing this. Night diving is possible from the harbour, best done from the last set of steps on the pier. It is a plain sandy bottom but home to lots of critters you are unlikely to see by day.

There are large stingrays, which can give you a bit of spook in the dark, as well as octopus and small sharpnose pufferfish. Watch out for the extra charge for night diving however, as it can be excessive and lazy guides will simply bring you around the boat moorings.

## El Dessierto

Like many of the simple names on the dive sites, The Dessert is aptly named. This the generally the furthest site dived from La Restinga taking about 15 - 20 minutes in the RIB. On hearing the description of this site, I opted to photograph it in black and white, using Agfa Scala film. This produced images very like what this site felt like. You descend a normal rocky bottom to begin with but this soon gives way to a bizzare black sand.

At about 35 metres, the sand lightens again and large colony of garden eels can be seen swaying gently in the food bringing current. Turning to swim back along the rocky reef, you are greeted by a large, very curious grouper who is happy to hang around as long as you are. Along the sand, stingrays and large butterfly rays will occasionally be seen resting, while back in the shallows snake eels were seen by many divers as well as lots of morays.

Great, two dive site.

## Further afield

The best of the sites around La Restinga can be dived in three days. If the sea is calm, a real adventure is to go west to Punta Ochilla (the lighthouse) and further on to Los Roques de Solmar on the Northwest coast.

These are a series of rocky sea stacks and sumerged rocks that attract pelagic animals. Here, you can see Hammerhead and other sharks, turtles, tuna and manta rays. This site has been described as 'THE' best in Europe.

## F100 and Photography Notes

And how did the F100 fare, I hear you ask? Marvellously. Having used the F100 on land for almost 18 months, I was comfortable with its general features. Underwater, it is a joy to use. Focus wise, I now never fit a focus gear. The camera can focus more quickly and positively than I can, despite many years manually focussing F8011s and F901s with all sorts of lenses. With a choice of 5 focus areas, you do not tend to 'bullseye' the focussing. In low light, for example the cave with the gully jacks, I could barely see the fish. Raise the camera, touch the AF button and zip - focussed. I found this aspect of the camera incredible compared to the F90X.

I also found the matrix metering excellent. Some of the shallow sites, in bright sunshine, are very contrasty but frames exposed using matrix were as good as careful spotmetering. One problem I did have was with flare in the dome. I use an 18mm now instead of a 16mm fisheye for extreme wide angle but had a lot of flare using the fisheye dome. So, smaller domes are probably preferable. Also, some of the sites lend themselves to narrower wide angle.

I had some very pleasing results using a favourite land lens, the 35mm F2.

Film wise, 100 speed is perfect for most sites, though I used Multispeed rated at 400 for some of the deeper sites, like the arch.

A day or two exploring the island to photograph topside would not go amiss also, it is a much more varied landscape than the other Canary islands.

### Essential Reading

'Diving in Canaries' by Sergio Hanquet is an indispensable guide to diving El Hierro, as well as the other islands. In many years of dive travel, I don't believe I have seen a better dive guide book anywhere. The photography is superb, there are accurate and comprehensive details of all the sites and detailed descriptions of all the marine life you are likely to encounter. Highly recommended.

Check [www.sergiohanquet.com](http://www.sergiohanquet.com)

for details, the book is easily picked up at a dive centre on Tenerife or El Hierro.

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## Travel Info

Getting to El Hierro requires a little planning but is not difficult. A holiday charter flight to Tenerife is easily arranged through a travel agent here. The ferry from Los Christianos is operated by Trans Mediteraneana and operates several times weekly. Car hire can be arranged locally. There are many apartments to rent in La Restinga, the dive centres are happy to organise this. Eating out is very good and cheap, as is the local beer 'Dorada'.

El Hierro has an excellent web site with all contact details at [www.el-hierro.org](http://www.el-hierro.org).

I travelled with Shane Gray of Scubadive West, one of Ireland's best dive centres. He has been organising escorted trips since October last and these are excellent, particularly for groups.

In typical Scubadive West style, everything is laid on and extremely well planned.

Details at [www.shanegray.com](http://www.shanegray.com)

As the island is not as tourist based as the other Canaries, a little Spanish is essential.