

Dover

Dunkirk

Jura Valley

Lake Geneva

Cervinia

Praz Sur Arly

Road trip

Alpine adventure

Don't save the road trips for the summer, the winter offers plenty of exciting opportunities, too



Nice racks – snow board rack up top, bike rack on the back



Chantalouette camping site at Praz sur Arly at the base of Mont Blanc



Words and Pics: Steve Lumley

Come on, let's go skiing in the Camper Van! We agree it sounded all wrong, but it was an adventure we just couldn't resist. Having been inspired by pictures of some winter campsites in Austria and Germany where they showed pictures of motorhomes covered in inches of snow we thought we would give it a go in our VW T5 California. We loved the idea of being able to chase the snow, experience a few different resorts and really test the T5 to the max. We'd previously cooked at 53 degrees in Greece, now it was time to step into the freezer and experience some extreme winter Camper Vanning. How cold could we go?

All-terrain machine

After some last-minute shopping and speedy assistance from the Alan Day VW dealership, we turned our Camper into an all-terrain, mountain machine! Ski and snowboard holders aloft and snow chains aboard, we loaded up the Camper with all the warm clothes we owned and threw the skis and a borrowed snowboard onto the roof. As soon as school broke up for half term we grabbed the kids and headed for Dover, arriving just in time to join the 6pm Norfolkline Ferry to Dunkerque. We had a super comfortable journey aboard one of their award-winning ships, where the boys spent the entire time in the play area running off huge amounts of energy – perfect preparation for the long journey ahead.

We left the port and drove into the night until our eyes could no longer stay open. We pulled off the road into a French *aire de service*, popped the roof and slept the night. We had



Driving from France to Italy. You don't get this kind of scenery in London!

L'Espace Diamant ski area sits between 1,000 and 2,069m in the Mont Blanc region



decided to head for Mont Blanc first, having driven through the region the previous summer and spotted numerous ski resorts along the way, so after breakfast we set off again.

By early afternoon we had snow in our sights and the drive through the mountains grew more and more spectacular with each bend in the road. We pushed on towards Chamonix and, as the evening drew in, found ourselves in the picture postcard ski village of Praz Sur Arly. The depth of the snow was incredible and it was piled high in every direction. The roads were totally clear though and horse-drawn carriages jangled along in every direction, passengers keeping warm under huge rugs pulled up to their chins. It was as if we had entered some kind of fairytale land. I think it was probably at this point that we really took on board the fact that we were going to attempt to sleep in our Camper in the snow with two small children!

We scouted around a bit to see whether there was a campsite anywhere close, but most people obviously thought there was a language barrier as we couldn't possibly be looking for a campsite, could we?! One lead led us down a tiny, snowy, deserted lane with not a campsite in sight. But just when we thought we would have to check into a hotel, we stumbled across a car park with a row of obviously inhabited motorhomes. By this point it was getting really late, so we snuggled in between two huge Hymer motorhomes, put the heating on full blast and settled down for the night.

Cosy Camper

Amazingly, we had a really comfortable night. The on-board petrol heater kept pumping out hot air, keeping us really cosy and, when we looked out of the window in the morning, we realised we were at the foot of the ski runs, with the lifts just a few metres away. The boys couldn't believe their eyes – so

much snow to play in. We threw on some warm clothes and headed into the local village for some breakfast. The 10-minute walk through the woods was magical, the bare trees dripping with snow and icicles over two feet long hanging from chalet roofs. We found a super bakery and stocked up with warm bread and croissants, then the children chose a sledge from the neighbouring shop and travelled back to the Camper on it, shrieking with delight all the way.

Warming up

After breakfast it was time to hit the slopes. We put the children in their ski boots and helmets and all waddled off across the car park. The nursery area was just ahead of us and there was a traveller to the top of the gentle slope. This was all free and perfect for the children, who had never skied before. Within a couple of hours the boys were able to balance on the traveller and ski down to the bottom of the slope independently. It was a perfect little run for such novices. We spent a happy day warming up in various cafés and then heading back to the nursery slopes again for another practice. As the slopes emptied in the late afternoon we took the children and their sledge to the sledging run, which had been dug out of the snow next to the nursery slopes. We had it to ourselves and it kept us all amused until it was almost dark and we were all freezing.

Thanks goodness for the petrol heater!



