



NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED:

- Camping La Canadienne, Ares (www.lacanadienne.com)
- Camping Arcachon, Arcachon (www.camping-arcachon.com)
- Camping Larrouleta, St. Jean de Luz (www.larrouleta.com)

HOW MUCH:

- CamperVanTastic hire: VW California T5.5 GP 2.0 BiTDi 180ps – from £630 per week (www.campervantastic.com)
- Fuel: We drove 669 miles. Fuel averaged out at 110p per litre and the van averages about 34mpg.
- Ferry crossing: Portsmouth to St. Malo, from £259 Santander to Portsmouth, from £359
- Campsites: La Canadienne – £22 per night (1 night), Camping Arcachon – £19 per night (1 night), Camping Larrouleta – £25 per night (2 nights) Total: £91 (£78)
- Hotel Bahia, Santander, family room – £108
- Total: £917 (not including California Camper hire)

Escaping the rat race

A half-term getaway to France in a T5.5 California

Words and photos: Steve Lumley

Kate and I were eager to get back on the road and do some real exploring after a long, cold winter. February half-term holidays were around the corner and so, when Friday afternoon came, we threw some essentials into our VW California Campervan, picked the boys up from school and drove straight to Portsmouth to board the overnight Brittany ferry to St. Malo. Among the essentials we packed were an insulating hood to keep our Camper toasty, as we weren't expecting tropical temperatures in France in February! We also took a cab hammock from South West Campers as, with the arrival of baby Max, we are now five, and face the challenge of all fitting into the California comfortably. With that in mind, we had to include the California's optional fifth seat, so we

decided to go as compact as possible, keeping luggage to a minimum and utilising one of Khyam's compact, quick erect utility tents to store the fifth seat and child seats in for our overnight stops. Zach and Louis (aged six and five years) were super excited to be off

“We are now five, and face the challenge of all fitting in the California comfortably”

on yet another adventure. Max, only eight months old, was kind of oblivious, but happy to be strapped comfortably in his seat having a good old snooze. The ferry journey (www.brittanyferries.com) was really relaxing and super easy. We had a four birth

outside cabin with a cot and everyone enjoyed a nice supper followed by a good night's sleep so, when we arrived in France at 8am the following morning, we felt refreshed and ready to go, so hit the road straight away and headed down to the Arcachon Basin.

The campsite we chose for that evening was in Ares (www.lacanadienne.com). It was close to the beach and we had the whole place to ourselves, although it was quite crowded with empty static holiday homes.

The children loved the playground at the campsite and couldn't believe their luck when they found a pile of wet sand to run up and down shouting, 'look, we've found the sand dunes!'

That evening, I was very happy we packed the hood as it was a chilly, wet night, but I was dry and toasty warm in



▼ Did it look like this in the UK in February? What a great time to plan an escape



▲ Oh, to be young again and find plate spinning entertaining



▲ We paid a little extra for a family cabin in order to arrive refreshed...



▲ ...but who needs a cabin when you can relax in a porthole?

▼ Some three kilometers of sand to run about on – the dunes in the Arcachon Basin



▼ Louis and Zach indulging in a spot of dune jumping



▲ The obligatory outside the campsite photo. Can you guess where this is?



