

Camping converts

Having experienced the hellish side of staying in a tent, Catherine Mack discovers a heavenly site in France that's comfy, eco-friendly and, most importantly, dry

THEY SAY THAT the three most stressful events in your life are moving house, getting divorced and losing a loved one. But they forgot one thing. Going camping. Sometimes it feels as if it's up there with the big three. I might as well be moving house with all the stuff I need to take. This alone is enough to put my marriage in the balance, never mind opening the possibility of throttling one of my loved ones in the process. It takes me about two days to recover after finally getting the tent up.

Go there

LD Lines (www.ldlines.ie) sails from Rosslare to Le Havre. You can then take a train from Le Havre to Paris, before changing stations and travelling on to Rambouillet. Irish Ferries sails from Rosslare to Cherbourg. Brittany Ferries (www.brittanyferries.ie) sails from Cork to Roscoff. Or fly to Paris and take a train.

smiles back on our faces very quickly. Because this is camping. Jean, but not as you know it. Despite the noise of humongous droplets of rain falling off the pine trees on to our canvas, providing a symphony of drumming noises, everything was dry as a bone. Rain and camping were not a novelty to us, but dryness was.

These tents are huge and, joy of joys for my six-foot-plus husband, he could stand up. This sounds trite, but for those who have spent two weeks crouching under canvas, this changes everything. There are two bed sections, side by side, each concealed behind a thick, dark-green canvas curtain. You can remove the divide between sections if you are comfier having one big family sleeping area, but our boys were ecstatic to have

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their own room. And mattresses. Proper mattresses, made of firm foam. Not air, not army, not yoga. The real thing, squidgy, warm and lifted off the ground on a raised wooden platform. Just to add to the five-star-ness of it all, there are crisp laundered white sheets, pillowcases (on pillows, not a bundle of clothes under my neck) and beautiful, big, thick fleecy blankets to make our cocoons exquisitely cosy.

There are many little coups of brilliance in these exquisitely designed tents, called Canadianes (they are modelled on a Canadian design). The "bed-rooms" have solar-powered lights, which, despite the weather, provide plenty of light for reading and a night light for little ones. An espresso maker (the one you twist and burn your hands on, as opposed to a machine - this is camping after all), proper wooden dining tables (inside and outside), a fridge, a metal trunk to store all your clothes in, and sweeping brushes for the dried mud. Everything but the kitchen sink.

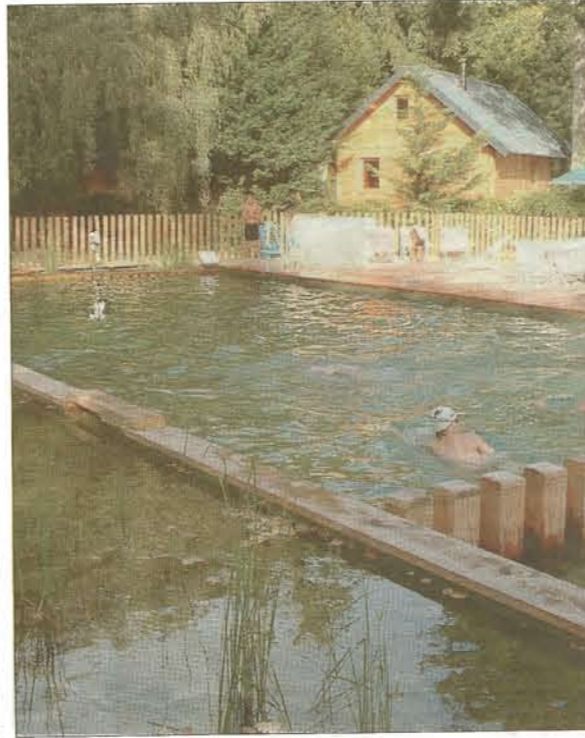
Unlike at many campsites, washing your dishes, or yourself, is an extremely enjoyable ritual at Huttopia, with stylish wooden wash lodges, ceramic (not grotty stainless steel) sinks, and proper showers, all decorated in tasteful forest-green shades, straight out of a Farrow & Ball catalogue.

The rain did stop, having given us enough time to have read all our books and to have finished a few mammoth sessions of Monopoly, all tucked up on sofas in the cosy games room of the site's wooden chalet, with wood-burning pizza oven constantly on the go, and kids bonding around table football, parents around beer.

The Huttopia sites are carefully thought out. This one sits on the banks of a lake, which we cycled around daily, as it is only a few kilometres - fine for little legs. It is surrounded by Rambouillet forest, a vast expanse of



Clockwise from left: the campsite, the natural swimming pool, and playing with bows and arrows at Huttopia in Rambouillet. Photographs: Romain Etienne/Huttopia and Catherine Mack



Where to stay, eat and go in Yvelines

Where to stay

■ Stay at Huttopia's Rambouillet site (www.huttopia.com, 00-33-1-30410734) in the Yvelines region, or at one of their other sites at Senoches, Font-Romeu, Rille or Versailles. At Rambouillet, you can take your own tent (from €17.40 per night), rent a ready-to-go Canadiane tent (from €55 per night) or go for the more solid options of a wooden *cabane* (from €120 per night), or a wooden *roulotte* or caravan (from €85 per night).

