

# tip -top tipi

## Modern World

Off road in Andalucia, **Will Gethin** picks up the canvas trail and uncovers a yurt and tipi resurgence.

**a**waking to a dawn chorus, I could hear goat bells, cockerels, crickets and wind rushing through the trees; light spilled through the open shutter doors and shadows of fluttering leaves danced across the translucent canvas walls of our bedroom.

Responding to nature's call, I headed outside to the bathroom, where I watched a golden hue of sunlight eclipse the mountain through a transparent white muslin curtain. A ball of shimmering crystal light rose above the trees and birdsong stole magically into play.

In search of the hidden gems of Andalucia, my girlfriend Gillie and I had veered off the beaten track and headed for the Grazalema mountains south of Ronda (two hours drive from Malaga), where we were eager for our first yurt hotel experience.

Reaching The Hoopoe Yurt Hotel via a cumbersome dirt track, a vision of round white tents crept into view through the trees. Ed Hunt, one of the proprietors, showed us to our living quarters – an exotic Aladdin's cave in canvas with a private garden and bathroom. We opened the shutter doors and light poured through the middle crown of the cavernous ceiling, lined with sumptuous red velvet and fortified with strips of bentwood. Criss-crossing poles wove spherical lattice walls, encompassing a luxuriant double bed, hand-painted Mongolian furnishings and shag pile rugs strewn over wooden floorboards. Our bentwood Afghani yurt was made locally while the straight-poled guest yurt is native Mongolian, made by English yurt-maker Paul King.

Yurts started out as tipis in Siberia but the shape was changed for ease of travel. Robust and portable, they have been lived in for centuries in Asia. Popular with nomadic peoples, they can be permanent dwellings, as unlike tents, they don't require guy ropes, can withstand harsh weather and stay warm if properly insulated.

In Mongolia, yurts accommodate most of the population and the yurt suburbs of its largest city, Ulaan Baatar, contain 50,000 yurts housing nearly half the population. For Mongols, the yurt's circular structure reflects the universe, and the raised crown roof, *tono*, represents the entrance to the upper world, as entered by

La Semilla, Costa de la Luz, near Tarifa

# Ancient Canvas

trancing shamans. Mongols assemble their yurts to be south-facing, so the movement of light and shadow across them reflects the sun's movement across the sky, allowing them to know the time of day.

## Yurt harmony

With his wife Henri, Ed Hunt opened the three-hectare yurt hotel in April 2005. 'The rounded structure feels natural, liberating and it's cosier,' said Ed, explaining the yurt's allure. 'Energy moves in circles and gets stuck in corners, so a circular structure creates a more harmonised centre.'

'Since I discovered them four years ago, there's been a dramatic increase in the number of yurts about – we're lucky to have been involved in this from the beginning.'

Over a mouth-watering three-course dinner al fresco, the Hunts delighted in the eclectic mix of holistic clientele their yurts had attracted: 'A bizarre mix of kung fu masters, reiki masters, shamanic healers, artists, psychotherapists and people interested in complementary health,' Ed beamed, exuberant.

Sleeping deep and rising refreshed for a deliciously nutritious breakfast, we passed the morning reading in a luxurious hammock, immersed in peace and tranquillity.

Ambling into the local village of Cortes de la Frontera for lunch, we roamed the rustic streets and white terrace houses before returning for a dip in the pool and a late-afternoon massage.

Over an evening drink, Henri gave us the low-down on their environment conservation endeavours, which included composting loos, solar power and recycling as much grey water as possible. 'Everything is centred around not wasting,' she explained.

She expounded on the various activities available: alternative healing therapies like reiki can be arranged, as well as massage and yoga classes at a clearing in the woods. Walking tours can be arranged with a local guide, visiting ancient cave paintings and rock pools in the area, and further afield, the unspoilt Costa de La Luz is within striking distance for day trips.

I announced that we would shortly be heading to this fabled coast of light and asked if they could recommend a place to stay. 'La Semilla,' Ed responded, 'a tipi place in the hills above Bolonia, should you wish to continue the canvas trail!'

## Wigwam bam

Traversing the mountains to the south west, we drove to the Costa de La Luz, reached the white sand shores of Bolonia around midday and forked up into the mountains, picking up a sign to La Semilla, as two cone-shaped structures rose out of the sprawling valley beneath us, pointing at the sky.

