

Spain

# Hotel El Tel — Terry Venables' new hideaway

The former England manager has opened a plush hotel not far from the Costa Blanca. **Tom Chesshyre** gets a first look

**O**n an escarpment facing pine-covered hills and terraces teeming with olive trees, the former England football manager Terry Venables stops in his tracks. "Just listen," he whispers in his distinctive East End rasp.

So we do — and for a while we stand on the bank behind his new hotel, a 40-minute drive northeast of Alicante, admiring the soft orange light blanketing the splendid scenery, almost as though we're observing a minute's silence before a match. All we can hear is the happy twitter of sparrows in a line of cypress trees dropping to a dusty ravine.

Yet we are not far at all from the sun, sand and sangria of the Costa Blanca, about 25 miles from Benidorm. We stroll around the well-kept gardens, passing cacti and lemon trees, as Venables explains that he purchased 1,000 acres in the remote Alicante mountains 20 years ago. He has since sold 500 of them, but has kept the heart of the estate: a grand 1890s manor house next to a well-preserved 13th-century Moorish defensive tower.

For a long time he came here simply to relax. However, now that he is in his seventies and his football days seem over ("I've not retired though ... I've left that door open"), he and his wife, Yvette, have started taking guests in what has become a rustic-chic hotel with ten suites on the edge of the sleepy village of Penaguila.

Though the couple had initially considered a big sports resort, the economic crisis meant financing it was impractical. Instead, they opted for a slick boutique hotel. And La Escondida ("the hideaway") is the result.

Yvette, with designer Hannah Lohan, has mixed stone walls and original beams with furniture shipped in from Kings Road, Chelsea: low-slung armchairs, plush apple-green headboards for beds, mirrors with distressed frames and designer lights. Bathrooms have neat limestone tiles and organic toiletries. Notably, there are no televisions in the bedrooms. "We want to be upmarket. Not for lads coming to watch Sky Sports," Venables says.

It's all a long way from the football stands, and also from past traditions of footballers such as Dixie Dean, Leslie Compton and Frank McLintock running salt-of-the-earth pubs.

The head chef, Darren Bunn, previously worked at Jersey's five-star Longueville Manor and he's about to train at Michel Roux's two-Michelin-starred restaurant Le Gavroche. Tables are spread out on the terracotta-tiled terrace and a ground-floor restaurant. There's also a cosy wooden bar where the maitre d', José, serves marvelous cardamom-flavoured G&Ts.

Beneath the terrace is a tucked-away lounge with plush sofas, leading to a 12m indoor pool with treatment rooms to one side. Beyond the spa is a lawn big enough for a five-a-side kickabout and a 20m outdoor pool.

Who would have thought "El Tel" would have come up with this? Yet it's not Venables' first taste of hospitality: his background includes working at Venners, his parents' former pub in Chingford in Essex, as well as running Scribes West, a private members' club in Kensington in the 1990s.

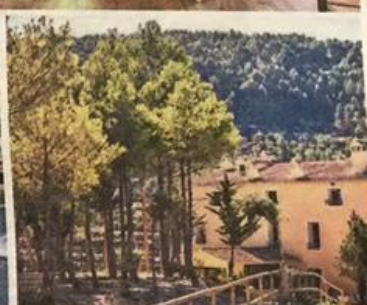
But why turn from football to hotel-keeping now? "I just wanted a different experience," Venables says as he relaxes with a glass of rosé. "I look at older managers and there they are on the side of the pitch while it's pouring with rain, and I'm thinking: 'Why are you doing it?'"

The ten suites are the start. Two Scandinavian-style wood cabins with decks are being finished behind the main building. More of these will come if they prove popular. There are also plans to add rooms by the 13th-century tower.

"Everything is evolving slowly," Yvette says, in her trademark Ray-Ban shades.



Terry Venables and his wife Yvette



It's an amazing 24C in January. "So hot you feel like you're getting brown under your shirt," Venables says. Guests have a strong chance of bumping into the pair, as they intend to spend "around 80 per cent" of their time at La Escondida.

