

➔ **CAMPING SPECIAL** on the road

Living the dream

Camping editor **Iain Duff** and his family hit the road for the ultimate UK camping trip – four weeks of beaches, country walks, theme parks and ice cream.





Left: Life's a beach!

Right: Water good time at Legoland

A S KEEN as I am on camping, I can see that four weeks living under canvas with two young children isn't everyone's cup of tea. In fact, if the reaction to our summer holiday plans for last year was anything to go by, it's absolutely no-one's. Apart from me and my wife Georgia, that is (although to be honest, I'm not entirely certain she was fully convinced at first). But for all our enthusiasm, just a few hours into our Grand Tour of Britain we were already wondering if the doubters were right and we were seriously pondering whether it was time to pack up and go home.

As opening days of a holiday go, it wasn't one of the best. Our 18-month-old son Thomas decided sleep was for the weak and battled to stay awake for five hours beyond his usual bedtime, keeping his big brother Callum awake in the process. Then at 1am, an hour after he finally dropped off, he decided, for no apparent reason, that it was time to shatter the tranquility of the campsite by waking again and screaming his head off. Before we had the chance to worry about what our fellow campers might think of this rude interruption to their slumber, there was a massive rumble of thunder and the heavens opened. For the next two hours torrential rain battered down on the canvas. It did drown out the noise Thomas was making, but made sleep impossible. To cap it all, just as everything finally settled down, I rolled over and our bed collapsed.

Add to all this the fact that we were out of mobile signal range, had no Wi-Fi, couldn't get a TV reception and could only pick up a local radio station that seemed to play nothing but Status Quo all evening and you could say things were not quite going to plan. As we lay on the floor in a tangle of sleeping bags and broken bed at three o'clock in the morning we either had

to laugh or cry - and thankfully we both chose the former.

But here's the thing. Despite the difficult beginning, we went on to have a brilliant holiday. The moral being, don't give up at the first hurdle. Or alternatively, don't let the bad starts grind you down.

None of this would have come as any surprise to our sceptical friends and family. The surprised/concerned/pitying looks when we announced details of our trip had told their own story. Our plan was to spend the summer touring Britain in our recently acquired (although far from new) Pennine Pullman, stopping for two or three nights at campsites around the country and sampling as many local attractions as we could fit in.

Having temporarily opted out of the rat race, for the first time in almost 20 years I wasn't in full-time employment and constrained by the limits of a two-week summer holiday. As a result, the world was our oyster, or as much as it can be when you've got two young children to take into consideration. We knew that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Chances were that we'd never again have the luxury of being



➔ CAMPING SPECIAL on the road



able to enjoy such a lengthy break and so we were determined not to squander the opportunity.

I set about planning the trip. Part of me felt it would be better simply to set off and see where the mood took us, but getting a pitch on a good site in mid-summer can be tricky and we didn't want to be turning up on spec and finding ourselves having to turn around because the site was full. There was also the danger that if we didn't set ourselves some sort of itinerary we'd be tempted to linger longer in certain places, meaning we might not manage to cover as many locations as we hoped.

Getting the planning right wasn't quite as easy as it might appear. We wanted to see as much of the country as possible, but didn't want to spend lots of our holiday time driving. A maximum of three hours between stops seemed reasonable, meaning we could be at our next destination and set up by early afternoon, freeing up the rest of the day for whatever the local area had to offer. Eventually I came up with a route that would see us head down from Scotland to the Lake District, before moving on to the Peak District, then to the south coast and back up the east of England.

Apart from making sure we were staying on pleasant, child-friendly sites, the main factor in choosing a stopover was that there was plenty to do nearby. From past experience of camping with young children, we

1. Alnwick Market Place in Northumberland
2. Callum looking forward to Legoland!
3. Behind the wheel at Alton Towers
4. Callum meets his hero
5. Father and son take it easy at Alton Towers
6. Searching for fossils at Charmouth beach

knew that no matter the weather, we wouldn't want to spend all our time on site, so it was essential that the locality had something to offer.

