



FAMILY WAY

STEVE AND KATE Lumley loved their post-redundancy road trip so much, they made it a new way of life

Words Kate Lumley Pictures Steve and Kate Lumley

As keen travellers, myself and my husband Steve consider ourselves fortunate to have experienced a range of different holidays. When we had children ourselves, we wanted to show them a bit of the world. So when Steve was offered redundancy, we seized the opportunity to embark on a 14-week adventure through France, Italy, Sicily and Greece with Zach (3) and Louis (2).

With children and the distances we had

in mind to cover, we soon ruled out the thought of buying a classic Camper Van. We needed something that was left-hand drive, robust, fast, reliable and fully equipped for the challenge. We soon found our dream machine, a four-berth, 2003 Westfalia California T4, with a 2.5Tdi 150bhp engine. It's one of the best and last VWs from the world renowned factory in Germany. It had all the refinements of a luxury car, air-conditioning, air blown heating, heated front seats and safety features such as airbags and

ABS. It proved itself to be a solid performer and admirably stood up to our antics, with two small children swinging about in it.

We equipped it with a few extras including sat-nav, reverse parking sensors, TV/DVD player, two inflatable kayaks and oars, four bikes, a body board, a kid's buggy, toys and an awning for when we arrived at our destination. We already had the kitchen sink, so why not pack the lot!

We left England in April 2007. The weather up until then had been glorious so



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when it started raining we took this as a sign and made a dash for Dover and caught the first available ferry. It seemed unreal to be leaving a grey and foggy England.

Our first night was completely unplanned but to our delight we came across a very beautiful campsite in a small town called Guignicourt, about two hours from Calais. We perched our camp by the edge of a tree-lined river but only spent one night here as the lure and excitement ahead was too great. We headed to Dienville, near Troyes, a sleepy little village on the edge of Lac Orient. The landscape was completely flat, with golden fields as far as the eye could see. Each morning Steve and one of the children cycled to the boulangerie to buy fresh baguettes and croissants. Most of our time here was spent just chilling out, swimming in the campsite pool and the lake, cycling and getting used to Camper Van life.

One of our greatest pleasures was cycling with the children. They absolutely love it, and France presented us with some really safe opportunities to go out and explore on two wheels, even three wheels when Zach,

our eldest's bike was attached to Steve's. From Dienville we travelled south to Annecy, a lakeside town at 448 metres high, nestled between the Alps not far from Mont Blanc. The weather was amazing – cool nights and blazing hot days. We could even see snow-capped mountains from our Van. In short, Annecy is a playground, offering everything from sailing, rollerblading, cycling and paragliding activities to extreme sports. The scenery was absolutely breathtaking, with the backdrop of snow-capped mountains stretching down to the lush area around the lake. We particularly enjoyed having the campsite virtually to ourselves. We took a trip to Chamonix to see the snow and found the road up to around 1,500 metres astounding. Avoiding the toll roads our route took us round many nail-biting hairpin bends. We also discovered the tiny 'train du Montanvers', which meandered up the mountain to the Mer du Glace glacier at 1,913 metres. The children were ecstatic

about the 20-minute train ride, but our minds were on the 280 steps down to the glacier. No one mentioned the fact that we had to take a near vertical gondola ride first. Zach and Steve thought it was amazing while Louis and Kate weren't quite as comfortable hanging off a bit of wire halfway down a mountain. Once we were safely down the steps we could enter the glacier which was a fabulous and weird experience. As well as some strange historical displays there was also an old man with a PC and an array of cameras focused on a glacier scene with a St Bernard dog for company.

MAKING A SPLASH

Having enjoyed the mountain scene we felt the urge to head for the seaside as the weather had closed in, so we bolted over the border to Italy and found ourselves



The view from the offices of Camper&Bus magazine, overlooking downtown Croydon; well, not quite...

in Laigueglia, a beautiful seaside village between San Remo and Savona. We had a sea view from our Camper and saw some great sunrises. Although set back a bit from the beach, we could still hear the waves and the fisherman in their boats at dawn gathering the morning catch. The town was typically Italian, with cobbled streets, little alleyways, piazzas, geraniums – it was lovely just to stroll about. The beach was immaculate, with sun loungers meticulously lined up to within the nearest centimetre (we actually saw a lady with a tape measure) and the beach was regularly attended to and swept clean. From Laigueglia we made our way down the west coast of Italy. We decided to check out the Island of Elba on our way south, which was a real jewel. We had our first taste of camping right at the edge of a beach and were quite tempted to go no further! The sun shone and we had a fabulous week. The campsite catered for all our needs – a playground for the children and a great internet café/restaurant with everything from ice-creams to three-course dinners. We discovered some amazing hilltop towns and castles with spectacular panoramic views of the coastline and mainland Italy, hazy in the distance. On our return to the mainland we dropped in on Pisa, which was a bit of a shock to the system after the peace and tranquillity of Elba. But it was fantastic to see the



Alpine weather closing in? Time for the beach...



