

**“As Campervan novices... we hoped our experience under canvas would be transferable”**

# Bébé à bord

**Nine weeks on the road with a 10-month old – madness or just another Campervan adventure?**

Words and photos Chris and Olivia Brown

**A** Campervan, vineyards and Roman engineering might not be what spring to mind when you hear the term ‘shared parental leave’, but when my husband, Chris, and I found out he could take extended parental leave during the first year of our baby’s life, we knew we wanted to use that as an opportunity to give our son the travelling bug we share.

Luca was born prematurely in November 2016 and, after a rocky start where he spent eight weeks in hospital, he flourished and, by the time he was 10 months old, we felt confident enough to tackle our first family adventure.

We liked the idea of going in a Campervan so Luca wasn’t faced with different

surroundings to get used to each night, and decided to focus on France and Spain as countries we had both visited several times, but never fully explored. As Chris’ company was prepared to extend the paid leave he as a new father could take, it enabled us to hit the road for a total of nine weeks.

As Campervan novices, we were slightly apprehensive about spending so long in a Van, but as keen campers we hoped our experience under canvas would be transferable. We looked into buying a Campervan initially, but in the end decided to hire a new T6 California Beach from a local company so we had back up in case we encountered any problems. It also enabled us to take a far newer Van than we could have afforded to buy, offering us peace of mind about its roadworthiness and reliability with a baby on board.

Now, it was just the small matter of the route to plan! We decided to see fewer places in more depth, rather than racing around Europe at breakneck speed, in particular because we didn’t want to spend more than two hours a day driving, for Luca’s sake. We both made a long list of places we wanted to visit in France



This beach was just a couple of minutes walk from a (free!) *aire* we camped at in the south of France



Flamingo spotting in the Camargue, just an hour or so drive from Arles



The Verdon Gorge. Lovely hiking, magnificent views and no health and safety intrusion anywhere!



The scenery and mountain top towns of Provence take some beating. Aix-en-Provence is nothing short of spectacular



**“we didn’t want to spend more than two hours a day driving, for Luca’s sake”**

The Roman amphitheatres in this part of France (this is Arles) are amongst the best preserved in the world, and way better than the Colosseum in Rome





and Spain, mainly focussing on the wine regions and the Roman remains in the south of France, so we used that as a rough itinerary, though we also wanted to be as flexible as possible so we could change plans if needs be.

This approach turned out to work really well. We ended up sticking to the broad route we had mapped out before we left, but spent longer in some places than expected and less in others, and also zoomed further south earlier than planned when I became fed up with the grey weather in northern France!

*All aboard*

We boarded the ferry from Portsmouth to Caen on September 2 and spent the first 10 days in the Loire valley, exploring the stunning chateaux, sampling the local wine and making the most of croissants for breakfast every day.

We also spent quite a lot of time in the first fortnight getting the hang of the Van, as we quickly discovered that – like with camping – everything runs a lot more smoothly when you use space effectively, find good homes for your most used items and run like a well-oiled machine when packing up and making camp

each day. It took a couple of weeks, but we really got into the swing of the Campervan way.

We found it worked best for us to sleep in the pop-up roof bed, and for Luca's travel cot to go in front of the back seat. The roof bed proved extremely comfortable, and the hatch not too tricky to get up and down through in the middle of the night when he needed feeding.

We tended to stay in each place for one night only, so got well skilled at quickly packing up the cot and our bed, taking down the blinds, making breakfast and hitting the road before most people were up – the benefits of a little human alarm clock!

From the Loire, we headed south through Burgundy, on to the Ardeche National Park, and then through the Luberon to the Verdon Gorge, which was one of our favourite places of the whole trip. We found a wonderful campsite with stunning views across the dramatic landscape and, being late September by this point, we had the place almost to ourselves. The Verdon Gorge itself is beautiful, and we loved hiking along the trails with Luca in the sling. Nights there were very cold, down to almost freezing at night, but we were toasty in our Van thanks to the Cali's diesel heater.

*A fortnight in Provence*

From there we headed south west to Provence, and spent a couple of weeks soaking up the sun and the history in Aix-en-Provence, Arles,



Kids love chateaux, or is it gateaux?



**“It took a couple of weeks, but we really got into the swing of the Campervan way”**



Luca slept in a travel cot downstairs, we bedded down in comfort in the pop-top.

