

▼ Camping in the Beach at the beach



French fancy

Five kids and two mums go mad for half-term on the west coast of France

Words and photos Anna Lumley-Noble

There's nothing like the metallic thud of the ferry ramp to make you feel like your holiday has started. Despite the late hour, there's a buzz of anticipation and excitement as families, exchange students, lorry drivers and various others board the impressive Brittany Ferries boat. We go in search of our cabins, passing by cinemas, restaurants, bars and large lounge areas with rows of seating and, on finding it, the 13-year old announces, "Wow! What great use of a small space." I have to say I agree. The bottom bunks are folded up into settees and the top bunks are magically slotted into the ceiling. The *en suite* is compact, but has everything you need. There's excited arguing

about who gets a top bunk (only really practical for older children as you wouldn't want your younger ones to fall out as it's pretty high) and then we head outside.

On the top deck the older boys check out the table tennis and admire the magnificent military ships in Portsmouth harbour, while the younger ones, snuggled into pyjamas, watch the lights of the coastline disappear into the distance.

We arrive in Caen just as the sun is rising and it takes nearly six hours to reach our first destination, Arcachon, a small town on the south west coast

of France, not far from Bordeaux. We have borrowed a seven-seater VW Beach from Campervantastic, a South London-based Campervan hire company, for this trip and already

“no children were harmed in the making of this article”

it's proved to be comfortable and luxurious feeling, with ample seating space for the five children we have with us, and

the two crazy ladies driving! It seems to eat up the mileage and even the four-year old revels in the space.

With an enormous supply of snacks on board, a wide selection of films for the DVD player, plus the odd game of I-spy and our French road trip soundtrack playing in the background,

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED

■ Camping Les Criques de Portails, RD114 - Corniche de Collioure, 66700 Argelès-sur-Mer www.lescriques.co.uk (open from end March until end Oct)

■ Arcachon Club campsite, 5 allée Galaxie, Cedex BP 46, 33312 Arcachon www.camping-arcachon.com

■ La Cozy, 1 Route de la Fond de Roumignac, 17120 Cozes

THE FIGURES

■ Miles: 1,720

■ Fuel: £270

■ Camping and accommodation: £360

■ Ferries: Portsmouth to Caen, from £115 (+ £39 cabin) one way www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

▼ From right to left: Kate, Anna, Jackson, Robyn, Max, Louis and Zach, in a rare moment of chilling on the dune, prior to going absolutely nuts



▼ You need to be on your A game to reach the staircase at the top of the dune



▼ Campervantastic came up trumps with a brand spankers 2017 Beach in Grape Yellow for us to borrow



▲ It's just a massive playground for both young and old. Up to a million people a year are thought to visit the Dunes. None go away disappointed



pretty soon the children forget to ask "Are we there yet?" every few minutes and revel in the occasion. Even I'm surprised at how much ground we are able to cover in one day with five kids, and how much I'm enjoying it!

Sand mountain

It's still only mid-afternoon by the time we arrive at our first stop and we know the perfect place to run off some steam – *Grande Dune du Pilat* in Arcachon. These almost indescribable sand dunes offer a breathtaking view from the top (certainly getting to the top takes your breath away!), as Arcachon sits in a basin and, from this incredible vantage point, the sea is visible both north and south of you. The children spend a whole afternoon running and jumping down the sand dunes. It's a spectacular sight, and well worth the painstaking climb to the top each time. Eventually, we tear ourselves away and go in search of our campsite.

The Van comfortably sleeps five of us – myself and the four and five-year old upstairs, and my sister and her seven-year old downstairs, both on incredibly comfortable beds. The 12 and 13-year

olds reluctantly take to the nearby tent. The weather is still warm and everyone sleeps well, the only distraction being vast numbers of hungry mosquitoes.

The following day we have a morning mooch around Arcachon town, which has a sweeping yellow sandy beach regularly visited by ferry boats taking passengers across the basin and sightseers on excursions. Restaurants line the beachfront offering largely fresh fish, commonly in the form of mouth-watering seafood platters piled high. The town itself, with its small cobbled streets and rows of cafés and shops selling clothes, ice cream and *crêpes*, is full of interesting architecture. There is also an array of *pâtisseries* selling exquisite macaroons and meringues almost as big as our smallest child!

Our humble Grape Yellow Van fitted in perfectly in such a pretty, picturesque seaside town.

“ The weather is still warm and everyone sleeps well, the only distraction being vast numbers of hungry mosquitos ”

On day two in Arcachon we are more prepared for the dunes, and the children have plenty of creative ideas as to how to get from the top to the

bottom as fast as possible. Feeling very counter intuitive, I push my five-year old down a black run sand dune on a body board (no children were harmed in the making of this article!). The kids were totally in the

moment and, from the youngest to the eldest, they buried each other in sand, built sand castles and slid down on their tummies, bottoms or body boards.

It's a place that brings out the child in everyone. Grown men and women were racing each other down, some even attempting roly-polys, it really was a sight to behold, and refreshing to see this massive natural playground providing hours of the simplest forms of entertainment, all for the price of a single euro to park.

