

## The Italian Blog 2009



Its difficult to think that it has been just over a year since we last headed for Folkestone in preparation for crossing to France on the Channel Tunnel. So much seems to have happened in that time from the virtual meltdown of the world's financial system, Sterling falling dramatically against the Euro and to cap it all the threat of a Flu pandemic. Perhaps we should be holidaying on a different planet! Tuesday 5th May and the day had come. Silly day as far as getting out of the estate, rubbish to be collected, neighbours not returning to work after the Bank Holiday! Anyway not long after 10.00am we were heading for the M1 and the journey to our overnight stop at [Black Horse Farm](#). Given the mythical status the M1/M25 have for being bad roads we seem to make very good progress and arrived at the site at around 1.00pm, not bad going I thought.

When we booked it we were allocated a pitch which was a bit unusual. The warden explained that she had over 60 units arriving that day and so I imagined that the site was pretty full. My request for a hardstanding also fell on deaf ears and I was given the impression that there were none available. So imagine my surprise when driving to our allotted pitch I could see that the site was no more than a third full. I do sometimes wonder if these wardens make work for themselves. Why on earth could we not have chosen our own pitch? Even more galling was the fact that at about 7.30 in the evening there were still about 18 empty hardstandings! Perhaps I am missing the point and perhaps the wardens wanted to organise the pitching so that all those due to leave at a certain time did not disturb others on the campsite.

On a brighter note I decided to try the new TV on the Status aerial for the first time. The site directory says that TV is 'Fair' which usually means rubbish! I was completely gobsmacked to get perfect pictures on all digital channels!

On Wednesday we were up bright and early although I could not claim to be that bright! We had set the alarm for 6.30am but Margaret was up at six. We got away from the site at about 8.15am which allowed us plenty of time for our 9.20am crossing. Mind you getting out of the site is not that easy at that time of the morning because of the busy road. We shared our crossing with one other caravan so not sure how the other arrivals at Black Horse Farm were getting to France. It seems that Eurotunnel have not yet taken the battle for custom to the ferry companies as there was capacity to spare and I would have thought that selling it at a cheaper rate would have proved a good business move.



The crossing was on time and we were soon heading down the A26 south. Why are motorways so much smoother in France? Everything

seems so effortless. So little traffic and no hassle passing trucks. After a while we filled up with diesel which cost €1.08 a litre which converts to a similar price at home and a little cheaper than it was a year ago. We had thought about trying to save some money by using non toll roads but in the end decided on the faster option, even if it did cost Margaret €33. We could have saved a few euro's had we left the autoroute at Reims but we missed a trick there! TomTom got us safely to the entrance of the [Municipal at Chalons en Champagne](#). This Municipal is highly regarded as a stopping place off the north/south autoroute. Its not the cheapest site we have stayed on at €22 a night but it does have free WiFi. The young lady in reception was most charming with impeccable English.



I think Margaret and I are wondering if our days of pounding down the autoroutes day after day are numbered. We seem to get a lot more exhausted than we used to do. But we are in a way committed to the earlier part of the journey because we want to be in certain places at certain times. Perhaps in the future we will allow more time. Thursday dawned bright and sunny so it looked like a good journey ahead. However as we were packing up disaster struck. Margaret was removing the water pump from the housing and one of the butterfly connectors that keep it in place snapped off. Having a day at the wheel to think of possible solutions I came up with several options. Plan A was to try and jam a piece of wood across the housing to keep the connector in place. This seems to work but when we have a shower in the morning will be the real test. If it does work it will be double satisfying as the piece of wood had been discarded on a service area!

Anyway back to the journey! When we left Chalons we headed for Troyes on the N roads rather than the autoroute as we know this section was very good and it would save a few Euros in tolls. We joined the autoroute just north of Troyes and stopped at the first Service Station to fill up. It was a couple of cents cheaper today. Until we got to Beaune traffic was again quite light but south of Beaune it was much busier. We had decided to stay at [Chateau de L'Eperviere](#) a campsite we had stayed at a few times before but the last time was 11 years ago. They have certainly made some improvements and for anyone heading this way it is well worth a visit. There was a very engagingly cheerful chap on reception who, as it turned out, was a keen fan of Fawcett Towers, strange I thought for a Dutchman!