So on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in late June, we set off for our first destination in the Lakes. We'd taken the camper on a test run a few weeks earlier and despite my trepidation found it was surprisingly easy to tow. Venturing out onto a motorway was another matter entirely, but apart from a few hairy moments when we were passed by impatient lorry drivers it all went well.

We arrived at the Camping and Caravanning Club's Windermere site near Kendal at about 5pm, and were checked in, directed to our pitch and set up within an hour. So far so good. After feasting on an evening meal of chilli, made at home the day before and brought with us in a coolbox, we ventured out to explore our surroundings. We found a site that was large but well maintained and imaginatively laid out, making maximum use of the natural landscape.

We spent an hour or so relaxing in the cosy family clubhouse, with its widescreen television and pool table, before heading back to the camper. The idea was that we'd put the boys to bed then relax with a couple of drinks, plan our next few days' activities and watch some TV before retiring to bed. Unfortunately, our plans were scuppered by a baby who refused to go to sleep, an ineffectual

TV aerial and a collapsing bed.

The following morning we gathered our thoughts - and the broken pieces of bed - and over an *al fresco* breakfast in the sunshine considered whether we should just pack up and go home or persevere with our trip. It may have been the good weather, but in the end we stoically decided we'd carry on with our holiday. We came to the conclusion that things couldn't get much worse, and even if they did, we were just going to go with the flow. It turned out to be the best decision we'd ever made.

The first thing to test our new-found resolve to enjoy ourselves no matter what, came when we tried to put up the Pennine's awning, and discovered that a broken zip meant we couldn't attach it to the camper. Instead of getting hung-up about it, we simply decided we didn't need the now useless collection of poles and canvas and packed it away.

We were now able to get down to the serious business of enjoying our holiday. Kendal, a couple of miles from the Windermere site, is a bustling town with lots of shops and plenty to offer for a day out. We spent a lazy couple of hours on Gooseholme Park, a large expanse of greenery on the banks of the River Kent a few minutes' walk from the town centre.

Of course the Lake District is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country and there are loads of options for things to do and places to go, depending on what takes your



fancy. At the height of summer, the crowds can be unbearable but earlier in the season it is much easier to cope with, even in extremely popular destinations like Keswick. From there we took a boat trip around beautiful Derwentwater, at three miles long and one mile wide, one of the biggest lakes in the area. For the more active among us, you can get off the boat at one of several stops around the lake and make use of the many footpaths in the surrounding woods and hills. We decided to make do with admiring the scenery and enjoying an ice cream.

After another couple of days spent enjoying the great weather on the campsite we packed up and made our next move. This time we had a drive of just over 100 miles to Leek in Staffordshire, chosen for its proximity to the Alton Towers theme park. The campsite was a much smaller affair than the sprawling Windermere site but no less pleasant, with clean and well-maintained amenities and a really good children's play area. We took up a hard standing pitch among the caravans but could have chosen to set up on the neighbouring grassy field alongside the tents.

By now we were getting to grips with living in such a confined space, helped by the fact that the dry weather was allowing us to spend a lot of time outdoors. In fact, instead of using the camper's own cooker, we chose to set up our Campingaz stove outside, where we prepared and ate most of our meals.

7. Georgia and the boys brave the Northumberland rain

8. One of the many seafood restaurants on the Kent coast

9. The beach at Whitstable

10. Paddling in the sea at Pakefield in Suffolk

Leek is on the edge of the Peak District and a good base to explore the National Park but for us, there was really only one reason for staying there - and that was Alton Towers. A 20-minute drive from the campsite took us to Britain's most visited theme park and its famous thrill rides like Thi3teen, Nemesis and Oblivion. Although it was still early in the year, the park was busy with school trips and queues for the major attractions were lengthy. But it was still a great day out and the seven hours we spent at the park was nowhere near long enough. For Callum, the Peugeot Driving School was the pick of the bunch - although the log flume ran it a close second - while Thomas thoroughly enjoyed the Doodle Doo Derby and the Squirrel Nutty Ride.