▼ You can't beat a Camper for bringing the family close together

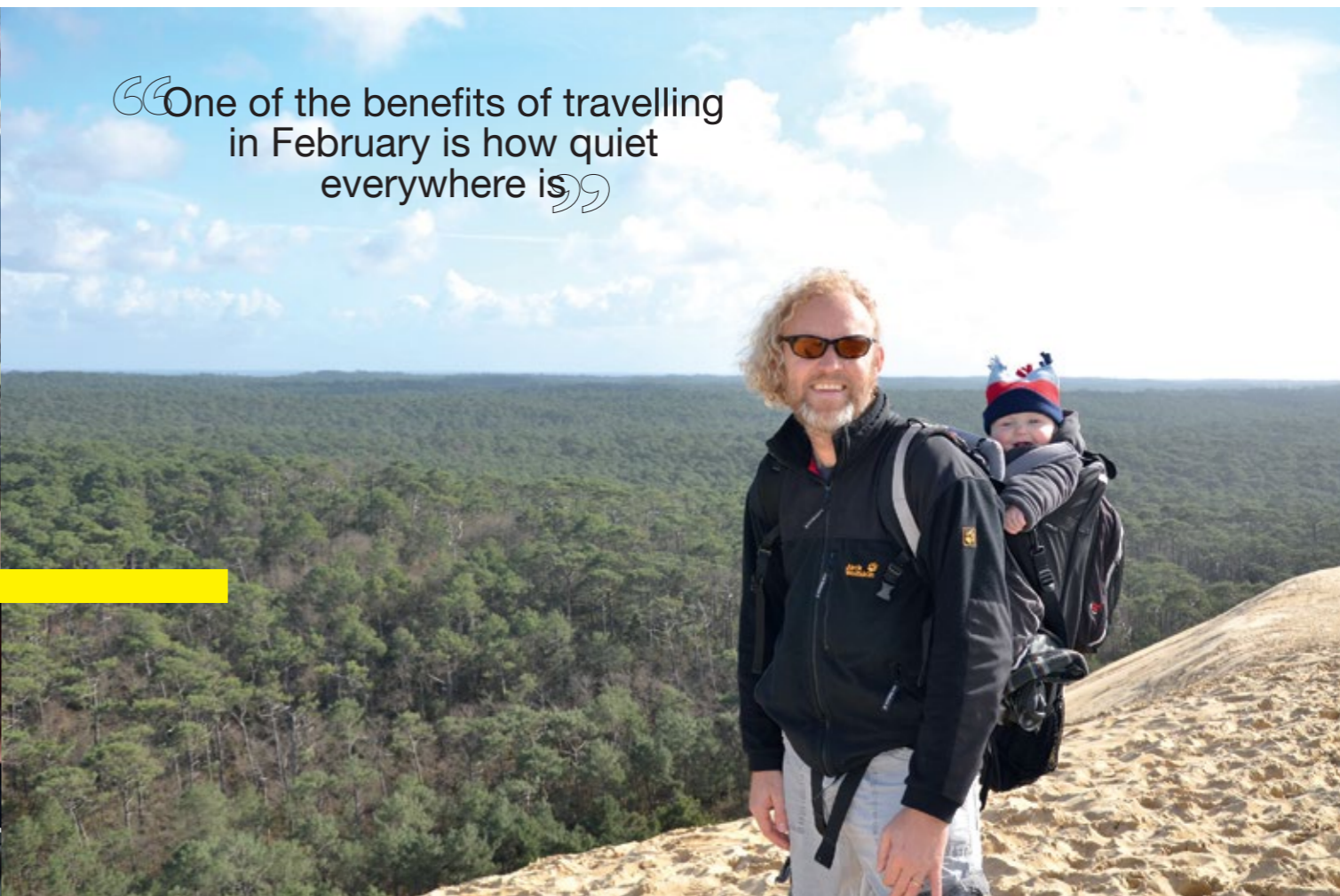
▼ Travelling out of season meant we could have our pick of the pitches, although many sites were closed for the winter



▼ Louis was snug as a bug in a rug on the cab hammock. A great utilisation of space in the Camper



“One of the benefits of travelling in February is how quiet everywhere is”



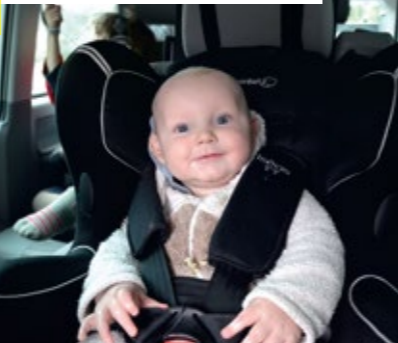
▼ No gloves, no hair net, no problem. Old school French butchery at its finest