Bunn says that Venables' football training methods rub off: "You've got to keep up good consistency," he keeps saying. "Work hard." His enthusiasm is infectious. And the food is good: modern British cooking with dishes such as scallops and black pudding, leg of lamb, roasted monkfish, and chicken breast with a delicious port jus. One of the other chefs was briefly a trainee at the three-Michelin-starred El Bulli restaurant in Catalonia.

Not everything is so spot-on: a slightly leaky shower, a room heater that did not always switch on, a broken door in the pool's changing room, inconsistent wi-fi ... though these seem to be teething problems.

There's plenty to do, including hiking, mountain-biking, horse-riding, fly-fishing or hunting. The latter is available nearby, and you can watch falconry displays with goshawks catching rabbits. For something less bloodthirsty, Yvette is organising healing breaks overseen by an "energy therapist" in March. It's also just half an hour's drive through the mountains to the breathtaking Moorish castle at Guadalest.

Many make it to Guadalest, as it's easy to reach from the coast, yet not so many go further. Maybe El Tel's smart new hotel will tempt them.



Tom Chesshyre was a guest of La Escondida and Monarch. B&B doubles are from €140 (£110) (00 34 965 513 046, hotelescondida.com). A three-course meal at the restaurant is from about €30. Monarch (monarch.co.uk) has Gatwick-Alicante returns from £49

## UK hotels owned by sports stars

### Hotel Football, Manchester

Opening in March next to Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium, this is run by former Manchester United players Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs. The 138 rooms are spread over ten storeys, with a five-a-side football pitch on the roof. The rooms come with full Sky Sports packages. Café Football serves "Nev's Noodle Pot" (roast chicken, egg noodles, shitake mushrooms and bok choy) and a dish called "Giggsy's" (sausage, mash and onion gravy). **Details B&B doubles are from £126 (hotelfootball.com)**

### Cromlix (Andy's Place), Kinbuck, Perthshire

A clue to the ownership of this plush 15-room hotel is by the entrance: a professional-standard tennis court. Former Wimbledon champion Andy Murray started taking guests at Cromlix — quickly nicknamed "Andy's Place" — last year, though much of the design is down to his mother, Judy, and fiancée, Kim. The hotel is in a 19th-century gothic mansion and has comfy lounges with open fires. **Details B&B doubles are from £250 (01786 822125, cromlix.com)**

### Bishops Hotel, York

The former football player Marco Gabbiadini and his wife, Deborah, run Bishops Hotel in York, which has twice won guest accommodation of the year in the city. Gabbiadini played for Sunderland and Darlington, among other clubs, and his wife says that some guests book rooms "so they can meet Marco

and have a chat about football". Trophies are displayed in one hallway, and there's a shelf of football books. The comfortable rooms are decorated in oatmeal and pale blue.

**Details B&B doubles are from £75 (01904 628000, bishopsyork.co.uk)**

### Pilgrim Country House Hotel, near Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire

This is owned and run by Steve Boyle, a former England and Lions rugby player. It's a fun hotel on a hill with sweeping views of the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons National Park. Boyle has been at the hotel for a decade. Rates are reasonable and the 20 rooms are simply decorated yet smart. It's a great base for walkers, next to the Herefordshire Trail.

**Details B&B doubles are from £100 (01981 540742, pilgrimhotel.co.uk)**

### Snoozebox, various UK locations

Retired Formula 1 racing driver David Coulthard sold his chic hotel in Monte Carlo a few years ago and is now involved in this avant-garde pop-up hotel chain of recycled shipping containers, which can be taken to events such as the British Grand Prix or Glastonbury. The up-and-coming chain's hotel at Silverstone is open year-round. Expect crash pad-style, clean rooms with TVs with sports channels; each can fit two adults and a child.

**Details Doubles with breakfast are from £65 (snoozeboxhotel.co.uk)**