The next day we enjoyed another fun packed few hours at the resort, this time at the waterpark, with its spectacular Master Blaster Water Coaster and outdoor flumes. All in all it was a fabulous way to spend two days.

After the excitement of Alton Towers we were looking forward to a more relaxed time of things at our next destination, the Charmouth Camping and Caravanning Club site at Monkton Wyld Farm on the Dorset coast. Unlike the Peak District, this is a part of the country we know well.

The site is actually situated between the charming village of Charmouth and the historic seaside resort of Lyme Regis.

Top tips

TOP TIPS FOR A MONTH ON THE ROAD

- Plan ahead. Without some sort of itinerary you might not get to visit everywhere you want
- Don't be deterred if things don't go to plan. Regroup, rethink and be flexible.
- Take it easy. Don't try to fit in too much or you'll not enjoy yourself
- Set a budget and stick to it or you could find your spending running away from you.

GEORGIA'S TIPS FOR CAMPING WITH KIDS

1. Pack a basic medical kit of plasters, antiseptic spray or wipes, paracetamol - suitable for all age groups. Scissors and a bug repellent are really useful too.
2. More and more sites have family bathrooms now, some even with baby baths. But these can be tricky to fill from a shower or sink. Take a good multi-use jug or bowl that can be used to pour water into the bath but also has a function in the tent too.
3. Don't take two bottles into the shower. Try to buy all-in-one body wash and hair formulas so that you don't have to juggle a huge washbag as well as clean clothes and towels.
4. Keep an eye out for Two-for-One theme park promotions that many of the big brands run during summer. They will save you a fortune. The vouchers can appear on everything from biscuits to washing powder.
5. Last but by no means least keep well stocked with babywipes. Handy for standing washes, cleaning up after travel sickness, removing chocolate from sleeping bags and even nappy changes...



➔ CAMPING SPECIAL on the road

11



➔ Where to stay...

For convenience, we stayed at Camping and Caravanning Club sites throughout our trip. For bookings, contact the Club on **0845 130 7633** or visit the website campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

Windermere

Ashes Lane, Staveley, Kendal, Cumbria LA8 9JS

Pitches 250

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; family shower room; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; family club house/restaurant; pub; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop

Details Large but well-maintained site with a pub and family restaurant. Convenient for south Lakes attractions

Leek

Blackshaw Grange, Blackshaw Moor, Leek, Staffordshire ST13 8TL

Pitches 70

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; dishwashing facilities; laundry children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups

Details A smaller site but well kept facilities. Handy for Alton Towers as well as the attractions of the Peak District

Charmouth

Monkton Wyld Farm, Nr Charmouth, Dorset DT6 6DB

Pitches 150

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; family shower room; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop

Details Excellent facilities including a huge children's play area. Close to the coast but surrounded by beautiful countryside

Canterbury

Bekesbourne Lane, Canterbury, Kent CT3 4AB

Pitches 200

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; parent and baby room; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop

Details A good base for touring Kent and a useful stop-over ahead of cross-channel trips

Horsley

Ockham Road, North East Horsley, Surrey KT24 6PE

Pitches 130

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; parent and baby room; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop; fishing lake

Details Tucked away in the Surrey countryside, this site has lots of room for kids to play and a well-stocked lake for fishing

Kessingland

Whites Lane, Kessingland, Nr Lowestoft, Suffolk NR33 7TF

Pitches 90

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; family shower room; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop

Details A family-friendly site that sits right next to a popular wildlife park. It is a short walk to the beach and very convenient for touring East Anglia.

It's another big site but retains a peaceful atmosphere thanks to the surrounding countryside. The main children's play area is fantastic and we were lucky enough to get a pitch just yards away. It meant we could let Callum run off and enjoy himself with his newly acquired pals but still keep an eye on him from the camper.

With its location on the Jurassic Coast, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Charmouth's biggest attraction is its beach where enthusiasts spend hours searching for fossils alongside families enjoying the expanses of sand and safe seas.

