

# 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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Maps produced by Russell Prothero

Front and rear cover photographs 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

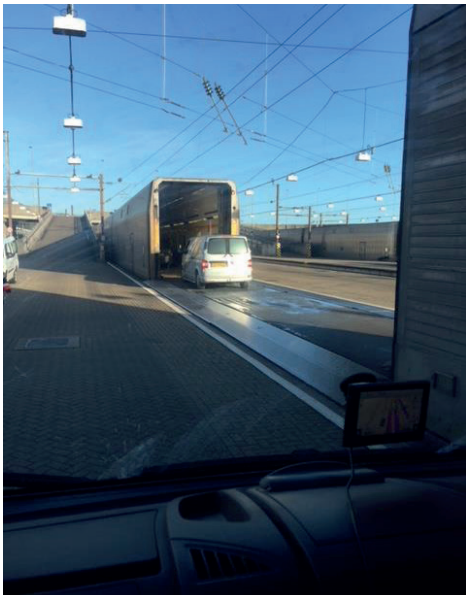
Drama before we even leave this green and pleasant land! I fired Brian up a few days ago to get fuel for the big trip and it appears he'd had some sort of brain haemorrhage. The dash lit up like a Christmas tree and 'refer to owners manual' flashed across the central readout! Just what you need four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

# To Be Continued

Full book available to buy or download from  
[www.travelswithmycocker.com](http://www.travelswithmycocker.com)