



Hilltop hideaway

Football legend Terry Venables and wife Yvette fell in love with the location of Hotel La Escondida, on the threshold of the Font Roja National Park in Spain. Giselle Whiteaker discovers why.

Above: The facade of Hotel La Escondida

Halfway into the taxi ride from Alicante airport on the Spanish coast, I glance through the window to see the motorways have guided us out of the city and onto a narrow road that twists and turns as it snakes its way upwards. Almond and olive trees dig into the sun-baked earth and tiny whitewashed villages tumble into the valleys between khaki mountains. It's late afternoon and the sun is losing power, its white midday light dulled to a warm, golden glow, when we pull into La Escondida; "the hidden one".

The boutique hotel on the doorstep of the Font Roja National Park is hidden in plain sight. The traditionally constructed Moorish building that began life as a hunting lodge in 1881 and was once a hostel is perched on a hilltop, yet somehow its charming, pale-yellow façade melds with its surrounds, as if it has always been there, sitting, waiting for guests to arrive.

"The estate stretches to a ravine over there," says Andrew Butler, a friend of the Venables' family, as he gives me a tour of the property. He points to the middle distance beyond an olive grove "...and just before that white building down there." Circling the main building affords 360-degree views of the 220 acre estate that stretches down the slopes to the flats, framed by a row of green-mantled mountains. Gazing at the vista feels much like surveying a private kingdom. I'm beginning to understand why former England football manager Terry Venables and wife Yvette fell in love with the spot during Terry's days as Manager at Barcelona FC, despite originally seeking a coastal property.

"You have a choice of rooms," says Andrew, guiding me to one of the two freestanding lodges on the edge of the garden. "The décor is Yvette's work," he says, as I admire the wire bookshelf on the wall, the beside tables crafted from logs, the central cushion on the plush bed featuring a deer motif, perhaps as a nod to the heritage of the main building. The rustic elements generate a sense of comfort, of home. This is a place designed for living; a place where you kick your shoes off, flop into one of the oversized armchairs and feel like you've been here before.

The corner room on the first floor of the main building exudes the same welcome, the original stonework, oak beams and hand-painted tiles combining with modern prints, delightful barn-style wooden doors, and thoughtful touches – a postcard of the property sits next to the welcome letter on the bed. Ten suites stretch over two floors, each slightly different. In this room, shuttered windows along one wall overlook the large terrace leading to lawn that stretches to an inviting swimming pool. It's the window on the far end of the room that makes my decision though, with spectacular views of a dramatically craggy mountain through the trees. >>



Top: The rooms boast spectacular views.
Above: The pool sits at the end of the lawn.

By the time evening rolls around, I'm famished, ready to sample the delights of Escondida's kitchen. The Michelin-star trained chef produces an exceptional, ever-changing menu of mouth-watering European dishes that take advantage of seasonal and local produce, including almond and olive oil produced from the spoils of the estate and vegetables from the market garden. The restaurant is open to the public and patrons make their way here from miles around to sample the fare. I'm keen to see if it lives up to its reputation.

I'm so taken by the presentation of the amuse bouche that I forget to listen to the description, instead allowing the flavours of the airy mousse wrapped in cucumber to assail my tongue in a burst of flavour. This heralds the feast to come. The goat cheese and sundried tomato ravioli starter that follows is equally delectable and the braised pork cheek melts in the mouth, with the intriguing addition of piquant pickled wild garlic and rich roasted black pudding. I certainly don't need dessert, but I can't resist the La Escondida chocolate sphere. The delicate chocolate orb in the centre of the bowl melts away under a stream of hot chocolate in a theatrical performance as spellbinding as the flavours are decadent. My only regret is that I won't have time to consume my way through the entire menu during my short stay.

The next morning, as I sit basking in the sunshine on the terrace devouring my late and lazy breakfast of eggs Royale, I think about all I could do here. Should I desire, a horse could be brought to the doorstep for anything from a ride around the property to a half-day trek; bespoke tours are on offer on the plethora of mountain biking, cycling and hiking trails in the vicinity; tee times can be booked at superb golf courses. There's a tennis court, walking in the hills, falconry, archery, paragliding, hunting, village visits, the on-site massage rooms and indoor pool. My eyes focus on the blue shimmer at the end of the lawn. The endless possibilities are pleasing, but today, the pool wins. There's a simple pleasure in doing very little.

As dusk falls, I sit in the restaurant sipping a glass of crisp white wine. Terry and Yvette saunter through the open space, greeting every guest like a friend. They smile and laugh, their relaxed demeanour infectious as they welcome us into this extension of their home.

That's the charm of La Escondida. This is no sniffy, white-glove establishment. It's a place to kick back, unwind, and savour: a true hideaway. ■

For more information about La Escondida see www.hotelescondida.com



Clockwise from left: The home-style comfort of one of the lodges; the Michelin-starred food is superb; the grounds of La Escondida.

For your own slice of Spanish paradise, here are a trio of property picks from Fine & Country Spain.



Vista Alegre, Ibiza, Spain

This modern home is situated in one of the most exclusive urbanisations in Ibiza: Visa Alegre. With 24-hour security, this villa would make the perfect lock-up and leave holiday home.

Spectacular sea views to the south towards Formentera can be enjoyed from many of the rooms and from the pool deck. The property has an innovative design, with six bedrooms, seven bathrooms, a living room, dining room, fully equipped kitchen, several spacious terraces with chill out zones, and a beautiful infinity pool. High attention to detail has been lavished on the property, which comes fully furnished.

Price: 4,500,000€

Fine & Country Spain

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Deiá, Mallorca, Spain

S'Era is a magnificent home that sits in one of Deiá's most sought after areas, Ca L'abat. Surrounded by olive trees, the property enjoys breath-taking views out to the Mediterranean Sea.

With six double bedrooms, including a one bedroom, self-contained guest apartment with a private terrace, this home is wonderful for large families and groups of friends. It is both traditional and luxurious in decor and offers all of the modern comforts, including a large outdoor pool, a wine cellar, and steam and sauna room.

Price: 10,600,000€

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Santa Eulalia Del Río, Ibiza, Spain

The island of Ibiza is known for its world-class bars and nightlife. This magnificent property is tucked away from the lively streets, located near the relaxed village of San Carles. The villa is in an exclusive location and offers spectacular views over the Mediterranean Sea and its surroundings.

With warm and welcoming décor, the property is ideal as a family or holiday home. It features a swimming pool and a tropical garden with lighting, air conditioning and underfloor heating. Below the main deck, there is a gym, jacuzzi and sauna.

Price: 5,250,000€

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