During the day we had noticed the temperature gradually rising to the point where you feel engulfed in warmth. It was a nice feeling and it was of course accompanied by wall to wall sunshine, that is until early evening when it started to cloud over. By the time we went to bed there were a few spots of rain and it had become quite muggy. We must have gone to sleep straight away only to be woken by a tremendous storm with thunder and lightning and what sounded like Phil Collins playing drums on the roof of the van. It was of course hailstones! Fortunately it did stop but you do wonder if a hatch will smash or the roof get dented!

Before we left on the Friday we had quite a long chat with the guy that runs (owns?) the campsite. He was saying that 40% of his clients are British and he was concerned as to what sort of season they were going to have given that many Brits were obviously thinking twice about a visit to France this year. I suppose one example would be the price of eating out. If you take the site restaurant which is pretty good but for two of us to eat there it would cost £50 which is no longer a cheap alternative. Even the takeaway seemed pricey. So even if people come to France I am sure they will be thinking twice about what they spend.



We are travelling into the Alps today in readiness to cross into Italy early next week. We decided to try and avoid the Lyon eastern bypass so instead used the Bourge en Bress motorway, which is longer but quieter. Not long after we joined the autoroute after leaving the site we notice something strange in so far as there were no lorries but lots of cars. This could only mean one thing, yes it was a Bank Holiday which we were unaware of! So far into the journey we made the decision to deviate from TomTom's route, big mistake. Got off the autoroute with the intention of taking the N75, which like a lot of French roads has been changed to a D road and extra numbers added, usually 10 in front of the original number so the N75 becomes the D1075. Anyway we got completely lost so cut our losses and made our way back to our original route. Strange to say but as we were heading south our son Simon was heading north on the TGV from Montpellier to Lille, and onward on Eurostar to London and Milton Keynes in the time it has taken us to move between campsites! When we reached the A43 we had it almost to ourselves as we gently climbed up through the valley towards St Jean du Maurienne where we intended to stop for three nights. TomTom got us to the entrance of [Camping Municipal Des Grand Cols](#) and we drove in. Not another camper in view. Apparently we were the first this year but the site only opened a few days before. The Guardian is very friendly and speaks some English. We were using the ACSI Card and this site is in the lowest price bracket of €11. However he explained that as they offer 16amp electricity, rare in France, there was an additional charge of €1.50. Personally I thought that quite a bargain but I am sure some will complain. Tried to set the satellite dish up but only German programmes so far. I would have thought we should be able to get UK programmes with an 80cm dish but perhaps we are on the edge of the footprint. No doubt will try again tomorrow!





This is the first day since leaving home that we have not moved on to another campsite so it was nice to have a lie in, although in truth we still woke fairly early. This certainly seems a delightful spot. We are surrounded by mountains, some with snow on them. One penalty of being in the mountains of course is that the weather can be changeable and we did have a few spots of rain at lunch time but generally its been sunny most of the day. After breakfast we went off to the Champion supermarket for food and essentials. I don't think prices have gone up but of course when you start to convert is when you realise that costs have gone up. At least the diesel was cheaper! We had given up on the satellite and tuned the Status for digital and got an excellent picture. decided to watch the Saturday qualifying on the French channel TF1. As most of it is self explanatory I suppose the language does not make a difference! Although to this day I am not sure who Jenson Botton is! Afterwards we walked into St Jean de Maurienne which is an agreeable little town. There had been a few more arrivals including another Brit which made the site look a little fuller. In the evening I had a chat to the couple who run the site. Madam has been to England a couple of times and knows someone in Worcester.

A very lazy day today but of course we did have the Grand Prix. An excellent result for both Brawn and Red Bull. The occupancy of the site has thinned out a bit today with no replacements. However we did have to pay our dues which was fun in itself! I think I was the first person to pay by credit card this year and the card reader was not even connected. In the end we managed! Its been good to relax here for a few days after the journey from home.



