

As a newcomer to the campervan life, **Charlotte Reather** set off with her husband and two young children to discover the joys of a seaside camping holiday at Charmouth Club Site



Mum's the word

I love the idea of camping - the freedom, the fresh air, the sunsets. I am, however, not a natural camper. As a child I camped on only a handful of occasions, one of which involved my friend Annabel terrifying me with stories of a boogeyman in the woods which meant I stayed awake all night, rigid with fear, ready to pounce, scream or run if the zip moved.

It was when my Royal Marines husband Ed showed me American-style camping in North Carolina back in 2012 that I saw a new, comfortable side to the activity - less endurance, more enjoyment. He later strategically planted the seed of buying a campervan, which I strongly resisted until it became 'my' idea. I am married to Machiavelli.

Fast-forward to summer 2020 and after the easing of lockdown restrictions, we are off in our VW T5 Sportsline to Charmouth Club Site

for a spot of Covid-19-style camping. The whole nation is champing at the bit for any type of freedom and I'm aware that we have a hotel on wheels, meaning we can have a holiday anywhere, anytime. Yes, that's right, it's my idea now.

My well-trained husband packs up our kit ready for us to go out 'on operations'. The garage is like a Quartermaster's store and our two daughters, Matilda, three, and Tallulah, five are messing with the equipment. The Colonel is becoming tetchy. "They are like wrecking balls. Out! All of you."

Hours later, we are ready to leave, having squeezed the last of our apparel into the T5 and said goodbye to our dear (but manic) labrador, Douglas. It's a two and half-hour drive from our home in West Sussex and we are making good time. Until 41 minutes in, when Matilda needs a wee. Then 20 minutes later, when Tallulah does too - and then they're both hungry.

▲ Charlotte, Tallulah and Matilda on site at Charmouth
► Ed, the children and Charlotte settle into the campervan life





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CHECKING IN TO CHARMOUTH

Three lay-by stops later, we arrive at Charmouth Club Site (also known as Monkton Wyld). It's now mid-afternoon and we realise we are not going to leave the campsite today. The pitches are large and at least six metres apart, which gives us ample space and is a sensible measure during a pandemic. Ed gets busy making camp, raising the roof of the VW, erecting our Outwell drive-away awning, and an adjoining tent giving us multiple living areas. I quickly get on with preparing tea to head off the pending miniature meltdowns.

I decide, given the space, we should spread out a bit, so everyone will have the best night's sleep possible. I propose sleeping in the tent while Ed takes the bed in the campervan, with the children up top under canvas. Strangely, Ed agrees, but insists on going outside as he says I'll find it warmer and more comfortable in the van. I'm suspicious, but realise he thinks he has the best deal, being further away from the children. We'll see about that...

When Ed returns from the toilet block he is waxing lyrical about the facilities. “The loos are like a London hotel and spotlessly clean,” says the OCD ex-colonel. I take the girls for an early shower after tea and I too am impressed. There is hand sanitiser outside and I can immediately tell the block is being cleaned regularly. We head into the Family Shower Room, which we use for the entirety of our five-day trip, never queuing once. I manage to catch up with Joanna Kewley, owner of the site, who tells us that her husband modelled the shower blocks on the high-end facilities at the Velodrome at the 2012 London Olympics, with doors the height of the ceiling, private wash basins and spacious modern showers with adjoining private changing areas.

Given it's the first night, the children are slow to settle but by 10pm they are eventually down and we hit the hay soon afterwards. Ed gives me a peck goodnight before withdrawing to his accommodation and I snuggle down into my Mountain Warehouse double sleeping bag in the campervan.

My first loo call from the children is at 11pm. Unable to locate a potty, I am forced to wearily trudge to the shower block, which is mercifully only 100 metres away. I return from the first trip only to be told by Matilda that was only part one and we retrace our steps for act two. My last and final loo call of the night is at 1.30am. After that I



TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE FAMILY CAMPERVAN HOLIDAY

sleep soundly until 5am when there is a strange banging. I open one eye and see a man's face at the campervan window. Argh! The boogeyman! "It's me - can I come in?" whispers Ed. I relent, and he joins me, but just as we start to drift off to sleep again the girls jump down from the top compartment to terrorise us until breakfast time.

BEACH LIFE

In the daytime, we head to Charmouth Beach. The weather is glorious and the children dig holes in the sand, are pulled along on paddle-boards in the waves by Action Man Daddy and swim with me in the calm shallow waters. The beach is busy but civilised. We return to camp, bronzed and invigorated by the sea air and exercise. I cook spag bol and let the children watch Mary Poppins, the dulcet tones of Julie Andrews causing pangs of nostalgia across the campsite.

Adjacent to our pitch is a brand spanking new T6 campervan with VW-branded fencing, a VW awning and a massive streamline caravan. We are impressed and even more so when we notice the 'runaround' - a racing green Aston Martin, parked under a tree. Ed and our neighbour opposite, Owain, admire the Aston. "I'm not being funny," says Owain in a broad Welsh Valleys accent, "but who comes camping or caravanning if they can afford an Aston Martin?"

"And they've got a top of the range caravan as well as a T6," says Ed.

"No, no, that's not a caravan. That's the trailer to put the Aston in!" says Owain.

"What" says Ed.

"Honest to god, saw it myself. The back came down and out popped the Aston."

PADDLE-BOARDING AND PICNICS

In the morning I've booked a paddle-boarding lesson for Ed and I at 10am in Lyme Regis. Even though we have been awake again since 5.25am it is somehow still a massive rush to shower and feed two feral children and ourselves and manage to be out by 9.45am.

