



CHANNEL HOPPING

After more than 30 years as a tent camper, Iain Duff finally took the plunge and bought a campervan. His first trip took him overseas to France and Belgium



WATCH THE VIDEO
motorhome.ma/vanlife01

Everyone seems to be on “a journey” these days. From sport stars to reality TV contestants, politicians to celebrity mothers-to-be, everyone’s at it.

No one just goes through the ups and downs of life any more. Turn on the telly or pick up a newspaper and before long you’ll be confronted with someone earnestly telling you about their dramatic journey and how they’ve grown as a person.

Strictly contestants don’t just learn to dance and maybe get a bit better at it over a period of time, with a few setbacks along the way. They have a dance journey.

Famous Hollywood actresses don’t just lose a few pounds on a diet, they have a weight-loss journey. Just as balding actors have hair-loss journeys.

So, not one to be left out, I thought I’d

share my campervan journey. No, I don’t mean the drive out to the Norfolk coast I took last week (although, admittedly, that was pretty profound). Instead, I’m going to tell you all about the metaphorical journey I have taken that has led to my current destination – the proud owner of a campervan and the editor of this magazine.

In the beginning

My journey began – inevitably – in childhood. But, don’t worry, I’m not going to go all

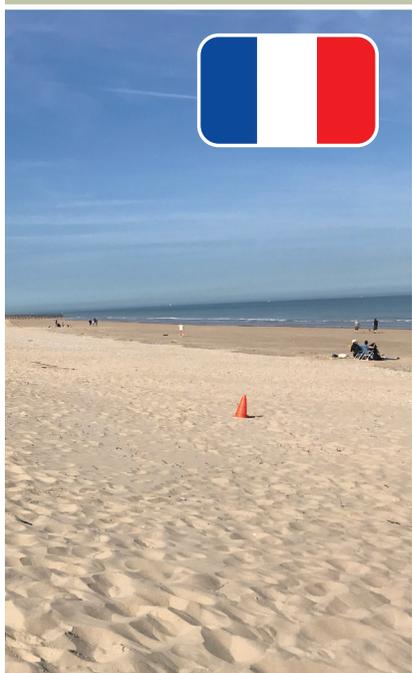
uncomfortably Freudian on you here. What I mean is that my

interest in living in small metal boxes on wheels began with the caravan our family owned in the late 70s.

But if that was the root of it, the real inspiration came a few years later. On my daily walk to school, I would pass a house where an clapped-out old Bedford ambulance was parked in the driveway.



I LOVED THE IDEA OF DRIVING OFF ON AN ADVENTURE, WITH EVERYTHING I NEEDED STASHED AWAY IN THE BACK OF THE VAN



LEFT The beach at Calais features miles of golden sands
 ABOVE Bonne-Chière Windmill in Bruges – one of many along the city ramparts

the seeds were sown and that urge to go camping never really went away.

Soon after, I got my first tent and the rest was history. I progressed through a variety of different tents, festival-going, solo trips around the Lake District, weekends away with my future wife and, eventually, full-blown family summer holidays.

Time for a change

To be honest, I was perfectly happy with our tent life. But the pull of the tin tent was always strong, and, after Covid struck the world in 2020, we decided, like thousands of others, it was time to sign up for vanlife.

Following much debate, we decided to hand back the company car and replace it with a campervan, not just to go on holiday in, but for day-to-day use as well. We began our research and quickly realised just how little we knew about the world of motorcaravans. Despite being a camping veteran of many years, I only had a vague idea of what was a campervan and what was a motorhome, for example. I didn't really understand the difference between coachbuilt vans and conversions.

Luckily, as the editor of Camping magazine – sister title of Campervan and MMM – I had plenty of colleagues to call upon for advice. And my many friends and

contacts in the outdoor industry were happy to share their knowledge, too. Very soon, I was ready to make the move.

Eastern promise

After a few weeks of research, in the spring of 2021 we finally placed an order through JAL, a Midlands-based importer and converter of secondhand Japanese MPVs. These vehicles are popular for camper conversions, largely due to their low mileage and the fact that they are right-hand drive.

They are generally in a far better state of repair than their UK equivalents due to the fact that they don't salt the roads, and, to be frank, the better care they are shown by their owners.