Monday had arrived and our next move but this time into Italy. Before we set off I drove into town to buy a baguette. It seemed a bit dull as we left the campsite and started to make our way out of St Jean. We had not gone far when we were delayed at a level crossing but this was not for long. We were soon on the autoroute which seemed no busier than the day we arrived. There were a couple of lorries and a handful of cars. Ahead we had two choices, the Tunnel de Frejus or continue further up the valley and use the Mont du Cenis Pass. This latter option was soon denied us as we came across a warning sign saying the Pass was closed. Margaret was not that keen anyway and although she was also not so keen on a long road tunnel for her it was the lesser of two evils. Perhaps I was lucky the decision was taken out of my hands! Although the road up to the tunnel is not particularly steep you do climb from about 500 metres at St Jean to about 1200 metres at the tunnel entrance. The real shock of the tunnel is the price! €44 for a single journey. It seems you can buy a return ticket which might save a bit. This is certainly the longest road tunnel I have driven through at 13 kilometres long. Although it is a two way road through the tunnel it seems plenty wide enough and apart from a sign half way though telling you that you were in Italy that was about the limit of the excitement. The decent the other side seemed much steeper and not helped by road works where nothing was really happening. After not too long we were on the motorway system proper heading for Torino and then Milano before heading off in the direction of Lake Maggiore on the A26, but not the one that goes to Calais! Having driven thousands of miles on French and German motorways the Italian ones are different again. One slightly confusing thing are the overhead signs on the motorway. Where as we are used to overheads showing arrows on all lanes going forward the Italian ones show arrows on the two outside lanes so the uninitiated could think you must pull out into the middle lane where the truth of the matter is that you stay where you are. We left the A26 at Baveno and made our way down to the lakeside, having previously had glimpses of the lake from the motorway. It was then a relatively simple journey to [Conco D'Oro](#) our campsite for the next 6 days. Reception was very pleasant and we were told to go off and find a pitch and register once we had done this. Conco D'Oro seems a very nice site with excellent facilities and perhaps unusually for Italy decent sized pitches. Once set up we did have a wander around the site but that was the limit of our activities except to have a chat to fellow Brits in a motorhome and a little later some Brits pitched behind us who were in a folding camper.

Our two sets of new acquaintances were leaving today, not sure if its something we said! We are now the only representatives of her Britannic Majesty on the site. We have been surprised by the number of Germans here who even outnumber the Dutch! With a little rehearsal I went off to buy four rolls for lunch. Amazing cheap I thought at 80 cents for all of them. After breakfast we walked into the next village of Feriolo which is a pretty lakeside place. Its always fascinating how much the Italians cram into such a small place. There are several hotels and even more restaurants. Several small food shops a small supermarket. Exhausted by our walk we did not need any encouragement to sit around during the afternoon. However after dinner a bike ride was suggested and off we went to explore. I think I can still walk!





Wednesday and we decided to venture out in the car, not far but just enough to give us a taste of Italian driving on local roads! In the main its not too bad except for two things, impatience and ignoring speed limits! Anyway the intention of our drive was not to judge the driving standards of our hosts but to visit a well known garden just the other side of Verbania. It goes under the grand name of [Giardini Botanici Di Villa Taranto](#). There is limited parking just inside the gates. The Gardens are situated on the shores of Lake Maggiore, and as the name suggests they surround a Villa. There are numerous themes and you are given suggested walks when you buy your ticket. There are some quite steep climbs as the cleverly designed paths offer vista after vista but you do need to be able to manage. Unfortunately I think our visit was between seasons but having said that there was still lots to see and worth an hour or two.





Until now we had not bothered with the satellite but decided to give it a try. I did manage to get most UK programmes except ITV channels, although we did manage to get Channel Island Television! We do have slight picture breakup now and then but that could be due to my tuning! I have also been connecting to the internet via my 3 Network Mobile Broadband dongle which does work but painfully slowly and the occasional page won't load. I only discovered that you can use a 3 dongle in Italy using your UK data allowance shortly before we left the UK but did have a chance to use it on our trip to Newcastle and York. I felt I needed to also purchase some WiFi time from the site but even this caused a problem because of windows security set up but I did manage to get through that!

