

## TERRY VENABLES

# “Bring on the bookings!” Terry Venables on swapping the football pitch for a Spanish boutique hotel

**On the pitch, Terry Venables would sneer at bookings, but these days the former England football coach accepts them with open arms — by phone, email or in person at reception, reports Richard Way**

**L**ast October Terry (or ‘El Tel’) and wife, Yvette, opened their own boutique hotel, housed in a former hunting lodge and set within a 500-acre estate an hour inland from Alicante. The couple spent at least a year creating their perfect hideaway, which was being used as a rustic 18-room hostel when they bought it almost 20 years ago.

“Back then, we were looking for a place on the coast, and someone suggested we take a look at it as they thought it could make a wonderful house,” Terry told *A Place in the Sun*. “When we saw it, we thought it was lovely, and in such a fantastic location we decided to go for it.

Terry and Yvette first fell for Spain during the mid-1980s, when Terry was coach of Barcelona. Since then, they’ve been making regular trips to the Costa Blanca, and their faces have become especially familiar in the beach resort of Jávea, where Yvette’s mother has a villa.

However, a busy football career, including Terry’s successful stint as England coach, combined with uncertainty over what to do with the hostel and unfavourable market conditions meant that redevelopment plans for the hostel stalled.

“At the time, I was too busy with football to actually do anything with the property,”

continued Terry, who grew up in east London and before becoming a manager was

the first player to represent England at all international levels. “And over the years, the ideas changed as to what we would do with it. Then the crisis hit and the big scheme was not an option, so we decided to turn it into a boutique hotel.”

The “big scheme” refers to Terry’s shortlived master plan for a huge sports resort at the site, which he put forward in 2010. Similar to the internationally acclaimed La Manga in Murcia, it would have included football pitches, tennis courts, a golf course, a hotel and private residences.

As it is, El Tel is more than satisfied with how things have turned out — La Escondida is an idyllic rural bolt-hole, a kilometre from the village of Penàguila and in a stunning location on the edge of the Font Roja national park. Deluxe double rooms there start from £140 per night, including breakfast. Local craftsmen were employed for the restoration, which included bringing back to life original beams, stone walls and floors. The whitewashed bedrooms have been furnished to reflect the natural tones of the countryside.

“We’ve turned it from 18 small rooms to 10 suites, and built two cabins in the woods,” continued El Tel, who is a big fan of tapas. “We have also added a large outdoor pool and completely refurbished our indoor pool and spa rooms. The main hotel is finished, but there are a few bits we need to add in the gardens, including a pergola for weddings and a sheltered area next to the pool.

“If the cabins are a success, we hope to add a few more of these. They’re a bit special, as they are separate from the hotel and have wood-burning stoves and their own gardens, so they give the feeling of really being in the country — very romantic!”

Terry and Yvette are especially proud of the restaurant they have created, which allows for al fresco dining on the terrace. The kitchen is headed by the Michelin-star

trained chef Darren Bunn, who they recruited along with his assistant from one of their favourite restaurants back on the coast. The menu includes simple tapas and Mediterranean dishes, using fruit, vegetables and herbs that are freshly picked from La Escondida’s garden.

It’s often the case that celebrities invest in hotels around the world, but hand over the management to someone else. Not the case with Mr and Mrs Venables. “Yvette runs it,” confirmed Terry, who speaks and understands Spanish well.

“I am obviously involved to a huge extent, too, but she is the one who deals with the managerial side. We used to spend a lot of the year at my mother-in-law’s place in Jávea, but

now we have the hotel we’re here most of the time and a few weeks there. We also spend time in London.”

For guests at La Escondida who tire of the pool and spa, the hotel’s rural location means that walking, fishing, mountain-biking, horse-riding and shooting can all be arranged (part of the new-year celebrations there included falconry). The luckier ones out for a ramble might spot a wild boar, deer, an eagle or even the rare Iberian lynx. Golfers are only a short drive from a selection of courses, but don’t expect to see Terry on the fairway.

“I never had time for golf — four hours is a long time out of a day. I enjoy other pastimes. I really enjoyed writing when I was younger and now I like to walk, read and relax when I am away from the hotel.”

Looking to the future, might Terry be interested in opening another hotel, perhaps in Barcelona, an area he knows well from his three-year spell there, or Australia, another national team he has coached? “One hotel is





enough," he said. "I had a wonderful time in Barcelona, but am very happy now in the peace of the countryside." That's a red card for that idea then, and who can blame him. ☺

Hotelescondida.com

## Any chance of a selfie with the hotel owner?

Celebrities such as El Tel spend much of their career living on room service and out of a suitcase, so it's not surprising many are drawn to hotel ownership once they have the time, money or simply the inclination to pursue a new project. And it comes with plenty of international cachet, too.

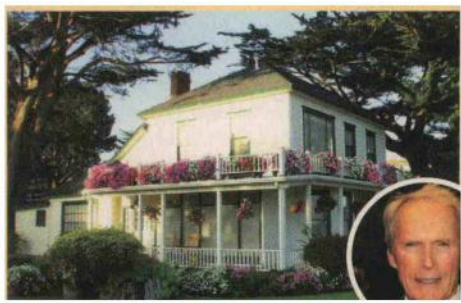
Famous sportsmen who have invested in hotels include the Spanish tennis star Rafael Nadal, who owns two hotels on the Mexican island resort of Cozumel, which he fell in love with from holidays with his other half. Rival tennis player Andy Murray bought Cromlix near to his Scottish hometown of Dunblane, and he and his wife Kim Sears celebrated their marriage at the hotel this spring.

