

France: Caravans fit for a gipsy king

With a quaint 'roulotte', pony rides, pools and the magical deliveries of the Croissant Fairy, Judith Woods finds caravanning in the French countryside a family delight.



A roulotte is a Romany-inspired mobile home and the best-kept secret in France

"Do you think she's arrived yet? I didn't hear anything. What if she hasn't? Can I spoon Nutella straight from the jar onto my Weetabix?"

My seven-year-old daughter was fidgeting with excitement and rattling the front door of our gipsy caravan, before finally bursting outside into the hazy morning sunshine. Squealing in triumph, she lifted the laden basket aloft.

"She's come! The Croissant Fairy has come!"

And so she had, putting the Tooth Fairy to shame with her generous offerings of fresh coffee and *chocolatines*, *pain de campagne* and *confiture*. We breakfasted outdoors amid the early morning stillness of the fragrant pine trees, our nine-month-old sitting at her wooden high chair chewing on a baguette crust and playing with cones (and vice versa).

Behind us stood our brightly painted *roulotte* – a Romany-inspired mobile home and, I would hazard, the best-kept secret in France since the sly invention of *boullion*. We were parked at Canvas Roulottes du Domaine de Dienné, just outside Poitiers, in the heart of France, but there's a whole hidden network of these sites across the country that can be booked for a night, a weekend, or longer during *les grands vacances*.

Now, I normally hate caravans – too pokey, too plastic, too, dare I say it, provincial – but our static *roulotte* was in an altogether different league, enjoying the veritable proportions of a stately home (relatively speaking). Fitted out with chic wood panelling, it had a neat little bathroom housing a sparkling loo and (the crucial decider in my book) the sort of businesslike shower that could exfoliate at 20 paces.

The main bed was on a raised platform with a curtain to screen it off – ideal for afternoon naps (not always for the baby – the French will insist on everyone drinking wine at lunchtime) and the furnishings were wonderfully funky, chosen from a luxurious palette of burnt orange and bright pink, lending the interior an exotic, Middle Eastern feel.

There was a fridge-freezer, a two-ringed cooker and access to a communal gas barbecue housed in an open-sided gazebo. We also had a little flat-screen television, but – and this says it all, really – over the course of a week we never even plugged it in.

In the mornings we had splashy fun in the on-site pool, in the afternoons we went riding at the on-site equestrian centre, or headed to the (yes, on-site) adventure course, where our daughter was fitted with harness and helmet and sent zipping across ponds, wobbling across rope bridges, swinging into nets and generally engaging in the sort of gung-ho fun that would leave the British health-and-safety brigade white-knuckled with terror.

The adventure park, which cost from €13 for a child, had three levels of difficulty; the middle one had a height restriction, much to our daughter's disappointment as she was desperate to stretch herself further. The adult course was very challenging and I was quite keen to try it with my husband, but he was still traumatised over an incident we shall call Trunkgate.

The day before we had left for France, I had remembered in a sudden panic that swimming trunks – as opposed to cool surfer shorts – were mandatory at all French swimming pools. As my husband was at work and couldn't get away from his desk, I scoured our local high street and duly bought him the only pair I could find – a tiny pair of Speedos snug enough to cradle a hibernating mouse.

On arrival at the campsite, he had stared at them in open-mouthed horror for an eternity, before shoehorning himself into them in mute misery. Taking a deep breath, he padded

resolutely to the pool with as much dignity as he could muster, comforted (sort of) by the knowledge that he wouldn't be the only one looking ridiculous.

Needless to say, every other male over the age of six was wearing funky swimming shorts. Worse, I had been so adamant and henpecky that it hadn't occurred to him to sneak his shorts into the luggage just in case I was wrong (a salutary warning to bossy wives everywhere).

By way of penance, it usually fell to me to take the children to swim, but that was no hardship as one of the two pools was heated – an appalling waste of natural resources that I very much disapproved of, until that is, I dipped my toe into the unheated water and blessed the sheer Gallic good sense of those few extra degrees.

