

# Travels With My Cocker

A camera, a cocker (or two) and a motorhome called Brian



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Andy Davies

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**by Andy Davies**

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*Yes, it looks like butter wouldn't melt but without this pair I'd probably have nothing to write about*

# Acknowledgements

How lucky am I? Not many people get the opportunity to travel as much as I have this year, and to do so with my wife Tracey as my sidekick has been a bonus. What started out as a few jaunts away, simply for pleasure, has resulted in my ramblings and photographs being committed to print in this rather splendid title.

Ever since the idea of documenting our travels was first discussed, Trace has been on-board all the way. I'd like to thank her for her patience and support - from spending hours alone reading in the motorhome whilst I was off taking photographs, to encouraging me to write the text and put the whole thing together when we returned home. It's not easy to finish an undertaking of this magnitude and there have been times when I've been overwhelmed by the amount of work involved. She was always there - offering me a choice of either soldiering on or a long list of chores around the house as an alternative!

Thanks must also go to my good friend, John Abraham. He enthusiastically offered to proofread and edit thousands of words whilst encouraging me to keep going when I wanted to give up. Easy for him, he wasn't doing the writing, but without his superior knowledge of the English language, particularly spelling and punctuation, this book would have been very different indeed!

Another person deserving of thanks is Russell Prothero. He's the man responsible for the superb maps and was always at the end of the phone whenever I needed hand-holding on layout, advice concerning graphic design or the book's overall look.

As I'm handing out thank-yous like sweets, I'd also like to extend one to everybody who followed our haphazard travels online in the regular Facebook posts penned every evening whilst we were away. The blogs have formed the basis of this volume and every comment and 'like' has, in some small way, helped to get this book written (especially comments like 'You should write a book').

Most of the photographs within these pages I've taken myself, however, there are a few exceptions and I would like to show my appreciation to the photographers who allowed me to use their work. Many thanks go to Julie Buckley for the Bodega barrels photograph on page 53, Warners Shows for permission to use the Malvern Show picture on page 13 and Joan Grifols for the Human Towers photo on page 76.

Finally, without the faith of the people listed below this book would not exist. Thank you so much to everyone who contributed to getting it published including: Christian Davies, Bethan Williams, Colette & Paul Williams, Elaine Derrick, John & Julie Southworth, Diane Ovens, Margaret Griffiths, Julie Duffield, Angela & Kevin Shipp, Gwynneth Webber & Rob Frame, Jane Smith, Denise Brawn, Fran & Sian Machado, Trish Greer, Philip Jardine, Sarah Woodward, Diane Bourne, Paul & Jo Hornsby, Ceri Williams, Deb Mellish, Lorraine Gwilliam, Val & Nelson Bellamore, Tania Lawrance, Lee Nicholas, Linda & Doug Hopkins, Peter Duffield, Helen Bailey, Frank Farrell, Tom Curno, Ali McCarthy, Sharon & Simon Rogers, Pat & Tony John, Sabine Funke, Sarah & Phil Davies, Sarah Yeates, Dave & Sue Ledwidge, Julie Williams, Jessica Hornsby, Teresa Davies, Ffion Wiltshire & Ciaran Clarke, Claire & Steve Aldridge, Lainey Fraser, Cerys & Ben Gibbs, Jane & Carl Wiltshire, Beryl & Mick English, Patrick & Annick Barremaecker, Jan & Steve Morgan, Moreen Davies, Jeff & Dinah Wallis, Sarah Davies & Dani Montaña, Sue & Andy Rees, Suzanne & Julian Hackling, John Newman, Rachel & Justin Abraham, Cheryl & Brian Manuel, Suzanne & Darren Mumford, Carron & Sheldon Goold, Rob & Helen Manuel, Arnie Edwards, Alan & Sally Davies, Janine & Matt John, Richard Thomas, Paul & Kat Manuel, Jayne & Byron Blake, Heidi Sachs, Mark & Ann Gater, Dave Brassey, Bob & Thelma Davies, Heather & Charles Greenwood, Gareth & Clare Williams, Andrea Robinson, Paul Turner, Clive Rawlings, Pamela James, Paul & Mo Cheshire, John & Catherine Young, Tony & Rachel Jones, Ian & Sue Bowden, Helen & Steve Marshall, Steve Clayden, Kate Jones, Jo, Rich, Caelan & Iris Wilson, Wayne & Sian Gibson, Steve & Bev McCann, Dave Coulling & Sharon Norris, Graeme McDonald, Jo Snell, Glenys Thomas, Adele Townend, John Cunane, Lydia Barton.



## Preface

Let's start with the bad news. If you're looking for a sophisticated tome with a complicated narrative and intricately woven storyline, this might not be the book for you. The same is true if you want a high octane page-turner with more twists and turns than an Olympic gymnast. You'll find no murders or hijackings within these pages. No tense car chases or scurrilous illicit affairs. In fact, not much drama at all - unless you count the campsite toilets being closed for cleaning at the wrong moment. To be honest, it could be argued there's no higher drama than standing outside a locked toilet door 'crowning' with a wide-eyed panicked expression on your face and, quite literally, nowhere to go. It's the stuff of nightmares, although, many would consider it unworthy of committing to print. Fortunately, I go the extra mile (much to the disdain of my wife).

On the other hand, if you prefer a book with some gentle humour, a sprinkling of geographical information, some nice pictures of dogs and possibly a few places you may want to visit (which are near enough to not break the bank) keep reading as this could be the perfect volume for you.



I have to be truthful and say I never set out to write this book. In fact, I never intended to write anything at all. However, I found myself jotting down notes every evening to document our travels when we first went on the road with our motorhome. This led to a nightly Facebook blog where I would post up photographs of our day's manoeuvres and talk a little of what we'd done and where we'd ended up. I thought it could be informative for other excursionists, passing on information for places to stay, dog-friendly eateries and interesting things to see and do. However, as time went on, people started to like it more for the armchair travel, the photographs and the humour. The factual information became less important and our somewhat unplanned daily meanderings began to take centre stage instead. Having said that, there's still plenty of guidance here for anyone wishing to follow in our wheel tracks, including GPS co-ordinates for all the places we stayed along the way - many of which are free.

Because I've always had an interest in photography and an enthusiasm to try to capture the world around me, you'll also find this book full of images. Many are just 'record' shots hopefully, to help enhance the story of our time on the road but others are more 'creative' for want of a better word. Should you wish to own one of the images portrayed in this title yourself, we can most likely supply it as a print for your home or as a gift for someone else's. Just drop us a line for size options and prices, either on our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/cockertravels](http://www.facebook.com/cockertravels) or at [www.travelswithmycocker.com](http://www.travelswithmycocker.com).

To all the people who encouraged me to write this book, I'm now going to reciprocate by encouraging you to buy it. Any shortfall on your behalf and Brian will have to be sold for scrap, the dogs will both have to be put to sleep and my family will be destitute, forced to survive by eating dust and drinking their own urine (or someone else's). Is that what you want? If not, get your hand in your pocket, you tightwad.

Dedicated to Tamsin Williams  
a unique soul, taken from us far too soon.







## Introduction

I'm not sure when it started, the idea of getting a motorhome and going off to have wild adventures. At our age, the word wild is used rather playfully although, on occasions, the odd game of Uno can get pretty debauched. I think the genesis of the concept came from using our estate car to travel Europe, either skiing in the Alps or to visit my brother in Andalusia. The sense of freedom to stop and go as you please, to change plans or direction on a whim was addictive.

We discovered years ago the package holiday was not for us. Two weeks in the same place is ok if that place happens to be somewhere exciting like New York or Tokyo, but not on a resort somewhere, not Greece or the Costas - without a car, I always felt trapped. The thought of spending the day lying on a sunbed, sizzling like a human rasher of bacon simply didn't appeal. A morning of beach was enough for me, I was always keen to be off exploring by lunchtime.

Years before we had the dogs - Ruby and Stan, Tracey and I would take month long fly-drive holidays in America, clocking up thousands of miles mainly across the Western States. In those days, I was relatively young, thin and thought myself dashing with a second hand Ford Capri (a vehicle incidentally, so terrified of rain, it was inclined to skid off the road at the merest sight of an ominous grey cloud). On these US jaunts, the Santa Ana winds would billow through my copious, long curly hair which, at that time, resided in the anatomically correct position on top of my head. Nowadays, in its place lies a small, pallid circle of exposed skin just yearning to get sunburnt. What curls I have left have slipped south to encircle my crown or retreated completely to the warmer habitat inside my ears and nose only venturing out for strangers to stare at when I've stood too far away from the hair trimmer.



*Back when my hair was longer than my shorts*



*Ruby and Stan in a race for lunch*

Later, post Capri, when the fur-babies came along, we didn't want to leave them behind so would all clamber into the, now upgraded vehicle of choice, to travel through Europe. We'd stop at hotels every night along the way and gradually as these trips proceeded, the car would turn into a sort of mobile kennel. The upholstery undergoing a rather fetching transformation from sleek velour to 100% dog hair during the course of the journey. On special occasions, a meaty fart would emanate from a well-fed cocker spaniel sleeping on the back seat. This would greatly enrich the atmosphere with a unique aroma capable of burning the eyes, scorching the plastic interior and making the most hardened of criminals break down in tears ready to confess. However, as time wore on, the inconvenience of finding hotels on these trips which were both nice and dog-friendly, plus the cost to do so, began to wear thin and I think it was then that the motorhoming idea began to form.

The next step was finding the money and time to buy and use one. I'd reached a stage in my career as a media composer where I was disillusioned with the music industry. Fortunately, I had invested any cash I'd made into property rather than wine, women and the rock n' roll lifestyle of my peers. While most of my colleagues were now skint alcoholics with a combination of the clap and tinnitus, my boringness was paying off. Combining income from the properties with my music royalties, I was making enough to step back from the day job and had some cash stashed away to buy a reliable second-hand camper.



*Doing the day job*



*Trying to decide what type to get*

We went to a few motorhome shows during the summer of 2017 and did a lot of research, narrowing the choice down to a six-metre van conversion with a fixed bed at the rear. We didn't want anything too big nor to have the faff of putting up the billet every evening, so a 'ninja' van that wouldn't look conspicuous and could be parked more or less anywhere was the plan. It was then just a case of waiting for one to come up at the right price.

Unfortunately, even the cheapest was on the cusp of what we wanted to pay. However, I was hoping we might get ourselves a bargain now in September, with summer over, demand would be low and owners could be faced with either selling or possibly paying storage fees for another winter. This was definitely the right time of year to be a buyer.



*The mighty Brian*

Being clueless about the operation of a motorhome we'd set ourselves four days to travel back from Yorkshire in order to try everything out. Thinking ahead, I'd brought along a caravan mains cable and levelling wedges (kindly donated by an ex motor homing neighbour) but not a bottle of Calor gas for the heating and cooking as we didn't know in advance the fittings on the van.

Without gas we would need to use an electrical hookup for the heating system to work and unfortunately, arriving late evening at our first campsite, I struggled in the dark to figure out how to connect the van to the outlet. Eventually, I had to admit defeat even though it was incredibly easy once I'd seen it next morning in the daylight.

Scanning eBay one evening, I came across a 2013 Adria Twin. 12,000 miles, all mod cons and a much better van than the models we'd been looking at from other manufacturers. Perfect for us but way above the price we'd provisionally set. I noticed the reserve wasn't met so put in a stupid offer in the hope of starting the auction. It ended subsequently not making the reserve but the seller contacted me as I was the highest bidder and we agreed, assuming everything checked out with the vehicle, to meet between my offer and the reserve price. A week or two later, after extended phone conversations, various paperwork checks, and a long drive to Middlesbrough for a look, Brian (as we decided to name him) was ours.

*View from the driver's seat*





*Table up - the dining area*

My overriding memory of our first night 'living the dream' was spent freezing our asses off somewhere in the Yorkshire countryside. The dogs, even with their integrated fur coats, were whining in discomfort as the night dragged on. In desperation, I toyed with the idea of getting back up and having another go at sorting out the electrics. However, it was so cold I was worried about keying the side of the van with one of my nipples so restrained myself. Eventually, chinks of light started to appear around the edges of the window blinds and finally, the long ordeal was over.

The following morning, suffering from PTSD and looking more like cesspit than Brad Pitt, I quickly sussed-out the electrical connection which had eluded me in the darkness and everything else slowly fell into place as we made the return journey over the next few days.



Arriving back home, Brian was more or less parked up for the winter, resigned to day trips just to keep the wheels turning as we made plans for a major jaunt to somewhere warm the following spring. Looking back, with only three nights motorhoming experience, we must have been mad to make our first outing a month-long trip to southern Spain. However, that's where the warm sunshine resides in February and I have family there who were eager for us to visit. I also figured it would be a useful refuge if things went horribly wrong mid-trip and we arrived, like Laurel and Hardy, driving nothing more than a smoking chassis after a gas explosion or some similar catastrophe.

Most camper-van journals are glamorised catalogues of free-spirited, tanned hipsters, living the dream with goatee beards and beach-fire singalongs every evening. What follows is our experience: a warts and all daily blog of the three European trips we embarked on during 2018. Take with a pinch of salt the general sardonic tone and gentle cultural stereotyping - it comes from a self-deprecating Welshman and is offered as humour with no malice intended. The result of these three journeys have turned us from camper-van greenhorns to accomplished motorhomers and I hope our adventures carry on for as long as we continue to enjoy them.

*Holiday haircuts all round. Now Ruby just needs her multi-nipple bikini and Stan his budgie smugglers*



# TRIP ONE

*France and Spain*







Tonight's stop - Montreuil-sur-Mer  
N 50° 27' 33" : E 1° 45' 34"  
N 50.459220, E 1.759530



*Eurotunnel provide a nice area for the dogs to let off some steam before making the crossing*

Day 1

Drama before we even leave this green and pleasant land! I fired Brian up a few days ago to get fuel for the big trip and it appears he'd had some sort of brain haemorrhage. The dash lit up like a Christmas tree and 'refer to owners manual' flashed across the central readout! Just what you need four days before undertaking your month-long maiden voyage to foreign climes.

Following a quick trip to the garage, the resident grease-monkey stroked his chin and made that 'this is going to cost you mate' sucking noise before telling us there's nothing much he can do in the short term. He thinks it's something to do with the CPU but said things shouldn't get any worse. Famous last words, let's hope he's right.



*The twins concerned over the amount of warning lights on Brian's dash*

So, we're heading off, nearly to Africa let's not forget, without a speedo; ABS; cruise control or central locking. In the blink of an eye, we've gone from the equivalent of a sophisticated, fairly plush mobile abode to a 1974 Ford Transit used and abused by a pub thrash metal band. Driving it to the Eurotunnel today, I felt a little like a World War Two Lancaster pilot trying to nurse his steed home after being shot to pieces over Cologne. However, we have managed to make the crossing and are about to celebrate with our first van cooked meal on foreign soil.



*All aboard*

There are four of us making the trip, Tracey (my long-suffering wife) our two canine comrades and me. I like to think of Tracey as my PA but in reality we both know she's actually my carer and I'd be lost without her. I'm sure, as we go along, our roles though vague right now will become firmly established. It's already been decided I will do the majority of the driving while Trace will be taking care of all the onboard cooking. As my greatest culinary achievement is salmonella, I'm very happy she's along for the ride. Left to my own devices, I would have to survive on crisps and cornflakes with the occasional McDonald's as a rare sophisticated treat.



*Brian somewhere under the English Channel*



*The motorhome aire at Montreuil-sur-Mer*

The dogs - Ruby and Stan, will earn their keep by providing us with entertainment (which in fairness, they always do) a stress-relieving head to pat in a crisis and a supply of muddy paw prints over any available clean surface. As previously mentioned, they are also capable of contributing an endless quantity of shed dog hair which we are allowed to use in any way we see fit.



Currently, we are parked on the outskirts of what looks like a lovely little town an hour from Calais called Montreuil-sur-Mer. There are about eight parking bays here specifically for motorhomes and as we pulled in this evening, just as it was getting dark, I was relieved to see a few other happy campers already here for moral support on our first night away. I'd heard about these motorhome stopovers before leaving. Most in France are free and many have provisions for emptying your waste and topping up water. Some even have toilets and free electricity. We have a toilet at this one but I shall reserve judgement on it until I've plucked up the courage to go in there. The French have something of a reputation in that department.

Today has been a bit stressful but we're now enjoying the ambience of being in the van, blinds down and music on. I'm writing this whilst watching Tracey rustle up our evening meal from Brian's little galley. Being here has the atmosphere of camping but without the negative connotations of sitting in a cold, damp field with wood-smoke blowing in your face. Both dogs are sleeping after the excitement of today's new experiences and we're all looking forward to having a mooch around the town tomorrow, including the joys of the Saturday morning market.

*Many of the aires have service points where waste water can be emptied and fresh taken on.  
Some even have free mains hookups*



Montreuil-sur-Mer



Tonight's stop - Broglie  
N 49° 0' 24" : E 0° 31' 50"  
N 49.006940, E 0.530760

**Day 2** Thankfully, today has been much less stressful. We slept in late after a slightly disturbed night. Nothing to do with the aire (the name given to an area specifically reserved for motorhomes) that was actually very quiet, more the noise of the heating coming on and off in the van which I'm sure we just need to get used to.

Montreuil-sur-Mer is a small, interesting French town perched atop three-plus kilometres of impressive fortified walls. The sur-Mer moniker is a bit misleading as it's about fifteen or more kilometres from the sea, quite a walk for an ice cream or a paddle! Apparently, in Roman times, the big blue did run up here for residents to wash their dirty togas in and during the 10th century, Montreuil was a major port before the estuary finally silted over. Victor Hugo, having passed through once, immortalised the town by using it as the setting for 'Les Misérables'. Nowadays, it's very easy to find les misérables all over France, mostly wearing yellow vests and setting things on fire.



*Three kilometres to walk on top of the wall and another three around the base*



*plus plenty of space for the dogs to run*

After breakfast, following the footpath, we walked around the top of the town's fortifications with plenty of off-lead ball throwing for the woofers (ever mindful of the unguarded ten-plus metre drop down the sheer battlement walls). Although the dogs are twins, their characters couldn't be more different. Whilst Ruby is intelligent and playful, she also has a tendency to be anxious, especially in unfamiliar situations. It's a complicated mix which has led us to nickname her Raindog as we're sure she's somewhere on the spectrum. Trust us to have an autistic dog!

Stan, on the other hand, has two states: sleep mode and scrounge mode. He's been genetically gifted a cruel amalgam of a single brain cell and an insatiable appetite. A dangerous combination as he's predisposed to consume almost anything, be it animal, vegetable or even mineral. We constantly have to restrain his spirited, outdoor food-related escapades and if we were ever tempted to supply him with a traditional kennel in the garden, 'eat, sleep, repeat' would be the sign above the door. However, on the plus side, he's easily the nicest dog we've ever owned and I have a special bond with him. He's super chilled, always amenable for a fuss and really, really funny. Even after eight years he still makes us laugh at least once every day.



*A mid-journey doggy stop*



After doggie recreation, there was just time for a quick mosey around the market selling your usual French fare: cheese; bread; berets; onions; pushbikes; etc, before we were off again in a general southerly direction. Although predominantly dry, the weather is too cold to sit outside and enjoy coffee from the various cafes in the square so it makes more sense for us to push on to warmer climes. Montreuil though has proven a great first stop - only an hour from the tunnel, free parking, water, toilets and plenty of places for your dog to run and have fun.

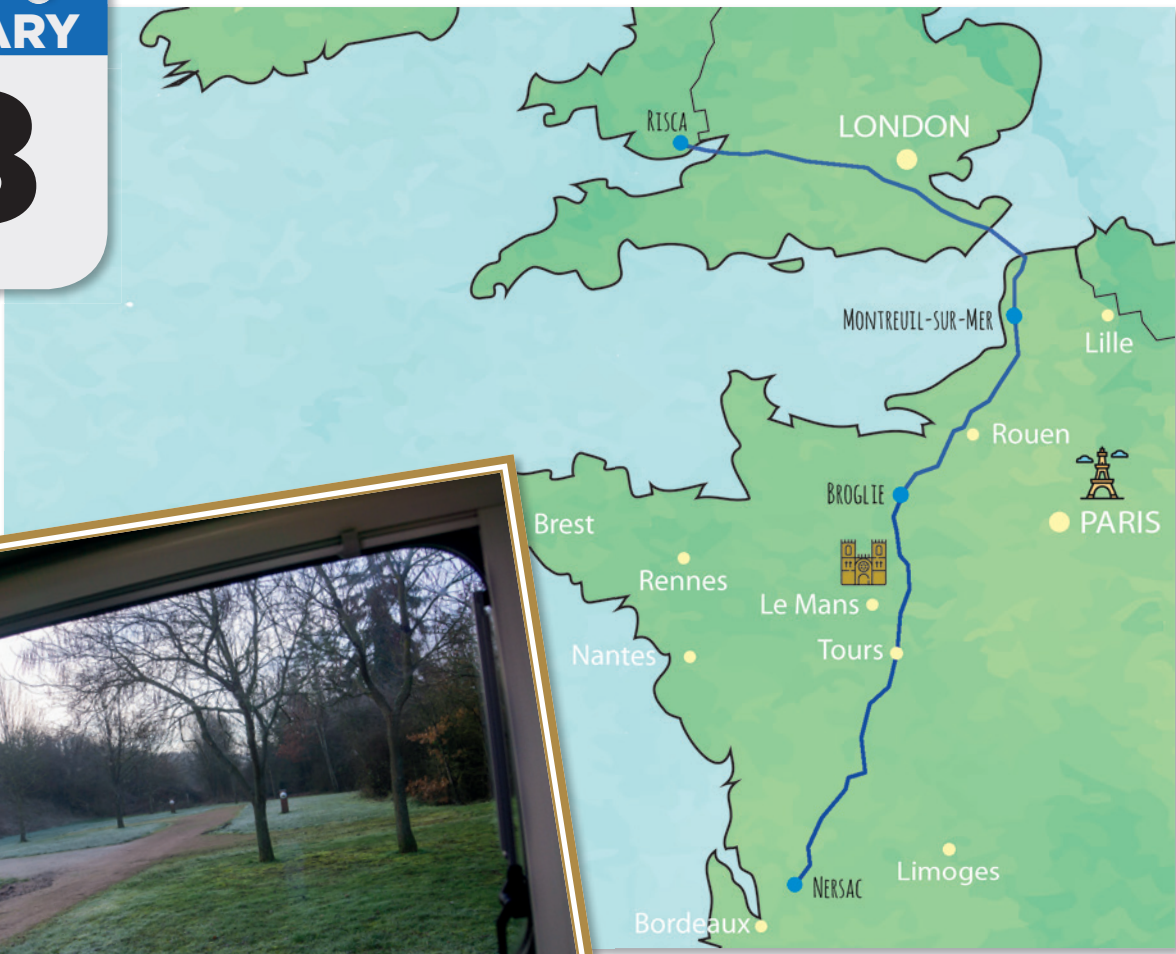
Tonight, as we didn't get moving until well after lunchtime, we've not made much ground and are currently parked up in a place called Broglie just above Le Mans.

*Food from the Saturday market*



*Somewhere between Montreuil and Broglie*





All alone  
somewhere in  
France



Tonight's stop - Nersac  
N 45° 37' 33" : E 0° 2' 59"  
N 45.626020, E 0.049860

### Day 3

Pulling up at the overnight stop last night felt a bit like the movie Deliverance. Darkness was falling and we were the 'only campers in the village' in a quiet, isolated spot away from the main town. Being new to all this, I did have reservations and thought seriously about moving on but eventually decided to brave it out. My imagination started to run riot though and I swear I could hear banjos in the far distance. However, moving off to find a new pitch in the dark would have been a real hassle so we reasoned, apart from rape, torture and a slow, painful lingering death, what's the worst that could happen?

In the light of morning, it turns out Broglie, as the town is known, is another French delight for motorhomers. Again, a free overnight stop with loads of dog walking opportunities courtesy of a disused railway track running directly next to the aire. At the moment, just pulling off the road to park somewhere quiet and sleep seems so weird to us though. We keep thinking someone will try to break in during the night. I guess in time we'll be able to relax when we find we're the sole inhabitants in a dark, empty field but as newbies, it's a bit of a bum-clencher.

A crisp and frosty doggie preamble along the previously mentioned railtrack this morning was interrupted by a contingent of cyclists engaged in some sort of amateur race. On my return, I encountered most of them huddled around a fallen comrade who seemed to be having some sort of heart episode. The ambulance arrived sometime later and the poor chap was whisked away in a hail of sirens. We watched the action, like nosy neighbours, from the comfort of Brian's dinette with a cup of tea and a Hobnob. It was like a Gallic episode of Holby City with muscular legs and padded shorts.

Once the ambulance had disappeared, the remaining riders did what the French do best, put up trestle tables and broke out the wine, pâté and olives. Well, it's what he would have wanted!

After all that excitement, we'd run out of time for a look around the small town of Broglie. The weather had also started to turn and we had a lot of driving to do so we decided to head towards Tours in an attempt to get ahead of it.



*Somewhere else in France*



*Pet Shop Boys album cover?*



*Tonights stop in the grounds of this grand building in Nersac*

Arriving at tonight's stop after dark - it looks like the aire is in the grounds of some sort of walled country estate in the village of Nersac. It's a small settlement about 100km above Bordeaux and we've parked alongside what appears to be a French chateau or something similar. With luck tomorrow, we should be crossing the border and eating our evening meal somewhere on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees.



# Staying Connected

## The World Wide Web

One of the first things we did before setting off was to massively increase the data allowance on our phones. This means we no longer needed to worry about getting cut off while we were away. I also found out how to tether my laptop to my phone. This enables connection to the net via either device from nearly anywhere in Europe and allows us to look at maps or other detailed documents on the larger laptop screen rather than on our phones.



I can't imagine this free-wheeling style of travel without having access to the web. We're always online checking out interesting diversions along the way; looking at online maps; finding the best cafés; restaurants or places to park for the night and using our phones as tour guides when in major cities. How people managed before the web I'll never know. It must have been so much more difficult.

FEBRUARY

19



Tonight's stop - Zumaia  
N 43° 17' 31" : E 2° 14' 51"  
N 43.292210, E 2.247550

Day 4

Yesterday, after driving on and off for most of the day we arrived at our overnight stay in Nersac. It's a tiny French village in lower Normandy and a six hour drive on paper. However, by the time we got going, stopped for food and to stretch our legs along the way, it was getting dark when we finally arrived. Finding the site caused us some problems as we missed the motorhome aire sign and got rerouted through some very narrow country lanes. Eventually, after the scenic detour, we made it and added it to our favourites in the Sat Nav.

The site has a couple of free mains hookups, water and again plenty of open space for the dogs. What's not to like? Unfortunately though, there was only one free parking place available in the middle of half a dozen other motorhomes with an awkward, constricted entry to negotiate and trees on either side. This was my first serious challenge for manoeuvring Brian into a difficult space at night and I've discovered, like many other things, spacial awareness does not improve with advancing years. Just as the Karma Sutra is easy in your twenties, should I be brave enough to attempt the wheelbarrow now it would probably lead to serious injury or even hospitalisation. Feeling somewhat daunted by the current reversing situation it was made even more uncomfortable as I found I was being watched with judgmental eyes from the illuminated interiors of the surrounding vans. The inhabitants looking up from their books, probably in the hope of a little drama which fortunately never came.