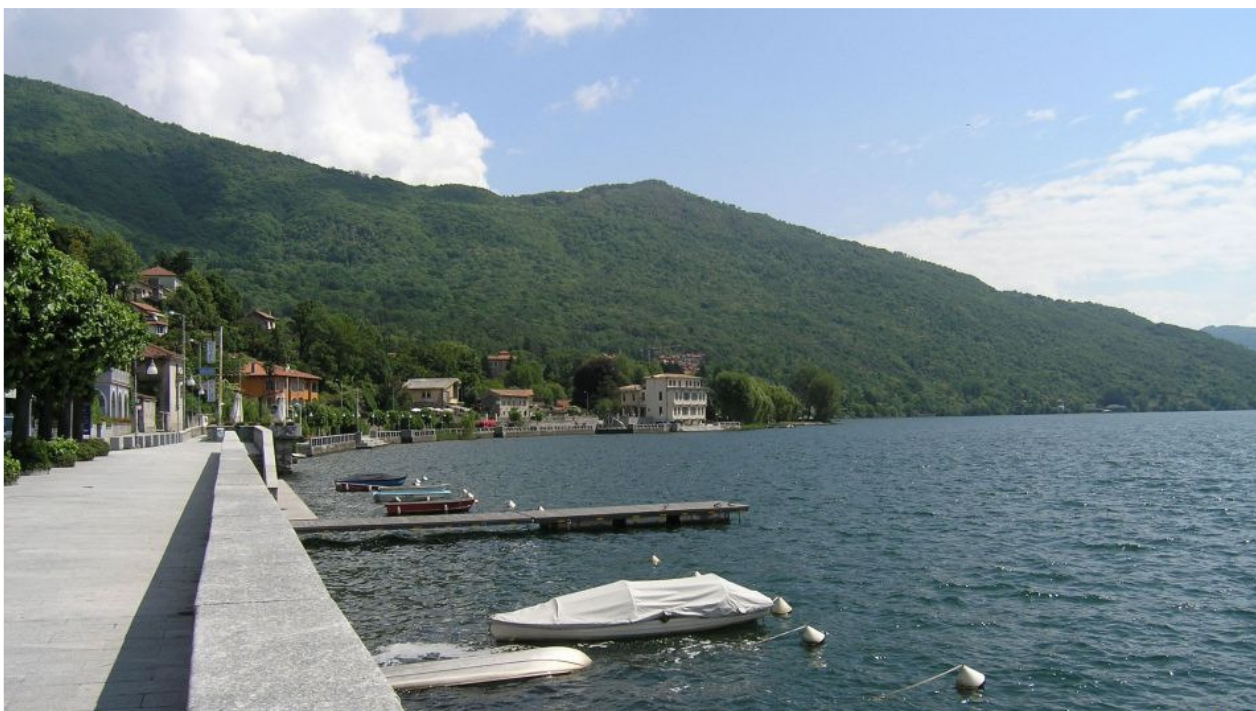


Today was mainly house keeping activities which is a necessary evil when you are away for longer periods. Over the days we have been at this site we have noticed a lot of tree pollen floating around and it gets in the entrances of the toilet blocks and rolls around like tumble weed! Obviously being the low season the site is far from full and I suppose as many leave as arrive although as we head towards the weekend the balance is changing in favour of the arrivals. Its interesting to watch people doing their initial look round for a pitch. Most immediately look at pitches on the front row facing the lake, they then wander off looking at other pitches further into the site. I am not sure where the ideal pitch would be but access to water and waste disposal would come fairly high on my list but as our European chums seem to enjoy trotting off for showers and dish washing I suspect that means less to them.

In the afternoon we did venture off on the bikes again, this time towards Baveno. There is a cycle way of sorts but it tends to disappear from time to time. Neither of us are keen on riding bikes on busy roads, especially in Italy so we only went as far as the end of the path. Sometimes walking long distances can cause me some real discomfort because of my hip but cycling strangely does not seem to cause the same problem.