▼ Steve in his natural element, behind the wheel of a California



▼ Start them young. Max looks happy spending life on the road



▲ The compact Kyham utility tent came in handy for storing all manner of things, like the kids

▼ The mouth-watering display in the Miremont tea rooms gave us something to enjoy whilst sheltering from the rain in Biarritz



▼ Taking in the sites, sounds and wares of the wonderful market in Arcachon



the roof while Kate and the boys kept warm and snug 'downstairs'. Louis fitted in the cab hammock perfectly as it lay across the front seats.

It was quite an experience the following day when we did find the real dunes. The Great Dune of Pyla is the tallest sand dune in Europe. At over 100m high and above sea level, 500m wide and almost 3km in length, it is slowly pushing the forest inland at a rate of 5m each year!

▲ Steve and Max looking pleased with themselves, having scaled the Great Dune of Pyla

Travelling out of season meant few sites were open, so those that were tended to be the bigger ones like this one. We more or less had the run of the place, but I couldn't help but wonder how busy and different these big sites would feel in the peak summer months. From here we were able to explore more of Arcachon, which has charming Victorian architecture, and we spent a wonderful day mooching around the markets before continuing our journey towards Spain.

As we drove through Biarritz, we decided it was time to stretch our legs and let the boys out. Unfortunately, it had started to rain heavily so we thought this a perfect opportunity to go traditional and enjoy high tea at the Miremont tea rooms. We walked in to find a counter offering the biggest and most exciting range of pastries, sweets, gateaux, hot chocolates, teas and coffees we had ever seen. It made our mouths water just looking at it all. We chose some delicious snacks and sat in front of the magnificent window looking out at the rain and lightning and huge waves crashing over the Grande Plage. One of the benefits of travelling in February is how quiet everywhere is, so we took advantage of the best seats in the house. Of course the downside is the unpredictable weather. The wonderful tearooms provided a much-needed break from driving and some fabulous tea and cakes. Did I mention the cakes?

That evening we camped on the border between Spain and France in a beautiful fishing port on the Basque coast called St. Jean de Luz (www.larrouleta.com). The campsite had a nice looking indoor swimming pool, but it was closed when we were there. St. Jean de Luz is gorgeous, full of character with its old 17th and 18th century buildings and a picturesque sandy bay. In fact, we thought it was so beautiful we decided to stay two nights. The Camper topper protected us from another day and night of heavy rain, so we decided to escape the damp campsite for a soft play centre a short drive away that was recommended to us by the campsite. The boys had a wonderful experience there learning a few French words and phrases through playing games with the staff and children at the aptly-named 'Luziland' centre. In the evening we enjoyed the romantic atmosphere of St. Jean de Luz and found a great pizzeria for supper.

Border crossing

Eventually we made it over the border into Spain, and our next stop was the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. It was incredible to look at, with its amazing contemporary architecture and random curves, sitting alongside the Nervion river. What was most striking on our arrival, and a delight for the children to see, was an enormous Scottie dog made out of flowers! Most importantly for us, the museum and grounds were really

Man on the moon

It was a hard slog walking up the dune, but definitely worth it as the views were absolutely breathtaking with large pine forests, ocean coast and the inlet of the bay stretching beneath us. On a very clear day we learned you could see the Pyrenees. Today, the sky wasn't quite clear enough, although we enjoyed a beautiful blue sky and sunshine. The dunes were like a moonscape and the adults and children all around us were running and jumping about in all directions with careless abandon. We joined in and had a wonderful day sand dune jumping and rolling, whilst watching the paragliders float across the bay on the air currents - at least their landings would be soft on all that sand.

We had chosen a lovely campsite close to the dunes that had private pitches, separated by trees and bushes (www.camping-arcachon.com). The site was child friendly and served very tasty pizza in the café.