With five minutes to spare until my lesson, Ed drops me off at the seafront and I have to run in flip-flops (no mean feat) to Boylo's Watersports in Lyme Regis to meet my instructor, Megan Woodman. The plan is Ed will park the campervan and wander over to the beach with the children to watch me and then at the 30-minute point we will swap over. Out on the mill pond water, the sun beating down, I search the beach for my children and husband, hoping they are witnessing my paddle-boarding prowess, but they never arrive. Nor do they witness my return to shore completely dry which, given Ed thinks I have the sporting ability of Bridget Jones, is galling. However, I do have 60 beautiful minutes to myself.



▲ Charmouth Beach provides the perfect setting for family fun
▶ Charlotte cooking on site



Back at the watersports shop I check my phone and have a voicemail from Ed requesting 'back up'. There is much crying and screaming in the background. When I find them, Matilda is covered in felt-tip pen and the rear-view mirror is hanging down, but given they've been in the campervan for an hour I conclude it's minor damage. Ed begs to differ. I ask him why he didn't meet us at the beach and he says the sandy part of the beach wasn't looking sufficiently socially distanced and the pebbly beach was too far away. "And by that point I'd lost control," he adds.

We decide to head back to Charmouth Beach and this is the moment Ed tells me his parents are en route from Taunton. It's the first time I've heard of the plan and it will be the first time we have seen them since lockdown. I buy some food



for a picnic including several pints of fresh prawns from The Wet Fish Shop in Lyme Regis.

At Charmouth Beach, we break bread, peel prawns and clink rosé, enjoying a proper day of sand and sunshine with Tallulah collecting coloured glass stones and fossils with Grandpa and Matilda building a ‘beach jacuzzi’ with Granny.

That evening, the children go straight to sleep without a fight and that’s when our neighbours, Owain and Lucy, beckon us over for gin and tonics and a socially-distanced game of Sequence, or five.

OUT ON THE SEAS

After a late night, I am woken at 3.45am by Matilda falling on my head out of the top bunk and Daddy groggily putting her back, muttering about fitting a net to catch her. Our little camp wakes at 7.15am with Tallulah pulling my eyelids apart to ask me

▲ The family’s VW T5 Sportsline campervan; Charlotte and family meet up with Ed’s parents for a beach picnic; playing in the sand

3 TO SEE CHARLOTTE’S TOP TIPS FOR ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA



Charmouth Beach

Perfect for swimming, beach games and fossil-hunting, Charmouth’s sandy beach is within easy reach of the Club Site. It’s also a great starting point for coastal walks to Lyme Regis.



Harry May’s Mackerel & Deep Sea Fishing

Head out on the seas from Lyme Regis with Harry May and his team to experience mackerel fishing like Charlotte and her children. It costs £15 for adults and £10 for children – and could be the source of a delicious fish supper!

■ mackerelfishinglymeregis.com



Paddle-boarding at Boylo’s Watersports

Head to Lyme Regis to test your balance on a paddle-boarding lesson for £25 per hour, with board hire £15. There’s a minimum age of 12 for this activity.

■ boylos.co.uk

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for my iPhone. I yield quickly: “Take it, take it,” I say, still trying to remain asleep.

We are, however, mackerel fishing from Lyme Bay at midday and, in spite of our thick heads, we have a great time out on the sea in a vessel from Harry May’s fishing fleet. I keep watching the horizon at all times while the girls catch two mackerel each using square wooden hand lines under the instruction of Captain Bob. They are very proud of their catch and we celebrate with a sensational fish and chips lunch on the beach from a takeaway called The Fisherman’s Wife, comprising local hand-dived scallops pan-fried in garlic butter, served with hand-cut chips (food nirvana), as well as fresh squid and chips and children’s fresh cod and chips. We sit on the pebbly beach, all four of us silently devouring our food while contentedly staring out to sea.

FISH SUPPERS AND A FOND FAREWELL

Back at camp we have a relaxed afternoon of card games with the little ones, and Ed gently barbecues the fresh mackerel to which I add a hint of chilli and lime, and serve with a green salad and a homegrown tomato salsa. The children love fish and eat their mackerel quickly lest greedy ‘Daddy King Penguin’ steals the fish they caught. They watch Greatest Showman for the first time in their den at the top of the campervan, while Ed and I enjoy a bottle of chilled Sancerre. Then we all have an early night, sleeping deeply, having noticeably let go from the stresses and strains of everyday life.

The last few days are spent on Charmouth Beach and with a visit to nearby Beer for a bracing cliff walk to Branscombe, a route from my own childhood holidays. As we pack up camp it begins to drizzle. We count our blessings with the weather and are thankful for our time together and our new Facebook friends, Lucy and Owain. Hilarity, friendship and memories are seldom made in five-star homogenous hotels, but more often the trips with sand in your knickers and your sandwiches, burnt sausages, bad sleep, and at least one emergency that requires large amounts of wet wipes. I found that camping is about letting go and giving yourself to the experience and your family whole-heartedly - and that sense of freedom is why even people who own Aston Martins go camping. 🚐



▲ The children enjoy catching mackerel on a boat trip; Ed getting the barbecue ready; a clifftop walk to Branscombe
▼ Freshly-caught mackerel for the family’s barbecue



Charlotte and her family stayed at Charmouth Club Site, which offers 25 acres of landscaped and well-maintained grounds, set within West Dorset’s Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and less than ten minutes’ drive from Charmouth’s sandy beach. To book, visit siteseecker.co.uk or call 024 7647 5426. For details of other Club Sites in Dorset - Corfe Castle, Veyan and Moreton - visit myccc.co.uk/dorset. There are also Certificated Sites and Listed Sites in the area.

■ Find out about pop-up sites run by District Associations or Sections in the area at myccc.co.uk/outandabout.