

Spain

The other side of Benidorm

In the stunning Valencian hills just beyond the infamous resort is a stylish new hotel. **Monique Rivalland** checks in

Half-asleep, I have forgotten where I am. I hit a switch next to my bed and the blind — as big as a cinema screen — shoots up to reveal a rugged landscape of mountains, olive trees and distant hamlets. Ah yes, I am in a glass-walled box 20 minutes from, wait for it, Benidorm. Huddled on a Valencian hillside, mine is one of several at a stylish new eco-lodge called Vivood.

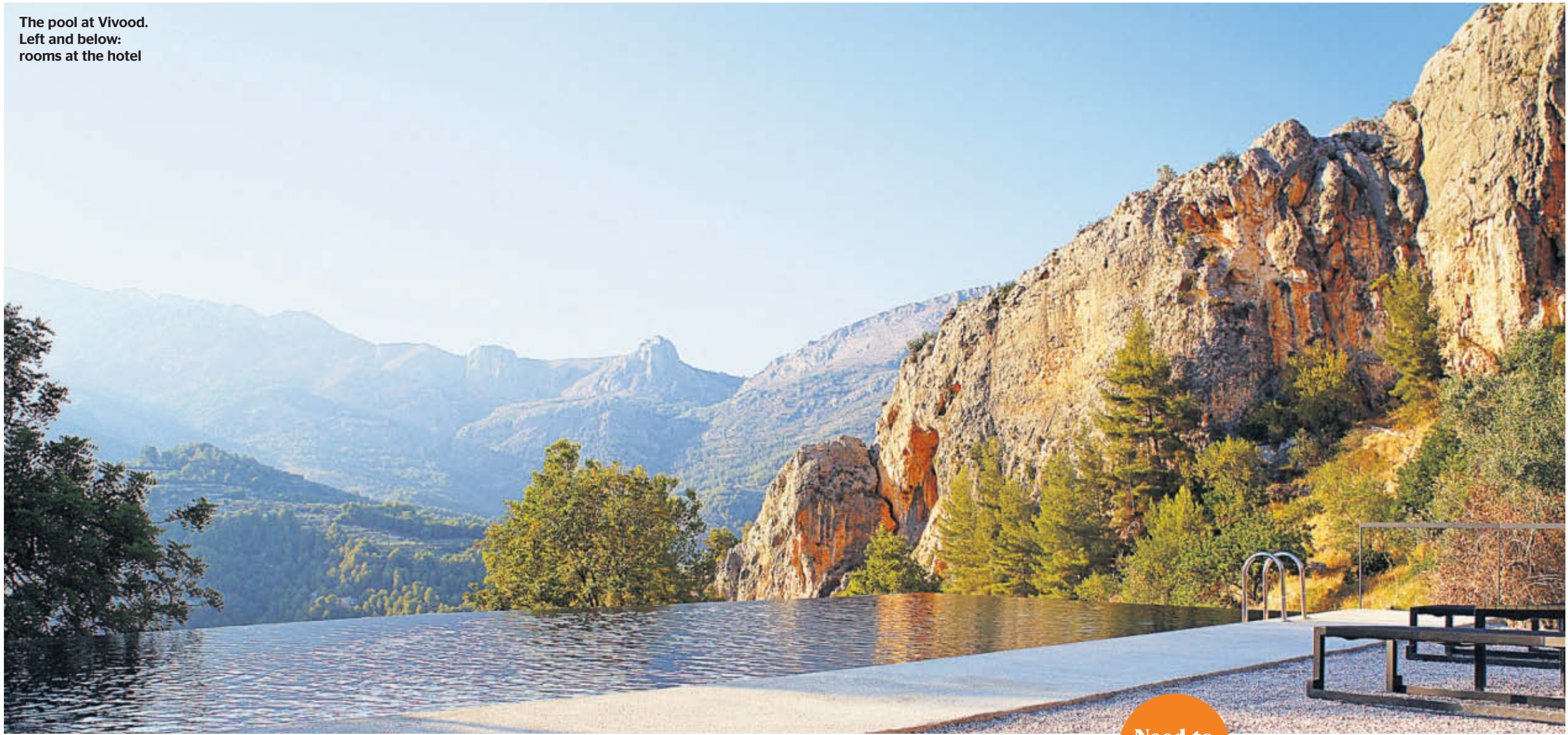
Lying in silence and stillness, with this scene before me, it is difficult to imagine that down the road is the great British watering hole where such TV delights as *Benidorm ER*, a show about rowdy Brits needing their stomachs pumped, are filmed.

To get here, you have to drive through

the city's high-rises and glistening gold towers. A few kilometres farther inland and you loop around a mountain, human existence becoming gradually less apparent, until eventually you arrive at a sleek, black welcome sign for Vivood, stating “Adults Only”. It sounds risqué, but it isn't.