This morning, we got chatting to the residents of the neighbouring motorhome, a London couple also making their way south. It's strange how camping and caravanning change the social norms and I was surprised, prior to everyone leaving, to see the lady standing outside her van, engaged in conversation with another neighbour wearing only a dressing gown and a towel wrapped neatly around her head. I bet she doesn't do that back home at number 14, Laurel Lane, Pinner!



*Everybody's gone this morning but chockablock last night*



*A swift walk around the village before heading off*

Later they kindly brought us back fresh croissants from the local bakery for breakfast and like Brits everywhere we indulged in our national obsession of discussing the impending rain and other weather-related topics in accents ranging from a Welsh Guard to the Pearly King and Queen.

A brief perusal of the town and we were heading out once again, down past Bordeaux, squeezing through the traffic bottleneck at Biarritz and crossing the border into Northern Spain.

We have now finally made it to tonight's stop at Zumaia and are parked on the side of a river with about half a dozen other vans. Unfortunately, the rain has followed us down, so with nothing better to do, we're about to dig out our onboard entertainment for the trip: a Sopranos boxset for the newly acquired 12 volt TV/DVD player combo. Having never seen it, it's been brought along as our 'break glass for emergency' time-waster for rainy days. Tomorrow we'll be moving down to central Spain where the weather should start to finally get a little more Mediterranean.



Tonight's stop - Ávila  
N 40° 39' 39" : E 4° 42' 16"  
N 40.660840, E 4.704640

### Day 5

Last night was very wet and windy in the Basque region of Spain. Our trusty app had lead us to yet another free parking spot in the town of Zumata where we joined other Motorhomers in an industrial area alongside a muddy looking river. Not the Ritz I agree, but anywhere dry and warm is a bonus considering the current poor weather conditions. It appears though, on first impressions, Spain does not do motorhoming with the same aplomb as our friends, the French.



Unperturbed, I was looking forward to my first rainy night in the van as I'm a sucker for being wrapped up snug and warm in a storm. However, things took a somewhat unexpected and rather noisy turn when we realised we'd made the rookie error of parking under some trees. My longed-for gentle, pitter-patter turned into the full Phil Collins 'In the air tonight' drum fill once the droplets started to fall in earnest. I did eventually manage to get a good night's sleep, but my dreams were all industrial-machinery related with Japanese Taiko drummers at the controls.

Waking this morning, I was disillusioned to find the continuation of the inclement weather so set off prepared for a wet and miserable dog walk. On disembarking into the drizzle, I was surprised to see a huge, half-built ship rising from the far bank of the river like a rusty block of flats. It's not the sort of thing you expect to see on the Spanish coast but apparently, shipbuilding has been here on the Urola river since 1921 and beginning with wooden boats, they have now launched nearly 400 vessels from this little shipyard.



*It's like the Clyde here*



With rain in for the duration, we decided to take action and head further south in an attempt to outrun it. Sure enough, after a few hours, the scenery changed from green grass to bare red soil, the clouds cleared and the sun appeared, at last, to light our way to the medieval walled city of Ávila.

Situated about 100km northwest of Madrid, the Town of Stones and Saints (as Ávila is known) is a UNESCO World Heritage site and for us, tonight's stopover. The free aire is nothing more than a car park outside the city walls with no facilities but the view is something you don't see every day (unless you live in Ávila of course). After parking up, I quickly scurried away to the outskirts of the city to take some photos as the light was great but fading fast.

*Where's all the grass gone?*



*Part of the city walls at Ávila*

It was unexpectedly close to freezing when I left, so Tracey bravely opted to stay close to the heater in order to prepare the evening's rations. So far the meals she's made onboard have been fabulous. Apart from the odd lunch, we haven't found the need to eat out as she's been enjoying using the little kitchen and comes up with absolutely brilliant food. I'm constantly amazed at what can be achieved with two gas rings, a grill and a talented cook. She's definitely a keeper!



*Van with a view - tonight's hotel*



*Impressive masonry*

# GPS, Sat Nav and old fashioned Maps

## Finding Your Way

Life on the road before GPS was very stressful. We travelled extensively in the States for years, pre sat nav, with Tracey sat in the passenger seat as navigator, map propped up on her lap (normally opened at the wrong page) using it more as a leg warmer than a directional aid. It was the cause of the majority of our marital strife in those days as she completely failed to understand a simple drawn chart and I completely failed to understand her total lack of direction or topography.

Enter the age of the satellite and our relationship on road-trips improved exponentially. That's not to say things can't be made even better though. What's needed is an intelligent sat nav that doesn't direct you down country lanes for an hour because it's four minutes quicker than being on decent A roads. If manufacturers allowed a mode that would tell you 'this route is X minutes longer but you'll be on good roads and you don't need to worry about being wider than a pushbike', I'd be first in the queue to get it.

At least both of us now shout expletives at the sat nav rather than at each other like we used to in the good old days. Generally though, we rely totally on the technology only resorting to old school maps for a second opinion when in doubt.





*Tonight's stop - Zafra*  
N 38° 25' 30" : E 6° 24' 38"  
N 38.425250, E 6.410660

Day 6

This was our second visit to Ávila having first passed by a few years ago. Last time we were here, similarly to France on any given day, it was closed. Not a soul on the streets and all the shops shut. On my photo recce around 7 pm last night, I was beginning to think no-one actually lived here as once again, I found the narrow walkways bereft of inhabitants and the shutters firmly drawn. However, revisiting later around 10 pm, the streets were full of families eating late, as is customary in Spain, and we finally got the full Ávila experience.



*7 pm and the streets are as empty as a tramp's pocket*

The first Grand Inquisitor of Spain, Tomas de Torquemada, became synonymous with the ruthless brutality of that religious crusade. He ended up buried here at the Monastery of St. Thomas, although walking Ávila today, nobody would expect the Spanish Inquisition (to coin a phrase)! It seems a laid-back place with impressive fortifications that can be ascended and walked in a similar vein to Dubrovnik in Croatia. However, at this time of year, it's elevation high up on Spain's central plateau brought the temperature down to near freezing last night so we didn't dally in the windy streets, choosing instead to make our way back for a nightcap and a warm bed.

The drive south this morning reminded me of the high plains in California with dramatic snow-capped mountains and huge open grassland grazed by hardy cows and horses. Occasionally we'd pass a small village seemingly populated exclusively with elderly people. Tracey noticed halfway through one such town that everyone she'd seen had walked with a stick. Driving further, we watched in ascending amusement as the whole town hobbled passed in varying states of decrepitude, except the very last person before we left the city limits. One, very popular, able-bodied man to change everybody else's blown lightbulbs.



*High Plains Drifter*



*Spring has come to Southern Spain*

An hour or two further on we started to descend and the temperature began to rise, eventually topping out at a palatable 18 degrees. The scenery also dramatically altered, looking more springlike and the architecture became more Spanish.

Tonight's stop is at a typical small town called Zafra. The aire is another nondescript car park near a noisy roundabout, but again free and five minutes walk to the town centre. We took a wander in for a coffee and a look around, ending up at one of the town's quaint squares just as dusk was falling. Tomorrow we should make the drive South, passed Seville, to my brother's at Sanlúcar for five or six days of family feasting and frivolity.

*Top: The unglamorous Aire at Zafra*

*Middle: Take my best side please*

*Bottom: One of the many small Plazas*



*Below: Zafra's backstreets*



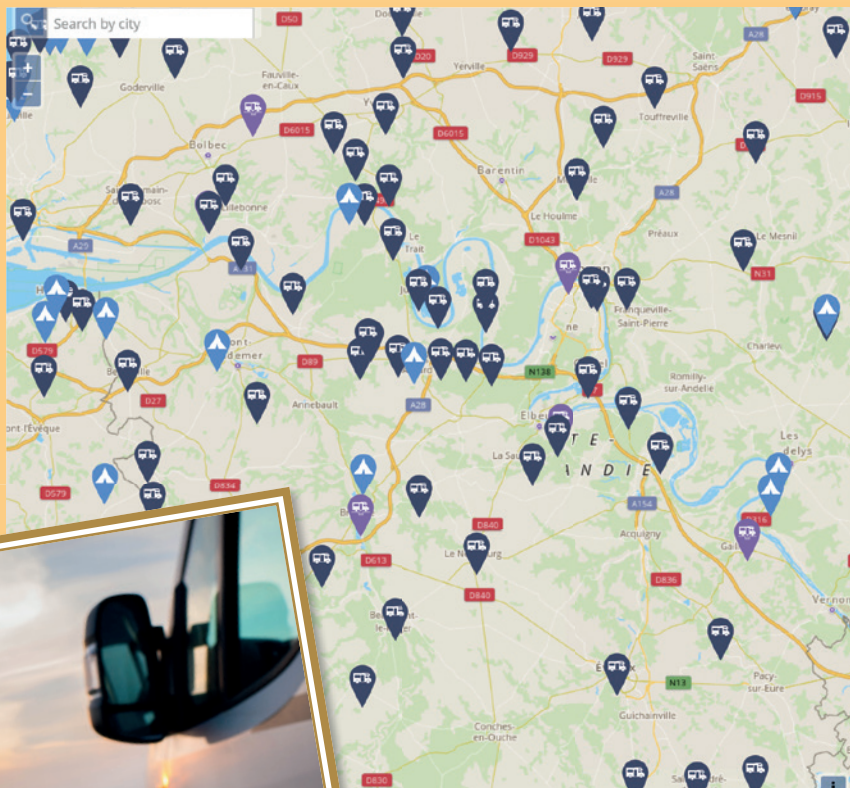




*Plaza Chica, Zafrata*

## Finding A Home

Over time, we've equipped Brian with some useful accessories and accoutrements while also discovering some fantastic motorhoming phone apps to assist us on our travels. The most important thing after finding your way is being able to secure somewhere to sleep for the night. Campercontact and Park4night are our go-to apps for locating the best aires and campsites. They both give you in-depth information on the number of spaces available, the facilities you might find there and any costs to use them. You can also read and leave your own reviews and rate each stop out of 10.



Other apps we occasionally use are the camper van bible and search for sites. They're all good and sometimes one will have wild-camping sites (i.e. not official places to stay) not listed in any of the others so it's worth having more than one in your armoury.

FEBRUARY

22



Sanlúcar de Barrameda



Tonight's stop - Sanlúcar de Barrameda

N 36° 45' 31" : E 6° 21' 39"

N 36.758728, E 6.360998

DAY 7

Day seven of the expedition and no-one's been forced to eat anybody yet (although as lunch was a little late, I did catch Stan glancing sideways at Ruby rather like a fox looks at a chicken). If we fail to return and feed them one evening, I'm pretty sure we'd be coming back to one huge cocker rather than two normal sized ones. In other news, Brian's earlier cranial issues appear to have righted themselves for the time being. The dashboard no longer looks like the lighting equipment used by a cheap wedding disco and today we made good headway, finally reaching my estranged family a little after lunchtime.

South of Seville, Sanlúcar de Barrameda forms one of the three cities making up Spain's famous Sherry Triangle, the others being Jerez further east and the southernmost El Puerto de Santa Maria. Situated on the Costa de la Luz (the coast of light) it draws artists and photographers to the area as the luminance has a special quality, which can best be appreciated during the golden hour at the end of the day.



*Vineyards on the outskirts of Sanlúcar*

Culturally it's very Spanish with the Andalusian holy trinity of flamenco, horses and sherry at its heart. For the casual tourist, it also boasts some world-renowned fish restaurants and fantastic beaches to while away the sunny hours between desayuno and late evening tapas. However, the majority of its summer visitors are Spaniards escaping the oppressive heat in Seville, so little English is spoken and therefore not many Brits venture down this way.

For us, the lack of a Queen Vic pub or fish 'n' chip shop adds to its appeal. To date, I've never seen a 70-year-old Londoner, with skin like a mahogany-coloured elephant's scrotum, make it down this far from their native habitat in Benidorm. Although, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before they start turning up, looking to buy a pint of Carling and yesterday's Daily Mail.



*Locals in the Plaza Mayor*



*Oranges already ripening in February*



*First stroll along the beach*



*Gifts for the güiris*

Arriving mid-afternoon, it was great to see everybody again. We were instructed to bring supplies from home for the Brits abroad, so we'd stocked up with Cadburys chocolate and Golden Syrup 'Oats So Simple' to dish out to the refugees on our arrival. Strange what you miss when you live away.



*Homemade paella*

A huge homemade paella was waiting for us, followed after a long lunch by a windy walk along the nearby beach. The long stretches of sand are deserted out of season, with the locals finding the near 20's temperature far too cold for anyone except 'güiris', as foreigners are slightly disparagingly called. As dusk fell, we watched the colour drain out of the sky while chatting over a coffee at the harbour bar. It's been a long way to come but not a bad way to end a good day.



*Family snapshot*



*Evening at the bar in Chipiona harbour*



*Tonight's stop - Sanlúcar de Barrameda*

*N 36° 45' 31" : E 6° 21' 39"*

*N 36.758728, E 6.360998*

## Day 10

We are still in Sanlúcar with the family, eating, drinking and enjoying the company. My niece, Sarah, has been living here for over 10 years now and more recently, my older brother Alan and his wife Sally have also been enjoying the warmer winters in the Spanish sunshine. They migrate like swallows down here when the weather at home starts to break up after the summer, returning sometime in May the following year with a complexion the colour of a Nigerian street trader.

I'm not the only one with relatives here though. It was one of Alan's dogs that gave birth to Ruby and Stan, so the twins have also been reunited with their mum over the past few days. They've been loving their walks along the beautiful empty beaches, as have I. Most days I take them back home, wet and tired, after playing in the surf or in Stan's case, routing through all the dead stuff along the strand line looking for something rancid to consume. Often we all go walking together, including Sarah and her dog, so sometimes there are six scruffy mutts racing up and down the beach together!



*Some of the local inhabitants*



*The world famous fish restaurants*

Al and Sal have a three bedroom house here so we've had the luxury of escaping the confines of the van for the past few days. Dogs, bodies, clothes and bedding have all been thoroughly washed in a way not possible in the cramped surrounding of Brian's tiny bathroom and we're now ready to set off again when the time is right.



*The garden where more than a third of Spain's annual GDP was consumed*

The weather's been great the last couple of days. My dog walks have mainly been along a particular secluded beach only known to locals. There's a single track road down to a small car park right on the sand and I fancy a night there in the van before we leave. It would be nice listening to the waves crashing into the shore from the comfort of Brian's little bed in the darkness.

Unfortunately, there is talk of the weather significantly deteriorating. A storm is threatening to sweep across Portugal and southern Spain in the next few days which could last for some time. We are now having to consider moving on, in an effort to follow the sun. The problem is where to go? The tempest is set to engulf the whole region so I think it will be difficult to find anywhere dry to run and hide. Let's see what happens in the week ahead.





*Montiquo Beach at sunset*



*Tonight's stop - Sanlúcar de Barrameda*  
N 36° 45' 31" : E 6° 21' 39"  
N 36.758728, E 6.360998

## Day 11

The weather today has been schizophrenic with bright sunshine interspersed with periods of heavy rain. Looking for somewhere local to go, we set off for a few hours exploring the beach resort of Chipiona. It's the next town over from Sanlúcar, about 10km along the coast. We've been there a few times before but have always managed to get ourselves lost in the narrow, samey-looking streets. This time, we decided not to risk it and parked a kilometre or so outside the centre, opting to walk in along the sandy beach. As we neared the town, the sky started to darken once again so refuge was sought under the canopy of a beachfront restaurant.



*A light lunchtime snack*

Not feeling particularly hungry, but wanting to patronise said establishment, we felt compelled to have something to eat. After studying the Spanish menu for a while we selected what we thought were shish kebabs. However, the Spanish version doesn't appear to be the small, delicate variety, presented on wooden skewers found in Greece. When they arrived, we were shocked to see they were huge, dangling like chandeliers from metal hangers. Just looking at them brought me out in a meat sweat and I realised we were going to have to come up with a spectacular excuse, later back at the house, for our lack of appetite at the planned evening barbecue.

Until quite recently this remote area of Spain has been a somewhat lawless quadrant of the Economic Union. When we first started coming here, drink-driving and crash helmets were mainly considered quaint advice from some vague figure in Brussels, rather than actual legislation to be strictly adhered to. The same applied to the smoking ban, which was generally ignored by the Andalusian populous. But things are obviously changing as, while we ate, I was intrigued to see one of the waitresses come outside to have a cigarette. A demure looking woman, she sat at the table directly behind me and lit up.

A short while later, having reached the conclusion my trousers were not designed to contain this much food, I was suddenly startled by a loud explosion from behind my head. Swinging around in my chair, I saw the smoking waitress with an incredulous, shocked look on her slightly charcoaled face, the jagged remains of a cigarette still clamped between her pursed lips. As I watched, a small puff of smoke escaped from her fringe and rose, cartoon like, into the air. Seconds later her two colleagues burst through the restaurant doors into the street convulsed in tears of laughter and I realised what had just happened.



*Chipiona with the church at one end and lighthouse at the other*

Even in Spanish, I could tell the victim of this practical joke was not at all amused. Her shocked expression soon transformed into one of rage. She started to gesticulate wildly while her workmates pointed at her angry, singed face and continued to fall about laughing. Tracey and I secretly joined in, heads buried behind our menus, shoulders heaving, pretending to look at the coffee options with tears rolling down our cheeks.

Later, arriving back at HQ, we had to confess to being somewhat replete but were soon forgiven after relaying the exploding fag story to the family over a long glass of red in the shade of the garden.



*Part of the beach at Chipiona*



*Fishermen at Sanlúcar de Barrameda*



*Tonight's stop - Sanlúcar de Barrameda  
N 36° 45' 31" : E 6° 21' 39"  
N 36.758728, E 6.360998*

## Day 12

I only get to see my niece Sarah once or twice a year, even less for her Spanish husband, so it's always great spending time together. Because they live here permanently, it's like having our own personal guide to all the best places to visit and eat.

Today we decided to take a tour of one of the many bodegas that populate the region. In summer, they are a good place to escape the heat of the day as they offer deep shade and a constant temperature for the barrels stored within. Most have a bar for tasting opportunities and food is also available in many.

Sarah asked the guide, who only spoke Spanish, if she could translate for us as we were taken around. Subsequently, the whole thing took on the air of a UN munitions inspection. The guide would start to go through her spiel, leaving pauses from time to time for Sarah to translate, while the rest of the group would gather around to stare at us intensely as if we were a foreign species. Then the entire party would shuffle off to the next point of interest where the cycle would restart. Although the tour was both interesting and informative, the personal translation plus the intense observation from the other members of the tour made me feel like Kim Jong Un on a state visit to a missile silo.



*Inspecting the munitions at the local Bodega*

Lunch was taken under the vines in the bodega's central courtyard. It involved one of my favourite things in this area: tapas. Small plates of really tasty food to share amongst friends. It's a lovely, relaxed way to eat allowing you to try out different dishes without the Russian roulette of ordering a full meal. Each of the bars have their own specialities and there's even a week-long festival here. Stalls from the various establishments are set up for you to try out their wares in a sort of outdoor tapas shoot out for €1 a plate.

Sanlúcar happens to be a base for one of the Formula 2 motor racing teams and because they are both foreign nationals, Sarah has become friendly with the French mechanics and technicians working there. When there are enough Taffs in town, we try to organise a Wales versus France boules match in the long dusty central boulevard leading from the town centre to the beach. It's quite competitive, normally drawing a crowd of locals attracted by the shouting and bright red Wales shirts. Although Spanish, Dani is allowed to play as an honorary Welshy and the game often goes on all afternoon between long stops for olives, wine and cheese which appears to be an integral part of any outdoor activity for the French.

Another essential for us whilst here in Sanlúcar is a trip to Zoco - a late night Moroccan themed bar with a super chilled vibe courtesy of the fantastic music, huge measures of Amaretto and 'herbal' tea served in authentic Middle Eastern silver tea sets. Yes, Zoco - putting the pot back in teapot since 1909! It's the sort of edgy place you feel cool even if you're a 50 something, chemical toilet using motorhome enthusiast. After a night out, it's always our last stop in the wee hours to end the evening quite literally on a high.



*Boules on the boulevard - the Frenchies setting up for a whoopin'*



*Off to find the sun*



*Tonight's stop - Pedro Abad*  
*N 37° 58' 1" : E 4° 27' 40"*  
*N 37.967140, E 4.461310*

## Day 13

Seville and Cordoba are two of the hottest cities in Europe so it's normally very dry here. My brother told me it had rained only three times between September and our arrival. However, today we found the rain in Spain doesn't always fall distinctly on the plain. It felt more like Aberdeen than Andalusia this morning as the long-awaited storm finally made its full presence felt.

The UK is currently experiencing 'the beast from the east' and the tail of that particular creature has started to lash the Iberian peninsula. On our walk earlier, the wind was so strong, Stan had the same poo three times while Ruby looked like she was about to take off, her ears flapping like wings in the gale-force blasts.

As previously mentioned, Ruby has a complicated personality which borders on autistic. This manifests in constant low-level whining when she finds herself in stressful or exciting situations. It can be triggered by new people or new surroundings which is not exactly conducive to life in a motorhome where every day is different. Apart from this admittedly annoying trait, she has a lovely, playful personality and seems to have adapted quite well to living with us on the road. However, for a dog who likes routine and order, there was not much I could do about the disorderly gale force winds today. I could clearly hear Ruby's discomfort as it whipped around her this morning stirring the sand on the beach. I think she was glad to get back to the shelter of home, which is very unusual for her. She normally loves being outdoors especially if there's a tennis ball involved.

Looking closely at the forecast, Portugal and south-west Spain are firmly in the firing line, so we've decided to say our farewells and move on. A change of plan is in order though, to avoid the rain lashed west coast, where we were originally intending to go next. Our return home via Portugal will have to wait for another trip as the skies look slightly brighter towards the east.



*The weather's on the turn - time to go*

We are disappointed we won't be going back through Portugal. It was somewhere we'd planned to explore more thoroughly after enjoying a previous road trip there a few years ago. The idea now is to point Brian in the opposite direction and head for Valencia, which is on the eastern edge of the inclement weather.

Although it was great to see the family again, we didn't want to outstay our welcome and the call of the sun was strong after travelling all this way. We said our goodbyes, fired up Brian and moved off in search of warmer climes.

Tomorrow we will take a detour past the windmills that Don Quixote mistook for giants on our way to Valencia. I've never been to either location so it will be good to see something new and we'll probably spend the next couple of days in Spain's City of Arts and Sciences.





Don Quixote land



Tonight's stop - San Clemente  
N 39° 23' 49" : E 2°26' 8"  
N 39.397220, E 2.435830

## Day 14

It appears our attempt at outrunning the gathering storm wasn't totally successful. Last night saw us parked in yet another very glamorous Spanish motorhome stop in Pedro Abad. However, this time we had company - gale force winds and rain that could slice a man in half! I heard today that this storm has already killed 23 people throughout Europe, so a poor night's sleep seems more than acceptable recompense in the circumstances.



*This morning finds us in the glamorous (and wet) aire at Pedro Abad*

As the rain and wind were still battering poor Brian this morning, we opted for a lie-in. There didn't appear much point in rushing. We had intended to go to Consuegra today, to see the dozen or so charming white windmills made famous in the book 'The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha', but as the weather was so bad decided to push on to Valencia instead.

After stopping for lunch about 20km before the Consuegra turn off, the heavy cloud marginally lifted and even though it meant a 50 minute detour we decided to take a chance and go. Twenty-five minutes later as we got to the windmills' car park, the heavens opened yet again for another biblical downpour, forcing us to put the kettle on and wait it out. Feeling a bit dejected, we sat in the van, doing the British thing of admiring the magnificent vista through the van's windscreen wipers with a hot cuppa in hand.

Twenty minutes went by and I was about to set off again after reprogramming the sat nav, when suddenly the drumming on the roof started to subside as the rain eased up. Sensing our opportunity, we made a frantic dash for it and got about 30 minutes of dry weather. Just enough time to have a look around and take some photographs. Those images however, cannot portray the force of the wind we encountered walking along the top of that rocky outcrop. Tracey was genuinely frightened at one point as she was lifted off her feet by a gust of wind and Ruby was howling, like a dog possessed, sensing danger but not knowing what to do in the full face of the gale. The lady in the little shop at the top said she'd never seen it so bad.



*Blue skies just long enough for us to look around*



*Don Quixote's windmills at Consuegra*

Safely back in the Motorhome, with some worthwhile photos and an experience we won't forget, we've now driven on to this evening's stop at San Clemente. We're at a free aire on the outskirts of the town. It's basically just a big car park but we can take on water, empty our tanks and shelter from the tempest until morning. The storm is still hot on our heels but gradually subsiding and the wind appears to have dropped for the moment. Tomorrow, assuming Brian is not skewered by an uprooted tree in the night, we should make it to Valencia where the weather is forecast to be a little calmer.

*This evening and we're still trying to outrun the chasing storm clouds*





El Saler



Day 15



Tonight's stop - Valencia  
N 39° 23' 12" : E 0° 19' 54"  
N 39.386710, E 0.331870

Not much to report today. Spent a much quieter night in San Clemente and got a reasonably restful sleep. Certainly much better than Wednesday night, when the rain on the van roof made me feel like a paedo in a police van trying to outrun reporters outside the courthouse.

We're currently stationed close to the coast, about three miles south of Valencia city centre. It's a small village called El Saler in an environmentally protected area of the Albufera Natural Park. The park covers a huge area and includes Lake Albufera, Spain's largest body of freshwater. It's one of the most important wetlands on the mainland with various walking routes, cycle paths and boat trips to be enjoyed throughout the 21,000 hectares.

Our home tonight is a motorhome park with about 30 other vans, complete with a basic toilet and shower block. Typical camping fair if I'm honest, adequate they maybe but I can't see Harry and Meghan using them anytime soon.

Across the main road, in front of the campsite, is a long stretch of scrubby dunes. Paths lead off in all directions and the sea can be found five minutes further on. This area is called Devesa del Saler and the landscape is a natural playground for Rubes and Stan. They run here, there and everywhere with their noses pressed to the sandy ground or disappear over a hill crests to return, by surprise, on another path somewhere else.



*THE SEA!!!*



Beyond the dunes, there are miles of beach to walk if we're so inclined and although it's obviously a touristy area, it's quiet at this time of year so we hardly passed a soul on our inaugural dog walk this evening as the light was fading.

It's the first time we've actually had to pay for our accommodation. €22 for two nights but we noticed vans parked on the beach today, so maybe we'll get an extra free night listening to the waves crashing in before eventually moving on.

We appear to have just about cleared the storm for now. Heavy clouds have filled the skies today but tomorrow is supposed to be a little better. Our intention is to take the bus to Valencia in the morning so we're hoping it stays dry. Only so much you can do in a big city with dogs in tow (unless I get out the white stick and sunglasses when climbing the museum steps) but we can always fly back and do that stuff again if we think it's worth it.

*Brian sleeping with his chums*





*The former riverbed now a grand park*

The problem now was how to get to see the sights. We contemplated taking the van, but parking something that size in a major city is always an issue so we were left with two options: try to get a taxi (from where exactly and again possible issues carrying the dogs) or bite the bullet and walk it.