If you do want a spending spree,

▲ The seven-seat capacity of the VW Beach also worked exceptionally well as a sleeping quarters for five of us

► The wonderfully ornate carousel on the seafront in Arcachon is a work of art



▼ Robyn loved the Grape Yellow so much she could often be found just touching it

▼ Going late in the season, around school half-term, meant we had the vast majority of the beaches to ourselves



▼ Louis looking cool in the beautiful Medieval harbour at Collioure, a sort of cliché-on-sea right by the Spanish border



▲ Our four-star camping digs in Argelès-sur-Mer weren't half bad. We had pre-booked a mobile home here to ease the space requirements in the Van

however, there's plenty of opportunity back towards the car park, with a choice of cafés, souvenir shops and random clothes shops.

Aire of refinement

We are all sad to leave Arcachon, but there's lots to come back for – the market, a range of beaches, cycle paths winding through fir tree forests and strawberry trees (who knew that was a thing?!). The journey from Arcachon to Argelès-sur-Mer, our next destination, takes around four hours. We have a few toilet stops and spend a bit of a time at a lovely *aire* (French roadside rest stop / services) with a playground and picnic area.

It's about 4pm as we reach our next campsite. It's four star-rated, has a heated pool and jacuzzi, a shop and a restaurant and looks rather swanky on arrival. It is surprisingly busy, though with only a few tents but an impressive number of Campervans and motorhomes on site. There's also

a raft of mobile homes largely situated at the back facing the mountains, and we have rented one of these with a view to divide and conquer, and because the Van doesn't have space for a full-on kitchen with seven on board. We also have the benefit of a sea view camping pitch for the Van, which is pretty spectacular.

As such, the next morning we are gently woken around 8am by the orange and pink glow from the sun rising over the sea.

Our first day at Camping Les Criques de Portails takes us to Collioure, a small village about five minutes away and not far from the border with Spain. It is a beautiful spot with a small beach lined with palm trees and an imposing castle, whose walls line the walk around

the seafront towards the rows of restaurants, cafés and shops. It also has a market twice a week, which we visit on Sunday. It is very much a local's market, with an amazing array of stalls offering cheeses, hanging salami, fresh vegetables, oysters and bread, alongside clothes, bags and random touristy fare. The smells and the colours

alone are worth the visit, and our Facebook posts must have looked a bit too tantalising as one of the dads couldn't resist flying out and surprising us for a couple of days so he could check it out as well.

“ Eventually we head home, seven tired but happy explorers ”

The next three days we explore and relax on various parts of the long stretches of nearby beaches. The backdrop of the mountains is quite spectacular and the colours change so much in the light – at times dark and almost menacing, then minutes later



▲ Like a photoshoot for an album cover. We wonder if any of this lot will go on to be on an actual album cover?



▲ Oysters and shellfish abound in this picturesque part of France



◀ The sights, smells and sounds of a French marketplace are always an experience to take in. Beware though, put it on Facebook and you never know who might fly in to join you!

▼ To ease the burden on the Van, and so nobody had to sleep in a tent for a few nights, we rented a mobile home in Argelès-sur-Mer. It certainly made cooking easier!



sparkling in the sun affording glimpses of little houses and grassy fields. The beach is wide and long and, although it's still warm and sunny, it's surprisingly empty. The children make the most of the space by flying kites, building Olympic-sized assault courses to race around and huge castles in the sand. Despite the chilly sea, the children still body board and swim, the younger ones in wet suits. It's nice and shallow, so feels very safe for everyone.

Argelès has pretty much finished up for the winter at this point, but there's still the odd shop, café and bar open and still plenty of off-beach activities for the children, with an afternoon fair and big playground with a huge assortment of slides and tunnels to explore.

Homeward bound

On our final night, we head back to Collioure for dinner. The children have meatballs and chips and my sister and I finally get to share one of those platters piled high with mussels,

oysters, prawns and a variety of other delicious fresh shellfish, with a bottle of wine thrown in for good measure. This costs around 40 euros, which seems pretty good value. We then head back to the campsite and reluctantly pack for an early morning departure.

The journey back is uneventful. The picnic manages to last all day and we get to sample more *aires* as the landscape becomes increasingly familiar and the weather chillier. We make one final stop for the night in a small B&B in Cozes. This was worth every penny, both to recharge our batteries for the last part of the journey and for the amazing breakfast!

Everyone is looking forward to the return ferry as our boat leaves at 4.30pm and arrives at 9.15pm, meaning we can really make the most of the entertainment and variety of things to do on board. The older boys disappear off to watch *Spiderman* in one of the two cinemas, the smaller children spend hours in the play room, colouring and climbing around

in the soft play. Afterwards, the adults participate (poorly!) in the quiz, and then we all sit and watch the clown who the children think is hilarious. There's also a treasure hunt for Halloween and dinner in the restaurant.

In what seems like no time, we are back in Portsmouth and heading home. Seven tired but happy explorers. 📍

▲ Our last night at the beach. We wandered into town and had a lovely seafood platter by the quayside. The perfect end to a superb trip



▲ On the way back home, we managed to turn almost the entire day into one extended picnic, with multiple stops to enjoy the views and weather. Top tip: don't rush the journey home, it's as much part of the adventure as the rest of the trip