In early July, the weather was glorious, so much so that I had no desire to visit the Jacuzzi, sauna or other spa facilities (on-site, of course); just lounging around drinking too much coffee was more than enough entertainment for me. The downside was that at night the *roulotte* got very hot, but there was a large fan that helped cool us down, and in extremis, I opened a few windows, in the selfless knowledge that any passing mosquitoes would feast on me, rather than anyone else, which did indeed happen.

A major part of the campsite's appeal was that it was (clingly swimwear aside) very French; little English was spoken, everything stopped for lunch and the restaurant was excellent – foie gras on toasted brioche is not the usual campsite fare in Britain. Bread, croissants and even fresh coffee could be ordered the previous evening and would be left on our doorstep early in the morning.

At the time of our off-season stay, there were no other British families, but there was so much to do that my daughter wasn't in the least bit dismayed by a lack of playmates. We went on woodland walks together, spent hours trampolining, visited the ponies at the stables and, at dusk every evening, undertook a twilight safari to track down glow worms (new word of the holiday: bioluminescence) and watch the bats flitting through the branches above us.

There was no shortage of culture, either. We drove to the nearby World Heritage Site of Saint-Savin to see the 12th-century frescoes in the abbey and lay horizontal on the pews looking up at the rendering of various scenes from The Bible – Noah drunk and uncovered, the crossing of the Red Sea, the story of Joseph.

Then we travelled a few miles farther to Angle-sur-Anglin, justifiably regarded as one of the prettiest villages in France, with its river and arched bridge, narrow streets, château and ruined castle. Poitiers hit the spot for an afternoon's recreational shopping, followed by drinks in the square opposite the intricately carved stone frontage of Eglise-Notre-Dame-la-Grande, the oldest Romanesque church in Europe, dating back to the 11th century and an absolute architectural gem.

On another afternoon my husband went on a (solo) outing to the tank museum at Saumur and brought the camera back crammed with more than 200 images of what appeared to be panzer wheel bolts and rivets, which he pored over at length.

Yet even for him, the highlight of our excursions was undoubtedly our day at Futuroscope, one of France's top theme parks, with amazing rides, 4-D films where you are thrown about in your seat and plunged into the action, and wonderful wildlife cinematography. Then we rounded off the day at the park's Le Cristal restaurant with the most extraordinary Heston Blumenthal-style meal of futuristic food that bubbled, popped and smoked – while still managing to be delicious.

Back at the *roulotte*, we savoured the tranquillity; the caravans were well spaced out, so no one overlooked anyone else. Each one had its own decked area with table and chairs, and each was named after a breed of horse, although it would have taken a tractor to get a single *roulotte* to budge. We were ensconced in Le Boulonnais, just down from L' Anglo-Arabe and across from Le New Forest and Le Welsh Cob.

Although the Poitou Charentes region had never previously been on my holiday radar, I was won over by the lush, wooded countryside. The fact that our site had so many activities made everything very easy and relaxing, and we felt happy to let our daughter run off to pat the nearby ponies or go to the playpark beyond our sightline.

I would heartily recommend *roulotte* living, even to those who don't have much time for caravans. Go on, abseil through the canopy, chase butterflies along the hedgerows, go pony trekking in the woods! And if you happen to see the Croissant Fairy, send her all our love.

Basics

Judith Woods travelled to Les Roulottes du Domaine de Dienné, in the Loire, with Canvas Holidays (0845 268 0857; www.canvasholidays.co.uk) A *roulotte* sleeping two adults and up to three children costs from £465 for seven nights, including midweek Dover–to-Calais return ferry crossing.

Summer-holiday weeks cost from £932 for a family of five.

Canvas has similar holidays at Les Roulottes des Monédières, a park in an orchard with a lakeside setting, near Limoges in the Dordogne; prices are the same at both sites.