We were told it was five kilometres which is less than a normal dog walk for us so we didn't really see that as a big problem. However, adding on the distance required to explore the city and getting back meant quite a serious undertaking. There was a cycle path to follow all the way into town. It ran along the coast for a few kilometres before turning inland following the Turia river to the heart of the city. As we couldn't see any other option, we decided to go for it.

The weather was pleasantly sunny and the walk along the beach enjoyable for both the dogs and ourselves. However, the five kilometres turned out to be more like nine to the city centre and by then we were glad of a long lunch stop when we finally arrived.



*One of the many bridges traversing the park*

Our mutts have travelled far and wide with us. Their passports would be full of stamps if any form of border control still existed in Europe. They have endured an Italian train, packed to capacity, where they stood calmly looking up at us through the tree-like legs of the crowded commuters trying not to stand on them; took the morning bus, along with the skiers, en-route to snowy walks in the French Alps; chugged along the Douro river on a tour boat in Porto and even descended beneath the city streets of Lisbon to ride the Metro system in Portugal. But this morning, as we attempted to catch the bus into Valencia, the driver took one look at them and with a wave of his hand, dismissed us. Left standing at the bus stop like naughty school children, I wondered if we should have checked before turning up but I honestly never expected Spain's transport system to be the least dog-friendly in Europe.

The Valencian authorities re-routed the Turia river around the outskirts of the city after a series of devastating floods. The remaining original, wide riverbed was left and subsequently turned into a monumental eight kilometre long park which now forms the focal point of the city. We sat at one of the many places to eat there, enjoying a long lunch in the sunshine and resting until we felt ready to move on.

The park is divided into 18 individual areas along its length with distinct styles, from formal gardens to futuristic structures that look like something from Buck Rogers. The whole 450-acre space is a green ribbon, cutting directly through the urban sprawl with bike paths, fountains, recreation fields and event spaces. It's a place you can easily spend a day strolling or people watching without ever touching the main urban part of the city.

Mindful of the long walk back, we wandered in the sunlight, taking in the sights and sounds, grateful the dogs could run free and enjoy it too. There are few city centres where they can.

Late afternoon, we wearily retraced our steps. It felt strangely like we'd seen the best of it, but at the same time hardly scratched the surface. Definitely a place for us to revisit sometime in the future for a long weekend without the furies.

Finally returning to the campsite, my hiking app had clocked up 26km but I actually didn't feel too bad, even popping back out to get some supplies from the local store after dinner. Tomorrow though, like God, I will take a day of rest.



*A different view of a more modern crossing*



*The palms grow directly through the centre of this bridge*



*The twins finally enjoying a city centre*





*Tonight's stop - Delta de l'Ebre*  
N 40° 39' 30" : E 0° 40' 28"  
N 40.658550, E 0.674680

*An easy walk along the beach this morning*

## Day 17

Following the trials and tribulations of the past 24 hours, an easier day was called for today. After a late start, we took the dogs for a gentle stroll through the dunes and along the beach before returning for lunch. Once our joints had warmed up, there didn't appear to be any long-term effects from yesterday's epic saunter, although I didn't fancy a repeat performance today.

The dunes are littered with interweaving paths. Every now and then a man would appear from the undergrowth, obviously on an innocent preamble like ourselves. However, I couldn't help thinking, this sort of thing happens around deserted car parks in Britain with much more salacious undertones!

When travelling in the van, we've found a good clean out is necessary every four or five days, otherwise we end up living like refugees. Today was the day for flame-throwing the bedding and also a good opportunity for a scrape down ourselves, using the luxurious (I use the word loosely) site showers. The van shower is ok in a pinch but it's a bit like doing the Macarana in a telephone box, you end up so contorted you see bits of yourself you never knew were there (or would wish to ever see again).



*Come on ladies, go fully continental and get in these sexy outdoor showers*

Sometime later, I nipped out for a short stroll. Enjoying the absolute silence of the surrounding area, I followed some of the unlit tracks through the reens trying not to get lost in the pitch blackness. Because of the clear skies the temperature had dropped considerably and I was reminded, after quite a warm day, of how early in the year it actually is. Walking with hands in my pockets (I always keep a spare pair in there) I finally made my way back to Brian and bed. Maybe it's a good omen for warm cloudless skies in the morning. We'll have a look around in the daylight tomorrow and stay if it's interesting or move on somewhere new if not.



*Fun in the dunes*

After a refresh of van, body and soul we made tracks up the coast towards Barcelona. Stan has a habit of dropping off to sleep in a sitting position, propped up on the back seat. Sometime during the journey, we rounded a corner and heard a big crash from behind us. Looking around we could see he'd nodded off and fallen onto the van floor in a big furry heap. More of a shock for him than us but he's so laid back I'm surprised he even woke up.

We were heading for an aire about halfway between Valencia and Barcelona. On arrival, we planted our flag and got the kettle on just as the sun was setting. There are about 20 vans here on some kind of nature reserve. No services to speak of, but again, it's all totally free and appears to be a twitcher's paradise. I could hear ducks and other wildfowl bedding down for the night outside while Trace was preparing dinner but apart from that it's really quiet and remote.



*Duck heaven out on the delta*



*Deliverance (again)*

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Tonight's stop - Delta de l'Ebre  
N 40° 39' 30" : E 0° 40' 28"  
N 40.658550, E 0.674680

Day 18

If there's such a thing as a jihadi mallard, this is the sort of place they are told will be waiting for them in the afterlife. For wildfowl, it's Nirvana and Xanadu all rolled into one and not too bad for us humans either.

We've decided to stay a second night on the nature reserve at Delta de l'Ebre. It's a national park about 160km west of Barcelona with 'great ornithological richness' according to the internet.

Arriving here at dusk yesterday, it was hard to know what to expect. We drove for around eight kilometres along a single track road, raised above the surrounding flood plain, with the neighbouring vicinity getting more and more remote. The sky was clear and many stars started to appear, somehow adding to the sense of isolation and foreboding. I started to get a little tense. I was sure I could hear those banjos from Broglie starting to tune up again as we approached our final destination.

On arrival though, to our relief, we found a community of 20-30 vans all huddled together on a large hard standing in the near darkness with a small restaurant set off to one side.



*Watching the wildlife*

This morning we woke to find the surrounding area is a large wetland reserve with reeds, bullrushes and enough birds to make a twitcher effervesce with excitement. A proper birdwatcher's paradise. At the end of the peninsula, arching off and disappearing into the Med is a long skinny sandbar which hooks back around to the coast like a witch's finger.

The sun was up before us and the temperature was already agreeably warm. We spent the day walking the various marked trails with the dogs; drinking coffee at the little rustic cafes; looking at the wildlife (including flamingos) and chilling back at the moho.



*Flamingos on the Delta*

I don't confess to know as much about birds as Bill Oddie but even with my inferior knowledge I can tell you with some authority we saw many varieties including white ones, pink ones and even grey ones with black bits!

I tried to take some reasonable photographs but unfortunately, my lens wasn't long enough to get close to the action so the experience was somewhat disappointing. Not the first time there's been complaints of dissatisfaction with my equipment, if I'm honest.

However, a good time was had by all and we returned to the comfort of Brian early evening for food and a continuation of our box set before bed. Today has been about simple pleasures, but a really enjoyable one.



*Perfect weather for hiking*



Tonight's stop - Miami Platja  
N 41° 1' 30" ; E 0° 57' 32"  
N 41.025170, E 0.959060

Stan opting for a lie in this morning



*Beach number one at Riumar*

Early afternoon, needing lunch, we headed east towards Barcelona stopping off at L'Ampolla for a nice meal at the harbour. Time to try out my shattered Spanish with the impassive waitress. Much shouting and pointing at the menu ensued on my behalf. She smiled politely but her eyes barely hid an overwhelming impulse to stab me with the steak knife as I tried to make myself understood. Just as we were finishing up it started to spot rain so we had to make a run for it back to the van.

The climate here at this time of year seems to be lovely in the morning but changeable with thickening cloud rolling in during the afternoon. It does make for dramatic skies at the end of the day though and many vibrant rainbows.

## Day 19

We decided to make this our last day at the Delta and with warm clear skies this morning, opted to drive down to the far end of the peninsula for a look around Riumar.

Taking a long walk along the beach there, the dogs enjoyed the exercise and freedom before being strapped into the van for the onward journey. The Delta has been great for Ruby and Stan with numerous off-lead walks, both through the marshland and along the sandy coastline. Tracey and I have really enjoyed it too and will definitely stop here again if we are passing. However, I wouldn't like to be around after April or May. I think with this much water you'd probably be a mobile mosquito feeding station, waking in the morning with a face like the elephant man.



*Rocks and rainbows*



*Ruby and Stan loving the open space*



*Beach number two. Some pretentious self-timer nonsense at Miami Platja*

Another 40 minute drive and we were at our stop for the night: €20 to stay right on the beach at a campsite near Miami Platja. I wasn't very impressed with the Valencia site. Although it was clean and only €11 a night, the gents toilet was in a converted garden shed! This one, however, is in a different league. The Spanish style of caravan pitches are unconventional by British standards, being more 'ramshackle hippy' than the acres of tidy mown grass we have in the UK, but the toilet block is brand new and beautiful. It's like a marble mansion. I said to Trace, once you've pooped in there you won't want to poo anywhere else ever again!

I took the dogs for a stroll along the beach this evening and tonight, as we're parked just behind it, I'm going to enjoy listening to the ocean from the comfort of my little bed, skylight open and blackout blind shut. Good night.



*Camping Spanish style*





Caravans at Miami Platja



Tonight's stop - Miami Platja  
N 41° 1' 30" : E 0° 57' 32"  
N 41.025170, E 0.959060

## Day 20 Captain's (B)log, stardate .....

Last night before turning in, I decided to take a quick snap of Brian sleeping majestically under the clear, star-laden, Iberian sky (truth be told, I was actually letting the dogs out for a wee). I could hear the ocean rollers thundering against the beach in the darkness and the wind was calmly rustling the palms. Bliss.

When we awoke this morning, it had once again turned into a howling monster intent on blowing us over as we slept. Tracey took action and got up while I decided to bravely stay in bed until it had passed.

We spent the day pottering. As part of the pet passport regulations, we have to find a vet to check the dogs over before re-entering Britain. We have previously used ones to the east and west in France but this time it looks like we'll be returning directly up through the centre of the country so much internetting ensued. Clothes had to be washed and showers needed to be taken in the 'toilet block of the gods' as we've now named them.

I walked Toot and Plute along the beach with Stan, as always, eating every unmentionable thing in sight along the high water mark. How he's still with us I simply don't know.

We found a park with really odd trees, we read, relaxed and just enjoyed the sun. There's not much to do here except the beach and not being a big fan of inactivity, I struggle a bit, although, since having the van, I'm trying hard to embrace my languidity without guilt. Everything is just getting geared up for the season so hardly anything is open. In fact, on my walk I tried, without success, to find a shop for vittles, as tomorrow we may be on dog food for breakfast due to insufficient provisions. I must have a word with the supply officer, she seems to have let things slip somewhat.



*Sleeping under the stars*



*The dogs enjoying a run under the weird trees*



*Why am I thinking of Father Ted?*

As I mentioned earlier, the Spanish don't seem to do campsites like the British with lots of space and neat green grass. Here it looks like an organised refugee camp, more Sangatte than Sandringham. It's hard to tell where one pitch ends and another begins. The caravans are all painted bright colours but tiny, in rows, like little Lego bricks. We did debate moving on this morning but decided to say another night to make one more deposit into those magnificent marble conveniences.



*Tracey enjoying our pitch directly on the beach*



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Tonight's stop - Vic  
N 41° 56' 3" : E 2° 14' 24"  
N 41.934440, E 2.240000

## Day 21

Earlier today we packed up and left the 'toilets of the gods' for a trip to Tarragona. A walled city sitting on the Costa Dourada coastline, it's another of Spain's world heritage UNESCO sites, due mainly to its rich history dating back to Roman times. Many buildings are still evident from that era including a chariot race track, aqueduct and an impressive amphitheatre positioned directly on the seafront. I'm sure this was very comforting to the numerous Christians slaughtered there as it afforded them the opportunity of a sea view whilst being bludgeoned to death or eaten by African wildlife.

Another of Tarragona's claims to fame is its importance in the cultural phenomenon, particular to Catalonia, of human towers or 'Castellers' (castles). These towers can reach an incredible ten storeys in height and are erected following very precise techniques with subsequent rows of participants balanced on the shoulders of the row below.

Because of the different factors involved, every castle is a law unto itself. The base is formed to a very strict order, everybody having an allotted station within the base group. Thereafter the different storeys begin to rise up, the strongest people positioned at the bottom and the most agile and lightest on the upper levels. The last person to climb the whole tower is a young girl or boy who, on arriving at the very summit, raises an arm to salute the public.

Apparently, you can watch practice sessions throughout the year but from the photographs I've seen of the actual festival, I think it would be a poor substitute for the spectacle of the real thing which looks absolutely incredible. I made a mental note to revisit sometime in the future when the festival is in town on even-numbered years in October.



*Castellers in action*



*Tarragona architecture*



*A house with a shocked face*



*Fighting our way through the crowds*



*Tarragona during siesta*



*Gothic or Medieval architecture Stan?*

After finding our bearings it was near lunchtime. Tapas was sought and consumed al fresco whilst enjoying the sunshine (more pointing and shouting) followed by a stroll around the old town. Nothing we haven't seen before, but still very enjoyable and worth a visit if you have a historical bent.

This evening finds us parked up overnight in a town called Vic. According to the internet, it's a 'quaint medieval town in a peaceful setting along the banks of the Meder River'. As we arrived after dark I can't confirm any of that until tomorrow but the motorhome aire looks quiet so I anticipate at least a good night's sleep. It's not exactly on our itinerary but as we are already here, we intend to have a look around in the morning before moving on to Girona, which is reputed to be one of the most interesting cities in Catalonia.

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The twins trying to win a staring contest



Tonight's stop - Girona  
N 41° 59' 35" : E 2° 49' 4"  
N 41.993330, E 2.817990

**Day 22** This morning found us waking up in the town of Vic. I'm assuming it must be at altitude as there was a considerable frost. This came as quite a surprise considering our location in southern Spain. Also unexpected was the ungodly hour our slumbers were disrupted by Stan whining to be let out. Both dogs are really well house trained, with bladders I would die for, so it's very unusual for them to wake us during the night.

Having let him out in the darkness we were again disturbed just after dawn by an intermittent wooshing sound. I lay in bed trying to work out its origin and why it sounded so familiar. Eventually I had to get up to appease my curiosity. Peeking outside into the light, I was surprised to see a huge hot air balloon taking off, literally right next to us. Suddenly the sound I'd desperately tried to identify and the sight of the burners being fired connected and made sense (although, the fact it was happening 10 metres from the van when we were surrounded by vast swaths of empty fields didn't).



*Cheers*

Later, on our morning walk, the reason for Stan's nocturnal manoeuvres became apparent. When we arrived last night it was dark and as we were parked in a large recreational area, with no threat from road traffic, I just let the dogs run loose around the grassland while we got set up. This morning, I discovered the motorhome aire is actually on the grounds of the university campus. The surrounding sports fields are littered with discarded food remnants from the students' various outdoor activities. Stan and Rubes must have thought Christmas had come early and gorged themselves before bedtime which eventually resulted in Stan's extended pre-dawn extrusions. Lesson learned for the future.

After breakfast, we took a leisurely stroll into Vic before moving on. The town itself is quite important in the Catalan region but we found little there to extend our stay apart from the picturesque medieval main square. By the time we'd finished exploring the narrow streets the temperature was beginning to climb so we headed back to the square for lunch in the early afternoon sunshine.

This evening sees us in Girona where things have deteriorated somewhat towards the end of the day. I've somehow lost a vital piece from my tripod and as a result of last night's sports field trolley dash by the twins, to date, Stan's had four poos and Ruby's just been sick. It appears, in life, for every spectacular sunset there's also a straining cocker spaniel.



*Vic's medieval central square*





Tonight's stop - Narbonne  
N 43° 3' 58" : E 2° 56' 27"  
N 43.066310, E 2.940920

## Day 23

Last night we decided to park right in the heart of Girona. The proper motorhome aire was a fair walk out of town but our trusty app led us to a bare earth car park between two busy roads, bang in the middle of the action. It was a bit like overnighting on a London roundabout and although I had a sneaking suspicion it wasn't 100% safe (or legal) our spirit of adventure made us decide to take a chance. We were apprehensive but with two other vans already there for company we concluded it would probably be ok. I'm normally the poor sleeper in the family but strangely I slept like a log, even with the passing traffic and faint thoughts of marauding murderers!

The cocker spaniel Vesuvius impersonations of the previous 24 hours appeared to have subsided and the four of us spent an enjoyable day strolling the city, taking in the sites and sampling the local cuisine.

My first impression of Girona was not a good one however. Looking down the line of brightly coloured buildings clinging to the edge of the river, the whole frontage looked as if it was in decline and desperately in need of a lick of paint. Standing above it all, dominating the whole city is the Cathedral de Santa María. A huge stone edifice which looks like it's receiving a piggyback from the buildings below and apparently boasts (cue Jeremy Clarkson voice) the widest gothic nave in the world.

The River Onyar cuts a swathe through the old town centre but we needed to look deeper, away from the faded facades and into the back streets to finally reveal a city that actually has a lot to like.

Girona wasn't on my 'must see' list of places to visit but has in fact won me over. The old Jewish quarter is surprisingly quaint and the city has a charm which, I admit, will live on long after its rundown first impression. Maybe somewhere to return for a weekend without the pets someday.



*Girona's imposing Cathedral*



*One of the many foot bridges over the river Onyar*



*The charming back streets*



*The Cathedral standing tall*



*Cathedral steps*



*These don't look very comfortable*

This evening we crossed the border back over into France. As we came through the winding roads of the Pyrenees foothills, Tracey noticed Stan sitting up in the back seat leaning into every bend like a motorbike rider. He's obviously learnt from his fall the other day and is now taking no chances. Perhaps we'll have to buy him some old fashioned leather motorbike goggles for future trips.



Tonight's stop - Saint Flour  
N 45° 2' 8" : E 3° 5' 53"  
N 45.035730, E 3.098180

## Day 24

Yesterday was spent roughing it on a roundabout in Girona so last night we decided to push the boat out and head for a campsite near Narbonne. After spending the princely sum of €18 we parked the van and headed for bed. Sometime later we were woken once again in the early hours by a heaving canine. That sound gets you out of bed so fast I actually think a 'vomiting cocker alarm clock' would be a viable idea for Dragon's Den.



It was Stan's turn this time and like some sort of conjuring act, without any moisture at all, he'd brought up a single item: a bottle top! It reminded me of an act I once saw on Britain's Got Talent. A man called Stevie Starr could regurgitate items at will and in any order. On the show, he swallowed Amanda Holden's engagement ring, followed by a locked padlock and its key. With a sort of coughing motion, he then regurgitated the padlock which enclosed the ring, followed by the key. Now if only I could get Stan up to that sort of standard we'd really be in the money. All I had to show for his efforts was a slightly damp Coke bottle cap and a very sorry looking spaniel. I'm hoping that's the last we'll see of the university lunches now and both dogs have been warned in no uncertain terms of further unauthorised snacking.



Because we wanted to maximise the good weather we have stayed south for as long as possible but this morning we finally decided to point Brian towards the long run home. This area looks interesting though and I'd like to return here on a subsequent trip to fully explore the region in detail.

After trying out the on-site showers we settled down to enjoy our last breakfast in the sunshine. The weather is deteriorating further north and the next few days are forecast to be predominately wet so we wanted to make the most of it.

Setting off late morning, we intended to stop at any interesting places we found along the way and eventually we made it to our overnight aire at a little town a third of the way up through France called Saint Flour. It's perched on top of an escarpment with the motorhome site located just out of town at the bottom. Looking up this evening, I noticed it was illuminated and would make a good photograph but as an unfortunate incident in Girona lead to my knob falling off, I'm unable to use my tripod anymore. It's holiday snaps only from now on I'm afraid.



Tomorrow we'll make the trek up to the town for a coffee and look around before setting off but the next few days will mostly be driving, unfortunately.

*Top: Taller than the Eiffel tower, the Millau Viaduct*

*Middle: The scenic countryside of southern France*

*Bottom: Saint Flour illuminated at the top of the hill*



*Tonight's stop - Meung-sur-Loire  
N 47° 49' 23" : E 1° 41' 53"  
N 47.823180, E 1.698200*

## Day 25

A somewhat frustrating day today. We wanted to have a look around Saint Flour this morning before travelling on to get the dogs passports stamped. Our appointment was for 3 pm and as the vet was about an hour's drive away, our intention was to leave at noon, be there for a spot of lunch and then after getting the dogs sorted, drive on three or four hours towards home. The weather had other ideas however and after taking the short drive up to Saint Flour it started to rain.

Deciding the best course of action was to beat a hasty retreat, we moved on in the hope of a drier climate and an earlier engagement at the vets. Unfortunately neither turned out to be available so we simply had to hang around and wait.

When we finally got to our consultation, the English speaking vet I'd spoken to on the phone had been replaced with one as fluent in English as I am in French. Like a game of charades, much gesturing and gesticulation ensued while both dogs were thoroughly molested and another 45 minutes slipped by.

Stopping along the way for something to eat, we finally got to our lodgings at a little after ten in the evening. Just before pulling into the motorhome aire, several pairs of eyes appeared out of the inky blackness reflected in the headlights of the van. As we passed I could see it was a group of wild boar standing near the side of the road. For some strange reason, they reminded me of hairy nude men holding an illicit card game in the bushes but, in my defence, I was very tired by this time after all the driving.



*Ruby and Stan make a new friend*



*Ruby's nemesis*

The aire this evening appears to be on the side of a river with a medieval town to explore in the morning (if the weather holds out). We are parked on the outskirts, surrounded by a large municipal area of sports fields and a funny incident happened soon after we arrived.

I took two very excited spaniels out for some late-night exercise after being cooped up in the van all day. Both were wearing snazzy illuminated collars so I could keep an eye on what they were up to in the darkness. They ran off across the fields like kids released from junior school and I watched the little coloured lights grow dimmer as they disappeared into the distance.

After some time I heard an exuberant squeal that I recognised Ruby makes when chasing a rabbit or squirrel and knew she was in pursuit of something furry. I called them both back but only one collar reappeared out of the blackness. I called again... nothing. Ruby has never actually caught anything in her life but fearing the worst I strode forward to investigate further.

As I got nearer, I could see the faint glow of her red collar and called her once more but again she refused to come. When I finally got to her I could see, in the heat of the chase, she'd run headlong into a football goal and was tangled in a ball of fur and netting with her head sticking through like tuna in a trawler catch. It took me a while to untangle her but finally we all made it back safely to Brian, exhausted and ready for bed.

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Tonight's stop - Montreuil-sur-Mer  
N 50° 27' 33" : E 1° 45' 34"  
N 50.459220, E 1.759530

Château de Meung-sur-Loire





*Emptying Brian's tanks at the Meung-sur-Loire aire*



*Better than most - Dirty French!*

## Day 26

France: it's big isn't it? The last bit of continental driving today sees us back where we started: the first French aire we tried out as newbie motorhomers a month ago at Montreuil-sur-Mer. Now, pulling in as semi-professionals, we found it still had one empty space available for us on our triumphant return.

The day started at Meung-sur-Loire, a quaint little town with a great motorhome site - flat pitches, water, plenty of space for the dogs to run free and by French standards, impeccable toilets. Dirty French! Nobody told us about the giant bins being emptied at 5 am though and unfortunately, we'd parked right next to them. Another rookie lesson learned.

We had a tootle around the town, grabbed a coffee and took a few photographs before finally hitting the road once more. Lots of driving to be done again today, the price we decided to pay for staying longer in the Spanish sunshine.





We stopped a few times on the way but nowhere noteworthy until, at a motorway service station, I decided to avail myself of the conveniences offered therein. While sat doing my thing, I noticed piped music being played into the restrooms and realised I was pooing along to one of Barry White's sexier numbers. It left me feeling quite uncomfortable and I dismounted promptly and retreated back to the van with haste.

It did get me thinking of a gap in the market though. Why hasn't anybody thought of a 'Now That's What I Call (Toilet) Music' CD? A sort of 'songs to poo to' playlist. Hits could include 'Let it Go' from Frozen; Leon Haywood's 'Don't Push It Don't Force It'; 'The Wayward Wind' by Gogi Grant and many more (but hopefully not 'Torn' by Natalie Imbruglia)!

We are currently snuggled in for our last night in Brian's cosy cabin. With coffees in hand, we've been reflecting on the trip and reliving some of the highs and lows of our first motorhoming experience.

It's been a steep learning curve but enjoyable and I think after a few weeks at home, we'll be keen to get back out for more adventures. Tomorrow we take the train under the channel and head back to Blyth. One more report before the whole thing is over and Brian gets a scrub down and much-deserved rest.

*Meung-sur-Loire*



All roads lead to... a cloudy sky

## Day 27

So that's it, our first motorhome trip completed. We're back home now and reminiscing on all the places we've been and the people who crossed our path along the way. We learned so much about living the motorhomer's life and the experience was getting better as it went along. We were starting to dance around one another in the small space and by the end of the trip, each of us had developed our roles and things were working pretty well.

The weather was mixed, the mileage was high and the dog hair was copious. In fact, on arrival home, I was tempted to just throw an incendiary device into the van and walk away, but a few hours cleaning and Brian will be good as new and ready for further adventures. The electrical problem we started out with has more or less cleared up. I can't remember the last time I saw any lights on the dash and Brian actually did us proud getting us all the way down to the top of Africa and back. Maybe he likes sunshine as much as us.

I'll take away three main things from our first trip:

One: less driving, more relaxing. Admittedly this time we were going to visit my relatives so had to put in the distance but I think exploring a small area and then moving on half an hour to the next place of interest would be better.



*These are part of the landscape of northern France*



*The lush, stocking up for the week*

Two: the number of places you can stay for free. If you're so inclined you could pay only for fuel and groceries - no need to eat out or pay to stay at campsites, etc. However, we've always felt these things are part of the holiday experience and a night or two at a decent hotel was always on our agenda. This time we broke the journey with a week at my brother's so it wasn't necessary but on subsequent trips, I can see us staying somewhere with room service occasionally just for a change and to enjoy a bit of luxury.

Three: not once did we need an electrical hookup during the whole trip. It's a nice thing to have as it conserves your gas (and Tracey gets to use her hairdryer) but, if like us, you have a solar panel and an inverter you can easily do without it.

So there you go, the first one done and now looking forward to the next. See you in May!





# TRIP TWO

The Netherlands,  
Belgium, Germany  
and Denmark





*Tonight's stop - Gravelines  
N 50° 58' 10" : E 2° 7' 54"  
N 50.969450, E 2.131690*

## Day 1

It was a toss-up between sneaking off again for a little break or spend time working on our fashionably 'distressed' house. We did ponder the issue for a short while before concluding people on their death beds never say 'I wish I'd spent more time glossing those skirting boards' and immediately started looking at maps of Europe.