All smiles: The Lumleys



The boys getting a bit Gordon Ramsay-ish about dad's cooking



Steve and Zach do a spot of mountain biking around Annecy



As the old saying goes, home is where you park it

One of the most impressive drives Italy has to offer

infamous leaning tower. From there we continued down the coast, passing field after field of blazing red poppies and arrived at lake Bracciano just outside Rome. We camped on the lake's edge with the swans and a bed of pollen that had covered the campsite like a cotton-wool cloud. We continued our journey south and found ourselves on one of the most impressive drives Italy has to offer – the Amalfi coast road. With its endless hairpin bends and mirrors balanced on cliff edges to help navigate the corners it is certainly not for the faint-hearted, yet the scenery is breathtaking – if you can take your eyes off the road long enough! We were rewarded with another beautiful beachside pitch at Camping Nettuno near Sorrento, and from here took in



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the sites of Sorrento, Naples, Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius before taking an overnight ferry from Naples to Palermo in Sicily.

We arrived at dawn with an incredible pink sunrise reflecting off the rocks of the port. By the time we drove off the ferry it was the middle of rush hour and we navigated the busy Palermo traffic and headed for the quieter town of Cefalu. The nearest campsite was superb, on top of the rocks with panoramic views, access down to its own little beach and a swimming pool, which we often had to ourselves. Cefalu itself was just a 10-minute drive down the coast. It is an enchanting town situated beneath an enormous rock face, and its buildings and streets spill down from the spectacular Duomo (church) directly onto the harbour and shore. The long, sandy beach was fantastic. Lined, in the Italian way, with row upon row of sun loungers and a few very relaxing beach bars. It was a lovely place to meander about and with the sea so close it was perfect for the children to go for a big run.

We spent about 10 days in Sicily, checking out Taormina and then Siracusa before crashing storms came in, bringing heavy rain and strong winds. One grey morning we decided it was time to find some sunshine and thought Greece was where we should be heading. By midday we were packed up and

on our way to the port of Messina and the ferry from Sicily back to mainland Italy. We knew there was an overnight ferry to Patras, Greece at 8pm from Bari – the other side of Italy and a seven-hour journey, according to our sat-nav. We decided to give it a go although it was a mammoth challenge for us all.

LONGEST LEG

We took the ferry from Sicily to Italy and hit the motorway without delay. It was another spectacular drive. We passed the coastline up from the heel of Italy along the west coast, and then crossed the ankle through the mountains towards the east coast. We had panoramic views of the hills dropping off to the sea in the distance. We finally found some sunshine about mid afternoon. The children were amazing. Through the power of DVDs, especially *Peter Pan*, snacks, and some naps along the way they did incredibly well. We eventually arrived in Bari at 6.45pm with the very real possibility that within less than 24 hours we could have left Sicily and arrived in Greece. We ran into the ferry office and managed to buy a ticket and were ushered straight onto the boat without delay. Before we knew it we were on our way to Greece.

We awoke as the boat sailed into the port at Patras in central mainland Greece.

Leaving the ferry we immediately noticed the change in landscape, which was much more rugged



Ship ahoy! Inflatable kayaks gave the Lumleys another perspective on life overseas

and undeveloped here, with crystal clear sea stretching out in all directions. We had been tipped off by a Greek friend that the peninsula of Pelion in the East was definitely a place worth spending some time in.

After such a mammoth journey we spent the next few days relaxing at Sikia Camping, just outside Volos in northern Pelion. It was a really well equipped site with a typical taverna overlooking the beach. We joined a larger than usual crowd of Austrians, Germans and one UK couple in a VW Camper spending three months here! It was not what we were used to but an indication that the high season was on its way.

We decided to go in search of a more remote pitch, so drove to the tip of the peninsula where we found Kastri Camping. Signs along the way directed us to 'Kastri Camping opposite Skiathos'. The location was so idyllic, Skiathos did indeed face us in the distance and the beach was great for swimming. We pumped up the kayaks once more and explored the neighbouring bays. We even blagged a boat trip for the whole family from a very friendly German whose motorboat we'd helped to launch. It was lovely to see the coastline and check out some incredible villas hidden



Laughing at the mere idea of a 'foot-long', the boys kept the bakers busy en route

away. At night the stars were amazing, it was almost a joy to get up in the night to go to the toilet!

We continued to enjoy the remoteness of Kastri until it was time to head off to Skopelos to meet up with the boy's grandmother. Even though we could see Skopelos in the distance there were no ferries from where we were so we had to drive back to Volos. We boarded the ferry and Louis immediately befriended an elderly Greek couple who fed him biscuits the entire journey. The boat stopped off in Skiathos and the scene before us as we stood watching from the deck was incredible. We were all transfixed as people, goods and vehicles were hurriedly rushed on and off the ferry as

We awoke as the boat sailed into port in Greece



In the queue for a bit of Greek island hopping

The sights near Skiathos airport

the port officials screeched their whistles at the traffic to keep it moving.