We plumped for a 2001 Toyota Hiace Regius – choosing the exact model from a selection of vehicles photographed on the docks in Tokyo, awaiting shipping to the UK.

We were able to specify the exact layout and spec we wanted, from flooring and upholstery to the type of fridge. We visited the premises to see the van in person – mainly to confirm it really existed! – and, once we were happy with everything,

placed our order and sat back and waited for it to be completed.

And waited. And kept on waiting. The ongoing Covid issues during 2021, along with the global supply issues affecting vehicle parts and the unprecedented demand for campervans, combined to delay production way beyond the promised delivery time. In the end we waited for nine long months before finally getting the go-ahead to collect our van. Even then, there were a few issues that needed to be resolved, but at least we were able to get on the road.

After a couple of decades of negotiating the streets of Tokyo, ferrying kids to and from school or doing the daily commute, the Regius now had a new life, opening up a whole new world of adventure for me and my family. Or at least that was the plan. But what about the reality?

On the road

After a few trial runs, we took the van on its first 'proper' trip over the Easter weekend. I thought we might as well make up for lost time and go big, so, rather than a short trip a few miles from home, I headed





across the channel to France with my youngest for some father/son bonding.

We had no particular plan, and it was quite scary to just head off to the Continent with no idea where we were going to end up. But after the last couple of years, it felt great to have the freedom to go anywhere we wanted again.

Breath of fresh aire

In the end we had a fantastic trip, starting off in Calais before heading east into Belgium on the toss of a coin. Our first night

was on an aire near the ferry port, chosen primarily because we were arriving in France after midnight and needed an easy place to stop overnight.

These aires were another mystery to me as a tent camper. If you're not familiar with them, they are something between a car park and a campsite, cheap (sometimes free) places for motorhomes and campervans to pitch up for a night en route to somewhere else. You'll find them all over France and elsewhere in Europe and, although the level of facilities on offer can vary, they really are

a superb resource that would be much welcomed in this country.

Right up your Calais

When you think about Calais, it's fair to say that golden sands and sparkling blue seas aren't the first things that come to mind. So we were pleasantly surprised to discover there's more to the town than just ferries and hypermarkets. Not a huge amount more, if I'm honest, but certainly enough to merit a couple of nights' stopover before moving on to somewhere else more exciting.

The beach and promenade seem to stretch for miles and, if the ice cream van queues were anything to go by, the seafront is obviously very popular with locals and visitors alike, especially on warm, sunny days like this.

Unfortunately, the town of Calais itself was a bit hit and miss. Some of the backstreets were desperately in need of a makeover but the main shopping area was nice and the neo-Flemish town hall here is absolutely magnificent.



OUR 'VAN

Toyota Hiace Regius 2.7-litre Converter Japanese Auto Locators

Layout Side kitchen

Travel seats/berths 4/3

Key features

- Double-burner stove
- Sink
- Compressor fridge
- Storage cabinets
- Rock 'n' roll bed
- Pop-top roof
- Swivel passenger seat

♥ What we love about it

Spacious and comfortable enough to live in but easy to drive on a day-to-day basis. A quirky thing I love is that all the writing on board the van is in Japanese. Admittedly that makes some things a little bit tricky, but for those there's always Google Translate...



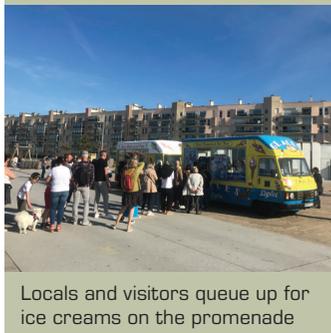
Cycling is an easy way to get around the historic streets of Bruges



The dramatic neo-Flemish town hall in Calais with Rodin's statue out front



Exploring the streets of Bruges on foot



Locals and visitors queue up for ice creams on the promenade



Only in Belgium will you find a museum celebrating the history of chips



The fabulous Market Square in the heart of Bruges



The Menin Gate in Ypres is dedicated to fallen British and Commonwealth soldiers

A sculpture outside the town hall pays tribute to the Burgheers of Calais – six locals who volunteered to be executed by England's Edward III during the 100 Years' War in order to spare the rest of the town. The poignant statue was created in 1889 by Auguste Rodin, the famed French creator of *The Thinker*.