However, travel days seldom seem to go without a hitch for us and today was no exception. We are generally well organised (if a little last minute) but things just have a habit of somehow going bosoms akimbo for us on the first day.



*Down with the daisies at the Eurotunnel*

As Travels With My Cocker season one aficionados may remember, Brian decided to throw a strop last time we ventured abroad and we left home with half the techie stuff not functioning. However, we worked around it and after a month on the road, I'd say we only encountered the issue five percent of the time. On our return, the garage said it would have to be more frequent for them to stand a chance of finding out what was going wrong, so nothing was done. We continued to use Brian, without incident, for over two months and then today, travel day, after no problems for weeks the fault returned. This time, however, with an extra twist. All the old faults we know and love were still there but we were also now unable to lock the doors, even with the physical key. Realising we couldn't go if we weren't able to make the van secure, the reality of the situation started to dawn on us. With the channel crossing already booked for late afternoon I called the garage to see if they could do something short term. It's as if racist Brian doesn't want to mix with Johnnie foreigner and throws a tantrum every time we book the Eurotunnel.

*Back again and due to the delay,  
lots of time to play this visit*



The garage said they were really busy but would have a quick look and try to reprogram the electronic key. As we drove the short distance to meet them the fault suddenly cleared (I'm guessing it must be a dry joint or short circuit that gets jiggled around when the van is moving). We decided, as the crossing was already booked and payed for we'd risk it and continue, reasoning the van's been fine for weeks and if it does happen again it probably only needs me to drive over some bumps to rattle it clear.

All the kerfuffle, however, had made us late so a four-hour layup in the Eurotunnel car park ensued until the next available slot. We finally made it across at about 10:30 pm French time and are now settled in for the night at some remote aire. Arriving after dark our location is a bit of a mystery but I'll know more in the morning, hopefully after I've managed to lock up tonight.





*Tonight's stop - Sas van Gent  
N 51° 13' 33" : E 3° 48' 9"  
N 51.226060, E 3.802570*

## Day 2

After the trials and tribulations of yesterday, we awoke to a warm sunny French morning on the outskirts of a small town called Gravelines. The first job after breakfast was to walk the dogs and get my bearings.

It turns out the aire is located behind a huge grass banking about 15 metres high, the result of accumulated spoil from a man-made lake on the other side. Constructed to hold rowing events and for training, it was quite a surprise to discover the rectangular body of water eight lanes wide by two and a half kilometres long when we finally rounded the end of the mound. The dogs and I enjoyed walking the path running parallel to the water's edge. We watched the rowers go by and did our best to dodge the French coaches on their pushbikes shouting encouragement through megaphones at the sweating participants.



*Allez allez!*

When we reached the far end of the lake, the path ascended the mound for the return trip along the top. As we started the short climb, Ruby disturbed some rabbit kits hiding in the long grass resulting in one little bunny legging it up the path in front of us. I managed to hang on to her while he made his bid for freedom, but Stan was immediately in hot pursuit and I could see this was not going to end well. I shouted at him to stop but instinct had taken over and he was oblivious to me yelling. As I tried to contend with Ruby, I watched in horror as he hunted the tiny creature down and plonked a huge furry paw on its back. Now contained, there was a moment of pause and I could see Stan had absolutely no idea what to do next. He looked up at me as if for guidance and I again called him back. This time he relented and the little rabbit lived to fight another day. A fortunate escape, but to be expected I guess when you have a lucky charm on the end of each leg.



*Halfway up the long lakeside footpath*

After lunch, I took out my new acquisition bought specifically for motorhoming trips: a folding bike. Sometimes, when we are nearing a destination, I see something I'd like to photograph away in the distance. In the past I've had to forgo these opportunities for the sake of getting to where we're going. However now, assuming it's within the Seatanus coefficient (not a clever formulae devised by Dr. Seatanus, but the distance that can be travelled before the saddle pummels your arse into submission) I can return at a more convenient time and snap away to my heart's content. Yes, it looks like something your nan would use to go back and forth to the shops, but it's going to be great for me to head off on my own for photography jaunts without the inconvenience of having to uproot everybody by taking Brian. However, with the unbelievable amount of insects I encountered today it was like riding through hailstones, so I only gave it a quick test before returning to the van with that fetching 'bugs in teeth' look.



*The mighty 'nan' bike riding high on top of the mound*

Mid-afternoon, we packed up and travelled through Dunkirk following the coast into Belgium. Passing Ostend and Blankenberge, through a place called Plopsaland (which brought out the schoolboy in me) and on to our overnight stop at Sas van Gent in the Netherlands. It's been a long time since I was last in Holland but I've always liked the laid back 'do-as-you-please' attitude of the Dutch and the fact it must irritate their rather uptight, authoritarian German neighbours. The aire here is basically a large field between two canals but we have views of the passing boats, plenty of room for the dogs to run free and a small town to look around in the morning. There's even a bar within easy walking distance for a swift one later.

*One of the many colourful bugs that later made a home between my teeth*



*A much easier day today at Gravelines*





Tonight's stop - Antwerp  
N 51° 11' 22" : E 4° 24' 2"  
N 51.189580, E 4.400640

## Day 3

I've discovered the beauty of a motorhome is you tend to find yourself in places that would never normally be on your radar. This can happen because you've just decided to wander and see where you end up or more likely you are being directed by an app to a free aire or campsite somewhere along your chosen route. Whichever way it happens, we've already been to some interesting little places and last night's stop was no exception.

Situated on a narrow peninsula between two canals, the aire at Sas van Gent made for a lovely stopover. Not much to do there but plenty of off-lead walking along the canal banks for the dogs and later we enjoyed strolling around the small town, stopping for a coffee in the sunshine and chatting to the colourful locals. Some of the canals here in the Netherlands are huge and can easily be mistaken for rivers. The one in front of our parking spot is a small tributary filled with moored boats but the other, to the rear, is the main canal from Gent to the open sea with large container ships passing and lots of interesting activity.



*A Dutch character from the nether region*

After lunch, we packed up and drove 40 minutes towards Antwerp ending up at another motorhome site about four kilometres from the centre. The shock of having to pay €10 for the night gave my wallet a nervous quiver especially after yesterday when we didn't spend anything at all throughout the day. I'm not proud of it but I don't think that has ever happened to us before whilst travelling, not one cent spent on anything. (There is a rumour I invented copper wire by arguing with my son Chris over a penny but it's categorically not true).

The campsite is overrun with wild rabbits. Trace counted twelve out in plain sight feeding or sunbathing together this afternoon. After Stan's escapades yesterday, both dogs have had a stern dressing down culminating in a ban from leaving Brian without written consent until further notice. The temptation is driving them crazy though and they are both on 'high alert' like a pair of meerkats from the vantage point of Brian's sliding side door (hab door).

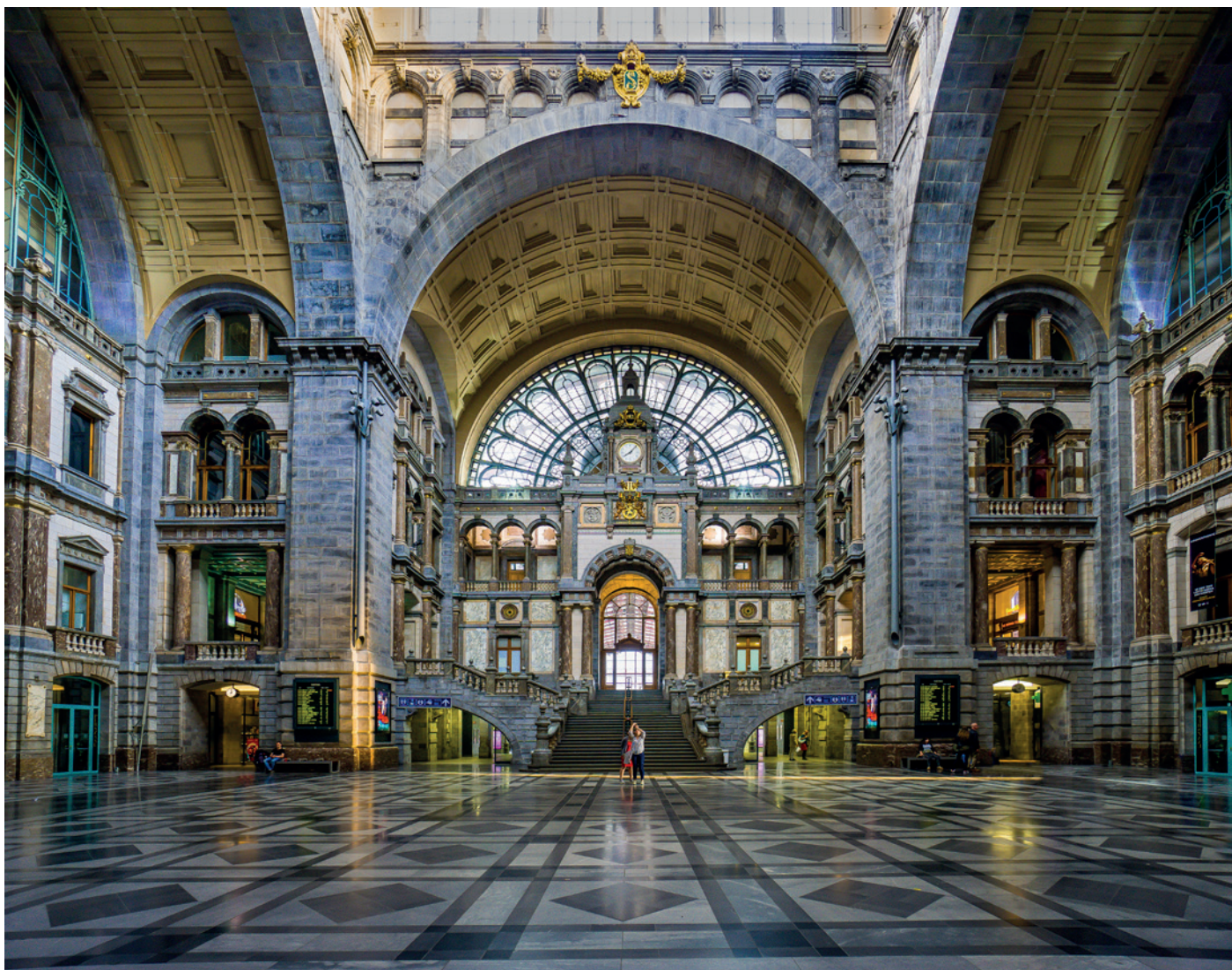
This evening I left Tracey to 'read' (which is her word for sleeping) and headed off into town for a recce on my mighty steed (the nan bike). Within 15 minutes I was finding my way around in the old quarter, looking for interesting things to photograph. In 2014 the British-American magazine Mashable awarded Antwerp Central Train Station first place for the most beautiful railway station in the world so that was one of a few places I wanted to visit in the city with the camera. Tomorrow we'll catch the tram in and have a proper look at a more leisurely pace following a guided tour I have downloaded to my phone.



*Wild rabbits driving Ruby and Stan mad*



*In Belgium the ice-creams come to you*



*The two faces of Antwerp railway station - the original terminal...*



*... and up the stairs to the newer terminus*





*Tonight's stop - Antwerp  
N 51° 11' 22" : E 4° 24' 2"  
N 51.189580, E 4.400640*

## Day 4

Normal service has been resumed. This morning after a disturbed night's sleep, the vomiting cocker alarm clock went off once again at 7 am. Jumping out of bed I observed Stan reproduce, with much heaving and a fair amount of theatrical flair, two large slices of watermelon skin which he'd obviously eaten whole and was unable to digest. After his epic Shakespearean performance he took a bow and promptly left the stage for me to clear it up. I have no idea where he found them, but it's not uncommon when we stay in cities as we use parks to exercise the dogs and people leave discarded food everywhere. It was actually his fault we had such a bad night's sleep, but not because of his alfresco dining habits.

The day had been very warm and on retiring (as posh people say) I noticed the familiar sound of a mosquito in the van with us. Too late to find the plug-in mozzie killing thingy, we decided to live dangerously and just bed down. About half-hour after lights' out there was a commotion at the dog end of the motorhome, followed by Stan trotting up to the bed to look up at me with a pained expression in his eyes. I sent him back and settled down once more only to have it happen again 30 minutes later. This cycle repeated until passed three o'clock before I finally drifted off for the rest of the night. I can only conclude he was being 'buzzed' by the flying terrorist and panicked by the unusual sound, was coming to me for reassurance. Hopefully, now he's lived through the 'night of terror' he'll be happier when he hears it next time.



*Ruby, Stan and (H)andy*

Today we took the tram into Antwerp. Dogs can ride along for free and within ten minutes we were in the heart of the old town which is surprisingly compact. Using our trusty phone app as a tour guide (izi.travel) we wandered the old streets for a couple of hours taking in the sights and letting the app inform us which direction to go and what we were looking at when we got there. The excursion comprised several interesting highlights including a church that once housed Jesus' foreskin (who wouldn't want to see that?). Also on the itinerary was the Parish of Misery (where I was eager to find an estate agent) and a statue of Catherine, the patron saint of coat buyers (I kid you not). Incidentally, this is the same Catherine who was later tortured on the so-called breaking wheel and is now remembered each November with a small rotating incendiary device shoddily nailed to a garden fence by a drunken dad. Isn't history enriching?



*Plenty of interesting architecture*



*The Cathedral of Our Lady Antwerp*

At one point during the day while passing a florist, seeing the only green thing for miles, Stan decided to relieve himself on some carnations. We all scurried away quickly with some stubborn resistance from him as he tried gallantly to finish the job off. I took comfort in the knowledge those flowers will go on to infuse somebody's home with an interesting and delicate aroma when given as a gift on a birthday or anniversary, especially if displayed above a warm fireplace.



*The twins do Antwerp's Grote Markt*

Antwerp's central square is called the Grote Markt. It's dominated by the impressive Cathedral at one end and the City Hall at the other. Many of the buildings forming the surrounding area are guild houses, celebrating the trade associations of each of the city's industries. Each one is topped with a golden statue which represents that guild's patron saint and below these ornate sculptures, on the ground level, are many bars and restaurants. In the centre of the

square is a fountain illustrating the gruesome story of the folklore giant Drone Antigoon who collected tolls along the Scheldt River and would sever the hands of those unwilling or unable to pay.

Outside a further tourist hotspot, the Steen Castle, we came face to face with another Flemish folkloric character - Lange Wapper. Apparently he's a legendary giant and trickster whose folk tales were told in the city and its neighbouring towns. However, to the ill-informed (ie: us!) it just looked like a disturbing statue of someone thrusting their crotch into the faces of young children in a 'hey, check that out boys and girls' kind of way. Ruby was justifiably disgusted.

Stopping throughout the day for lunch followed by late afternoon coffee and cake, we headed back for a sit in the sun and to rest our aching feet. I intended to bike back in tonight to take photos but the heat has resulted in a thunderstorm so I abandoned that idea. We'll probably have the morning here tomorrow but move on after that. Antwerp has turned out to be a nice city, more than worthy of a visit, but not exactly Rome or Barcelona.



*Check out the goodies kids*



Public transport Antwerp style

Tonight's stop - Kinderdijk  
N 51° 51' 34" : E 4° 39' 29"  
N 51.859710, E 4.658160

## Day 5

Remember living dangerously and just bedding down from the previous post? Well, Moziegate, as it's now being called, has taken its toll on one particular member of the team and for once it's not me. Tracey's face looks like a strawberry with eyes this morning where she was eaten alive by the little devil the night before last. How we laughed this afternoon as she rubbed on the bite and sting relief. Living the dream love, living the dream.

This morning before leaving Antwerp I wanted to take a trip down to Den Bell Tower which I'd noticed yesterday. Doing some research last night, I realised it had a fantastic spiral staircase which I wanted to photograph for an upcoming architecture competition back home. Setting off for the ten minute bike ride with camera in tow, I didn't know if access was public or private so wasn't even sure I could get the shot. However, I thought it was worth a try as I was already here.

On arrival, I noticed a large reception area to the right of the entrance with the staircase peaking tantalisingly out from the rear. The reception was really busy, so rather than risk being denied access and therefore disappointed, I decided simply to walk in with confidence and head directly for the upper levels of the building via the staircase. If approached, I resolved to play the stupid foreigner card and hope to get redirected to the front desk where I could ask for permission. However, no-one attempted to stop me and I climbed the 14 storeys to the top for some great shots before returning to the basement level for my favourite image of the set, a perspective looking up from below. Happy with my mornings' work I headed back to the campsite for tea, biscuits and medals as appropriate.



*From the bottom of the Den Bell Tower*



*Are you going to eat all of that?*



*The supplier of tea and biscuits*



*None for me thank you, I'm on a diet*

We've now moved on from Antwerp but thinking back, I've never been anywhere with so many wild rabbits as that site. Tracey was slowly turning into Michaela Strachan and I'd receive regular 'bunny watch' reports from her on my return from dog walks or photo trips.

Our new home for this evening is roughly 20km outside Rotterdam in a place called Kinderdijk. €17 a night (we're pushing the boat out now) but the showers are fab and we're about 3km away from an area of windmills which we want to see in the morning. No off-lead action for the dogs unfortunately as we're on the edge of a small busy town, but hopefully they'll get plenty of opportunity for a run tomorrow.



*The local boozier across from the aire at Kinderdijk*



*Tonight's stop - Haren*  
N 53° 9' 47" : E 6° 34' 43"  
N 53.163090, E 6.578830

## Day 6

Kinderdijk is an area of windmills situated at the confluence of the Lek and Noord rivers. Nineteen old mills drain the surrounding land and have been doing so since 1740. This is the largest concentration of old windmills in the Netherlands and has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1997.

I'd seen photographs and was interested in taking a look as we were passing, so the night before last I sloped off to have a peak in the hope of possibly getting some sunset shots. We'd had many thundery showers during the evening and the weather wasn't looking good at all but I thought I could at best, acquaint myself with the area for the following day and at worst, come back soaking wet.

When I finally got there, against all odds, for over an hour the skies held for a truly spectacular sunset. Tracey texted me halfway through, afraid I may be missing it, but fortunately I wasn't. I'm normally the person who gets a cloud roll across the solar eclipse just as it's approaching totality so I was shocked, after all the rain, to get some clear weather for shots of both the windmills and the amazing display in the firmament behind.



*Just before sunset and the weather is holding*





*20 minutes later with the camera facing the other direction*

On the bike ride back through the reens, it was literally like having handfuls of bugs thrown in my face as I rode along. I got back to Brian with most of the Netherlands wildlife in my eyes and teeth like a car radiator on a summer's evening, but it was worth it.

The following day it rained again in the morning so we hung around the van waiting for better weather. After lunch, the drizzle abated and we had a lovely afternoon wandering amongst the reens and windmills. Kinderdijk is free and well worth a visit, but unfortunately, your pooch will have to stay chained to your side as the whole area is riddled with bike paths and hiring a two wheeler is probably the best way to see it if you're dog free.

At about 4 pm the sun broke through and the heat really began to build until we finally decided to leave around 5 o'clock. Sat in the van before we set off, I started to ponder how strange it was to think that as the whole area is below sea level, the only thing keeping Brian and ourselves from a watery fate was the antiquated system of dykes and pumps driven by those lovely old mills.



Paterswoldsemeer

Tonight's stop - Harsefeld  
N 53° 27' 13" : E 9° 30' 11"  
N 53.453650, E 9.503180

## Day 7

Last night after leaving Kinderdijk, we travelled east for a few hours to overnight at a great free aire on the outskirts of Haren. It's a small 'nothing ever happens' kind of town with about 20,000 inhabitants but I found an interesting article online which made me re-evaluate its sleepy demeanour.

In 2012, a 15-year-old girl sent 78 friends an invitation to her 16th birthday party via Facebook. She deliberately chose the option 'public', so her friends could bring other friends. Not the wisest of moves in the circumstances as within a few days 55,000 people had received invites and more than 5,000 actually turned up on the day. Rioting broke out and 30 plus people were eventually arrested. When the dust settled the damages amounted to more than a million euros. However, the article failed to mention if the girl enjoyed herself so we'll never know if the evening was truly a success! If I'm honest, it all sounds quite similar to the parties my brother used to have in the good old days when we were young and arthritis-free enough to kick the odd bin over in the street ourselves. Anyway, I digress.

Set on a lake called Paterswoldsemeer, we arrived just before dark so I rushed out to take some last-minute shots of the sunset. There were only six bays available for motorhomes but they looked straight out over the water and the vista was tranquil and relaxing (unlike that girl's 16th birthday party). Not only a great view but modern toilets and unusually for a free site, a shower too.



*Sundown at Paterswoldsemeer*

Regarding the shower, during breakfast this morning we observed, from the comfort of our dinette (Oh, posh!) a man drive in, park his car, shower and then leave again. Now this may be normal behaviour for the Netherlands but it struck us as a bit weird: why not shower at home before leaving? We pondered that perhaps the Dutch water rates are extortionate and he was saving himself a few bob or maybe his home shower has a long queue of motorhomers waiting to use it which would have made him late for work. We'll never know, unfortunately.

After a short doggie walk around the edge of the lake, we set off for a day mainly consisting of travel intersected by stops for coffee, more dog walks and lunch later along the way. It's been a good day to be on the road as the weather is unseasonably hot here at the moment so we were glad to be in the air-conditioned cab through the worst of it.



*The aire on the lake*

Crossing the border into country number four, Brian got to experience the unrestricted German autobahns where, on certain sections, there is no speed limit. At one point we were doing almost 75 miles per hour. Thrilling stuff indeed! Finally, we arrived at our destination, another free aire in Harsefeld close to a monastery. A look around tomorrow and then onwards towards Denmark.



*Picturesque houses on the water near Groningen*



*Tonight's stop - St Peter-Ording*  
*N 54° 19' 57" : E 8° 37' 9"*  
*N 54.332630, E 8.619290*

## Day 8

Tonight friends, special offer, two days for the price of one (participants must be over 18, conditions apply). This may be the start of a trend as currently, the sunsets are so spectacular I've not been getting back to the mohome until after 11 pm and by then I can't be bothered to blog.

You last caught us in a little town called Harsefeld in Northern Germany. With the rear of the van parked tightly against the hedge defining the start of the town's municipal park and a monastery to our right, we were looking forward to a peaceful night's sleep. All was quiet and appeared idyllic until 45 minutes after we arrived when I noticed the monastery clock tower chime the hour and realised this could be a big mistake.



*It looks peaceful but the monastery held an aural surprise*



*Stan prior to his dip*



*In need of coffee this morning*

The following morning, after being woken up every 60 minutes by the bloody bells, I blearily took the dogs for a walk in the park. Halfway around Stan startled some ducks and while chasing after them fell headlong into a large pond they call home. He did try to stop himself with some Chaplinesque comedic balancing routine on the water's edge but to no avail, momentum was against him and in he went like Mrs Doyle falling off the window ledge in Father Ted. Luckily, the weather was hot so he was banished to sit outside drying off, looking up at us shamefully through the open hab door while we enjoyed breakfast.

Later, after packing up, we travelled through horrendous traffic around Hamburg heading north towards Denmark and finally arrived at a campsite on the German coast near St. Peter-Ording.

Checking us in with military efficiency, what the Kamp Kommandant lacked in warmth and sunny disposition he made up for in surly grunts as he directed us to our spot. We were asked if we would like croissants delivered for breakfast? "Oh, that sounds nice" was our reply. "Ok, you pick zem up at terty seven in ze morning from ere". 7:30 am! I wouldn't get up that early to go to court let alone for a French pastry!



*Ruby and Stan attempting the doggie land speed record*

In the afternoon we took the dogs for a run on the huge, white sandy beach. There were many cars and motorhomes down there and it brought to mind the Bonneville Salt Flats outside Salt Lake City where the land speed records are set. What Bonneville lacks, however (and St. Peter-Ording has in spades) is lots of naked Germans trotting around everywhere in socks and open-toed sandals. What is it with our Teutonic cousins, have they no shame? Socks with sandals! In Croatia, where most of the beaches have sharp rocks and pebbles, I've seen them naked except for walking boots which is almost as bad but it appears they'll go to any length (no pun intended) for an opportunity to flash little Herman and the twins at unsuspecting foreigners, even if it means looking ridiculous.

Late evening, hoping they'd all gone home, I walked back down to the beach in order to experience another vivid sunset to add to the growing collection of travel memories I've been acquiring.



*Keys, phone, wallet - I'm sure I've forgotten something*



*Sundown at St. Peter-Ording*



# Day 9

This morning, after treating the dogs to a cooling dip in the North Sea, we took a stroll into St. Peter-Ording itself. Spotlessly clean as you'd expect being German and pretty with modern thatched houses and lots of flowers everywhere.

The weather is currently very warm so lunch was an outside affair conducted at length in the shade of a large parasol before undertaking the hot walk back.



*The leafy centre of St. Peter-Ording*



*Posts and patterns*

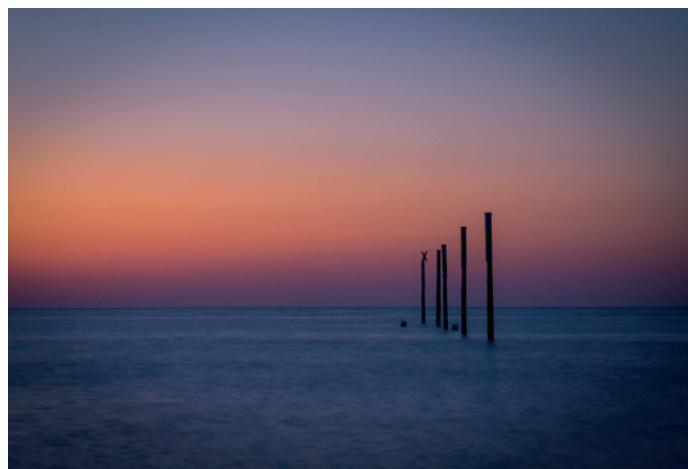


*Ruby and Stan getting their morning swim*

Returning to Brian late afternoon, we sat outside relaxing and rehydrating. Tonight, I once again ventured out, tripod and camera in hand, in an attempt to catch another glorious sundown. Tomorrow we move on and finally get to country number five: Denmark.



*Enjoying the last of the sunshine*



*Another glorious sunset on the beach at St. Peter-Ording*



*Suspicion from the locals  
after crossing the boarder into Denmark*

*Tonight's stop - Ribe  
N 55° 19' 27" : E 8° 45' 28"  
N 55.324320, E 8.757840*

## Day 10

After more than a week on the road, we're really finding ourselves settling into the motorhoming lifestyle now and things are beginning to become more routine. Any minor worries about Brian's health, finding somewhere to stay or flattening our batteries by leaving lights on don't even occur to us any more. Yes, it's true I still have a dash full of pretty coloured bulbs, no abs, cruise control or speedo, but the central locking hasn't let us down yet so we've stopped worrying.

You do need to get along well as a couple to do this though. I realise marriage is all about finding that one special person to annoy for the rest of your life but you are together most of the time in a motorhome. Trapped in a small space, with nowhere to run, tensions can build up so you better not be worried about being smothered in your sleep because you said the wrong thing earlier in the day over breakfast.

