

# MACARONESIA



*Pinus canariensis* and Mount Teide



Lava fields below Teide

Islands invariably possess unique species, their isolation inviting evolution to take a different course to continents that are subjected to different pressures. The Canary Islands chain together with the Azores and Madeira collectively form Macaronesia and they have taken and shaken a mixture of elements and developed a very distinctive flora with many endemic species. And, despite the ravages of mass tourism there are still some fine areas of, sometimes spectacular, wilderness remaining. This is in no small part down to the volcanic nature of the islands, with periodic eruptions and extensive lava flows creating relatively unassailable plant refuges. That said, the iconic dragon trees (*Dracena draco*) of Tenerife have been reduced to mere remnants almost entirely through the extraction of their sap, which necessitated the felling of mature trees. Forests of these magnificent plants can only be seen on remote Socotra, an island off the coast of Somalia (and part of modern-day Yemen). Disparate as this distribution may seem, dragon trees once stretched from Morocco to Arabia. Only relict populations remain in the former.

What we see today is a blend of this ancient flora mixed with elements from mainland Africa and the Mediterranean Basin. The dominant



*Himantoglossum metlesicsianum*





*Euphorbia canariensis*



*Aeonium tabuliforme*



tree is *Pinus canariensis*, unusual in its ability to resprout following fire (a regular occurrence in volcano country). Among a few areas of old lava and pine woods can be found the rare orchid; *Himantoglossum metlesicsianum*, rather similar to the widespread Mediterranean *H. robertianum*. Other orchids include *Gennaria diphylla* (also western Mediterranean) and pretty pink *Orchis canariensis* (similar to *O. olbiensis* of Andalucia). Other Mediterranean elements include *Arbutus canariensis* (akin to *A. andrachne* from the eastern Med), *Lavandula canariensis* and *Erica arborea* (pan-Mediterranean), whilst wetter versants are clothed in laurel forests containing *Laurus azorica* very similar to Mediterranean *L. nobilis* (Bay). To add a little more flavour to the latter it grows with *Ocotea foetens*, a relative of the avocado, the genus common in cloud forests of Costa Rica where it is the main food of the dazzling Resplendent Quetzal!

Another layer of exotic flora is provided by the herbs-turned-shrubs, of which there are many. Again, elements from the Mediterranean and Africa, they now manifest as much larger plants, filling vacant niches in the woody flora. The isolation of islands, means some plants never arrive and thus others take their place. here we find impressive *Sonchus canariensis*, one of a number of jumbo sow-thistles, as well as several extraordinary buglosses such as *Echium acanthocarpum*. The two most famous *Echium* here are red-pink *E. wildpretii* (from the high slopes of 3715-metre Mount Teide) and blue *E. pinanina*, rare



*Aeonium urbicum*



*Aeonium* flowers





*Canarina canariensis*



*Sonchus canariensis*



*Echium acanthocarpum*

in nature but common on the Scilly Islands and other mild gardens where they soar to several metres tall. Elsewhere are daisy bushes of *Argyranthemum frutescens* and *Pericallis cruenta*, the forerunners to florists' margerites and cinerarias respectively.

The final botanical layer is the often-architectural African plants such as various spurges, most strikingly *Euphorbia canariensis*, but others clothe the lava flows and coasts. One of these, *E. berthelotii*, has a doppelganger in *E. arborescens* also alongside dragon trees in far flung Socotra. Among the interesting succulents are many species of *Aeonium*, from *A. tabuliforme* with its dense plates of overlapping leaves to lanky *A. urbicum* and just about every size in between, some forming colonies on cliffs, others filling forest edges or crowding rock crevices. Perhaps the most obvious Africa element is the Canary Island Palm; *Phoenix canariensis*, a common sight across the islands.

One of our favourites is also of African descent, the beautiful coppery-belled *Canarina canariensis*, which scrambles and tumbles around forest edges. It is often bird-pollinated, seducing endemic warblers into attending the flowers and it certainly had enough appeal to lure us to the islands.



*Dracaena draco*



