

Combine the twin vogues of 'eco-tourism' and 'de-stressing' and stay at a yurt or tipi hideaway, says **Will Gethin**. He checks out the best in Andalucia and meets two London couples who have left the rat race to set up retreats

Present tents

VALLE DE VIDA

Meandering through olive groves with panoramic mountain views, a scattering of conical structures rises skyward from a tipi valley.

Having sized up my 21ft tipi — stylish tiled floor; elegant furniture, electricity — I descend a solar-lit pathway for a poolside barbecue with my English hosts, serenaded by crickets and cicadas grinding the night fantastic.

"It's the kind of place we always dreamed of staying in but never found," enthuses osteopath Robi, who opened Valle de Vida with wife Keri last year. "The tipis are close to nature but with all the mod cons and luxuries we like around us."

Luxuries include hydrotherapy tub, steam room, hill-top yoga platform and treatments such as osteopathy, acupuncture and reflexology. Reclining in the hydrotherapy tub after dinner, my body aches dissolve in hot bubbling water as I lose myself in the matrix of stars.

Retreats (yoga, Pilates, mosaic classes) run throughout the year (0034 951 238614, www.valledevida.com; seven nights from £450pp or from £1,000 per group of 10).

Beyond the 18-acre oasis of serenity, the nearby El Chorro gorge offers awe-inspiring scenery, and the El Tintero Campo restaurant in Cartama Estacion seats 1,000, serving exquisite local dishes (Crta Carretera, Churriana-Cartama, Km 2; 0034 952 420 475; three-course meal from £20).

THE HOOPOE YURT HOTEL

Ed and Henrietta Hunt are another English couple who traded the London rat race for back-to-nature wilds, opening this three-hectare bolt hole in the Grazalema mountains, near Ronda, last summer.

Locating the round tents below a mountainside olive grove, I am escorted to an Aladdin's cave in canvas with its own cork-shaded

garden, private bathroom and solar-powered mod cons. Opening shutter doors, light spills through the crowned roof, lined with red velvet. Criss-crossing poles weave lattice walls, encompassing a luxurious double bed, hand-painted Mongolian furnishings and shag-pile rugs strewn over wooden floorboards (0034 952 117 055, www.yurthotel.com; seven nights from £300 for a double yurt).

"The rounded structure feels more natural and liberating," says Ed. "Since I discovered them four years ago, there's been a dramatic yurt revival and we're lucky we got involved from the start."

Yurts started out as tipis in Siberia but the shape changed for ease of travel. Robust, portable and popular with nomads, they have been lived in throughout Asia for centuries.

Over a tantalising three-course dinner al fresco, Henrietta expounds on their environment conservation endeavours, including composting loos and recycling water.

After a good night's deep sleep I am lulled back to consciousness by an ambient dawn symphony of goat bells and cockerels, as shadows of fluttering leaves dance across the translucent walls of my bedroom.

Lounging in hammocks and lazing by the pool, days slip blissfully by. Alternative therapies, massage and yoga classes can be arranged on site.

Local restaurants in Cortes de la Frontera offer quintessential Spanish flavours, and beautiful mountainous countryside awaits exploration — Unseen Andalucia's walking and horse-riding tours come with specialist knowledge of the area (0034 952 153 330, melytigre@erasmas.com).

Ronda, the most famous pueblo blanco with its historic bullring, begs a visit. The Moorish citadel straddles the gargantuan El Tajo gorge, where civil war prisoners jumped to their deaths, as Hemingway's For Whom the Bells Toll recounts. For a gourmet



The wild south: tipis provide accommodation, without a feathered brave in sight, at Valle de Vida and La Semilla, in Spain

feast, try Tragabuches (Calle Jose Aparicio 1; 0034 952 190 291, www.tragabuches.com; £30-£45 taster menu).

LA SEMILLA

Sprawled down the side of a mountain and spread over 2.5 hectares, La Semilla is a nature lover's paradise on

the unspoiled Costa de la Luz: an assortment of wooden cabins, tipis, solar panels and organic vegetable gardens linked by snaking pathways, adorned with exotic flowers and plants.

My tipi stands resplendent — its criss-crossing poles rising like a quiver of fanning arrows — before plummeting valleys of azure and green, extending to the untamed shores of Bolonia. (0034 956 236 753, lasemilla.ourproject.org/index.htm; from £14 pp pn).

"We're raising awareness about sustainable resources," explains Laura, one of three Italian owners who founded La Semilla 12 years ago.

I sunbathe on secluded white-sand coves and soak up the African vibes and labyrinthine streets of surf-Mecca Tarifa, on the southern most tip of Europe — where Africa's Riff mountains twinkle in the distance and Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans collide.

Feast your senses with a fusion meal at Souk (Mar Tireno 64; 0034 956 627 065, www.souk-tarifa.com; three-courses from £12).

The first point of Spain's Moorish invasion in AD711, the Arabesque flavours of Tarifa still pervade, as aptly described by Paul Coelho in *The Alchemist*:

"The wind had brought the Moors, but it had also brought the smell of the desert and of veiled women."

● easyJet has return flights from Gatwick to Malaga from £49 (0871 750 0100, www.easyjet.com).



Comfort in a yurt: Hoopoe's circular tents come with Mongolian furniture (above), luxurious touches and solar-powered mod cons



Will Gethin

INTERNATIONAL TENT-SETTERS

● Aman Resorts' Aman-i-Khas (0800 2255 2626, www.amanresorts.com; from £332pp pn) in India's Ranthambhore National Park has Mogul tents for viewing wildlife.

● Steppes East's Mongolia tour includes ger tents in the Gobi (01285 651010, www.steppeeast.co.uk; 14 nights from £2,250).

● Cornish Tipi Holidays have lakeside tipis near the surf (01208 880 781, www.cornish-tipi-holidays.co.uk; from £315 (seven nights, sleeps 2-3)).

● Canvas Chic offers luxury yurt holidays in the Ardèche, France. The yurts are large handcrafted tents made from oak, ash and natural canvas, with king-size beds, private relaxation areas and fluffy towels. A minimum three-night stay costs from £255 per tent and includes breakfast. www.canvaschic.com.

● Fours Seasons Golden Triangle, in northern Thailand, is a luxury all-inclusive riverside camp of 15 tents with views to the Burmese border. A two-night adventure package with Mekong River excursion costs from £1,338 per tent. www.fourseasons.com.

● Thomson Al Fresco is a new venture from Thomson responding to demand for stylish camping, and is aimed at young couples and families. There are sites in France, Spain, Holland, Italy and Portugal. Seven nights at Les Prairies de la Mer on the Côte d'Azur, in a Rossini mobile that sleeps six, £286. Departing 21 April-11 May; book by 30 April. Call 0870 060 1378, www.thomsonalfresco.com.