Moving on this morning from St Peter Ording, Herr Lip released us with the same ruthless efficiency and joke-packed delivery as check-in, itemising everything on the bill including the number of dogs and bizarrely number of showers taken (he counted the tokens). I worked for a German Company for many years and got to like the people very much but they are culturally in a different universe to the Brits and it all gets brought back to me whenever I travel here. Incidentally, this site has also been the most expensive stop on the two 'adventure before dementia' trips we've done so far, coming in at €50 for two nights.

Ninety minutes later we were crossing the border into Denmark and our first impression was the same as our previous brush with the Danes in Copenhagen, everything spotlessly clean and well-tended.

Stopping for lunch at a quaint little town called Møgeltønder (and being something of a gastro pioneer) I was interested to try out some food from the region. Scanning the menu I eventually opted to order the 'three pickled herring'. It tasted pretty much how it sounds if I'm honest. Not exactly a bush tucker trial but let's just say an acquired taste which will stay with me every belch until sometime tomorrow.



*Three pickled herring - yummy!*



*The only restaurant we could find in Møgeltønder*



*The beautifully kept church in Møgeltønder*



Always keen to take advantage of local knowledge, I asked the waitress for a place to visit on our way north. She suggested the island of Rømø off the west coast which forms part of the Wadden Sea National Park. It's an important area of tidal flats and another UNESCO World Heritage site so we set off, powered by herring burps, for the short commute out to the coast.

The island itself is reached by a spectacular 5km long road causeway built out into the sea. Arriving a short time later, we drove directly across the island landmass and on to the west side where the tarmac road eventually morphs into rough tracks along an enormous beach. Brian got his first feel of sand under his wheels as we drove along the compacted surface enjoying the novel experience. Finally, we stopped for the dogs to have a run on the expansive beach and did the British thing of sticking the kettle on and people watching from the comfort of the van (more naked Germans).



Around 5 pm we packed up and drove the half-hour return leg to our last stop of the day: an aire on the outskirts of Denmark's oldest town, Ribe. It's basically a car park containing 20 or so vans but it's free, has facilities, and is a five minute walk from the centre of town which we'll investigate tomorrow.

*Top: Flowers and traditional buildings at Møgeltonder*

*Middle: The vast beach at Rømø with vehicles at the water's edge*

*Bottom: OMG, look at that one, 25 stone and not even sandles!*



*Relaxing at Rømø*



Tonight's stop - Heager  
N 56° 7' 48" : E 8° 17' 47"  
N 56.130140, E 8.296410

## Day 11

Good evening everybody and welcome to another thrilling edition of chemical toilet daily! It's a tale of two cities tonight, medieval Ribe and modern Esbjerg.

We were up and about fairly early this morning heading into Ribe for a look around Denmark's oldest town. It's a relatively small place with lots of nice architecture, coffee shops and stores selling expensive upmarket trinkets. No Poundland to be found here and definitely no horned Viking hats in any of the shops. In the centre is a lovely old town square built around a huge cathedral. We browsed for an hour or so enjoying the ambience and early morning sunshine before heading back to the van to continue our onward journey. Next stop was Esbjerg, a major seaport on the west coast and of interest for one particular reason.



*Ribe - Denmark's oldest town*

I was talking to some Germans in Copenhagen last year, they showed me photographs they'd taken of four huge white figures staring out to sea. It's a monument called 'Man Meets The Sea' and I wanted to see it for myself to take some photographs as we were passing on our way north. We drove through the centre of Esbjerg without stopping, not because it was horrible, it actually looked very nice, but time is our enemy on this trip so maybe we'll come for a second look on the way back down.





*A walk on the beach and cooling dip just outside Esbjerg*

The monument itself is situated near the port outside town and stands guard over a long narrow beach. As the dogs had been on a leash all morning around Ribe, the first order of business was a long walk and swim for them to cool off and calm down.

Lunch was served alfresco back at the van which we'd left parked overlooking the beach. Tracey cooked in Brian's little kitchen and saved us over €8,000 on eating out. I quickly calculated if we do this for most meals whilst in Denmark, the van will have paid for itself by the time we get back to Germany.

After lunch, we left behind the hustle and bustle of Denmark's fifth-largest city and headed further north. Following a long narrow causeway with the sea stretching out on both sides, the area quickly became sparsely populated with lovely views, sandy beaches and old thatched-roofed houses scattered along the horizon. It's how you'd imagine the Isle of Skye to be with a Scandinavian twist.



*It's starting to get quiet*



*Parked up for a night on the farm*



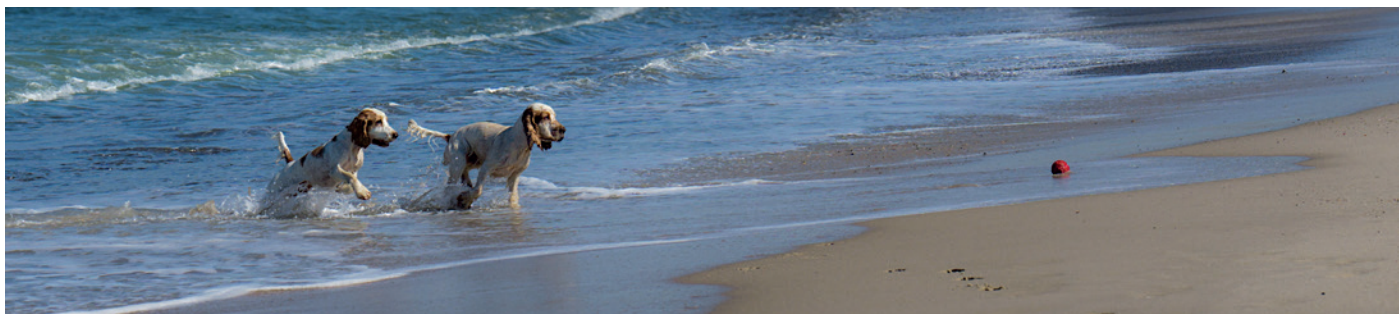
*Man Meets The Sea*



## Day 12

Tuesday brought sunshine yet again to a part of the world not used to it. The farmer who welcomed us at our stop last night apologetically said "sorry about the weather, it's too hot." He's right, we chose to come up here because we're not big fans of high temperatures and thought low twenties would suit us fine. However, hot is much better than rain and we recounted how lucky we've been so far this trip as we ate breakfast yet again outside in the fresh air.

*Tonight's stop - Agger*  
N 56° 46' 53" : E 8° 13' 56"  
N 56.781600, E 8.232470



After food and ablutions, we set off with some sightseeing recommendations from Per, our friendly farmer. Following a thin isthmus on the most westerly part of Denmark, the first stop was a beach walk and swim for the pooches. Tracey decided to have a paddle but I was more hesitant. Although inviting, let's not forget this is the North Sea, I feared my testicles might retract up into my neck never to be seen again if I dipped a toe in there.

Stopping sometime later at a little fishing port, we decided to spend our son's inheritance on lunch. Fresh fish and chips directly on the harbour. Afterwards, wandering around the small settlement, we came across a local with an interesting shed full of boat paraphernalia and dried fish. As I was taking some photographs he suddenly pulled out a knife and started towards us. Rather alarmed at his overreaction to my innocent interest in his 'shed o' fishing crap', my first thought was 'well I'm ok, Tracey's wearing flip-flops, I should easily be able to outrun her.' However, it turned out all he wanted was for us to taste the dried fish. Cutting some pieces off, he gave us a small section to try. It was like eating salty foot skin but we smiled in approval, made the right yummy noises, thanked him and left with most of it still lodged between our teeth.

*Dried fish - ooh tasty*



*You're never far from the sea in Denmark*



*The town of Agger - it's beginning to feel remote now*

A short while later the road came to an abrupt end (along with the land) and we needed to take a ferry across a two kilometre wide strait, Brian's first short maritime adventure. On the other side, we began to look for our stop for the night as directed by our ever-useful phone app.

The towns are becoming no more than a few dozen tin sheet or thatched roofed houses now and it's beginning to feel quite remote. Home tonight is behind the dunes on the outskirts of a town called Agger. I went out to catch the sunset at 10 pm but a thick band of cloud rolled in and stubbornly refused to move on until the sun had disappeared below the horizon. Later after it had cleared, a strange pink coloured moon rose over cattle still grazing in the near darkness. Very odd, maybe it's an omen.

*Onboard the ferry, crossing the short strait*



*Pink moon rising*



*Tonight's stop - Lønstrup*  
*N 57° 27' 5" : E 9° 47' 44"*  
*N 57.451550, E 9.795660*

## Day 13

A rushed post tonight because we've been watching the sunset at Rubjerg Knude Lighthouse. Being so far north, sundown is after ten o'clock with twilight continuing long passed midnight so it's now quite late. One more day and we'll be at the most northerly tip of Denmark signifying the halfway point of our trip and the start of our homeward journey.

We've already looked out over the vast blue ocean and imagined we could vaguely see the shape of Norway in the misty distance but I think that was a mirage brought on by lack of sleep. Stan woke us at first light once again with more fly chasing antics. Fortunately, not a mosquito this time but it's made us realise we need to make sure the van is clear before lights out as it seems to bother him.



Today started like most since we've been in Denmark. After breakfast, a long walk on the lovely, empty beaches and a swim for the dogs to cool down. It's warm again this morning so they were dry by the time we made the return trip up the deserted seashore.

Back at the van, we set off for the short drive to a town called Thisted.

It was our intention to take lunch at the harbour there but when we arrived, to our surprise, the bars and

cafes were mostly empty and

lifeless so we decided to move on to Bulbjerg,

as recommended by our farmer friend Per. Great views,

lovely beaches and World War Two gun embattlements to investigate. In

fairness, it struck us as being very similar to the beautiful coastline we have in West Wales but here we had the advantage of bright sunshine and 28 degrees, a rarity indeed back home.

Having dodged a bullet by avoiding a costly herring based lunch at Thisted, we once again ate 'al vano' overlooking the coast. Ironically, considering the vista and cuisine, we could have saved ourselves a fortune by just staying in Wales and choosing a sunny day to visit Oxwich Bay.



*WWII bunkers to explore*



*Strange but interesting*



*A series of sculpture along the beach front*



*Lunch with a view*

Pressing on to our final destination of the day, about an hour's drive further north, we arrived at Lønstrup to see Rubjerg Knude Lighthouse. First lit in 1900, the now abandoned structure is gradually being enveloped by a 40 metre high marauding sand dune called Råbjerg Mile, the largest migrating dune in northern Europe. Erosion and shifting sands are reducing the coastline in this area by one and a half metres a year. Mårup church (originally built a kilometre from the coast) used to stand nearby, but over time the elements encroached until every Sunday the local congregation would dig out the sand before services. Eventually, with the sea a mere nine metres away, it was decided to move the whole building further inland before it was completely taken. Not the same fate for Rubjerg Knude however, unless there is a similar intervention, the days of the lighthouse are sadly numbered. Entropy will run its inevitable course and within the next five years, it will be gone forever.



*Wind patterns in the dune*



*Sundown at the doomed Rubjerg Knude lighthouse*





Skagen lighthouse

Tonight's stop - Skagen  
N 57° 44' 21" : E 10° 37' 58"  
N 57.739280, E 10.632940

## Day 14

This morning, once again, started prematurely thanks to a poorly dog. The root cause of this probably goes back to our coastal walk 24 hours earlier where, I suspect, some serious beach combing took place by one particular member of our party.



*Handsome Stan on home turf*

Cockers, in general, are known for their insatiable appetites but Stan, as you know, is a tramp in dog's clothing. He can assault a wheelie bin with the precision of a SWAT team and has the ability to discover sustenance in the most unlikely of places. It's not uncommon for him to find the odd sheep jawbone when walking in the mountains or, on occasion, raid someone's garden for left-out cat food or birdseed. His nose is like a radar for a discarded sandwich or polystyrene kebab box and he's worked out how to open most containers capable of holding food remnants, even without nature's gift of opposable thumbs.

At home though, he's rarely ill. He's built up a cast-iron constitution as a result of his street snacking so is pretty immune to sickness. We've always joked, come world annihilation, there will only be Stan and the cockroaches left alive. However, when we're somewhere unfamiliar, he has more opportunities for unregulated consumption and access to more unsavoury items found marooned along the beach or left to fester for days in the hot streets. Therefore, more care is required to keep him on the straight and narrow.

As we were travelling last night he was suddenly sick. Earlier in the evening, Tracey said he was weird and unsettled. I suppose it didn't help that, in the afternoon, he'd wandered into an electric fence used to deter cattle and lit himself up like a light bulb. However, I'm guessing the real cause of his discomfort was more gastro related.

After we'd settled down for the night, I woke to whining and found him sat by the hab door with the panicked look of a desperate dog. I let him out to do his stuff and later again, at around 6 am, the same scenario and the same worried look of a cornered animal about to redecorate Brian in a more Seventies hue. Sending him out into the dawn a second time appeared to do the trick and he seems to be feeling much better this morning. I can only deduce he'd picked up something tasty on his beach walk and we have all been sleep deprived because of it.

Irrespective of the early start, after breakfast we took the one hour drive to our most northerly stop of the trip, Skagen. This is where Denmark comes to an abrupt end with a narrow, pointy, finger of land facing north-east towards Sweden. At its tip, the North and Baltic seas collide allowing you to stand with a foot in each watching the waves arrive from different directions until they finally meet.



*A Danish home in the dunes near Skagen*



*The point where two seas meet*



*Supplier of Danish pasties for the price of a dispensable organ*

Rather than take the novel tractor-pulled bus, the Sandormen, with the chattering classes we opted to walk the 30 minutes from the car park up the sandbar to land's end. Trace even persuaded me to have a paddle and my earlier fears regarding my unmentionables were allayed as the sea was more refreshing than bracing in the 30-degree heat. After we'd posed for a photograph with one foot in each sea (as is obligatory) we returned in search of coffee and Danish pastries. Some discussion took place over whose kidney would be auctioned on eBay to pay for it before unfortunately settling on mine.



*Sunset at the tip of Denmark*

Late in the afternoon, after a good look around Skagen's trendy shops, we headed to another nearby coastal hamlet. I'd heard about a house on the beach which I wanted to photograph so, while Tracey was once again helping to pay off our mortgage by using Brian's little galley to prepare dinner, I climbed the dunes and got the shot. Although I love taking landscape photographs, I consider myself more of a travel photographer. A true landscape shooter will make dozens of trips to the same location until the conditions and lighting are just right before pressing the shutter. This is a luxury not afforded to a tourist just passing through so it's very unusual to simply turn up and get a reasonable landscape photograph first time. However, just occasionally things work out and this evening I came away with a half decent image, helped by a low sun and some dramatic clouds.

Later, all four of us took a stroll along the beautiful uninhabited beach. Enjoying the dying embers of the balmy evening, we found somewhere to sit and watched the sun dip into the ocean while the sky circled through a kaleidoscope of colours. In a noisy, busy world, occasionally it's the simple pleasures that have the deepest impact.

Sometime after 10 pm, as darkness really began to take hold, we reluctantly took the short drive back to our overnight home at the car park in Skagen to finish off an evening we'll remember forever.



*Home by the sea*



Tonight's stop - Sønder Omme  
N 55° 50' 18" : E 8° 53' 20"  
N 55.838450, E 8.888940

## Day 15

Today was earmarked as a maintenance and travel day so after a lie-in, we got busy cleaning the van and returning everything to its rightful place for the homeward journey. The aire is in the car park used to catch the Sandormen to the end of the sandbar. In fact, it's not possible to go any further north from here by road, this is the Danish equivalent of John o'Grotes.

The spit of beach out to the point was strategically very important for the Germans during World War Two and is littered with bunkers and gun positions. We had a look around before leaving this morning but didn't go into the bunker museum at the edge of the car park as we were keen to get going.

Before setting off, I took the dogs for a short walk down a wooded lane next to the motorhome aire, not realising until ten minutes in I was being eaten alive by the mozzie militia. I came back out running like Phoebe from 'Friends' waving my arms frantically trying to ward them off, but to no avail. I now have some huge horsefly and mosquito bites as battle scars. Once more, living that dream.

We wanted to get some distance under our belt today so late morning set off for a campsite in the middle of the country. Making regular stops for walks and coffee along the way, at a beach sometime later, Ruby (who, as previously mentioned, is slightly on the spectrum) took umbrage to a buoy bobbing in the sea about ten metres offshore and let it know in no uncertain terms by barking and growling at it. She stood her ground for quite a while but the buoy was unimpressed by all her bluster and easily won the Mexican standoff.



*Exploring the beach bunkers*

While in Denmark we've noticed many lovely churches as we've travelled around. The buildings are always the same design, immaculately kept with beautifully manicured graveyards attached. I've found the more I travel the more interested I've become in how different cultures bury their dead. It started when I visited Japan where they leave food on the graves for their dearly departed. Here in Denmark, I've observed in some cemeteries many tombstones all bunched together. A waist-high, cross-shaped hedge is grown and each of the four triangle segments become, what I assumed to be, a family plot with 20 or more headstones all squeezed in cheek by jowl. What a lovely way to enter the afterlife I thought, all your past family already there to welcome you in. However, when I looked more closely I could see all the surnames were different so now I'm thinking the Danes get to spend eternity squashed together with a bunch of randomers. The life hereafter must be like being on a bus here. Not quite so enchanting spending perpetuity next to a bloke with horrendous halitosis and a single mum with a crying baby.



*These lovely churches are all over Denmark*



*The afterlife with strangers*

By early evening we had arrived at our campsite stop near Soender Omme and are now enjoying the transition from warm day to balmy night. The site is quite busy but being responsible, solicitous types, we've parked away from the other campers in an effort to keep the dogs away from those members of society who do not share our joy of the canine fraternity (or miserable turds as we like to call them). To be honest, I will admit other peoples dogs can be hard to love. They are either playfully jumping up on you, humping your leg or farting and licking their bits. It reminds me of having family stay over at Christmas.

This evening we've taken up positions outdoors under the awning. I'm Deeted up to the eyeballs and slightly on edge after my wildlife encounter earlier today but Tracey is trying to calm me down with a new tippie she's found on a shopping expedition this afternoon. Life's good as we sit toasting the end of the day with a large glass of 'Lucky Bastard' before wobbling off to bed.

*Tonight's tippie*



*Stan took this one - impressive skills for a cocker spaniel, I think you'll agree*



Washing day

Tonight's stop -Møgeltonder  
N 54° 56' 27" : E 8° 48' 29"  
N 54.941040, E 8.808060



## Day 16

Well, I'm not sure if it was the inappropriately named wine, the Danish pastries or poisoning from the half dozen horsefly bites but I got a touch of the 'Stan's' this morning. Nothing too troubling, I didn't actually feel ill but was relieved to be on a very nice campsite with a toilet block not too far away just in case.

Coincidentally, today was laundry day so we just happen to be loafing around waiting for it all to dry anyway (not that any of the washing was the result of a mistimed fart or anything, indeed just to be clear, no underpants were harmed in the making of this blog). My friend was on a Megabus coming back from Heathrow Airport when the lady next to her shat herself so I'm counting my blessings as it could have been a lot worse. Like Stan though, I guess I shall also have to stop eating stuff I find on the beach.

I spent the morning enjoying the sunshine and outdoor vibe lounging around the van. However, I was careful to always have one eye on the campsite conveniences in the near distance and my trainers firmly attached to my feet in case a wide-eyed sprint was necessary. I reckon I could have beaten Usain Bolt over the short distance between the van and toilet block but fortunately, I didn't need to prove it.

Later, when I thought it was safe to venture further afield, I took the dogs swimming in a small river running along the edge of the site. While there I noticed a plethora of blue dragonflies darting amongst the reeds on the water's edge so went back later with my camera to annoy them. I don't have a particular interest in wildlife photography but I now have a newfound appreciation of those who do. It's much harder than it looks getting those little devils in focus. What's needed is a hammer and nail to stop them darting around.



*A cool down for Ruby and Stan*



*What you looking at?*



*A Blue Damselfly*

Late afternoon, when all the clothes were dry, we set off to revisit a couple of places we'd liked on the way up. Tracey had deemed, in the circumstances, I qualified to break the 'emergency solids only' rule we have in place for Brian's little bathroom so, with renewed confidence and a spring in my step, off we went.

We decided to divide the two-hour journey by revisiting Esbjerg along the way, after which we continued on to the Danish-German border. Currently, we are at a lovely free motorhome stopover we noticed on the way up along with five or six other vans. It's set near to woodland so nice and peaceful and the town is pretty for a stroll later. Tomorrow, after a dog walk in the morning, we'll put some miles in and hope to avoid the horrendous roadworks in Hamburg by travelling on a Sunday.



*The wide open landscape of West Jutland*



*Back to Man Meets The Sea for another look at sunset*



*Tonight's stop - Buxtehude  
N 53° 28' 44" : E 9° 42' 13"  
N 53.478990, E 9.703660*

**Day 17** I mentioned previously how the motor homing thing has a habit of sending us to interesting, off the tourist trail places. Well, tonight is no exception. We are currently enjoying the evening at a boatyard in the centre of Buxtehude in northern Germany. For the princely sum of €8, we have a novel, secure place to park with a view of the river and use of the clubhouse toilets and showers. Two minutes walk away is an authentic German town which probably contains no foreign tourists at all besides us.

This morning we said our goodbyes to Denmark. Staying overnight at Møgeltønder, the little town we'd visited on the way up, we breakfasted like kings with a full fry-up before walking the dogs through the woods and expansive surrounding barley fields. Stan managed to get his third electric shock of the trip from another cattle fence on the way around, will he ever learn? If I could buy a cable with USB at one end and a dog's bum connection at the other I could keep all my electrical equipment charge from him, saving money on a mains hookup every evening. I did feel sorry for him though as he let out a pained squeal when it happened. Fortunately, there doesn't appear to be any lasting effects. Sometime later, he proudly presented me with a dead pigeon that he'd managed to find while foraging in the woods. He wanted to eat it, I wasn't so keen.

There is a Sunday ban on heavy goods vehicles in Germany so our plan to drive around Hamburg on the Sabbath worked well. Of course, the normal traffic from the working week was also absent so we made good time completing the three-plus hours without incident. After setting up in Buxtehude and having a stroll around the town, we chose a restaurant for our evening meal. I got a very decent peppered steak and a good bottle of red to share between us without suffering 'the Stan's' when being presented with the bill. In Denmark, on the other hand, weeping into an empty wallet became a daily ritual observed by embarrassed Danish onlookers wherever we went.

Later, I took the camera back out for some night shots, as the old town is quite picturesque. Apparently, Buxtehude is known as The Friendly Fairytale Capital Of The World. The Brothers Grimm helped to form this reputation as their story of "The Hare and the Hedgehog" (The Hare and the Tortoise in the UK) took place here and many other German folk tales use Buxtehude as their setting.



*Full English*



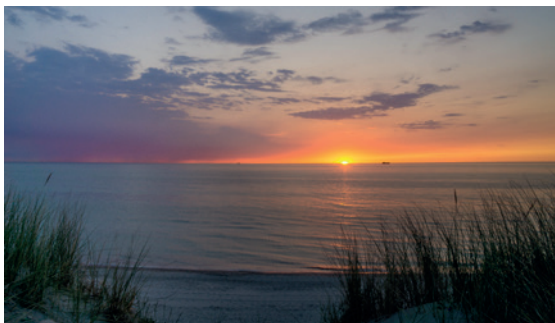
*Exploring the Danish Countryside*



*Buxtehude at night*



Having now completed our time in Denmark, I feel a roundup is in order. Without doubt the cleanest, well-kept country I have ever visited. Not a scrap of litter anywhere, all grass verges mowed, everybody's gardens tended. It really is unbelievable and puts the UK to shame. It's full of friendly, polite people who mostly speak great English, which is handy when your Danish is not so good and you pick up pile ointment instead of toothpaste. However, it's not all good news, with the exception of Ribe and Copenhagen (which we visited on a previous trip) most of the towns are a little 'Stepford Wives' and lack character. The rural interior looks like Britain with Danish style houses but importantly, without the windswept litter found in many counties and although the coast is wild and the beaches beautiful, there's nothing much of interest unless you like walking, swimming or sunbathing. Personally, as I'm not a lover of crowds and touristy places, I really liked the remote, wild ruggedness but as with all the Scandinavian counties, you need deep pockets to eat and drink unless you take sandwiches and a six-pack.



*Bye bye Denmark, I'll be back when I've sold my remaining kidney*



Tonight's stop - Cloppenburg  
N 52° 51' 8" : E 8° 3' 10"  
N 52.852370, E 8.053010

# Day 18

Not too much to report today. I woke this morning feeling a bit under the weather (which coincidentally was how the weather itself was feeling). With no rain for nearly two weeks, the unprecedented dry May had been replaced by heavy, overcast skies and a more palatable temperature.

It's not unusual for me to have a down day every now and then because of a family complaint which causes the Davies' stomach to produce too much acid. Both my mother and sister have it while my brother appears to have killed his off with unimaginable high levels of alcohol and fried bacon in his youth. I think I suffer more in the morning because I've been lying down all night. Normally by lunchtime I'm feeling better, although sometimes it lasts all day and on rare occasions for longer.



*This morning at the boatyard*

On a positive note, for the first time this trip I actually felt comfortably cool which went some way to making up for my rubbish wellbeing. In the circumstances, as I was having trouble getting going, we decided to make this a chore day allowing me to work at my own pace and stop if I felt poorly, not that we had any major plans anyway.

The fur babies got a bath. This wasn't a necessity with all the swimming they've been doing but we like to keep them smelling pine fresh as we all have to cohabit in such a small space. Then, chore two was cleaning three week's worth of dead bugs from Brian's windscreen. By the time we were ready to set off, it was like I'd had my cataracts removed for the onward journey.

We drove for an hour and had an extended stop for lunch at a nondescript town called Ottersburg. I was feeling better by mid-afternoon so we sat and tried to plan a route back to Calais which involved some interesting cities and nice lakeside or waterway type overnight stops along the way. However, we soon realised we needed to be an hour further on to get it all to work.

Late afternoon I took myself and the dogs for a wander along the footpaths dividing the big open fields of Northern Germany. Fully recovered now, I was enjoying the fresh air and exercise whilst watching, with fascination, the breeze ripple across the swaying heads of barley. Suddenly a crazy tractor driver came passed to harvest it all and I disappeared in a swath of dust and pollen. Blind and snotty from the subsequent hay fever flare-up, I managed to find my way back to the van to drive the extra 60 minutes to our next stop at Cloppenburg. Tomorrow, with renewed sinuses, we will cross the border back into the Netherlands where we plan to spend the day in the town of Zwolle.



*Hey fever flare-up*

JUNE

5



*Tonight's stop -Zwolle  
N 52° 31' 49" : E 6° 4' 28"  
N 52.530340, E 6.074650*



## Day 19

It has amazed me the organisations that open their facilities to motorhomes on the continent. Sometimes for a small fee and occasionally for free, the places you can find yourself staying is an adventure in itself. Yesterday we were amongst the tarpaulin-covered boats in Buxtehude boatyard. Today started in Cloppenburg Museum car park.

After a quiet night's sleep and the regular morning inspection of Ticky Minaj and Bruce Tickinson (they've never had a single one at home but always pick up a few on mainland Europe) we took the pair of them for a run around the neighbouring lake before setting off for what should have been an hour's drive to Lingen for lunch. However, road diversions and a serious traffic accident (the type that brings the whole road to a halt with everybody out of their vehicles) meant we didn't arrive until around 2 pm.