Stuck in the Middel...

Apparently, 10 million people visit Calais every year, but most of them barely stop as they head out into the rest of Europe. We were soon following in their tyre tracks and

for our next stop we headed east towards the Belgian coast. After a quick tour of Ostend, we found a good campsite nearby, in the seaside resort of Middelkerke.

Belgium, of course is famous for its chips, chocolate and beer – and, as far as I'm concerned, that is the three main food groups, so obviously it would have been rude not to sample some (OK, all) of the local culinary specialities...

Beautiful Bruges

Next day we headed to the beautiful historic city of Bruges, where negotiating the narrow

city streets in the campervan proved to be something of a challenge. We ended up parking on the edge of town and hiking into the centre, but, despite the complaints of my walking-averse 13-year-old, that actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise as we got to see parts of the city that we might otherwise have missed.

Of course it didn't stop us trying some more of the local fare, waffles this time, and, despite the crowds, the famous market square looked absolutely magnificent in the spring sunshine.

Poignant Ypres

After the hustle and bustle of Bruges, we moved on to our next campsite near Ypres, a place of quiet reflection. Ypres (known as Ieper, locally) is synonymous with mud, blood and the horrors of trench warfare and it has become a pilgrimage for those whose relatives were cut down in their prime during the First World War.

The town's huge Menin Gate memorial features seemingly endless lists of fallen soldiers from the UK and the Commonwealth, victims whose bodies were never recovered. And as you read the names engraved in Portland stone, it's almost impossible to get your head around the sheer scale of destruction and loss of human life on the Western Front.

It's not until you visit the trenches,



Walking around Bruges lets you see parts of the city off the tourist trail

OUR CAMPERVAN

VAN LIFE



memorials and cemeteries in and around the town that you fully appreciate the sacrifice made by these young men and boys – some barely older than my own son. I'm glad I brought him to see it.

A hidden gem

The campsite in Ypres was one of those lucky finds that you dream of as a camper. Our first choice was full, and we stumbled

across 't Hof Bellewaerde almost by accident, but that's one of the joys of the off-the-cuff approach.

This was a tiny site with a small fishing lake and some amazing views over the countryside and Ypres. I could enjoy a Belgian beer in the evening and have freshly baked bread, croissants and hot chocolate delivered to the site from a local bakery first thing in the morning.

The views were stunning and the location just perfect. It's definitely worth checking out if you plan to visit the area.



Homeward bound

After Ypres we were on the road again, this time back to France where we spent a night in Calais' well-appointed main campsite, before catching a morning ferry back to the UK. Soon we were back on English soil and heading home, tired but pretty happy with how it had all gone.

As a long-time camper, the big question for me was, would I now be packing up my

tents for good, and the answer was a definite no. In fact it reminded me just how much I appreciate sleeping under canvas. Two of us squashed onto a fold-down bed in a very confined space wasn't a lot of fun. That said, sleeping arrangements apart, we had a great time and the campervan was a huge success.

We loved just driving around and exploring, stopping off wherever we liked and heading off anywhere we fancied the next morning. And essentially that's what vanlife is all about. It gives you the freedom to go where you want, stop overnight where you want, and spend as much time as you want at those

places. And in that sense it worked really well for us.

There was lots I learned from that first trip and plenty of things I would do differently next time. A tent or awning to increase our sleeping space was top of the list. But, as a first trip, it was an overwhelming success and it really whetted my appetite for getting back out again.



STAY AT

CAMPING LE GRAND GRAVELOT

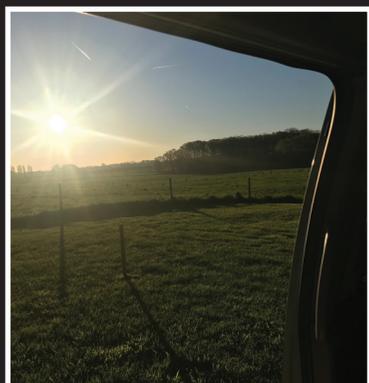
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Enjoying the sunshine by the fishing lake