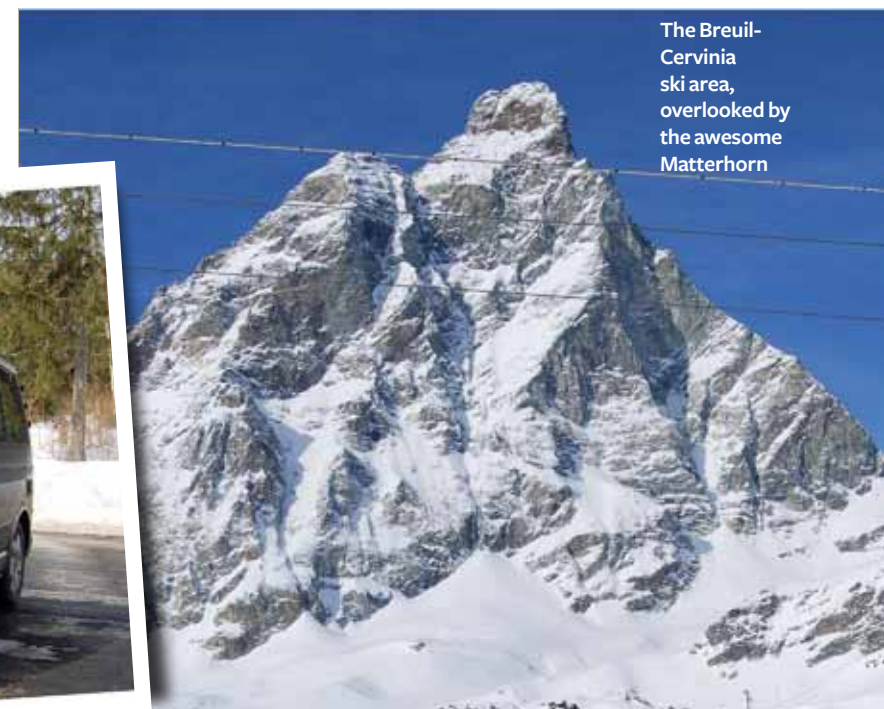
Steve cram

Luckily, the Camper's heating was still working. As we weren't on hook-up we were wondering how long it would last! We defrosted ourselves, cooked up some pasta and snuggled up to watch a film. With so much bulky stuff on board and with freezing temperatures outside, Steve crammed himself into the roof bed with our gear, but the next night we decided it would be better to use the roof bed for all our gear and all sleep downstairs! We turned the two front seats towards each other, which made a perfect bed for our eldest, and our youngest slept in with us.

We had another cosy night and, when we saw the temperature gauge, it was -17 degrees outside! We couldn't believe it. We waited for the sun to rise a bit further before venturing out into the village on the sledge for fresh croissants. As we explored the village further we discovered a campsite, which was open for winter camping and was almost full. We were tempted to relocate, but the car park was so convenient for the slopes we decided to stay put for another night or two.

The children continued learning on the nursery slopes while Steve got himself a lift pass and explored the higher slopes. ☺

The Breuil-Cervinia ski area, overlooked by the awesome Matterhorn



Sledging to breakfast to pick up fresh croissants



HOW & WHY LEAVING HOME

If you're planning a winter road trip, take plenty of warm clothing and extra bedding, especially if you haven't booked a campsite! And don't forget snow chains – the law requires you to carry them in most European countries, and to use them, too.

Praz Sur Arly – car park by day, camp site by night. And right by the ski lifts, too.



By the afternoon of the second day, the children were desperate to have a go on a chair lift, so we bought three more passes and headed up the mountain to the top of a blue run. We were slightly worried as to whether we would make it back down again but we took our time and once again the children amazed us with their perseverance and good humour.

After three nights staying at Praz sur Arly we woke up to a really grey morning, so decided to make the most of our mobility and head around Mount Blanc and into Italy. After another spectacular mountain drive, we headed into Cervinia, a high-altitude resort below the Matterhorn on the border with Switzerland. We did see a few motorhomes parked up in a snowy lay-by and were tempted to stop, but a hot shower was calling us so we checked into a local hotel!

Hot chocolate

Cervinia was great fun, really child friendly, with breathtaking views and wonderful Italian hospitality. The children couldn't believe their luck when they were served their own personal jugs of hot chocolate every morning in the hotel. The kid's skiing continued to improve so each day we could head higher up the mountain. However, the lure of the childrens' play area was often too much by the afternoon, and great fun was had by all as the children slid down the sledging slope or dug about the snow making snow castles with buckets and spades!

It was so difficult to tear ourselves away, but finally it was time to head for home. We decided to travel through the Saint Bernard tunnel into Switzerland and encountered yet more stunning scenery. We eventually found an aire de service late at night by Lake Geneva, and in the morning cooked breakfast with the glorious backdrop of the snow-capped mountains we had just driven through.



Who needs a beach when you have snow?

The scenery in the Jura Valley in Switzerland was simply breathtaking



As there was no snow where we were we thought we'd take a countryside route through the Jura Valley and stumbled upon one of the most spectacular landscapes we had ever seen. We passed deep banks of snow and frozen plateau interspersed with trees as far as the eye could see. On the crests of the hills we could see kite boards curving out tracks in the snow and, on the plains, cross-country skiers and walkers

with huge tennis rackets strapped to their feet to avoid falling beneath the deep snow! Switzerland certainly lived up to its beautiful, snowy reputation.

Magical journey

Despite coming across numerous snow-blocked roads and weaving across the border between France and Switzerland, the satellite navigation eventually guided us back to Dunkerque and our Norfolkline ferry, ready to take us home to England.

All in all, it was a magical journey that really pushed our VW California to new limits, and it performed admirably. Our advice is, if you cannot get your hands on a VW California, hire one with Campervantastic and get out there. A Camper is not just for the summer, it's for Christmas and winter, too!

Campervantastic offer complete winter packages with options such as ski / snowboard racks, roof boxes, snow tyres and snow chains. See www.campervantastic.com or call 0208 2916800. ☎



Nursery slopes were free and a great place for the kids to learn to ski