Finding the quaint central marketplace we headed for somewhere to eat. I was sweeping my translator app over the menu when the very friendly waitress came over, keen to practice her English. She explained they have a special dish of the house which she described as a pancake with onion, tomato, marmalade and salad. I know German cuisine is very different to the UK but thought she must mean an omelette of some description. She suggested Tracey should have the one called 'bucken' and proposed an alternative for me with some kind of apple. This was getting seriously weird but I'd been in this situation many times in Germany so we went with the flow.



Lingen



Seeing double - Brian and his twin Basil in the aire at Cloppenburg



Lunch German style

What came back was indeed a pancake. Tracey's was a savoury type with 'bacon', while mine was a dessert pancake with apples, apple sauce and jam. At least it was a little more acceptable to my British pallet than a previous occasion in Germany, where I was subjected to a full cooked dinner with what I thought were cherry tomatoes, but turned out to be cold grapes. My taste buds had never been so abused.

After the gastronomic onslaught that was lunch, we strolled the pretty town for a few hours before crossing into the Netherlands and onto our final destination for the day at Zwolle.



Our site this evening is another novelty. A river harbour just outside town surrounded by boats. There are many vans here, their occupants all sat outside watching the sunset after paying the harbour master €10 for the experience. I noticed just inside the entry gates a red British phone box which has been converted into a mini library by adding shelves until it's essentially full of books. On further inspection this evening, I can see it's a free exchange system based on trust. When you've finished reading the book you brought with you, it can be deposited and a new one removed in its place. What a great idea. With so many motorhomes passing through there must be a tremendous turnover of new reading material for the avid bibliophile.

Back at Brian we settled down for our evening meal. After my lunch experience, I'm thankful Trace is cooking tonight as I'm pretty confident I'm not going to get a vanilla ice-cream with a carrot sticking out of it and Branston pickle for garnish.

*The novel book exchange scheme at the motorhome site*



*The aire on the marina at Zwolle*



*Tonight's stop -Zwolle  
N 52° 31' 49" : E 6° 4' 28"  
N 52.530340, E 6.074650*

## Day 20

Well, Zwolle has turned out to be the surprise of the trip so far. Like Antwerp, not a major player in world cities but a very nice place to spend a sunny day strolling and people watching from the many cafes and bars. Its unique selling point is the old town centre, an island about one kilometre across, entirely segregated from the rest of the city by a wide circular canal. Most of the commerce and industry is kept on the outside of this waterway so it's mainly pedestrian and bicycle traffic only in the centre. It's surprising how removing the cars and lorries reduces the hustle and bustle yet still manages to retain the big city feel.



After an enjoyable evening and peaceful sleep at the harbour, this morning we took the 30 minute walk along the canal into town. It's been hot yet again today so after strolling the streets for a while we found a park with a fountain where the dogs could splash around and cool down. Stan, the intrepid explorer, once more found a cast-off sandwich in the bushes which, like a cheap magician, he managed to make disappear before I could get to him.



*The Sassenpoort gatehouse*



*If you're not on the beach - just make your own*



*Car-free Zwolle*

Lunchtime we chose a place serving baguettes, burgers and some Dutch specialities. Although I think I may have peaked yesterday, today I had marinated chicken skewers, chips and, wait for it... a peanut sauce! Gastro pioneer strikes again! The food here is a bit like the meals made by the lady from 'The Vicar of Dibley'. However prior to that, whilst Tracey was inside ordering, I was outside trying to wrangle two dogs, each on separate leads and attempting to secure a table at the same time! At this point, Stan took it upon himself to explore a large metal rubbish bin in the vicinity by hopping up on his back legs and looking inside. Because it was only a quarter full, as soon as his front legs came into contact with it he pushed it over with an enormous clatter, knocking the top off and spilling the contents everywhere over the pavement. There then followed, in full view of the seated patrons, what could only be described as a 'tramp street fight' between myself and two cocker spaniels.



*Stan's bin of destiny*



*More room around the nethers*

The objective for them was to eat the maximum amount of spilt chips in the shortest time possible while I scrambled to clear everything up and right the aforementioned waste receptacle. All this while I was trying to untangle the two criss-crossing leads as they scurried around after the scattered goodies. I'm sure Tracey would have died of embarrassment if she'd been there, but fortunately I'm made of much sterner stuff. When she finally appeared with the food she looked at my flushed face and said casually "all right?" totally unaware of the preceding drama.

Arriving back at the van late in the afternoon, a glass of red was in order after the rigours of the day. We intend to stay here again this evening so I'm thinking of taking the nan bike for a spin at dusk to get some moody night photos. It will depend on my level of comfort later and whether one glass turns into many.



*Coffee is a serious undertaking for the Dutch*



*Tonight's stop -Vianen  
N 51° 59' 53" : E 5° 5' 25"  
N 51.998210, E 5.090510*

## Day 21

I guess until you're a seasoned pro, using a motor home is an evolving experience. This is our second big 'Tramps On Tour' outing and we learnt so much from our first trip away in February. We now have books and phone apps to show us places to stay and realised all the aires are different.

There doesn't appear to be any standardisation when it comes to refilling or emptying water and waste etc, so sometimes it takes a while to work out what's what and where to get it. Most of all, you realise there are things you wished you'd brought along to make the trip more comfortable or enjoyable.

Of the extras we bought for this trip, the best one for me has been the nan bike. Yes, I know I look a pillock on it but fortunately, due to an extraordinarily high tolerance to shame, I don't care. Also, compared to the bikes here in the Netherlands, she's a real looker. Most of the Dutch models are huge framed things with a wicker basket at the front. They look like they should have a 1960s midwife riding them offering a glimpse of stocking top to eagle eyed passers-by. Instead, many here are ridden by trendy city types or young students, proudly perambulating around on machines that would have been binned off long ago in the UK. Others have contraptions for carrying babies or goods, I've even seen ones whereby the front wheel has been repositioned about a metre further forward allowing a box to be fitted in-between for carrying small children. Yes my friends, in the Netherlands when I ride by, I turn heads for all the right reasons. The nan bike is the Austin Martin DB9 of bicycles on the mean streets of Zwolle.

And so it was last night, as I majestically took to the cycle lanes and pavements to get some night shots. Ignoring all the meticulously drafted rules of the road, I spent a happy hour with camera in hand exploring the city, narrowly avoiding accidents with other cyclists and generally annoying the residents until near midnight.



*Zwolle's Glass Angel - I'm not sure if I like it or not*



*Graffiti on a railway bridge*



*Trendy Dutch starter homes*

This morning we moved on to Utrecht, Holland's fourth largest city. It's described as a mini Amsterdam but without the tourists, red-light district and Ann Frank's crib. I think that's doing it a disservice though to be honest, it has a vibe all of its own. It's a compact city, easily walkable and although true, it has canals, unlike Amsterdam they have a unique split-level character with wharves. The Oudegracht (Old Canal) has a lower section a few metres below the street, almost at water level. This was where merchant ships would drop off goods which were then stored in warehouses along the wharf. Now, restaurants, bars and shops have moved into these spaces and the former offloading pavements are seating areas or pedestrian walkways giving the streets an unusual two-tiered appearance.

Although the city centre was very interesting, we decided to cut our visit short as the mercury topped out at 31 degrees and I feared I might spontaneously combust walking in the unshaded streets. The dogs were also suffering because of the heat so we decided to leave early as it was not as enjoyable an experience as it should have been. Tomorrow is supposed to be cooler with rain due in the evening so we may return and spend some more time here again in the morning. Our aire tonight is only 20 minutes out of town so it wouldn't be a hardship to pop back for another look, especially as Utrecht appears to be a hidden gem.



*The split-level canals at Utrecht*



*The Dom Tower - the tallest church tower in the Netherlands*



*Amsterdam without the tourists*





Tonight's stop - Sas van Gent  
N 51° 13' 33" : E 3° 48' 9"  
N 51.226060, E 3.802570

## Day 22

A bit of a strange, nothingy day today. I woke to the pitter-patter of rain on the bedroom skylight and knew our carefully crafted plans were about to change. In fairness, this is only the second morning of rain in over three weeks and the first wet walk for the dogs this entire trip. The harbour master in Zwolle told us it's been the hottest May on record and looking at Tracey this morning, I think most of that heat has been directed towards her face. She looks like she's been for a day trip - to the Sun. It was probably a result of walking around Utrecht yesterday where shade was in short supply. When she asked me what was best to conceal it, I suggested a burka.

Last night's stop was at a free aire on the outskirts of Vianen, a little town just outside Utrecht. There were half a dozen of us parked up along the banks of a large canal. Great for walking the dogs and watching the huge cargo barges taking containers of goods all over the country. What I didn't realise though, is these canals have proper sand beaches which are cleaned by the wash created by the boats. They're actually very nice and in the absence of a coast, the locals use them to swim and sunbathe.

Not so this morning though. Walking along the shore in the light rain the dogs came across an injured duck which they enthusiastically chased down the beach to the water's edge. Once the stricken bird was safely afloat I thought the pursuit would come to an end. However, unusually they both decided to wade in and stand over it looking at each other, once again clueless as to what to do next. I called them back and the duck went on his way. They may have the breeding of working dogs, but fortunately the killer instinct has been lost somewhere along the bloodline. The only real victim of the entire incident was Brian's interior after they returned wet and sandy for breakfast.

Abandoning plans to head back to Utrecht for a second day we decided to drive east where the weather was better. We have an obligatory vet appointment tomorrow at Sas van Gent and knowing the stop is a nice place to spend some time, made the journey early. We spent the rest of the day enjoying the light sunshine and relaxing around the van. Tomorrow, again following the advice of a local and with the forecast further improved, we're going to check out the nearby town of Sluis. A return to Utrecht will have to wait until a future trip unfortunately.



*The aire at Vianen*



*Chasing the wildlife on our first wet walk of the trip*



*Returning to the aire at Sas van Gent*



*Tonight's stop - Sluis*  
N 51° 16' 46" : E 3° 23' 38"  
N 51.279630, E 3.394030

## Day 23

It is a legal requirement, when travelling back to the UK, that Ruby and Stan have to be poked and prodded by a foreign vet before returning. They are also wormed and have their passport stamped to prove they have been passed fit to travel. We'd made an appointment for today and as it turned out, not a minute too soon. Yesterday evening I noticed Stan scratching his ears. When the vet had a look inside this morning, not only did she see light coming through from the other side but, maybe from the swimming or perhaps the high temperatures we've been having, they were both slightly infected. The upshot is I have to administer drops for the next couple of days until things calm down again. However, both dogs have been passed fit to travel so, €72 later, we were back on the road and heading to a town called Sluis.



*One of the few pictures I took of Sluis*



*After her canal ordeal....*



*The car park clean up*

Tracey has discovered a supermarket here in the Netherlands called Albert which she really likes. On the drive this morning she said she wanted to stop for some things if we passed an Albert. I informed her, with my best schoolboy humour, I'd passed an Albert earlier before we left. How we laughed.

After a good look around Sluis we had lunch. No bush tucker trial today and a nice little town to wander to boot. I went to use the toilets in the restaurant afterwards but the gents were occupied so I surreptitiously loitered in the vicinity until the door opened to reveal a man in full-on ladies attire walkout. Those Dutch, so LGBT+.

Unfortunately, I didn't end up taking many photographs of Sluis because our visit was cut somewhat short by an incident involving Ruby for a change. We'd explored the town and were walking the many foot and cycle paths around the outskirts to give the dogs a bit of off-lead time before returning. The whole area is littered with canals and I could see Ruby was itching for a cool down as the day was once again in the upper twenties. However, between the footpath and water was a metre or more of dense thistles. These were nearly two metres high and made a seemingly impenetrable barrier to getting in. Somehow though she managed to push through and we heard a splash. Without being able to see what was going on because of the undergrowth, I called her back but got no response. After some time we started to hear whimpering and realised she was in some sort of difficulty, probably tangled in roots in the water. Not knowing if she was drowning I was faced with the unsavoury prospect of wading through the dense nettles in shorts and t-shirt in order to jump in and fish her out. Without hesitating I volunteered Tracey to do it as nettle rash is really nasty and she is Tracey's dog after all. Stan would never do anything so stupid.

Eventually, I decided to be the hero and had one shoe off when Ruby suddenly reappeared rather wet and smelly through the thick undergrowth. Back at the van, she got a thorough car park shower before being allowed entry but fortunately, no real harm was done.

Moving on towards the end of the afternoon, we've now checked into a campsite nearby and are relaxing with a glass of red. Ruby though, is still in the dog house.



*Tonight's stop -Bruges*  
N 51° 11' 44" : E 3° 13' 34"  
N 51.195670, E 3.226380

**Day 24** Last night's campsite was a revelation after lights out. Early evening driving in, we were warmly welcomed by the friendly owners who, on our arrival, were busy tending the extensive grounds. After paying €13 we found a spot, set up and settled back to a glass of wine and a long conversation with our Belgian neighbours (and new friends) Patrick and Annick. My first impression of the site was positive, everything well-tended but with lots of objet d'art and bric-a-brac scattered around like a well-kept shantytown. Every tree, flower bed and decorative fence was covered in hanging mobiles, plastic pineapples or artificial coloured flowers. I only realised the reason for the profusion of knick-knacks at sunset when everything gradually began to come to life.



Each item was fitted with a small, solar-powered light source turning the whole camp into a bohemian fairyland. Hundreds of tiny trinkets illuminated the area with small points of light like multicoloured fireflies. They formed an outline for pathways, lit up the buildings and hung from the trees and shrubbery adding a magical after dark vibe to the whole place. Coincidentally, it also made it much easier to find the toilet block after a few glasses of wine which was a bonus.



*The Sluis campsite before and after dark*



*The last swim of the trip*

This morning we had a lazy start. We'd decided to end up at Bruges for the evening but as our overnight stop there was a strict 24 hour affair, we didn't want to arrive too early to give ourselves until 6 pm the following day to look around. After breakfast, dog walk and ablutions we headed to the coast at Breskens to give the woofers their final swim of the holiday. A somewhat unremarkable seaside town but the dogs enjoyed cooling off and it was nice to walk the beach with them for the final time.

We picked a Turkish restaurant for lunch. The waiter patiently went through the menu explaining everything in detail. We liked the sound of chicken and lamb on a bed of fries topped with a salad - it came back as a kebab in a bowl. Now, as everybody knows, the golden rule regarding kebabs is strictly no eating during daylight hours. It's preferable for it to be after 11 pm and your blood alcohol must be higher than 80 milligrams per hundred millilitres, so it just felt wrong and dirty to be having one during the day.

Travelling the hour to Bruges we once again passed an Albert and I repeated the same joke, patently informing Tracey it was way too good to only use once. The site here in Bruges is expensive for a motorhome stop at €25 a night but it's only a ten minute walk to get into the city centre and by being so near, we have all evening and tomorrow to fully explore its delights. We figured it would probably cost us that in parking fees alone for 24 hours so was well worth it.

I took a trip into the centre this evening to get some dusk shots with the camera. The place is beautiful and I'm looking forward to a proper look around tomorrow.



*Kebab in a bowl*



*Bruges after hours*





Tonight's stop -Gravelines  
N 50° 58' 10" : E 2° 7' 54"  
N 50.969450, E 2.131690

## Day 25

Well, a pretty perfect end to our second adventure. Bruges was stunning with fewer crowds than expected. The sun shone, the temperature was just right and even the dogs behaved themselves. No-one nearly drowned, no sandwiches were snatched out of the hands of unsuspecting toddlers by furry thieves and nothing legally eaten was later theatrically regurgitated in front of a surprised and less than appreciative Belgian audience.

We have been to Bruges once before but it was literally a lifetime ago when we were both kaftan wearing youths. Thin as a Twiglet and with about the same level of travel experience as one, I was personable, had a mop of hair like a Brillo pad and unlike now, could pass a public toilet without needing to use it - a catch indeed for any young lady! In the intervening years, however, I had retained absolutely nothing of that trip except vague memories of the boats and canals. I certainly didn't remember or appreciate how beautiful Bruges is or indeed how close and easy it is to visit from Calais.

Passing by the various gatherings of tourists milling around the main square, we once again relied on our trusty phone app to show us the sights and to keep us informed of the centuries of rich history we were walking through. Not for us a guide with a red umbrella or upheld flag to follow. Those groups always remind me of five-year-old kids in their first football team, all zig-zagging after the ball in a little huddle like a swarm of bees. We followed our own path and were duly rewarded with information regarding the bell tower, built as a lookout for possible fires around the city which ironically burnt down three times. We also got to know 'Phillip the handsome' and his homeboy 'Hilarious' (I kid you not) who I bet was a riot to go out for a drink with. However, only a brief mention was made of his sister, 'Abigail the munter', who was once mistaken for a horse in a dark ally. Ok, I admit I made that last bit up but the rest is historically accurate.



*The Bruges belfry in The Markt (market square)*

Tracey found the €7 I'd managed to save throughout the month by not using the paid public urinals and insisted we put it to use by having a fancy lunch at a riverside restaurant. I reluctantly agreed as it was the last day and told her with uncharacteristic generosity she could have anything on the menu up to and including the pasta selection. However, I did manage to hold onto a few pennies sometime later by getting her to share a rather spectacular Belgian waffle with strawberries and ice cream.

Around 5 pm we got back to Brian and headed for our last overnight stop of the trip. Thirty minutes from Calais, we once again found ourselves back where we started on the first night, almost a month ago, at Gravelines ready to cross the channel for home tomorrow.



*Splashing out on a riverside lunch*



*View from the Rozenhoedkaai*



*The Poortersloge*



*Bruges by day*

**JUNE**  
**12**



*Ruby and Stan - able to smell a French pastry from three kilometres*



## Day 26

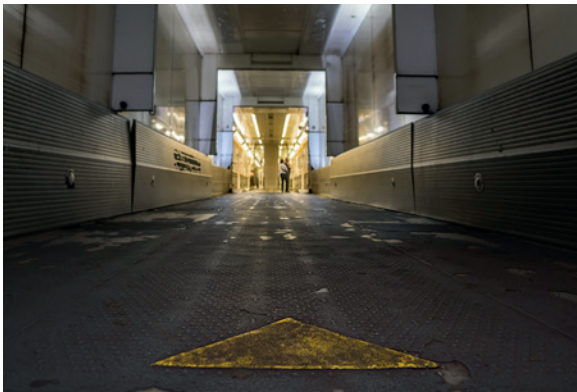
Ok folks, it's the last one for this trip. Travel day today so not much to report.

Brian did the business once again getting us all home despite the inauspicious start. He really is the unsung hero in the team. We've still got issues and varying amounts of lights on the dash (four today) but he keeps on going through it all. The fault is more regular now so hopefully the garage can sort it before our next outing.

I took the dogs for their last French walk this morning. Five kilometres around the rowing lake, fortunately without a repeat of the 'bunny incident' from last month. Then, back for breakfast and off to the Eurotunnel. We got there early to have a mooch around the duty-free, grabbed something to eat and managed to catch an earlier train than booked. This put us back in Blighty an hour ahead of schedule. The traffic for once was lighter than expected so we made good time both on the M25 and M4 to complete our month-long journey and return home safely.



*One last walk around the rowing lake*



*The Eurotunnel train awaiting our return*



*Two sleepy travellers going home*

We've visited some interesting places on this trip but I've noticed, over the last few years, my ability to retain information about the things we see has deteriorated considerably. So much so, we have stopped taking guided tours and to a lesser extent, even frequenting museums. The most interesting of facts are simply forgotten a few months later so there seems little point. It's as if my mind is a conveyor belt of knowledge with a large bin at the far end. Every travel fact starts its journey, shiny and new, working its way along the conveyor before falling into the receptacle at the other end never to be seen again.

I've concluded concessions have to be made as life goes on. Just as I'm no longer able to play a football match without needing a heart defibrillator on the touchline, so also must my travel plans be adapted for my gently advancing years. There was a time when I would want to delve into every hidden corner of a visited city, eager to know everything about the place and enthusiastic, no matter how tired, to see over the next horizon. Now, I'm happy to sit and drink coffee in the main square. From there I can observe my younger, more energetic fellow travellers who, having inherited my inquisitiveness, still possess the capacity to retain acquired information and the stamina to explore beyond the distant skyline. That's one of the reasons I started writing down our adventures in this blog. I reasoned it would be something nice to look back on in my dotage when it has all become a senescent memory and the term travel is redefined as a trip to the toilet at the other end of the house (with excitement being re-interpreted as whether I make it there in time).

So that's it for now, home again. It was great but not all wine and roses (although mostly wine for Tracey). In six months, thanks to that dodgy midlife memory, I will have forgotten the insect bites and strength-sapping temperatures to be left with the rose-tinted memories of our best motorhome adventure so far.

# TRIP THREE

*France (Aquitaine)*









*Back again*



*Tonight's stop - Montreuil-sur-Mer*  
N 50° 27' 33" : E 1° 45' 34"  
N 50.459220, E 1.759530

# Day 1

For this trip, the plan was to head south (like my man boobs) hoping for five weeks wandering around Europe, soaking up the last of the summer sunshine. No fixed plan but somewhere possibly in the direction of Italy, the south of France or Croatia. At this time of year, we would need to be quite far south for any good weather so considered taking a week to travel down, a few weeks to enjoy the temperate, autumnal sunshine without too much driving then a further seven days to get back home.



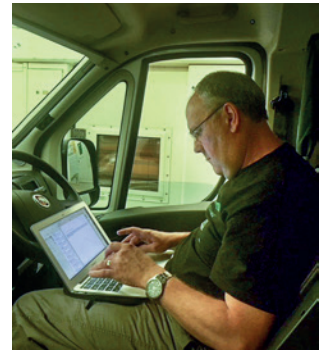
*So true*

Brian had spent nearly six weeks in the garage having a difficult and financially challenging brain transplant but was now fully restored to peak performance and rearing to go - as were we. We'd even procured some new kit for the trip which we were keen to try out along the way.

Then, two weeks ago, my 94-year-old mum had a fall. Things didn't look good for a while as she'd fractured her pelvis and broken her wrist in two places. We naturally decided to abandon any travel plans until she was back home from the hospital and able to look after herself once more. However, the nursing staff said she'd be in for at least a further three weeks so the family decided we should continue, albeit with a shorter trip, as in the interim it was simply a case of organising a visiting roster while she was hospitalised. The real family commitment, we reasoned, would be necessary when she returned home.

Therefore, fortunately I find myself writing this while sat on the Eurotunnel waiting to be whisked under the sea to France. However, travelling anywhere on Friday is never a good idea and the traffic today has been horrendous. Five and a half hours to get to Folkestone meant we missed our 5:50 pm slot and were put onto a later train which promptly got delayed. At 8:30 pm we were, unfortunately, still waiting to go.

It's our anniversary today so as you can imagine, it's not really what we had planned. Sat on a stationary train with a manky sandwich and flavoured water to toast 30 plus years of wedded bliss is not how we envisioned we'd be spending it. Worse still, because of the situation with mum, when we do finally get to the other side, we're not even sure where we're going to end up now. Without a lot of driving, a few weeks is not enough time to comfortably get to Croatia or Italy so what was supposed to be a five-week amble for the sun has turned into a three-week sprint. We'll have to take it as it comes I guess and hope there's some good weather further north.



*A bit of undersea blogging*



*Stan resting between poonamis*

To add insult to injury, on an already trying journey, Stan threw up as we were passing Swindon (a reaction I can relate to). He then looked around in a 'is anybody eating that?' kind of way before attempting to get stuck back into enjoying it all over again! I suspect, going on past experience, he may have had his nose in the 15kg bag of dog food at my brother's house when we dropped in to say goodbye before we left. He's always keen to 'top-up' at any opportunity. When we stopped for a dog walk at the services later, he had a further chunder, three poos and capped it all off with a final 'entente cordiale' deposit when we arrived at our French destination close to midnight.

All in all it's been an eventful first day and the poo bag stock for the trip is already pretty depleted but at least we're on the road.

SEPTEMBER

29



Tonight's stop - Courville-sur-Eure  
N 48° 26' 45" : E 1° 14' 30"  
N 48.446070, E 1.241670

## Day 2

Last night we pulled in after dark at Montreuil-sur-Mer. It's a return to the very first aire we stopped at on our original trip to Spain at the start of the year and reassuringly, a nice quiet place to overnight after such a stressful drive. Having a quick look around back then, we could see it was an interesting little town perched on top of an imposing fortified outer wall, but in February it was cold so understandably we didn't spend much time strolling the chilly cobbled streets.

Six months ago, this motorhome aire only had eight bays. However, the adjoining car park has now been commandeered to deal with the overspill and pulling in yesterday, there were probably close to 20 vans bunched together as we slowly manoeuvred Brian in alongside them.

This morning we strolled the perimeter of the town and subsequently had a look around the Saturday market in the central square. The fortifications are perfect for walking the dogs. There's a path around the top, which we took on our first visit, but the unguarded drop made us slightly nervous of losing one of the twins down into the undergrowth ten metres or more below. This time, we discovered a safer path around the base and circled the town, with the dogs enjoying being off-lead, before heading to the central square for hot chocolates and a bite to eat.

Oddly in the main square, the Place du Général de Gaulle, we came across a British flag fluttering alongside a statue of Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. During the First World War, Montreuil-sur-Mer was the headquarters of the British Army in France and Haig led the British forces here from 1915 onward. He has the unenviable reputation of being considered the worst British general of all time so somewhat undeserving of a commemorative memorial. However, I was informed the statue is not the original. The first one was used for target practice by the German Army during their occupation here in the Second World War and it obviously proved easier to dispense with than the actual man 20 years earlier.



*A safer path around the base this morning*



*The Saturday market*



The weather at this time of year is warm during the day but turns quite cold in the evenings. We're fine sleeping under the heavy duvet without the heating on, but I was worried about Flee Waybill and Ticky Minaj so, we brought along funky Halloween jumpers for them to wear overnight. They modelled them yesterday for the first time as jimjams and I think everybody had a reasonable night's sleep. I certainly didn't hear any chattering doggie teeth from the comfort of my cosy bed at the back of the van so I'm guessing they were warm enough.

*Toot and Plute in their fetching night attire*



*Another view of the walks around Montreuil-sur-Mer*

After lunch, we drove on to Courville-sur-Eure about four hours further south. It's another free aire, this time on the edge of a river with proper parking bays separated by hedges like a campsite. After a short walk to get our bearings, we were treated to a spectacular sunset which, when reflected in the water, turned the river a vivid pink. The town appears to be somewhere that could be enjoyed during the summer months, but because of the cold nights, we want to push on to a more southerly climate as soon as possible. Therefore, for the next few days, we'll be spending most of our time on the road.