Friday 15th May today and we seem to have solved the tree pollen problem because its wet,wet,wet, not the pop group you understand but just rain and lots of it! We had to go shopping so what better day. We had picked up a leaflet from reception advertising what seemed to be a new shopping centre at Gravelona Toce called Le Isole which is a few miles away from the campsite. We were not altogether sure where we were going but there were lots of signs but they seemed to be taking us up some strange roads, round industrial estates but we got there eventually. It was indeed fairly new and not only had quite a few, mainly fashion shops and a food court but also a large Ipercoop supermarket. Food costs seem very similar to what we have at home. On the way back I followed the signs for Verbania as I guessed it would bring us back to near to the campsite, fortunately I was right. The rain stayed with us for most of the afternoon.

Saturday and our last day at Lake Maggiore and a much better day weather wise. The general temperature here has been very pleasant, no doubt it gets much hotter moving towards the summer. We needed to fill up with diesel so we drove into Verbania where there are several garages. Although they are advertised as self service generally someone pops out to fill up for you. Today ours even spoke a bit of English. Interestingly there is little price difference between buying fuel on the motorway as compared to regular garages. As yet we have not discovered a supermarket that also sells fuel.



After filling up we set off in search of Lake Mergozzo which is a small lake just west of Verbania. We may have set off with the intention of finding it but we had to make a detour after taking a wrong turning. Mergozzo which the lake is named after is a pretty little place. After lunch we set off again, this time in search of the larger Lake Orta and fortunately this time we did not get lost! We noticed lots of campsites along the way. One of the issues for me was that there was no where to stop to admire the view. Having driven the entire length of the lake we headed for Arona on the shore of Lake Maggiore. We then headed north along the lake. Stresa looks very grand with lakeside hotels to match. Stresa also seems to be the departure point for many lake steamers.



Back at the site we started to pack things away but also had time to sit and observe the new arrivals. The Dutch and Germans know exactly what they want, there may be the odd confirmation of which direction the satellite dish should point! Now the Italians ponder long and hard working out where the sun will be at any point in the day and of course none of this can be achieved without the waving of hands and arms. Then when they decide they pitch across two pitches!

We were packed up and away from Conca D'Oro by 10.00am. It had been a good campsite with quite generously sized pitches which was one of the issues we had in selecting sites in Italy. We were soon back on the motorway for the start of a surprisingly subterranean journey with an amazing amount of tunnels both on the shores of Maggiore and Como. In fact when we had set up at our campsite I checked the mirror just to check I had not developed a long snout and started to grow a glossy black fur coat so convinced was I that I had become a mole! From Lecco at the south of Lake Como to the northern point is 41kms, I reckon 25/30kms must be in tunnels. Mind you the tunnels were something of a relief after negotiating the motorway round the north of Milan and then heading north past Monza. Without TomTom it would have been very difficult. Something else that surprised me was that on the motorway I noticed a guy unloading bags of rubbish from the back of his car at one of the emergency lay bys. As we progressed it became obvious that it is fairly common practise! I am sure they must have local rubbish disposal but not on the motorway.





[Camping La Riva](#) is at a place called Sorico right at the northern tip of Lake Como on the river? When we arrived we were the only touring unit on site although we were joined by an English couple in a tent later on. Like a lot of continental sites La Riva has its share of permanent vans, many with some permanent additions. This is one of two campsites we booked via the Caravan Club because there was a price advantage in doing so. Personally, as nice as the site is, I feel it is over priced for what it is and to give an example, if we wanted to stay another two nights it would cost us an extra £54. As we went to bed we could see lightning flashing in another valley. The storm did develop overhead as it tends to in the mountains.



Monday and a beautiful day after the storm of the previous night. We decided to use our bikes and rode to Sorico all along the river and eventually onto the edge of Lake Como itself. In contrast to Lake Maggiore this area is well provided with footpaths/cycleways and we could have gone further. Surprisingly cycling is a good way to keep cool as you create your own draught! Having said that it started such a nice day I have to say the weather is somewhat changeable! After lunch it went very dull and the wind came up quite strongly and we could hear more thunder. Although as a storm it did not come to much the wind always bothers us since what happened at Wurzburg last year with the Caravanstore. Later on the wind came up again but from the opposite direction! As dinner was being prepared Margaret threw away the comment that the cauliflower was taking a long time to cook. The clue was in the next comment that the electric ring was usually faster! A quick check revealed that as well as the ring the water heater was also on, not usually viable on a 6 amp supply!