It's more like a chic nature reserve with a smart restaurant, and children just aren't part of the package. The owner, Daniel, a young entrepreneur and architect who had the vision and knowhow to pull it together in a year, tells me when we arrive: “I wanted to make something different. There's nothing like this in the area.” Yes, I say, we noticed.

Built on a slope, the hotel consists of four little avenues of wooden-slatted cabins on stilts. Ours is a handy two-minute walk



The pool at Vivood. Left and below: rooms at the hotel

Need to know

Monique Rivalland was a guest of Vivood Landscape Hotel (00 34 96 631 85 85, vivood.com), which has double rooms from €100 (£70) a night. She travelled with Monarch (0333 0030100, monarch.co.uk), which has return flights to Alicante from £79. Car Rentals (0330 1226426, carrentals.co.uk) offers cars from Alicante airport from £5 a week.

panoramas. After 45 minutes we reach the restaurant Sa Canterella in Tàrbena. The palm-tree-lined entrance gives it an air of grandeur, but it is basic fodder.

Sitting on the terrace, you can take in the surrounding towns, built on slivers of high land, as well as mountain ranges and a glorious view of Benidorm. From this far away, it is a hazy, majestic city skyline. It is to the Valencian shore what Las Vegas is to the Nevada desert — a bizarre, isolated and gaudy city — but strangely alluring.

Before the trip, I thought the location for Vivood was unorthodox — who knew that 20 minutes from the Costa Blanca is an area of extreme natural beauty, where you can head for a salubrious 48-hour escape? Not me.

Just make sure you wake up in a pretty glass box rather than *Benidorm ER*.

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from the green, glass-like infinity pool and restaurant. The rooms are basic and eco in more ways than one. They are constructed entirely of sustainable materials but also feel economic, like prefab housing.

Inside, everything is white — the walls, the bed, the tables, the bathroom — so as not to distract from the glass wall, which can be opened so it looks as if the front of the house has fallen off. All the cabins are positioned strategically so that nakedness is not an issue and the view is as spectacular as it can be.

From my bed I can see an old church in the nearest town, Benimantell — and by town I mean a string of five restaurants (of which more later). To the right is the towering amber and charcoal rock that presides over the hotel. It is magnificent and wouldn't look out of place in Yosemite.

Eventually, we get out of bed and head into the wilderness after breakfast by the pool, of course. The hotel sits in 84,000 sq m of countryside and has its own walking route. It's an easy downhill start, which leads us past lavender, honeysuckle, streams, caves and overgrown bridges. Aside from our feet crunching on fallen pine needles and the soft sound of trickling water, it is blissfully quiet.

At the bottom, Guadalest reservoir emerges, an astonishing shade of pastel blue. It is surrounded by the crumbling re-

mains of Valencia's Muslim settlements (the prefix “beni”, of Benidorm, Benimantell and the next two nearest towns Beniardà and Benifato, means “sons of” in Arabic). That their land is scattered with ancient architecture is not mentioned by staff at Vivood. They leave it for guests to discover.

Fast-forward about 10,000 years, and the site's most recent incarnation was Benimantell's zoo, frequented by tourists from Alicante and Benidorm. The best suites at the hotel — the ones with private hot tubs — are where the lions used to be penned. It was here in 2003 that a woman had an arm ripped off by a lion; the zoo has since closed.

After two hours, and a difficult slog uphill — past orange groves and almond trees — we arrive in Benimantell and enjoy a cerveza on a sleepy street. Lunch back at the hotel is great value: €18 (£12.60) for the daily menu, which consists of five seasonal courses made from produce grown in the garden or sourced from within 30 minutes of the hotel.

Worn out, we do the done thing and take a siesta back in our box, setting our alarms for 5.30pm so when we wake, our cinema-screen window is displaying an autumnal Spanish sunset. When we emerge from our room at nightfall, the pathways weaving up the slope and through the hotel are lined with hundreds of candles. The big rock is just visible by moonlight and there are thousands of stars. It is stunning.

By this point we are ready to head out again and ask for a dinner recommendation. The unanimous suggestion is Ca Rafel, in Benimantell. This is an authentic, local restaurant, where everyone knows



everyone. There is a continuous stream of holas and hugs and kisses.

Rafel comes to see us. He asks us if we want to “do like the locals” and try four or five of the best tapas dishes. It sounds good, but unfortunately it isn't. It might be the most dated meal I've eaten: three courses of battered food — goat's cheese, then veggie, then shrimp — followed by pineapple slices and chocolate gateau.

However, what it lacks in culinary refinement it makes up for in warmth and fantastic people watching. We swing out the door, drunk on herbero, Rafel's home-made herbal digestivo, and shout “buenas noches” on our way.

Autumn and spring are good times to visit Vivood. During the day the air is warm, not hot, but it is pleasingly chilly at night. Returning to your box and turning on the super hi-tech heating, you feel as though your little home is glowing red on the hillside. Outside is black but for the twinkle of villages.

The next day we explore the area, taking a very bendy road trip. If you can stomach it, you will be rewarded with some glorious

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