▼ The kids loved the enormous Scottie dog of flowers outside the Guggenheim. He changes colour depending on the time of year and the flowers in bloom



accessible for children, with play areas as well as art to captivate them. Inside the museum the boys absolutely loved it and ran around the huge modern sculptures wearing headsets that gave them all the information they wanted. Needless to say, they became our tour guides for the afternoon. Our favourite piece was the 'matter of time' sculpture, which was like moving through a maze

“The boys had a wonderful experience”

walking between its big, curved walls. The museum had a great playground outside, so the boys were able to run off some energy before we got back on the road to Santander.

Size matters

We arrived in Santander quite late in the afternoon and struggled to find a campsite open close enough for us to indulge in some sightseeing, so decided it would be easier to have a night in a hotel so that we would also be ready and packed for our ferry home in the morning. We found one right opposite the ferry port entrance called Hotel Bahia. (www.hotelbahiasantander.com). We had the most enormous bedroom, which was a real contrast from squeezing in the Campervan all week. It couldn't have been more perfect – clean, comfortable and only 200m from the ferry terminal, so we actually watched our ferry arriving

▼ We cheated and spent our last night in Spain in a hotel room. This was our view from the Hotel Bahia opposite the ferry terminal



from the bedroom window! The bonus of staying so central meant we could explore this amazing city as we were within easy walking distance of the town centre. So, the next morning, we enjoyed meandering around the streets of Santander, stopping off for coffee and tapas before boarding the ferry for our journey home.

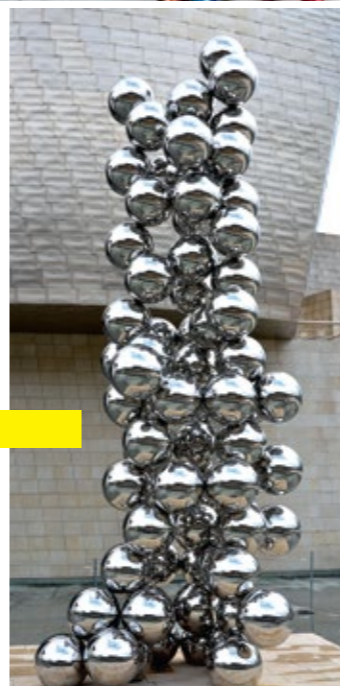
Class act

Once we were on the ferry, we decided to upgrade and come home Commodore class. With three young boys in tow, it was well worth having the extra space and Zach and Louis were amazed when we opened the door to our cabin.

'Wow, daddy, daddy, we've got our own flat on a boat!' they shouted. We then explored the facilities on board and found a cinema, swimming pool (closed out of season) and a soft play area with a fabulously friendly children's entertainer who captivated the children with puppetry, stories and jokes, leaving us some time to relax close by in the lounge before dinner. After a super dinner in the main restaurant, we settled down in our 'flat on a boat' to rest, and enjoy the last of the day's sunshine on the balcony. As we sailed, we began to plan what the next Lumley adventure might be. It truly was a wonderful way to end an epic short break.



▲ Jeff Koons's massive tulips



◀ Anish Kapoor's sculpture, entitled Tall tree and the eye



▲ Some people can sleep on a chicken's lip. Or, in this case, pretend to on an antique cannon



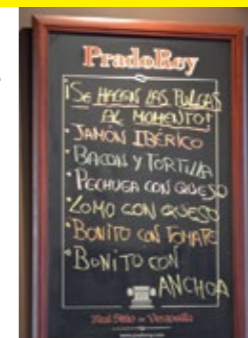
▼ Our campsite in St. Jean de Luz. It was pretty quiet this time of year



▼ The weary traveller's reward – a pint of the amber nectar that is San Miguel



▶ Sampling the local delicacies...



▼ The perfect picture to end our winter break. Ahead of us, drizzly ol' England