The one negative of our stay came late one evening when a burning Chinese lantern dropped from the sky onto the camper. Luckily we were still awake and managed to put the flames out before they took hold, but it was a scary moment and a reminder of the dangers posed by these lanterns.

Canterbury in Kent was our next stop, and with the mercury creeping towards the mid-90s we were thankful to be within easy reach of the coast. At Herne Bay, the boys were able to go swimming in the sea, not something you get to do too often in Britain. The quaint seaside resort of Whitstable was a revelation – full of quirky shops, art galleries and wonderful seafood restaurants and cafes, particularly in the harbour area.

Having reached the southernmost point of our journey we headed north again, our first stopover being East Horsley in Surrey. The Camping and Caravanning Club site is notable for its large fishing lake but, for us,

its appeal lay in the fact that it was close to Legoland in Windsor. By now we had returned to typical British summer weather, but the rain did nothing to dampen our spirits. I had always been a bit sceptical about the merits of theme parks but our days at Legoland and Alton Towers have me converted.

Three weeks into the trip, we were now in the home straight. Kessingland in Suffolk was next, where we enjoyed the surreal experience of being wakened by the sound of lions roaring from the neighbouring wildlife park. At Sheriff Hutton campsite near York, Callum reached a major life milestone when he learned to ride his bike without stabilisers. York itself is a great city, especially the fantastic National Railway Museum, where you could easily spend a whole day without getting bored.

Our final stop was Dunstan Hill in Northumberland. The weather wasn't great (in fact it was awful!) but that didn't stop us enjoying the walk to a wonderful, unspoilt, sandy beach. The seaside town of Seahouses is close-by as is Alnwick, home of Barter Books, possibly the best second-hand bookshop in the country. Alnwick Castle was used in the Harry Potter films and the neighbouring gardens are an excellent place to spend a day.

So after four weeks, 2,000 miles, eight stops and countless ice creams our adventure was over. It had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience and one that our children will remember for years to come. And that is what it is all about. ■

Our folding camper

11. A sunny evening at Windermere campsite

12. Sometimes you need to chill-out indoors

13. Canterbury leaves Callum stump;ed

14. Yes, I am reading!



► PENNINE PULLMAN

After much research, we decided that a folding camper was the best option for our trip. For the price of a good-sized family tent, we picked up a 1990 Pennine Pullman on eBay. In its day this was the height of luxury, and although it was obviously well-used and looked its age, it was clean and structurally sound and at £800 it was a bargain. It had fold-down double beds at either end, which can be left made-up throughout the trip. The settees and table could be converted into a third bed, until ours met its sad demise!

The bonus is that you can pack most of your gear in the camper, meaning there's no need to splash out on accommodation and a trailer or a roof box. They are also easy to set up and pack away. By the end of our trip we could be on the road within 20 minutes of starting the process. The market in second-hand folding campers and trailer tents is fairly buoyant so as long as you take good care of it you should be able to make your money back.

Price £800
Berths 6
Length (closed) 3.99m
Width 2m
Maximum gross weight 700kg

THE GOOD

- Comfortable double beds
- Warm and watertight
- Simple to tow
- A fridge with freezer compartment
- Lots of storage
- Electricity

THE BAD

- The awning couldn't be attached to the camper
- No toilet or hot water
- Collapsing bed

THE UGLY

- The garish brown fabric on the seats!

Below: Brotherly love in Northumberland

Bottom: The superb play area at Charmouth

Sheriff Hutton

Bracken Hill, Sheriff Hutton, North Yorkshire YO60 6GQ

Pitches 90

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop
Details A great site for children and handy for visiting the nearby city of York. Friendly staff make you feel welcome.

Dunstan Hill

Dunstan Hill, Dunstan, Alnwick, Northumberland NE66 3TQ

Pitches 150

Facilities Toilet and shower blocks; parent and baby room; laundry; dishwashing facilities; children's play area; Wi-Fi; electric hook-ups; shop
Details A very popular site that can feel a little crowded at the height of summer. But enjoys superb facilities, excellent walks and is hardly any distance from an glorious, unspoilt beach.