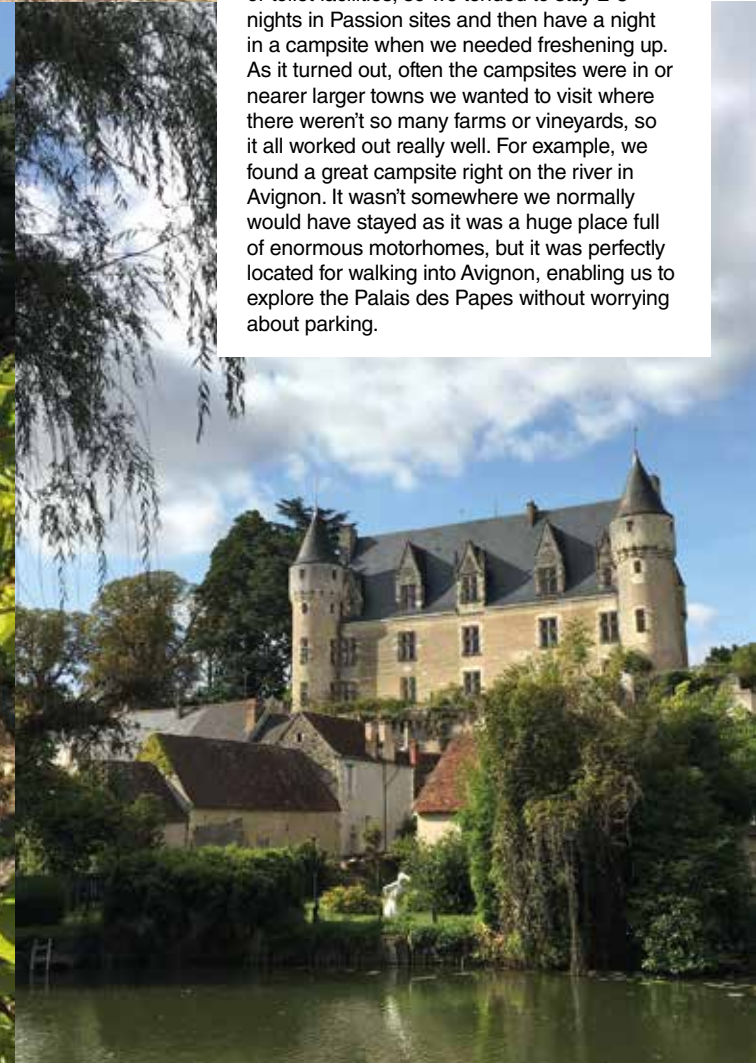
When we needed to wash clothes, we headed to the local *supermarche*



Avignon, Uzès, Pont du Gard and Nîmes. This was another favourite part of the trip for us – days packed with amazing sites, such as the Pont du Gard itself and the amphitheatre at Arles, and nights spent in stunning spots in villages and vineyards.

We were able to stay on many vineyards thanks to the France Passion scheme, which really transformed our camping experience on the trip. We found out about the scheme before we left the UK and signed up immediately, enabling us to stay overnight in any one of hundreds of vineyards and farms across the country. This gave us an insight into the French way of life we wouldn't have had otherwise, and we were delighted to be able to avoid the large resort-like campsites, which don't really suit us.

We even stayed at a biscuiterie one night, so had fresh biscuits on tap! The only downside of the France Passion sites is there are no shower or toilet facilities, so we tended to stay 2-3 nights in Passion sites and then have a night in a campsite when we needed freshening up. As it turned out, often the campsites were in or nearer larger towns we wanted to visit where there weren't so many farms or vineyards, so it all worked out really well. For example, we found a great campsite right on the river in Avignon. It wasn't somewhere we normally would have stayed as it was a huge place full of enormous motorhomes, but it was perfectly located for walking into Avignon, enabling us to explore the Palais des Papes without worrying about parking.



## Be inspired...

### Where we stayed:

Camping Bio Verdon, nr. the Verdon Gorge  
[camping-bio-verdon.blogspot.co.uk](http://camping-bio-verdon.blogspot.co.uk)

Le Chant d'Oiseau, Loire Valley  
[www.loire-gites.com/accommodation/camping/](http://www.loire-gites.com/accommodation/camping/)

Camping Lou Labech, Bouzigues  
[www.loulabech.fr](http://www.loulabech.fr)

Mille Etoiles, Ardeches National Park  
[www.campingmilletoiles.com/en/](http://www.campingmilletoiles.com/en/)

Camping Chantemerle, Cevennes National Park  
[www.camping-chantemerle.com/en/](http://www.camping-chantemerle.com/en/)

**Miles:** 2005 (part one)

**Camping costs:** £330

**Portsmouth to Caen ferry:** £270 (return)

### Must visit:

The Verdon Gorge

Pont du Gard

Amphitheatres at Arles and Nîmes

Palais des Papes, Avignon

Bouzigues



On the ferry home, another load of great memories banked, and (hopefully) the beginnings of a love of travelling instilled in Luca

From Provence, we headed to the Camargue, a wild and rugged area that made a real contrast to mellow Provence. Our first night there wasn't a great success as we stayed on a *manade* (Camargue bull farm), which turned out to be hosting a huge party so we were kept up all night by people arriving and leaving. Oh well, *c'est la vie!* The next site made up for it though – a beautiful *aire* next to a deserted beach where we ate dinner before hunkering down in our cosy Van.

From the Camargue, we stayed on the coast as we headed down to a charming town called Bouzigues, south west of Arles. Famous for its mussels and oysters, we spent a great couple of days there soaking up the sun and making the most of the laundry facilities at the brilliant Camping Lou Labech. 📍

Next month, our travelling trio continue through southern France and into Spain, and offer up some tips on Campervanning with a baby.



**“the France Passion scheme... really transformed our camping experience”**



## We want your trips!

Have you been on a great trip in your Van or are you planning to get out there soon? We'd love to hear about it and so would other readers. We're looking for adventures big or small, near or far, and if we feature you, we'll even pay a few shekles for your words and pictures. So take some snaps of you and your Van next time you go and email 'em to:

[james.wallace@kelseymedia.co.uk](mailto:james.wallace@kelseymedia.co.uk)