Reaching a dirt track, we nosed down, and abandoning the car en route, we followed a pathway down the mountain, weaving through exotic flowers and plants. Wooden cabins, tents, a couple of tipis and a caravan were dotted sporadically about the sloping vale. Wind chimes tinkled in the breeze and African beats escaped from outdoor speakers.

“Energy moves in circles + gets stuck in corners so a circular structure creates a more harmonised centre”

Our tipi stood resplendent – its criss-crossing poles rising like a quiver of fanning arrows – before plummeting valleys of azure and green, which extended to the white-washed shores of Bolonia, blurring into the misty ocean. The other tipi is used as a children's play area.

Nomadic Native American Indian tribes were the first to use the tipi – migrating across the plains, pursuing herds of bison, they needed a sturdy dwelling to withstand harsh prairie winds, yet easily collapsible to follow drifting herds.

The tipi was structured to harness the elemental forces of nature – grounded on the earth and reaching for the sky – and its slender cone created light and space for spirit to soar. Prayers were transported ritually by pipe smoke, rising heavenward via the aperture at the crown. Its 15 poles reflected a holistic way of living, with each pole reflecting a spiritual quality, such as love or humility.

La Semilla is a self-sufficient eco-community, an exploration into living in harmony with nature and living off the land. Founded 12 years ago and spread over 2.5 hectares, it provides space for people to live more consciously, pioneering an innovative vision of the future.

## Tip up

'We are trying to raise awareness about sustainable resources, like renewable energy, composting, aquatic plants and recycling water,' explained Laura, one of three Italian founders of La Semilla.

Alternative courses, workshops and talks are held throughout the year, covering healing, ecology and music, and child-focused groups are also becoming a feature.



The Hoopoe, Yurt Hotel, Grazalema Mountains, Near Ronda



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.

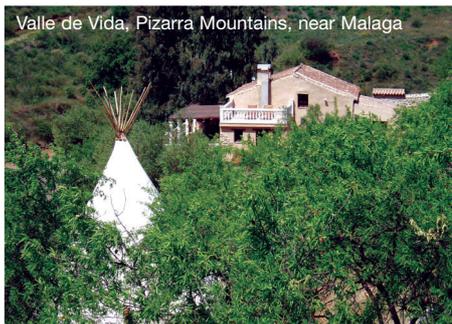
When I later mentioned my idea of a yurt and tipi revival, Robi was quick to agree: 'Building regulations have really tightened up lately and consequently about a third of the buildings in Andalucia are illegally built so less permanent structures like tipis and yurts are becoming very popular.'

## 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

“ everything is centred around not wasting ”



Valle de Vida, Pizarra Mountains, near Malaga



La Semilla, Bolonia



tipis – we were amazed by the sheer number, housing the various festival activities but also accommodating a profusion of happy campers.

Catching up with Somerset yurt-maker Paul King of Woodland Yurts who supplied La Abubilla, I gathered that a number of people in the UK now live in yurts all year round, surviving the winter with the help of wood-burning stoves. 'When I started out in 1991,' he said, 'I was struggling to sell any yurts, and now with at least six yurt makers in the UK, I'm fully booked for the next six months.' Their escalating success suggests this canvas resurgence is more than just a passing fad. ks

## more information

- Andalucia canvas hotel and retreats:  
The Hoopoe Yurt Hotel: [www.yurthotel.com](http://www.yurthotel.com)  
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[info@valledevida.com](mailto:info@valledevida.com) tel: +951 238614.
- UK yurt and tipi manufacturers: Paul King, Woodland Yurts: [www.woodlandyurts.com](http://www.woodlandyurts.com) tel: 01275 879705.  
Albion Canvas: [www.albioncanvas.co.uk](http://www.albioncanvas.co.uk)  
tel: 0845 456 9290.
- UK yurt and tipi holidays: Cornish Tipi Holidays: [www.cornish-tipi-holidays.co.uk](http://www.cornish-tipi-holidays.co.uk) tel: 01208 880781.  
Devon Yurt Holidays: [www.devonyurtholidays.co.uk](http://www.devonyurtholidays.co.uk)  
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