Football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo is reported to have invested some of his prolific earnings in hotels on the island of Porto Santo, little sister to his birthplace of Madeira, and in central Madrid.

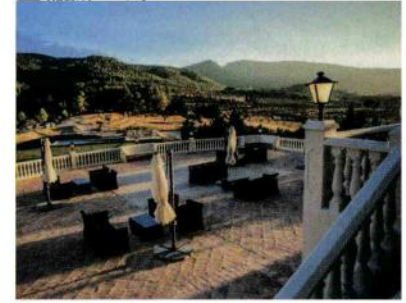
From the world of music, Jim Kerr from the band Simple Minds has swapped Scotland for a life in Sicily, where he owns and runs Hotel Villa Angela, in the coastal resort of Taormina. Still in Italy, Sting rents out his luxury Tuscan villa, Villa Il Palagio. Meanwhile, Chris Blackwell, the record producer and pioneer of Jamaican ska music, owns the GoldenEye hotel and resort in Jamaica, where he spent his childhood and which has connections with Bond creator Ian Fleming.

Fellow entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson's Necker Island resort isn't too far away, in the British Virgin Islands, but the Virgin Group founder's hotel interests don't stop there – he also owns Ulusaba Game Reserve in South Africa and the Kasbah Tamadot hotel in Morocco.

Hollywood stars with hotel interests include Robert De Niro and Richard Gere, who can offer you a bed for the night in New York, Clint Eastwood who owns Mission Ranch Hotel in California, and Olivia Newton-John, the owner of the Gaia Retreat and Spa in Australia.



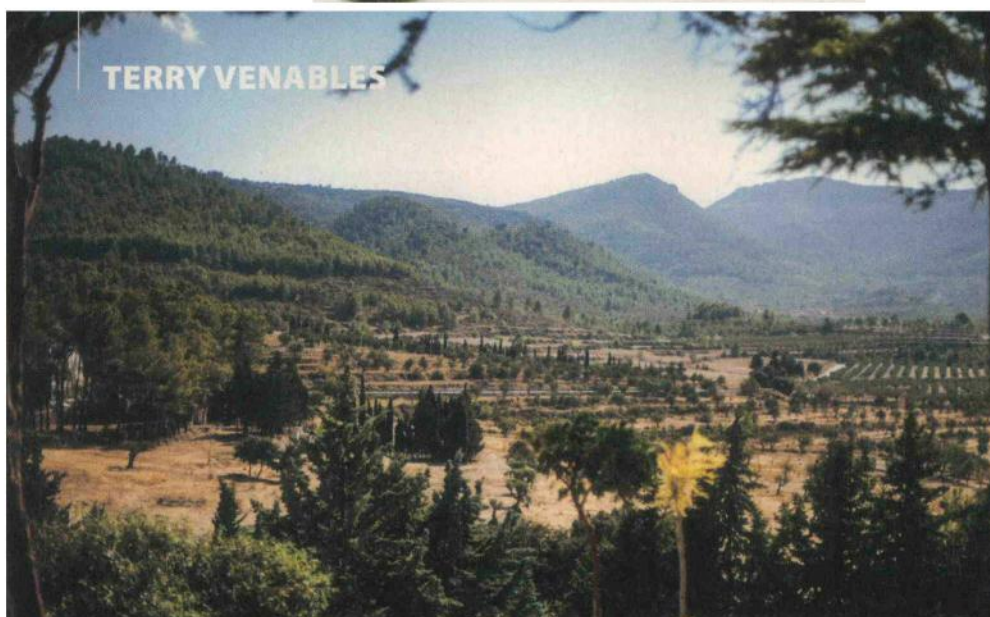
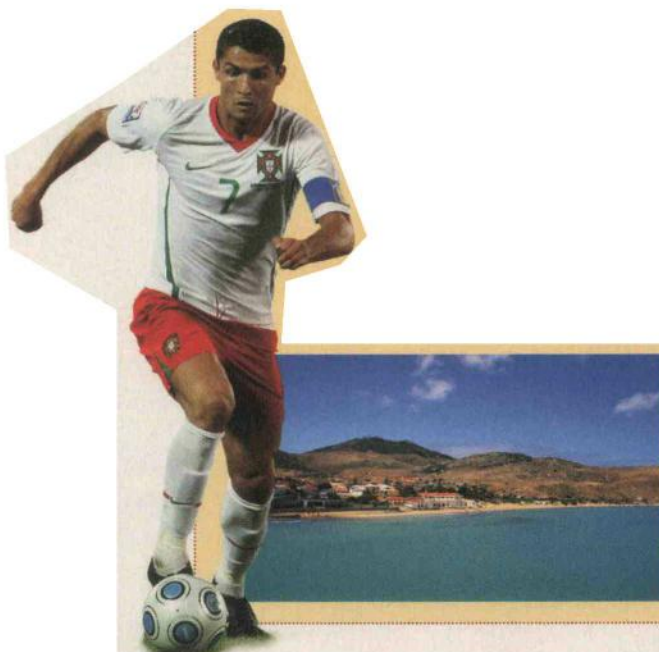
Above, right and below: Terry with a falcon, which featured in new-year celebrations at La Escondida





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**Right and below:**  
Various views of Terry  
and Yvette Venables's  
boutique hotel,  
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