When we arrive at La Riva we were given an information folder of things to do locally which was a nice touch. Included in the information was the location of the nearest large supermarket so being Tuesday we made it shopping day! When we got there most of the parking was covered but because we don't bother to take the roofbox off we had to find one of the parking places on the outside. We found a few cars parked at one end of the shopping centre and parked there. Margaret got a trolley and we headed for what we thought was the entrance. Up one level in the lift but still only access to the car park. Up another level and the doors opened onto a beautiful office area reception. The poor receptionist was a bit startled at two shoppers, complete with trolley, arriving where clearly they should not have. She was a most charming young lady who explained in pretty good English where we needed to be! When we found it we discovered a new shopping centre with lots of small shops and a supermarket. We are still coming to terms with the unfamiliar names, but we are gradually working things out which seem second nature in France or Germany.

We were of the view that La Riva was going to be a quiet campsite with just us and the tenters for the rest of the week. How wrong we were and also in a way I would not have imagined. We were sitting having lunch when Margaret noticed a couple of motorhomes arrive that were clearly English. Interestingly the guy that helps run the site rushed down on his bike and put them straight on a pitch. A bit odd given the registration process I went through! Before long there were two more and then a lot more, all from the UK. It turned out in the end to be 22 motorhomes and they were on an organised tour with a company called GB Privilege. They seem to be a friendly crowd and we had chats with lots of them as they discovered the campsite. It seems many had been abroad before but not as far as Italy and they seem to like the idea of company and the security of a tour. This was their first stop of more than one night since they left the UK. Some wished they were staying longer.





Wednesday was again washing day, albeit expensive at €5 a time although it was a big machine so Margaret was able to make the maximum use of it. We sat around the rest of the morning and just to prove that La Riva had not become a British enclave in Northern Italy we had a Dutch motorhome join us complete with four noisy children, how unreasonable! We decided that we should drive out and discover a little of the other side of Lake Como so headed for Colico and down towards Olglasca. Again access was a problem and also the lack of somewhere to stop (without payment) for 10 minutes. Later this evening a couple more Swiss motorhomes arrive and also it seems some of the people in the statics have returned having only left a few days ago. I think we are now in the middle of the main German/Dutch/Swiss school holidays so the peaceful idyll could be about to change!









Whilst it is very easy just to sit around relaxing we did make the effort today to get out and explore. Our destination was [Villa Carlotta](#) at Tremezzo on the western shore of the Lake. It is an interesting road south from the campsite and not always that wide which caused Margaret a few sharp intakes of breath along the way. Not a road for towing along! Villa Carlotta is right on the edge of the Lake and you wonder if, in the past, that it had private access to the lake rather than having to cross the now S340 road. There are two elements to a visit to Carlotta, the Villa itself is now a museum detailing the past ownership and the creation of the gardens. Then of course there are the gardens. We were a bit late for the rhododendrons but they must have been magnificent. There is much to see and you should allow a couple of hours. We met an English couple with whom we had a pleasant chat. Trying to take photographs in public places is often difficult but a lot of people recognise this and stand aside. Unfortunately this compliment can't be levelled at the American's who were visiting at the same time. They showed no regard for other people at all. On the way back to the campsite I stopped to fill up with diesel at the local filling station. Unbeknown to me it was of the automatic variety and I had no idea how it worked. I gestured to a lady on a scooter and she kindly explained to me that I had to introduce my money first, press the button of the pump I was using and it would fill up to the amount of the note subscribed. I don't think I would have worked that one out but yet another illustration of the kindness offered to us by the locals.