*Brian tucked in the aire at Courville-sur-Eure*



*Sunset at Courville-sur-Eure*



Tracey 'reading'



Tonight's stop - Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine  
N 47° 6' 16" : E 0° 37' 28"  
N 47.104670, E 0.624540

## Day 3

Tonight, as it's our anniversary week, we have decided to push the boat out and celebrate. Many couples will mark such an occasion with a meal at an expensive upmarket restaurant. Some may go further and book a holiday somewhere romantic like Paris or Rome where they can wander the sunny cobbled streets hand in hand, stopping from time to time to drink coffee from the various roadside cafes. Others may even splash out on a romantic cruise to some hot, exotic destination like the Caribbean. There they can explore the fascinating, disparate Islands and possibly renew their vows while topping up faded tans on the white, sun-kissed beaches. This evening, as a nod to those giddy, lovestruck fools, we've gone absolutely wild and splurged on an overnight stay at a French campsite. It's a decision I didn't make lightly and for a moment I had second thoughts when it was time to hand over the money. This resulted in the notes being briefly pushed and pulled back and forth between my hand and the campsite owners during the transaction as I fought to relinquish control. Eventually the €14 slipped away never to be seen again but the fee does include dogs, wife and most importantly, electrical hookup. Normally, I don't agree with such extravagance and abhor exuberant displays of wealth like this but because we came away in a rush, we haven't brought along two full bottles of gas to run the cooking and heating. Now the evenings are becoming chilly, it makes sense to switch our heating system to electric until we're a bit further south and no longer require it. With every country having different fittings for their gas bottles, it's not possible to replenish them in Europe so we have to make it last, if not, we may run out on the colder homeward leg, when campsites are more likely to be closed and access to electricity is in shorter supply.

As I sit writing this, the heating is on full. Who needs the Caribbean? The cab is like Barbados and I am proudly parading in only my pants to make sure I get my €14 worth (yes, picture that ladies). The dogs are panting so hard I think Ruby may have a heart attack and Stan's just nipped off to take a cold shower. However, I'm not turning it down for anyone.

This morning started with an enjoyable and sunlit dog walk around a nearby lake at Courville-sur-Eure. The fishermen were up before us and I honed my substantial linguistic skills by bonjouring every one of them as we passed by.

After breakfast, we headed off for our current stop at Sainte-Maure-De-Touraine just below Tours. Checking in around 4 pm our site host, who spoke very little English, was way too friendly (which we both concluded was probably to do with the near-empty bottle of wine on his desk). I'm sure he was more than three sheets to the wind and apparently failed to understand we didn't speak French, even though we repeatedly told him - in his native tongue!



*We have the site to ourselves*



*Once around the lake*

After trying to escape his Gaelic ramblings for about ten minutes, we finally broke away to set up camp and enjoy the late afternoon sunshine from one of our new acquisitions - comfortable chairs bought to replace the €10 fishing seats we'd used previously.

The site is quiet at this time of year but very nice. There's a lake within the grounds to walk the pouchers in the morning, a play area for the kids (which we forgot to bring) and even a small square of gravel for playing boules, which was in use by some residents when I walked passed. All in all, très bien.



OCTOBER

1



Tonight's stop - Oradour-sur-Glane  
N 45° 56' 8" : E 1° 1' 29"  
N 45.935670, E 1.024890

## Day 4

Motorhoming is not all glitz, glamour and living the dream you know. There's a fair amount of work to be done to keep that dream on the road, especially when you have two hitchhikers along for the ride shedding hair like a barber on amphetamines.

Every three or four days there are certain, err... 'substances' to be emptied and fresh water to be taken onboard plus the daily cleaning and routine maintenance which goes with day to day living. This is quite important as it prevents us dying from something hideous like typhoid or gassing ourselves in the night - neither of which incidentally, forms any part of our holiday itinerary for this trip. Therefore, this morning found us carrying out the necessary chores before setting off around midday to continue our journey south.

Our first stop was Chauvigny, a typical small French town which has sprung up at the base of a much older medieval village perched on a hill high above. We followed the brown 'tourist' signs winding our way to the top only to find all the interesting buildings and surrounding cafes closed. Anyone familiar with France will know, as a country, they are closed on Bastille Day and any other day ending in Y so it wasn't really a big surprise. It was still enjoyable to wander the quiet streets though and the views looking down from the top, out over the red tiled rooftops, made the climb just about worth it.



*Stan in scrounge mode on our morning walk*



*Medieval Chauvigny on top of the hill. I'm sure it's very nice when it's open*

While up there I discovered a local graveyard so popped in for a quick shufti at the stones. As I've already mentioned, I'm quite interested in how different cultures deal with their dearly departed. I've told Tracey, after my sad lamentable demise, my personal preference is to be fired out of a cannon. I could imagine myself gracefully sailing through the air while all my friends saluted from below as I arced passed at speed like a disappointing comet. However, as a more realistic second choice, I'd quite like to be interred into a wall as is de rigueur in Spain. Your remains are posted into what could be described as large, pigeon-hole type receptacles stacked three or four high along the length of long walls within the cemetery. Quite fitting really for my final resting place to resemble an enormous, brick wine rack. 'Bring on the wall' as Dale would say if he was still with us (but in my case, not too soon please). After what I've seen today, I certainly don't want a French-style burial where they place a load of old tat on top of you. Most of the graves looked like a nan's mantelpiece.



*Just stick a load of old toot on me, that'll be nice*

Continuing on, our intention was to visit Oradour-sur-Glane, however, on arrival at 5:05 pm, we were informed the thing we'd come to see had shut five minutes earlier. A change of plan was required but fortunately, there was a motorhome aire nearby so we decamped the short distance ready for an early start in the morning.



*Spot the Brian. The motorhome aire at Oradour-sur-Glane*

OCTOBER

2



*Tonight's stop - Nersac*  
N 45° 37' 33" : E 0° 2' 59"  
N 45.626020, E 0.049860



*My first shot of the Milky Way*

## Day 5

Late last night I popped the dogs out for their final wee of the evening. All the little vans were asleep, it was pitch black and the night was clear and cold. I happened to look up and suddenly caught my breath. I couldn't believe the number of stars I could see in the night sky. Even the Milky Way was clearly visible which can normally only be seen in dark sky areas like the Brecon Beacons. As I stood there gazing towards this celestial marvel, I realised my emotions were racing. I felt small, humbled and insignificant with the entire universe circling around my head and to be honest, quite cold. Perhaps I should put a jumper on next time!

On a more abhorrent note, today we got to walk in the martyred village at Oradour-sur-Glane. During the Second World War in June of 1944, for no apparent reason, German troops arrived out of the blue at Oradour-sur-Glane and promptly killed all the men in the village. The women and children were rounded up and herded into the town church where, sometime later, the building was set on fire killing everybody within. 642 people lost their lives that day, nearly 200 of which were children. The soldiers then looted anything of value, set the remaining buildings on fire and left.



*Oradour-sur-Glane*

The village, which is quite substantial, has been preserved exactly as it was on that fateful day and is now a memorial to all those poor souls who perished. From the burnt-out, 1940's cars and old children's toys to the pots and pans used to cook their valedictory meals, the minutia of life is all still there amongst the rust and ashes. A sad place, a place that carries a heavy burden with a melancholic character that reminded me of Auschwitz. But a place worth visiting, if only to remind ourselves of man's inhumanity to man, the sacrifices made by others for the freedoms we enjoy today and a prompt to all our consciences for actions we may take in the future. It appears humanity resides on a very thin veneer of benign rectitude. Places like Oradour-sur-Glane are important as they allow us to look below the surface at the darkness buried just beneath.



*The grounds of the motorhome aire at Nersac*

After lunch in a nearby restaurant garden, we headed for our overnight stop at Nersac. This is another aire we had previously visited earlier in the year situated in the grounds of what appears to be a grand French house (like a mini British country estate). It's a quiet place for a stopover which offers free amenities, including, an electrical hookup and a good bakery nearby.



*In the same slot but not the same fears backing in this time*

While walking at the boundary of the grounds, I noticed another graveyard some distance away so decided to see if the 'tat on my coffin' trend is universal here in France (side note - yes it is!) What I discovered, however, is something far more sinister. Nersac is a small, rural village. There are not many residents but by comparison, the graveyard is suspiciously capacious. There are literally hundreds in there! I've concluded this little town is the French equivalent of 'Midsomer Murders' and I believe the reason is buried in there with them. I took a photograph of one particular grave (see pic). You can tell he's a wrong'un from his name alone. I think he's responsible for the unusually high rate of attrition here and let me tell you, I'll sleep easier in my bed tonight knowing he's singing with the choir eternal.



*The reason for the huge cemetery maybe?*

OCTOBER

3



*Tonight's stop - Le Teich*  
N 44° 38' 24" : E 1° 1' 9"  
N 44.640040, E 1.019410



## Day 6

Yesterday, just as the weather apps had predicted, the clouds rolled in as the afternoon progressed blocking the blue sky and warming the surrounding air. The previous night, the temperature had fallen to four degrees so to be treated to our first balmy evening of the trip was a relief and we made the most of it by sitting outdoors until late.

Knowing the forecast was not good for the following morning, we decided to make it a lazy travel day and woke to the finest dusting of rain. After a leisurely breakfast and numerous cups of tea, we packed up and drove two hours south, skirting around Bordeaux, then heading west to the coast at Le Teich. As we drove, contrary to the weather predictions, the skies lightened and by mid-afternoon the sun was back out pushing the mercury up to a very pleasant 22 degrees.

Our home tonight is on a marina at a wetlands nature reserve on the Bassin d'Arcachon. There are miles of footpaths through the reens and cycleways linking together the various little hamlets that make up the surrounding area. On arrival, it looked as if all the places had been taken in the motorhome aire but we managed to find a small space and squeezed in-between two vans already in situ. Not knowing the proper etiquette, we weren't sure if this was considered good form but neither side even looked up as we manoeuvred into place. I'm hoping they're not just secretly concealing a festering hatred of us and plan to set fire to Brian in the night or even worse, start playing French rap CDs at high volume. I'd take first degree burns over that any day.



*Brian and chums at the back of the marina*

To the left, we have two older French couples who wasted no time re-manoeuvring their van to allow space for a table and chairs. They then promptly occupied them to sink a bottle of Captain Morgan along with various nibbles while chatting quietly. On the other side, we have Walter White from Breaking Bad. A 'full-timer' who is living here in his van and probably cooking crystal meth in the bathroom. The van looks like a mobile ghetto and he has 'friends' who come knocking on a regular basis. This afternoon he was playing flamenco tunes from his little transistor radio and treated us to a Spanish singalong in a high, warbly falsetto voice. Entertaining for both himself and to a lesser degree, the other surrounding motorhome inhabitants. Having said all that, during our short exchanges, he seems very nice.



*Chemical Kenny's mobile cook house*

I've been lazy with the camera today but got the nan bike out for its inaugural foray this evening. Riding the short distance out into the wetlands, the sunset wasn't very spectacular but I enjoyed the exercise. At one point my pathway was blocked by a particularly bad-tempered swan who refused to let me pass. I'm not exactly sure what his problem was. Perhaps he'd found Mrs Swan in flagrante with the goose next door and was looking for someone to take it out on or, maybe the wildfowl council had stopped his planed nest extension as it impeded the neighbour's view - who can say? All I know is the tense Mexican standoff continued for some time with my attempts to move forward repeatedly hindered by the hissing hoodlum. Eventually, just as I was on the verge of beating him to death with my camera tripod, he decided to step aside and let me through. Fortunate for him I'd say, as he would have fitted nicely on the little rack at the rear of my bike, although, I'm not sure Tracey has ever cooked swan.



*None shall pass*



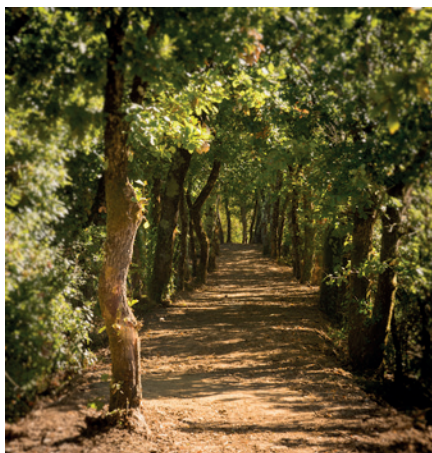
*Sunset on the bassin d'Arcachon*

OCTOBER

4



*Tonight's stop - Le Teich*  
N 44° 38' 24" : E 1° 1' 9"  
N 44.640040, E 1.019410



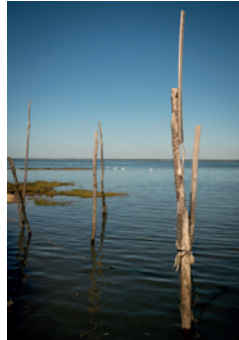
## Day 7

We are here for our second night at the marina in Le Teich. We've decided to stay as there's lots to like if your interests are walking and nature or even if you simply want to people-watch while enjoying a coffee in the sunshine. There are miles of raised paths through the woodland and reens, many with water on both sides and good views of the wildlife. Dogs are allowed but for most of it, they have to be kept on a lead. Probably wise as I'm sure the twins could find a rare Willow Thwong Warbler or similar to chase given half a chance.

The aire is free and although busy during the day (due mainly to the hubbub of the marina and the many bird watchers passing through) in the evenings it's chilled and quiet when only the Motorhomers remain. I'm sure I should be photographing the multitude of bird species attracted by the wetlands area here, but to be honest, that's not my thing. Anyway, I would need longer lenses than I've brought with me to get any decent shots. It does make me smile though when I put the dogs out last thing at night and hear hundreds of ducks having a massive argument out in the darkness. It sounds like an Irish family party.

Back in the UK, we bought a book released by the AA called '25 best drives France'. Each drive is between three and four days in length and this area is covered by one of the entries so we thought we'd give it a go. Our guide starts with the next town over, Gujan-Mestras, which is a bit of a hub for oyster fishing apparently. On our arrival, we were led to a working boatyard down at the waterfront which had been converted for the tourist trade. It had the original oyster fisherman's huts and all the fishing paraphernalia you'd expect along with cafes, restaurants and bars where you could sit and watch the boatmen go about their daily business. It made for an interesting afternoon which should have resulted in many more photographs than I actually took but I feel my mojo is somewhat lacking with the camera at the moment.

*Swimming and walks are  
the order of the day here at Le Teich*



*An interesting day looking around the oyster huts at Gujan-Mestras*

Returning to Le Teich, the site is much quieter this evening. We've got ourselves a new pitch away from Chemical Kenny where we can spread out and enjoy the late evening sunshine from our rather comfortable new chairs. Later, if it gets chilly, we'll retreat inside and maybe watch some DVDs or read. Who knows what will happen next with our riotous rock n' roll lifestyle? We may even break out the dominoes! The weather's been hot but bearable today. Tomorrow the temperature is set to rise to somewhere nearer 30 degrees so I'll have to find somewhere shady to hide.



*Sunset with the wildlife*

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5



Arcachon



Tonight's stop - Navarrosse  
N 44° 25' 51" : E 1° 10' 3"  
N 44.431080, E 1.167710

## Day 8

Today was a big day which started at our overnight stop in Le Teich. After breakfast, we waved goodbye to Chemical Kenny and his mobile cookhouse to take the 20 minute drive west to Arcachon. It's a pretty tourist town, with a laid back feel and lovely stretches of groomed beaches populated with a few end of season holidaymakers topping up their tans. The temperature was already rising when we strolled the promenade for a while, with Ruby and Stan straining at the leash to get onto the sand and into the sea. Unfortunately, dogs aren't allowed so it was more like torture than a holiday for the canine crew.



*Can we help you with that?*



*Arcachon park (with the lift in the background)*



*Not the best start for Ruby and Stan*

Returning to find some shade and wander the town, we settled in the central square for lunch and later took the lift up to the town park to let the dogs run around and enjoy themselves. Yes, you did read that correctly, Arcachon has a park with a lift in the centre.



*Say 'fromage'*





*The impressive Dune du Pilat*

Moving on, our next stop was the Dune du Pilat on the coast 20 minutes further south. It's supposedly the greatest sand dune in Europe at over 100 metres high and nearly 3km long. Unlike the dune at Råbjerg Mile in Denmark, which we visited earlier in the year, this one isn't migratory so is not in the habit of wandering around eating things and generally getting into trouble like the naughty Danish version. It is substantial to climb though and by now the temperature was somewhere near the high twenties.



*It's hot for climbing today...*



*but a reward awaits on the other side*

All four of us were suffering in the heat as we ascended to the summit and down the other side to the sea. A few other hardy, Lawrence of Arabia types had also made the trek and were enjoying the rewards by swimming or paddling in the Atlantic. Rubes and Stan joined in the former while Tracey and myself indulged in a bit of the latter.



*Part of the lake at Navarrosse*

Returning to the van, we drove to our last stop of the day on one of France's biggest lakes at Navarrosse. We were looking for a campsite to have a proper shower and chill but on arrival, unfortunately, it was closed for the season. Quickly changing our plan, we headed instead for an adjoining motorhome aire nearby. It was getting late when we finally rolled in and although the site probably holds 50 plus vans, the only place available was under the pine trees away from the other motorhomes. At €6 a night with all mod cons, including electrical hookup, nice views and walks around the lake it's perfect even if we are segregated off like lepers.

Once we settled in we realised a slight flaw in our woodland location. Every time we opened the van's side door 100,000 midges came in from the surrounding pine trees for a dance around our interior lights. By the end of the night, it was like a David Attenborough documentary for us and Pacha for them. If I'd been a habitual wet shaver, I could have added some foam to the proceedings to give them the full Ibiza nightclub experience.

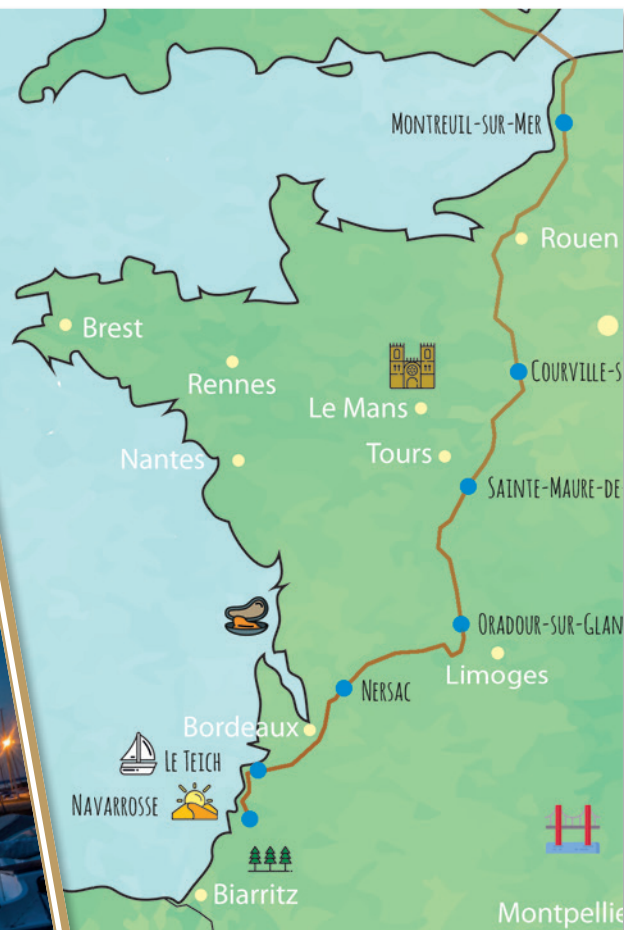
Trace was beginning to panic at the thought of sleeping with so many bugs in the cab so I hatched an ingenious plan for last orders. Taking out our trusty handheld Dyson, I turned all but one light off, waited for them to gather around the remaining bulb and hoovered them up before emptying them all out into the warm autumn night. Job done. We'll move pitches tomorrow when some occupied spots become available and as it's nice here, I think we may stay for a while longer than anticipated.



*Brian banished to the woods*

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7



*Tonight's stop - Navarrosse  
N 44° 25' 51" : E 1° 10' 3"  
N 44.431080, E 1.167710*

## Day 10

Well, just as the forecast had predicted the weather has changed for the weekend. We woke yesterday morning to the sound of loud banging on the van roof. Slightly alarmed, I peered out through the bedroom skylight to see it had become very misty overnight and realised the weight of the condensing water was proving too much for some of the pine trees we'd parked under. Pine cones and other tree-related debris were raining down on us from above. We needed to take action to prevent any potential damage to our solar panel so quickly relocated before settling down for breakfast. We have now taken up a vacated space looking out over the marina and are parked, along with the rest of the pack, enjoying the views.



*Nice walks in the woods around the lake*



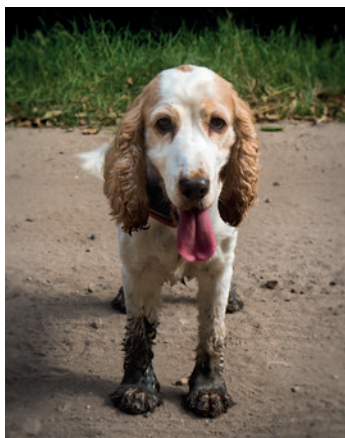
*Getting big air*



*One of many enjoying the windy conditions*

By mid-morning, the mist started to clear. I took the dogs for a walk through the pine woods and on to the sandy beach at the edge of the lake. We stood for sometime observing the windsurfers getting 'big air' (as the yooof would say) and were entertained ourselves watching them enjoying the wilder conditions.

On my return, with rations running low, we decided to take a stroll to the supermarket following the bike path towards Biscarrosse. As I mentioned earlier, in France the only thing open on a Sunday is an amorous Frenchman's flies on an illicit liaison so it's easy to get caught out without food.



*No not me, I havent seen any puddles*

With fridge restocked and bad weather due in for the evening, we settled down to watch it all happen. Perversely, this is one of the times I like being in the motorhome best. When dusk is falling and the weather closes in, you get to watch as the brooding storm clouds approach through the wide vista of Brian's oversized windscreen. Unlike being in a house, you feel part of it all, listening to the rain on the roof and the wind rocking the vehicle while you're snug inside with the heating on. As I've mentioned, it has the ambience of being under canvas but with better views and none of the discomfort of squatting crossed-legged on the floor while your arse cheeks gradually wander off to sleep.



*Waiting for better weather*

Talking of comfort, on a previous post I'd extolled the virtue of the nan bike as a new addition to the travelling family. This trip we have another, rather more rudimentary, new acquisition which Tracey has become very fond of. She says she loves it more than she loves me and at £5.99 that's quite a blow to the ego. It's only a small, folding step to help her get into the high bed at the back of the van but following her knee op, it's been like observing two giant tortoises trying to mate watching her mount the bed at the end of the day. She said the step stops her making an arse of herself climbing up into the billet, but unfortunately, the purchase didn't include a blindfold for me so I still have to watch as that arse rises slowly like a harvest moon at the end of every evening.

Tucked up in bed last night, I felt like I was a kid again. The wind and rain lashing the van, the tinkling of the rigging hitting the boat masts in the harbour, and us, all cosy and dry snuggled down in bed. This morning, with conditions still inclement, we've spent the day mainly in the van reading, watching videos or on the internet. I thought I might be bored but it's been rather nice to just relax and watch the rain run down the windows. The weather is clearing this afternoon so a blustery walk with the dogs is in order sometime later. However, that's about as far as we'll go today. We're basically sitting out the bad weather and waiting for something better.



*Tracey's step of glory*

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8



*Tonight's stop - Navarrosse  
N 44° 25' 51" : E 1° 10' 3"  
N 44.431080, E 1.167710*

**Day 11**

Rinse and repeat has been the order of the day today. The weather is still very overcast and not much fun for outdoor activities, however, this area seems like an undiscovered jewel so we're hanging around hoping for some sun to see it at its best before moving on. The wind has finally dropped and the rain has ceased for the most part so a slightly better day if you're an optimist. Certainly not a weekend to be enjoyed by German naturists who, as we've seen, like to parade round in nothing but walking boots looking like mountain climbers with Alzheimer's. I'm sure if they were here now there'd be an unacceptable amount of 'shrinkage' for their hobby in this weather.

Today marks another inaugural day for Brian as we had our first visitors in for a cuppa this morning. Our neighbours John and Julie braved the bounteous amounts of dog hair and cramped conditions to spend a few hours chatting about travel, music, the joys of van ownership and broken cookers (theirs not ours). With all six of us inside it was like having a tea party in a shower cubicle but we managed to wave them goodbye without Stan eating any of their biscuits or otherwise embarrassing us.



*High octane fun at an overcast Biscarrosse Plage*

This afternoon, needing to get out, we headed over to Biscarrosse Plage about 15 minutes away. It's a typical seaside resort, a bit like a French version of Barry Island without the diddlers or Nessa. The dogs had been cooped up for a day and a half so we had an eventful and chaotic 20 minutes while they ran their energy out before calming down.

Fortunately, there were not too many people around to witness Ruby, who I can only surmise thought it was solid, jump up onto a small fence with a thigh-high hedge directly behind it. She gallantly tried to walk along the top before her legs fell through the undergrowth leaving her beached for a while like a doggie quadruple amputee! Somewhat shocked, she wriggled around and managed to disentangle herself by disappearing completely into the shrubbery before eventually re-emerging looking rather dishevelled.



*Stan still looking for Ruby after her hedge ordeal*

Stan saved his comedy moment until later when he snowploughed headfirst into a deep pool of water on the beach chasing the seagulls at high speed. Wet and tired we rounded them up and returned to the van. Home tonight will once again be back at the lakeside aire next to our newfound friends.

I'm sure Biscarrosse Plage is a lovely place in the summer. With the beach full of sun worshippers, the bars and restaurants buzzing with people and children gleefully running around eating ice creams. However, on an overcast day in October, it had the air of a coastal town closed for winter which, in effect, is more or less what it is.

Tonight our neighbours, John and Julie, reciprocated this morning's visit with cheese and wine at theirs. A much more spacious and palatial affair compared to Brian's humble accommodation. We tried to leave Toot and Plute at home but they decided they weren't going to miss out on camembert and French



*The neighbours - John and Julie*



bread at any cost. The howling became apparent from the neighbouring van within ten minutes of our departure. I think they could hear us talking next door and didn't want to be left out. Graciously, our hosts let them in and a good time was had by all. Tomorrow the weather is supposed to be better so we're crossing our fingers we finally get to see this area in unclouded sunlight.

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9



Tonight's stop - Plage de Lespécier  
N 44° 09' 52" : E 1° 18' 05"  
N 44.164659, E 1.301415



**Day 12** This morning we bid a fond au revoir to our new chums John and Julie. They're off to find a man in Dax to fix their motorhome (we know a little about that ourselves). Meanwhile, as the promised better weather had failed to turn up, we decided to pack up and move on. We're sorry to leave without exploring the area more comprehensively but as we'll be passing again on our way to Spain in the new year, we can always come back then.

Returning to our AA guide book, the next stop was Mimizan Plage on the west coast an hour further south. Pulling in, we could see it was a small but modern seaside resort with thunderous waves crashing in from the Atlantic and a few hardy surfers on the beach, readying themselves to catch a ride on one. We arrived around lunchtime just as the weather began to improve, so we ordered lunch and watched the rollers push up the beach from our table outside on the esplanade. We settled on crepes with ham, cheese and eggs, in case you're interested, which turned out to be a good choice.



*I'd like to say it's me, but it's not*

In the afternoon we strolled the beach and let the dogs play for a short time along the expansive sand but the waves were huge and the water dangerous. We were also worried they would pick up fish hooks from the numerous rods positioned along the high water mark so exercise was curtailed until we could find somewhere safer.

