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White van man: Robert Crampton sets up camp with wife Nicola, Sam, 9, and Rachel, 7

He's king of the road

Robert Crampton takes the wheel of a camper van in Sardinia and opens our six-page camping special

I WAS offered a choice of destinations for my camper van holiday with the family: Germany or Sardinia. I said to my wife I fancied Germany. She said she wanted to go to Sardinia. Guess where we went?

Not that it made much difference. There was us, a retired butcher from Nijmegen, and a French couple, and pretty much everyone else in Sardinia in a camper van was German. And because our van had a Munich numberplate, they assumed we were German too, which was fine, now that after the World Cup the English have decided to like the Germans again, but became irritating when they still insisted we were German even after we'd told them we weren't. "Aber, Sie sind Deutscher!" one man kept shouting at me. "Sie kommen aus München!"

Those Germans, my goodness, they love their vans, their Joxys, Eura Mobils, Carthagos and Hobby Excellents. They buy the biggest model, 25, 30, 1,000ft long, and then pile them high with satellite dishes, televisions, barbecues, bikes, kayaks, fridge freezers and so much cabling they could probably have stayed in Düsseldorf and still been plugged in overlooking the Med. They would pull up, the whole family would leap out and in a well-



rehearsed blur of activity, they'd be tucking into a five-course dinner ten minutes later. Luckily, the Germans couldn't have been more helpful in showing us, total van novices, what to do.

There was a lot to learn. I felt I'd just about got the hang of the van by the time we had to come home. Well, I'd got the hang of it stationary, the hang of driving the thing was still elusive. Halfway through the week I was backing out of a campsite and bashed in a door on a tree that had no right to be there. That made me a bit nervous and so, within miles of the airport drop-off, I clipped a crash barrier on an unexpectedly tight turn.

One of the ironies of a mobile home, we found, is that

they actually make you less mobile. Aside from the classic VW and one or two other mostly US conversions, your traditional camper van is a big, boxy unwieldy thing unsuitable for anything much below a main road. If I never see the narrow streets of Cabras again, scene of an epic 85-point turn, I won't be unhappy. The urge to get where you are going and then stay put is strong. Or maybe I'm just a rubbish driver.

We flew into Alghero, a pleasant old walled town, probably the nicest town we saw on Sardinia, although we saw less than a third of the island, which is bigger than you think — we covered 360 miles (620km). It was good to be back in Italy. Our first evening, we saw one chap, he'd never see 50 again, shiny white suit with bolero jacket, shirt undone, medallion, you get the picture. He looked... fabulous, in the way only Italians can.

This was our children's first taste of the Med. They liked what they found, especially the food. "This spaghetti bolognese tastes even nicer than proper spaghetti bolognese," said my son. The Italians are famous for their food, I explained. And their football, singing and organised crime, said my wife.

Finding a site just out of town, we secured a pitch and

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took stock. Various dramas with gas cylinders, fridge catches, retractable steps, fold-down beds and tables that turned into other beds ensued, none of them pretty. A camper van is like a small boat: everything has to be in its place or your life falls to bits. "It's a perfect holiday for someone with obsessive compulsive disorder," said my wife. "You're all right then," I said. She laughed and told me I'd put my sunglasses down in the wrong place.

You have to renegotiate the division of labour in these situations, otherwise you'll spend the entire week arguing. Either that or you check into a hotel, and that would have felt like failure. Nicola and I got to about Wednesday before we reached a *modus vivendi*: she would be in charge inside (beds, fridge, clothes storage, etc) and she would be in charge outside, too, except that I would do the actual labour there, under supervision.

Within this new regime, Sam, 9, and Rachel, 7, shouldered their usual roles. Daughter to back up mother and laugh at father whenever the need arose, son to come half-heartedly to father's defence if he sensed a display of male solidarity might result in an increase in his food supply, as in, "Come on, son, let's leave them to it and go to the bar" — "Does that mean I can have an ice-cream?"

Everything hinges on establishing your preferred van etiquette. The etiquette of our van was for Sam and I to be put out during the day, like dogs, and be allowed in only at night with the greatest reluctance. But then I kept breaking things and he kept locking himself in the lavatory, so far enough.

Sleeping, which had been my main concern, funny enough worked out fine. You have to go to bed at the same time, the kids late, the parents early, but there's not a lot of entertainment on Sardinian campsites in any case. Those places were as quiet as the



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grave. And almost as dark, lit only by the low glow of a hundred TV screens, which tend to be turned off at 9.30, when the Germans go to bed. I like quiet and dark, so that was fine.

I'm sounding moany, but once domestic equilibrium was restored, we had a good time. I can't say that Sardinia has much to recommend it beyond the weather, the beaches and the well-documented attractions of the Italian way of life, not least their uninhibited delight in other people's small children. But to be fair to Sardinia, the holiday became much more about the van than about the country.

Still, we managed five sites in seven nights — La Mariposa, near the airport; Camping Spinnaker on the west coast; Porto Rotondo on the Costa Smeralda; Camping Capo D'Orso in the far north, which was very good, and the best of all Torre Argentina, near Bosa, a friendly, hippyish, pleasingly primitive site right on the beach on the west coast. Sadly we didn't make it to Buggerru, which I had wanted to visit for obvious reasons.

Mostly our energies were directed towards the next site, the next pitch, the next hook-up, the next *supermercato*, leaving little time for exploration. I really ought to go back, maybe even in a camper van — this time with a chauffeur.