Friday and our last day at Camping La Riva. We had considered staying as we had a good BBC picture on the satellite for the weekend Grand Prix but in the end decided that it was a pretty poor reason for staying especially as it would have cost quite a bit for two days extra. However we did need to return to the supermarket to stock up for the weekend. It's a pity they don't put bigger fridges in caravans! At least we knew where we were going this time!

Saturday and time to move on and what a day it proved to be! We had rather liked it at Camping La Riva but the tour goes on. We retraced our steps to the A4 autostrada and headed in the direction of Venice. We encountered a problem we have sometimes experienced in Germany where, because lorries are generally not allowed to travel at weekends, the service stations are filled to the rafters which makes it difficult to find a place to park with a caravan. In one we did just park along a row of car parking spaces. The A4 is quite a nice road once you get past Milan and it is four lanes for part of the way. Our journey today was about 133 miles so we knew that we would arrive at our selected campsite '[Bella Italia](#)' fairly early and we were prepared to be told to wait. What we were not prepared for was to be told the site was full! We could park on the sports field and find a pitch in the morning as there would be people leaving. So off we went and found a spot in the corner of the field, a bit like being on a CL! There were electrics and a tap. However we did feel a bit put upon and did wonder if we should move onto another site in the morning. We had a ride around the site and it was certainly pretty full. Later we walked round with map in hand and found one empty pitch and also had a chat with an English couple in a motorhome. As we were chatting a Belgium car went by towing a van, clearly on the way out of the site. When we got back to the van the very same Belgium couple were parked next to us and they both spoke very good English, they were leaving at 4.00am the next morning hence over nighting on the sports field. Their advice was not to wait until the morning but go this evening because the Italians will get in first if we don't. They showed us on the map where they and some friends had been so off we went to inspect the pitches. One would suit us very well so we rushed back and packed everything up and found our pitch. Whether we will still be there after I report to reception in the morning is another matter but possession is nine tenths of something! Like most Brits I suspect we tend to stand back a bit but we had been frustrated and there were now about a dozen units waiting for pitches so firm action was required!





Well when I went to reception this morning to book in, fortunately we were not thrown off the campsite for doing things our way the previous evening. In fact Claudia could not have been more charming. Even more important I collected our passports which had been kept overnight. I am very reluctant to leave my passport but its the second time we have had to do it in Italy, although the first time it was only for about an hour. I suppose if anyone really objects their only option is to leave the campsite and go elsewhere.

I tried to set the satellite up so that we could watch the Monaco Grand Prix. Had no success with normal UK programmes but I think the tall trees were to blame. Did manage to get the BBC Streams which I think are the equivalent to pressing the Red Button. Fortunately the GP was carried on one of the Streams so there was no need to watch in Italian!

Afterwards we went for a walk down by the Lake which was quite crowded. It is certainly a lot hotter here compared to being in the mountains.





One immediate difference being here on Lake Garda is the massive increase in temperature compared to being in the mountains and it takes some getting used to. Given the heat it was time to start cooking outside something we had not done for over a year. Opposite our pitch is a Dutch motorhome and the poor chap who owns it has his leg in plaster. We got chatting to him and apparently he broke his leg whilst on the beach at the bottom of the site on his first day and is now waiting to be flown back to Holland and his insurance will pay for someone to collect his motorhome and drive it back to his house. He is clearly an active person and enjoys his cycling so I can imagine the frustration it is causing him. The Dutch do seem to have the same stoical outlook on life as us Brits. Apart from the washing not much else was achieved today, just too hot!



