

Over the ensuing days, we sunbathed naked on beautiful unspoilt beaches, swam in the turquoise ocean and spent evenings soaking up the North African vibes and charmed cobbled streets of surf-Mecca Tarifa, which sits opposite the North coast of Africa, just half an hour's boat trip away.

A cavernous Moroccan eatery was to suggest our final destination on this enlightening canvas trail – it was here, browsing a loose copy of *La Chispa* magazine (Andalucia's answer to *Kindred Spirit*), that I chanced upon Valle de Vida, a brand new holistic tipi-retreat in the Pizarra Mountains, just half an hour's drive from Malaga.

Tipi valley

Taking the N340 coastal road east and winding up into the hills, we approached Valle de Vida on a 4km dirt track, meandering through valleys of silver olive groves and panoramic mountain views.

The rustic Andalucian retreat house was nestled in an 18-acre oasis of serenity with eight tipis scattered across the surrounding valley. Our spacious 21-foot tipi was stylishly decked out with

comfortable double bed, tiled floor, elegant furniture, electricity and rock-crystal lights.

Serenaded by crickets and cicadas grinding the night fantastic, we descended a solar-lit pathway connecting all the tipis, and joined our English hosts for a poolside barbeque.

Robi and Keri had long dreamt of starting a new life in Spain and a year ago, their dream finally became reality, as setting off in their 26-year-old camper van to find their ideal home, they landed on Valle de Vida. 'It's the kind of place we always dreamt of staying at but never found,' Keri enthused over dinner. 'The tipis are very close to nature but with all the mod cons and luxuries we aspire to have around us...'

'Like the hydrotherapy tub,' added Robi, 'you'll have to try it later, with the stars gazing down – it's a wonderful romantic experience!'

Other highlights include a steam room, a hilltop yoga platform and a treatment room offering a range of treatments from osteopathy and acupuncture to shiatsu and reflexology.

While principally being run as a retreat house with a variety of retreats running throughout the year – such as yoga, pilates, tai chi and mosaics – the venue is also available for group bookings and

tailor-made retreats of 10-28 people, with yoga instructors, therapists, chef, cleaner and crèche all on hand. There is also the option of staying as B&B guests like myself and Gillie, when space is available.

Robi has run a successful osteopathic practice in London for 12 years and Keri is a qualified beauty therapist. Thanks to the reputation of Robi's practice, retreat bookings have come easily, with the majority of practitioner bookings coming from existing London clients.

After dinner, we followed Robi's advice and took a dip in the hydrotherapy tub, revelling in the warm bubbling water and losing ourselves in the matrix of stars.

When I later mentioned my idea of a yurt and tipi revival, Robi was quick to agree: 'Building regulations have really tightened up lately and consequently about a third of the buildings in Andalucia are illegally built so less permanent structures like tipis and yurts are becoming very popular.'

A mania for canvas

As with so many new discoveries – once awakened, they suddenly appear everywhere ... as if by magic!

Landing at Gatwick and driving directly to the Big Green Gathering in Somerset, the Mendip Hills were alive with yurts and

Valle de Vida, Pizarra Mountains, near Malaga