We both noticed the odd waft of what smelt like cheese as we perused the tat shops along the front and down into the back streets. Later, we were told it comes from a paper mill outside the town so decided we won't be looking in the local estate agent's windows anytime soon.

Our aire tonight was supposed to be a 30 minute drive further south following the coast. However, the sat nav took us along a road which turned into a dirt track after 15 minutes and eventually lead to a spot close to a deserted beach miles from anywhere. Instead of going back and starting again, which would have added over an hour to our drive, we've decided to wild camp (motorhomer's term for parking in an unofficial place, not an aire or campsite). It's actually illegal in some countries and a grey area in many others. Here in France, as we understand it, it's normally tolerated as long as you're away from tourist areas.

We are alone in the heart of a pine forest five minutes walk from the beach. As we're not exactly campsite people, it's the type of location we love: quiet, picturesque and back to nature. However, it's also very isolated and dark. We won't be watching any slasher movies later that's for sure. The keys are in the ignition ready for a speedy getaway and an extra pair of pants are on hand just in case they're necessary. Should there be any sudden noise in the night, I have the feeling they will more than likely be called into action.

If there's no blog tomorrow, it's because we've been butchered in our sleep by a psychotic, beret-wearing Frenchman and our bodies thrown into the Atlantic never to be seen again. Happy holidays!



*All alone in the forest before nightfall*



*More pretentious self-timer nonsense at Plage de Lespazier*

OCTOBER

10



*Tonight's stop - Labastide-d'Armagnac*  
N 43° 58' 19" : E 0° 11' 9"  
N 43.972080, E 0.185850

## Day 13

Well, we made it through the night without being disembowelled but I would be lying if I told you sleeping without neighbours, in the middle of a foreign forest, didn't get the heart racing just a teeny bit faster. It's amazing how sinister the darkness can make a place feel, especially when it's really quiet. However, Freddy Kruger failed to manifest, probably kept away by the pungent smell emanating from Brian's interior after the occupants have been on the road for nearly two weeks. I'm surprised there's not a ring of dead grass around the van.

Whilst on the subject of personal hygiene. I've mentioned the cramped showering conditions onboard the good ship Brian. We used to stop more regularly at campsites but as time has gone on, we've adapted to the tiny bathroom and it now seems much more spacious than on previous trips. The contortionist course also probably helped as I can now get into a position to look down my own plughole without falling over when carrying out my ablutions. However, over the past few days, we have been forced into playing a new and dangerous game called shower roulette. It involves a near-empty bottle of Calor gas and a nervous bathing occupant, willing to take a gamble in the name of cleanliness. So far we've both come out smiling after a warm sprinkling but one day someone's going to get caught. It's only a matter of time before the water turns as frosty as the breakfast milk when the gas does eventually run out.

This morning has been one of my favourite four hours of the trip so far. Nothing special, just a stroll with my furry family on a beautiful, near empty beach, then lunch back at the van. Sitting in the dappled shade outside, with the weather near perfect, at last, I felt fully relaxed listening to the sound of the balmy breeze through the pine trees all around us (and Tracey swearing in the kitchen as she prepared lunch). If this is that mindfulness stuff the new agers are talking about, give me more of it.



*Stan like a coiled spring ready to pounce*



*Not so scary this morning*



*Found this little fella in the grass nearby*



*We have the beaches almost to ourselves*

By mid-afternoon we'd moved on to look around Mont-de-Marsan. A good size town to wander with some old historic buildings, good coffee shops and pink fountains (apparently they're doing their bit for Breast Cancer Awareness month). Our overnight stop this evening is back on the grid with about eight other vans at a free aire just outside Labastide-d'Armagnac. However, just as any thoughts of jeopardy from homicidal maniacs was beginning to subside, Tracey tells me we've run out of plastic bags to put the dirty clothes in and are now having to use bio-degradable food bags instead. Not a problem for most people I'm sure, but my dirty pants can melt their way through those like a hot knife through butter so tonight may be yet another sleepless one.



*Pink fountains for breast cancer awareness week*



*I thought you had to go to Ireland for the craic*



*Mont-de-Marsan main square*



*Statue La Plongeuse*

OCTOBER

11



Tonight's stop - Castets-en-Dorthe  
N 44° 33' 43" : E 0° 9' 2"  
N 44.562120, E 0.150610

## Day 14

Today started with promise. The sun broke through and burnt the early morning cloud away revealing a bright layer of blue above. By mid-morning, we'd left Brian at the aire and completed the ten minute walk into the little village of Labastide-d'Armagnac. It's a tiny hamlet but without doubt the most picturesque town on this trip to date. A place that has the quintessential essence of quaint Frenchness. Almost miraculously, the central arched square, Palace Royale, has survived with little alteration since 1291 and a resident told us, in summer it's a riot of colourful flowers which must make it even more attractive.



*Labastide-d'Armagnac*

After coffee and a leisurely amble around the pretty streets, we returned to do some chores back at the van before moving on. It was at this point I happened to mention how hot it was getting. From her prone position outside in one of the reclining chairs, Tracey, casually reading with a floppy hat shading her face, lifted her eyes and glanced across at me. "You're never happy," she said lightheartedly. Unperturbed, I shot her a scowl back as I stood sweating in the baking sunshine before counting my blessings and joyously continuing to empty the chemical toilet. She jokingly likes to tell me I'm miserable but in these modern times I actually think of myself as being 'existentially challenged'. If she keeps calling me names she might find herself 'consciously uncoupled'.



*Long exposure using an ND filter (for you photographer types)*

Our second stop of the day, Barbotan-les-Thermes was an upmarket spa town with a slightly alpine feel. People have congregated here for years in order to take to the thermal waters. All we wanted was lunch and a quick mooch around. Arriving close to 2 pm, the proprietor of our chosen dining establishment explained the restaurants were all closing so he wasn't sure he could accommodate us. In his words, he'd have to ask 'the cooker'. Off he scurried to the kitchen for a short conversation with an Electrolux 3000D before returning sometime later with news. Apparently, the cooker said no.

Disappointed but not too disheartened we returned to have lunch 'Chez Brian'. I knew Tracey could rustle up something fantastic and I'm not sure my wallet could have taken another meal out anyway. Some nights, when I'm in bed, I hear it sobbing in my trouser pocket draped over the passenger seat at the front of the van.



Sat in our little dinette in the corner of the supermarket carpark, we ate our knocked up salad and 'mystery meats' (a name we've given to a type of pâté probably made of hooves and cows noses Tracey buys when we're in France). With heavy cloud starting to form above our heads we gazed across at the majestic vista of the bottle bank and recycling area. Now seemed a good moment to assess our experiences so far 'living the dream' and to ponder the lot of the avid motorhomer. It seemed a long way from those hipster, beach bonfire singalongs we'd seen in the brochures.

As lunch was coming to an end it also summoned the termination of the good weather. Rain started to drum on Brian's roof with some urgency so we decided to write off Barbotan-les-Thermes altogether. We've now moved on to tonight's overnight stay on a canal lock at Castets-en-Dorthe. Maybe tomorrow will bring us more luck.



*The only photo I took of Barbotan-les-Thermes*



*Mrs Father Jack hugging a wine bottle - as usual*

OCTOBER

12



*Tonight's stop - Saint-Palais-sur-Mer*  
N 45° 38' 33" : E 1° 4' 35"  
N 45.642550, E 1.076520

## Day 15

Situated directly on one of the canal locks, the free aire at Castets-en-Dorthe is another great example of how to do a motorhome stopover. From the flat pitches positioned just behind the canal towpath, we could observe the boats passing by and enjoy watching the fishermen doing their thing while sipping a morning cuppa and biting into freshly buttered toast. There are many off-lead dog walks, toilets and even washing machines here for good measure. Say what you like about the French but they do know how to make motorhomers feel welcome.

While on the subject of our Gaelic cousins, there are I'm sure, many things they excel at apart from motorhome aires. Bread and wine are two examples that spring to mind as well as smoking copious amounts of fags and



*The aire at Castets-en-Dorthe*

dropping the butts everywhere for Stan to eat. However, what on earth have they got against the humble toilet seat? Not their arse cheeks that's for sure. Every public convenience you visit, no matter how spotless, look like they've been vandalised. Acres of white porcelain adorn the traps and not a toilet seat to be seen. From museums through campsites and visitor centres, not one. We're talking €20 tops for a plastic toilet seat. Not a king's ransom for a warm bum, is it? Dirty French!

We were moving on to Royan today but as I jumped out of the van this morning with the dogs in tow, they were set upon by the neighbour's German Shepherd. Much heated snarling and posturing ensued but it was all handbags at dawn really and I think he bottled it when he realised there were two of them.

The owner, German herself, started to bark orders at him from the doorway of her van in an attempt to retrieve her wayward charge. By the time she'd managed to shoehorn him back inside, it had all begun to sound a little like a Nuremberg Rally with her shrill German voice continuing from the interior long after the door had been firmly slammed shut. Unbeknown to us, Stan got his own back sometime later by sneaking around to her motorhome and eating all the dog food from Klaus' bowl which had foolishly been left outside.



*Captain cainine*



*The location of Stan's lunchtime raid*



*Ruby's towpath of terror*



*Coffee amongst the pungent smell of damp dog*

We decided a nice long walk along the canal footpath would be fun. The sun was shining and everything was going well until Ruby managed to fall in halfway around. The banking was knee-high and quite steep so she needed rescuing after she'd tried, unsuccessfully, to get herself out. As I was trying to reach her without falling in myself, a lightbulb must have gone off in Stan's head, 'ah, swimming now are we?' and in he went as well. Two rescues later, wet and smelly we all relocated for coffee at the waterside cafe before starting the onward journey to Royan.



*Tramps on tour - an impromptu lunch with much canine interest in the mystery meats*

Sometime later, as lunchtime approached, we decided to just stop the van at a park on the outskirts of a little village and have an impromptu picnic. Tracey made coffee, plated up salad, camembert and the remainder of the mystery meats (Mystery Meats 2 - The Sequel) for us to carry over to a picnic table some distance away. I'm not sure if we looked like normal French locals relaxing in the sunshine or eccentric foreigners too cheap to use the village restaurant but we all enjoyed it.

We keep saying we're going to break these trips up with some nights in hotels but that hasn't happened as yet. To be honest, it's fun in the van and such a hassle to book something nice, which is both dog-friendly and has parking to accommodate Brian's height and length that we simply haven't bothered. Tonight we're at a campsite at Saint-Palais-sur-Mer which is on the coast just north of Royan.

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Saint-Palais sur-Mer



Tonight's stop - Champigny-sur-Veude  
N 47° 3' 54" : E 0° 19' 3"  
N 47.065040, E 0.317730

## Day 17

The evening before last we arrived at Saint-Palais-sur-Mar where we checked in for two nights at a campsite near the beach. It's the last weekend before they close for winter but there are still quite a few campers and caravans here. Although the weather is changeable, it's still warm when the sun shines so I think people are squeezing every last pip out of the summer before the long dark winter months arrive. It's both a nice little seaside town and a well-kept site with good size pitches and modern facilities right across the road from the sea (no bog seats though, dirty French!)

Yesterday, waking up to glorious sunshine, we decided to walk the coastal path and explore the various bays and inlets with the ultimate goal of lunch after an hour or so before heading back. On the way, enjoying the exercise, Stan took umbrage to a group of teenage girls stood admiring the sea views and decided to leave them the gift of a little curly brown number about a metre away from their feet. Unsurprisingly, they left rather quickly leaving him to soldier on for some time determined to get the job done. I've often wondered why he sets an unwavering gaze on me every time he's in this position. It's the same fixed stare you'd get from Greta Thunberg if you left your car running in the driveway to de-mist on a frosty morning. Apparently, according to the behaviourists, it's because I'm his 'point man' when he's in a vulnerable situation. He relies on me to be his eyes and ears while he's indisposed. I'm not entirely sure how I could assist him if danger came calling mid-poo but it's nice to be considered a steady hand in a crisis.



*The twins checking out the coastal path*



*Mussel huts along the coast*

Several kilometres on, we reached the cliff top restaurants I'd spotted on Google maps while doing my research. As it was after 2 pm, I nipped in to see if they were still serving. Apparently yes, but only if you were French. The conversation went something like this:

Me: (in French) "Hello madam, do you speak English?"

Her: "No"

Me: (in French and gesturing) "We'd like to eat?"

Her (in English) "Finished"

Me: (in French) "Ok, two white coffees, please."

Her: (French mumbling).

On my way back out to rejoin Tracey and the mutts, I noticed a group of six French people with drinks and menus in hand who were obviously about to order. I got to our chosen seats outside where another Frenchman was discussing food with a different server. I called the waiter over and he was more than happy to take our order.

Sometime later, when the girl came out to deliver the coffees, surprise surprise, she spoke perfect English and seemed unapologetic when I told her I'd ordered food from one of her colleagues. I'm not saying all French people are like this, absolutely not, but it is an attitude we've seen a few times before. I suggest they forget Agincourt or Brexit or whatever bug it is they have up their derriere and get over it. Sometimes the worst thing about France is the French themselves.

Lunch over, we walked the hour or so back for some chill time in the sunshine under Brian's awning. Later, I decided to take the nan bike for a spin to exercise my photographic bent but the weather had other ideas and the sunset never really showed up. I still enjoyed trying though.



*Not the sunset I was hoping for*



*Late evening and I'm back on the coastal path but on the nan bike this time*

Today, as rain was due in by mid afternoon, we decided to move on and make it a travel day. We did manage to make the most of the few hours of sunshine this morning by stopping off en route at La Palmyre for a stroll and lunch. No problems with the staff this time, they couldn't have been more helpful, especially as I decided to go native and have the mussels that all the locals were ordering. They looked like something you'd find hanging out of a five-year-old's nose but tasted delicious.

This evening we are once again somewhere in the centre of France trying to outrun the thunderstorms that are hot on our heels.



*Looks like this fella's had a hard life*



*Eating like a native*



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*Tonight's stop - Montoire-sur-le-Loir*  
N 47° 45' 26" : E 0° 52' 9"  
N 47.757410, E 0.869310

## Day 18

Champigny-sur-Veude was where we found ourselves last night. A nice little aire on a lake with toilets and electric hookup if you managed to get there early enough. We didn't unfortunately but no worries as our trusty solar panel means we didn't have to. This blog is dedicated to our motorhome comrades Lyn and Edd who gallantly led the way like Columbus finding all of today's things to see and do on one of their previous trips. Guys, we salute you.

After breakfast and a scud around the lake with the dogs, we retraced our wheel tracks a few miles to Richelieu. It's an interesting fortified town where the backs of the houses themselves form the city wall. Built in a rectangle, their rear gardens look like a moat would once have encircled the settlement and four arched gates in the centre of each wall serve as entrances to the towns considerable interior from north, south, east and west. Another interesting quirk we noticed is rather than having one central square, there's one at each end of the town with a road adjoining the two.



*A morning walk around the lake with Brian at the aire in the background*



*The backs of the houses form the city walls at Richelieu*



*Could this possibly be a moat?*

We strolled inside the city walls until we were hungry and then stopped for lunch outside a restaurant in one of the squares. Whilst there, I received a text notifying me that my quarterly PRS royalties had been paid into our account. This is money from broadcasters like the BBC for music I've composed that has been played on TV and radio all over the World. The amount varies every time and is always a complete surprise so after this bit of good news, uncharacteristically, I told Trace she could have anything on the menu including a dessert or wine (but not both).



*One of the four gates from outside the city walls*

As we sat waiting for our food I noticed a beret wearing youth having lunch a few tables away. Nothing too out of the ordinary about that until he got up and removed his long jacket to reveal the most spectacular black and white vertical striped suit I'd ever seen. On further inspection I noticed he also had a little artisan beard and then, like the gift that keeps on giving, he lit up a long, thin pretentious French cigarette. Speechless now, my only hope was that he would ride off into the sunset on a bicycle festooned with onions to make the stereotype complete but alas, he didn't.

After lunch, we walked the extensive, chateaux style gardens outside the city walls before driving a further two hours to Montoire-sur-le-Loir for our mandatory vet appointment in the morning. This has turned out to be the most uninspiring aire on the trip to date but at least tonight we'll eat like kings. Trace has made a Spaghetti Bolognese and where better to consume it than a disused train station car park on the edge of town. Well, you can't expect every aire to be a winner, can you?



*The châteaux gardens*



*Check out the clocks in the background. Exotic places like New York, Paris and good old Cardiff!*

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Tonight's stop - Verneuil-sur-Avre  
N 48° 44' 22" : E 0° 55' 49"  
N 48.739720, E 0.930420

## Day 19

This morning started with a routine vet appointment required to get our pair back into the UK. Poked and prodded they were eventually declared fit, free from visitors and ready to transport home. Stan has been on his best behaviour this trip so it's been a challenge writing these blogs without his help. He normally gets into some sort of daily mischief which makes it into my evening ponderings.

Unimpressed by our overnight stop, for breakfast this morning we moved on and found another aire a few kilometres further on. Parking on a grassy area next to a river, we were able to enjoy eating outdoors in the sunshine while watching the ducks squabble on the placid water some distance away.

Moving on once more, we drove the hour or so to our next stop at Le Mans. Known worldwide for its 24 hour motor race, we've passed by many times but never visited the actual city centre. After locating a parking spot, we were surprised to find, perched above newer buildings, a very quaint, old medieval quarter with many cobbled streets, traditional timbered structures and renaissance mansions.



*Le Mans quaint old quarter*

I think, in the past, there must have been a lot of sin in Le Mans because the Cathedral is huge! It dominates the city skyline and looks out of proportion, like an obese American on a tiny motorbike. I can only assume, at one time, the entire city must have congregated inside on Sunday mornings praying avidly for bulk quantities of toilet seats to be delivered by Devine courier. Swaths of good Christians were then probably on stand by, ready to distribute these new wonders far and wide among the ungodly in an attempt to convert the masses who were still using squat toilets. Many a medieval peasant saw no use for these 'sit-on things' while devotees, already converted, waited patiently with frozen backsides for seats that never came.

Eventually, the prayers fell silent, the faithful drifted away and the Cathedral was left empty and barely used, as it is today. The French populous, in due course, turned away from a life of observance to one of lethargy instead. Ultimately this led to the three-hour working day now typical throughout the country and the need for toilet seats was no longer considered of any importance. The nation, finding itself with so much free time, almost unobtrusively transferred their leisure endeavours into illicit affairs instead and the modern era was born. Dirty French!



*The Gothic monstrosity at Le Mans*

We spent a fun day browsing the cobbled streets and around 4 pm headed back to Brian for the two-hour drive northeast to tonight's destination at Verneuil-sur-Avre. Another free one, but again not that nice. We're beginning to spend more time on the road again now in order to make it back for a concert we have on Saturday evening in Cardiff. This eats into the time I have for taking photos or writing blogs, but if Stan explodes or anything else of note happens, I will let you all know.

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*Tonight's stop - Montreuil-sur-Mer*  
N 50° 27' 33" : E 1° 45' 34"  
N 50.459220, E 1.759530



## Day 20

According to the forecast, today was supposed to be miserable and overcast. When we climbed into bed last night we were thinking we'd just have to make the most of it and continue north in the hope of something better. However, as it happens, the weather today has been unexpectedly glorious.



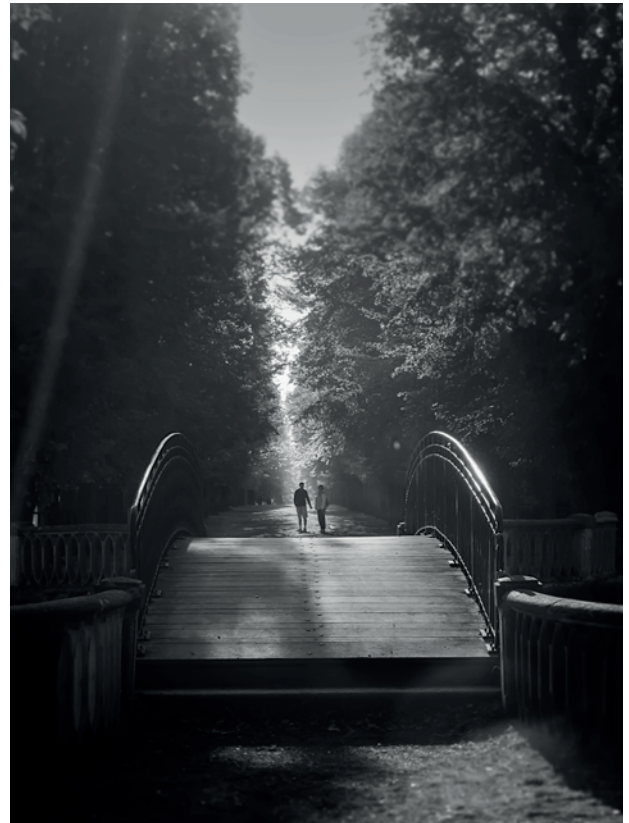
*After all those arty photos, what's needed is one of a lady picking up dog poop*

On the walk back to the motorhome we happened upon Keith Duffy, formally of Boyzone who was involved in a photoshoot for a new French boyband he's putting together called 'Deja Vuzone'. He seemed a bit embarrassed to be recognised however and wouldn't look at me for a photograph (see below). I guess I couldn't blame him, fame and the paparazzi are odd bedfellows.



*Keith and Deja Vuzone - keep an eye on the charts, pop pickers*

Because of the change in circumstances, we decided to have a look around our overnight stop, Verneuil-sur-Avre, this morning although it wasn't on our to-do list. It's like a lot of French towns, a central square with people drinking outdoors in the cafes and bars, a few historic buildings, a gothic church or Cathedral. All very nice but we'd seen it many times before. However, as this was a Goldilocks day (the temperature not too hot and not too cold) we thought we'd join the groups of friends or couples having a coffee or beer in the square and people-watch along with them for a while. For us, there was only a lot of driving to look forward to so why not enjoy the sun while we could?



*For romantics everywhere*



*A glass of Pont-de-l'Arche*

Our next stop was lunch at Pont-de-l'Arche, another quaint little town near Rouen. In the family, Tracey has the nickname 'Lion Steaks', a monicker I gave her following her penchant for choosing the most expensive thing on the menu. Today Mrs Lion Steaks struck again. As I hadn't shaved for two days and looked like a mobile refugee camp, the serving staff probably thought she was a wealthy widow doing a good deed by giving a tramp a meal or otherwise had simply picked up a local bit of rough.



*Another thing France does well*



*Sunset at Montreuil*

Back at the van, after driving a further two hours, we're once again at our old faithful aire in Montreuil. I went out to take some 'arty' photos while Tracey made dinner this evening before returning to eat Chez Brian. Halfway through dinner and 20 days into the journey, I realised we've now reached the point in the trip where dog hair has become a condiment. Yummy.

Eurotunnel booked, tomorrow we leave the land of bread, cheese and wine for our return to Blighty and a proper toilet seat at last. All that's needed now is a good nights sleep for the rigours of the British motorway system tomorrow.

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*The last bit of freedom before the long journey home*

## Day 21

Well, that's it. We're home! Of the three, this has been the shortest outing by both number of days and distance travelled. 2000.1 miles door-to-door. I wish we hadn't diverted for fish and chips on the way back now, we could have made it a nice even number.

I took the dogs for their final walk of the trip this morning. Once more a three kilometre preamble around the fortifications at Montreuil. The weather kept me guessing if I should put on a coat or not, misty one minute, sunny the next, but the views were gratifying from the top of the ramparts looking out over the contoured landscape below. After breakfast, we headed out for the Eurotunnel and the joys of the M25 beyond. Nothing much more to report. The traffic was reasonable and we arrived home around 5:30 pm.

Although I've enjoyed it, this hasn't been my favourite trip of the three. However, I'm not entirely sure why. I have a love-hate relationship with France and the French but it was pointed out to me I'd been a bit harsh on them in these blogs. In my defence, it was only for comic effect and no real ill intent was implied. Dirty French!



*Stan not wanting to go back to normal life*

I also think I should have been more persistent with my camera in the last three weeks but the weather conspired against me, the landscapes somehow didn't inspire me and the shots that were there I obviously failed to see. Such is life, maybe next time.



*Misty morning at Montreuil-sur-Mer*

This is the final blog for this year so I'd like to make it a poignant one. It's often said travel broadens the mind. In my youth, I can still remember the wide-eyed excitement of witnessing a new culture, trying exotic foreign cuisine or wrestling to make myself understood by the locals. There used to be a palpable exhilaration when travelling abroad. Different smells and dialects, a real sense of adventure at what you might see and learn.

Now I'm older and have witnessed more of it, the World seems a smaller, more homogenised place than the one I first started to discover in my teens. The same fast food and coffee chains can be found on every street corner from Texas to Timbuktu. I find I need to visit more undiscovered places or have more intense experiences to feel the same emotions that were stirred up in my youth. However, my sense of adventure still burns bright and given the option of a foreign excursion or some expensive shiny new trinket, I'd take the trip every time. The buzz of material possessions is very transitory but travel memories last a lifetime.

Years ago, we passed a German motorhome on the Autobahn with a slogan inscribed along its side which read 'Stop dreaming the life, start living the dream'. It's not entirely practical for the majority of people but I think it's what we've tried to initiate this year. We decided not to buy the latest iPhone or a new car and go off to make some memories instead. As we've found out, it's not exactly living the dream but it is much better than languishing in the repetitive mundane.

I'm going to sound like an old hippy now but the things I've enjoyed most from these trips are not particularly the places we visited, the food we ate or the things we saw. Great as they were, it's more the simple free pleasures we experienced and how they made us feel. What I'll remember long into the future are the incredible jet black skies packed full of stars in the middle of France, the wild, rugged coastline of northern Denmark, the dog walks on near empty sun-kissed beaches and sitting, eyes closed, in warm, dappled sunlight, listening to the gentle sea breeze move the trees in the pine forests below Bordeaux. Those are the memories that will stay with me long after the new iPhone or car have been forgotten. I'll also remember the jolly friendship of the other motorhomers who befriended us along the way, either for a snatched conversation or something more visceral with real substance and of course, hauntingly, walking among the personal effects of the inhabitants of Oradour-sur-Glane, 74 years after they woke up on that June morning not realising it was going to be their last.

Maybe that's a lesson for us all. We're all in a queue to the same final inescapable destination, but nobody knows how far towards the front of the line they are. Perhaps we should try harder to live in the present, to slow down and take time to enjoy now - because who knows, now might be all we get.



## STOP DREAMING THE LIFE, START LIVING THE DREAM.

What is it actually like to embark on a European adventure in a motorhome? Could it really be the carefree lifestyle depicted in so many books and TV ads? Is it compulsory to learn to play an acoustic guitar, wear open-toed sandals and grow a goatee beard? What about your husband, will he have to grow one too?

Most of these questions unfortunately, will not be addressed in this book. However, in an amusing, warts-and-all insight into life on the road, we follow our newbie motorhomers from the perils of buying their first camper to the realities of travelling Europe crammed into a small van with two wayward Cocker Spaniels.

It's a travelogue written with biting wit, packed full of beautiful photographs which can be enjoyed equally by both the armchair traveller, or anyone contemplating leaving the rat race behind and heading off into the wild blue yonder themselves. Taking in Spain, France, Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, you'll find lots of useful information on places to visit, advice on locations to stay (if you already own a motorhome) and of course plenty of laughs along the way.