We really enjoyed the beauty and relaxing atmosphere of Skopelos, not to mention the mouth-watering food. For a fabulous week we wild camped on Glisteri Beach, at the invitation of the owners of the local taverna. We were utterly spoilt by the kindness and generosity of our Greek hosts who often brought us fresh fruit and Skopelos pie direct to our Camper Van.

HEAT AND THE HINTERLANDS

It was finally time to start heading back westward. On our way we took a look at Skiathos, which was as touristy as it got for us. We stayed at the campsite at Koukounaries, one of Greece's most popular beaches. It was very green, lush and pretty much

deserted and as the temperatures rose and mosquitoes had their fill we decided to head back to Sikia Camping before moving on for Lefkas. When we arrived back on the mainland, to our amazement the temperatures kept on rising and we found ourselves trapped in the heat. Our new neighbours were very concerned about how the children were managing in the increasing heat. They

ensured that when a seaside pitch became available later that day we moved into it to benefit from the sea breeze (which felt like a hair dryer!). The temperature rose steadily day by day and we found ourselves touring the peninsula in search of cooler mountain air in our air-conditioned Van.

We got to see the incredible inland scenery, which was mountainous with pretty little villages scattered throughout. On our first day out the temperature hit 45°C while we were touring Mount Pelion. Over the next two days we eventually hit 53.5° with a sultry 35° at night. We continued exploring and dipping in and out of the sea, which was on our doorstep, and at times became rough enough for boogie boarding. Both Zach and Louis stunned onlookers, and us, with their boogie boarding antics – totally no fear! Finally the weather broke and we managed



Ah Venice. Well, it's not likely to be anywhere else on earth, is it?



Camping on the Greek island Meganisi



The swimming pool at the campsite near Lefkas, Greece was carved into the rocks



On Skopelos: our view to Glisteri Beach



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to pack up. The day we left, the fires seemed to engulf the whole of Greece. It was a sad and terrifying time for the people of Pelion and we feared for what may lie ahead for them as three fire planes swooped low in front of us, scooping up gallons of water for the other side of the peninsula.

We headed across the mountains across central Greece to the rock formations of Meteora, one of the most visited locations in Greece. These, once submerged, huge pinnacles of rock rose out from the town below. The landscape was formed about 10 million years ago by tectonic movements when the area was submerged by an inland sea. In 11AD, hermit monks decided to build monasteries, precariously balanced on the inaccessible rock summits, to seek refuge from the bloodshed of Turkish incursions. Luckily for us today, roads run around the clusters of monasteries.

Back on Lefkas we found a campsite near Vasiliki one of the best places in Europe for windsurfing. We had been tipped off by a German couple while staying at the Kastri

Campsite in Pelion that Kastri camping in Lefkas was the only place to stay. We left the tourism of Nidri behind and the roads got smaller as we wound our way through the rural landscape. After passing through remote farmsteads we finally reached the campsite and pitched in a great spot overlooking the sea with Kefalonia in the distance. It was one of the most beautiful



and natural sites we had come across, with its own private beach and a swimming pool carved into the rocks below the panoramic bar. The sea around Lefkas was the most breathtaking sapphire blue colour imaginable. All our explorations of the island involved swimming

at some point as the water was completely irresistible. We eventually left Lefkas for Sami in Kefalonia and had another week here visiting the world famous beaches and haunts of the film *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Our Greek adventure was drawing to an end and we took another ferry back to the mainland and drove back to Patras to take the ferry to Venice. Like all our boat trips we had opted where possible for a cabin as taking the Camper Van on the

camperdeck for such a long trip seemed a bit hard-core when we had such small, energetic children. Luckily we got a window cabin, which gave us fabulous views of Venice as we arrived in the early morning. We spent a week with friends near Padova before taking off to the Italian Alps and the beautiful lake Orta with its smart shops and narrow streets. It was again incredible to be in such a beautiful place and the final journey to Normandy brought us so close to home on the hottest day of the summer here that we abandoned the crowds on the beaches and, though our love of Europe is stronger than ever, we did the sensible thing and drove home to surprise our family and friends.

NEW CHAPTER

Fourteen weeks, three overnight ferries, a bundle of nautical miles and more than 6,000 road miles, our adventure had been immense. CamperVantastic it certainly was, and CamperVantastic is now a new chapter in our lives. In the months that followed our return we quickly began to establish our new business offering self-drive hire and online retail goods tried and tested by us! But on the road we never did discover where the rest of you were hiding, except for a few British retired couples who likewise shared our secret! But if you feel inspired or want to find out more about our story, check out our blog at www.thelumelysbigadventure.blog.co.uk or go to www.campervantastic.com

We pitched in a great spot overlooking the sea