Where to eat

■ Le Pradaud. This bar has a terrace overlooking Rambouillet's town square and chateau. Unglamorous, so perfect for muddy campers, and right beside the town carousel.

■ Le Savoyard, 46 Rue d'Angiviller, Rambouillet, 00-33-1-34833577. This restaurant brings a little bit of the Alpine tradition to the Yvelines region, with excellent fondue, raclette and superb regional wines to accompany the ideal outdoorsy meal, after a day of



Where to go

hiking and biking.

■ L'Espace Rambouillet (00-33-1-34830500, www.onf.fr/espaceramb). The vast expanse of Rambouillet's forest park, which is just a 10-minute cycle from the campsite, makes for a great family day out. Here you can see wild deer and boar, and dramatic falconry displays (speaking from experience, it is wise to hide your sandwiches during this). See the forest at its finest from a suspended walkway through the trees.

oak and pine, with an excellent layout of cycling and hiking trails. Within a few minutes' walk of our tent, we had access to 200,000 hectares of forest, with its richly diverse flora and fauna. Of the latter, deer and wild boar are most common, although they stayed well clear of all the happy little campers.

An easy 20-minute cycle through woodland takes you to the town of Rambouillet. It is idyllically French, with plenty of *boucheries* and *boulangeries* in which to stock up on daily supplies. Spend a morning strolling around the chateau, lunch at the *crêperie*, then sip a glass of wine at the town-square bar, watching the kids go around on the antique carousel, and you have to blink to remind yourself you aren't in an art-house film.

Huttopia is the beautiful baby of Philippe and Céline Bossanne, whose ever-growing family has spread to five sites in different corners of France. They make every effort to respect their natural heritage, and have excellent eco-friendly practices in place. One of the most impressive is the natural swimming pool, which is filtered by sand and reed beds. Not a hint of chemicals, and no stinging eyes at the end of the day. Getting past French bureaucracy to build this was a battle for the Bossannes, but they fought for it and their efforts have resulted in a change to the law, making it easier for others to build eco-pools in future. Consequently, only this site and their new one in Senoches have these pools to date. Another refreshing feature is that their sites are car-free, so the children were never off their bikes.

They invite their guests to follow the green path, too, but not through lecturing and endless notices to recycle this or switch off that. The shop is full of local produce, and there are daily activities that take you out into the landscape. We signed up for a twilight nature trek through the forest. This was led by the manager of the nearby Espace Rambouillet, an enclosed section of the forest set up to educate and conserve this precious resource. He put us into two teams; then, hoping that we had enough French between us, we headed off on a treasure hunt, finding clues concealed under leaves or in tree-trunk hollows, and filling in nature-quiz questions as we went. We ended up walking for hours, making new friends en route, and the kids racing the whole way around to see if they could be the winning team back to base. I can't imagine having garnered that much enthusiasm if I had suggested a three-hour walk in the woods to study nature, somehow.

Funnily enough, our teammates on this nature trek have since become close friends, and we are all going back to Huttopia again together this summer. Just to add to the Enid Blyton-ness of it all, we are not even taking the car this time. Instead we will take a ferry, then a train to Paris, a 40-minute train ride to Rambouillet, and a stroll through the woods to our favourite pitch by the lake. We will hire bikes when we are there, and chill out for two weeks. Rain or shine, we are hooked on Huttopia, and camping converts for life.

GO GADGETS ADAM HARVEY

In a blind panic?



■ Enforce a holiday blackout on wide-awake children with a Baa Baa Blind (€34.99, www.cleverlogs.ie), a lightweight dark cloth that sticks to windows with suction cups. It beats turning the apartment upside down to find a blanket to hang over the curtain rod. The blinds measure 200cm by 135cm. Use it upon your return to block out the sight of the Irish summer stormclouds.



■ A jellyfish deterrent in a sunscreen? What's next, shark-proof deodorant? Actually, Lifesystems sunscreen (€14.99, Great Outdoors, Dublin 2, www.greatoutdoors.ie) isn't as silly as it sounds. The sunscreen doesn't scare away the jellyfish - the creatures don't have a brain, or the capacity to change course away from a swimmer - but tricks it into not firing the thousands of tiny poisonous darts that line its tentacles, which normally activate when they make contact with fish, or flesh. The deterrents mimic the chemical reaction caused by contact with another jellyfish. That's the theory, anyway. Try it with a lightweight Irish stinger before you do battle with a tropical box jellyfish. The downside: you'd need to smother it over every part of your body that could come into contact with a tentacle.



■ Lighten your cable load with a retractable USB cable (€4.45, www.proporta.com) with interchangeable heads for linking phones and hand-held games to your computer's USB port. Each clip-on head is also €4.45.

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