Having been almost lifeless the day before we were determined that we needed to get out and about so we decided to get the bikes out and ride into Peschiera del Garda. There is a cycleway along the Lake from the campsite and then a not too busy road. Whilst there is still a lot of traffic around, the roads seem a bit better and generally we either walk or ride along the pavement paying due care to the pedestrians! We stopped at the harbour and watched as a couple of families hired speedboats then we moved on to where the big ferries go out across the Lake. Peschiera is a delightful little town which is fortified, and the old town has narrow streets which are nice and cool as you wander around. Back at the site we relaxed around the caravan and also said goodbye to our Dutch neighbour as he left for the airport. After dinner we went for another bike ride, this time to check the sports field to see if there were people waiting and there were. Earlier today one of the vans left from the end of our row but within seconds someone was reversing their van onto the just vacant pitch! We then ventured out the main gates of the site. As an aside I have rarely seen a campsite with such an impressive entrance as Bella Italia. Anyway I digress, we were looking for the site next door called Camping Cappuccini which we had caught glimpses of from our campsite and from the lakeside. The entrance was down a residential street. We rode up to reception and asked if they had a brochure which was handed over to me. However got a bit of a shock when I asked if we could just cycle round the site to have a look around, which we could do if I handed over some sort of identity! More through shock than anything I offered my camping carnet. It seems a nice enough site but it was only a quarter full and expensive at €29 a night. When I returned to reception to reclaim my carnet I had to wait some time whilst the lady was on the phone when I would have thought she could have just handed it over. Not very welcoming and I should imagine that we won't be going there! By the time we had got back to the van the wind was coming up and we were immediately concerned about the Caravanstore. However it did subside and hopefully it will make things feel a bit fresher.



On Wednesday we ventured out to the Auchan (yes same as in France) supermarket on the way to Verona. We had hoped that they would sell a similar product range to what they do in France but unfortunately this was not the case, we were particularly looking for Orangina Light as Margaret can't drink sugar laden drinks. As a bonus we did manage to buy diesel at €0.999 a litre, the first time we have found a supermarket and fuel station combined. When we got back to the van the sky was darkening and the wind starting to get stronger. It did start to rain but not to any significant amount but we did have several hours of thunder. Eventually it did brighten up but fortunately it was cooler than the previous few days. Whilst we are inclined to sit back and enjoy such conditions our European chums seem to reach for their fleeces!

With the wind and rain of the previous day the car and van were pretty mucky so I gave both a partial wash. After lunch we drove into Sirmione. Our last visit was 17 years ago and apart from the approach with lots of new buildings and roads its much the same as it was. It is a nice place to visit and a couple of hours should be enough. Sirmione is on a peninsular that juts out into the southern end of Lake Garda. The entrance to the peninsular is fortified. It is a nice walk up to the end and there are good views out over the Lake. The town is a bit on the touristy side but pretty none the less. Back at the site we paid our dues, or rather handed over 6 Camping Cheques! Later we packed everything that we could away in readiness for our departure the following day. Bella Italia has been a good campsite but I think we would have preferred somewhere quieter or perhaps to visit when it was less crowded.





On Friday we were up and packed quite early for us. The motorhome next to us had left so their pitch gave us a bit more room to get hitched up. We left the site just after 9.30am but were soon in trouble as we missed our turning to the autostrada so had to go on until the next roundabout and double back. We were soon heading towards Venice. People complain about service stations in the UK but from my experience they are infinitely better than their Italian versions which is saying something! Often its impossible to find somewhere to park with a caravan as there is limited parking for lorries and they always seem to be full. We did eventually find somewhere to stop. My 2006 Road Atlas of Italy shows a new motorway being built around Mestre, the inland part of Venice. It is now open but despite buying new maps for TomTom before coming on holiday he did not recognise the road at all. Those that know the motorway around Mestre, will appreciate how busy it gets. In contrast the A4 bypass motorway is built to an excellent standard and far better than any others we have been on in Italy. Anyhow I digress. We merrily went long the new road confusing TomTom as we went with the odd interruption to turn right through a concrete wall. Not being Harry Potter I resisted the temptation! With the aid of our trusty Atlas we found our way to the end and heading back in the direction of Venice. After a lengthy wait at the toll booth but fortunately at far lower rates than any others we have been on in Italy. We then missed our turn off, we should have gone in the direction of the Airport! Not such a good day for making correct turnings! We did eventually get back on the route around the Lagoon. Some of the roads have not changed since we were last here 9 years ago but there does seem to be lots of development in the towns along the route. Unfortunately we arrived too late at [Camping Ca Savio](#) to be allowed to find our pitch until after the 3.00pm enforced rest period which I always find frustrating especially as it wastes so much setting up time. I am also not convinced it adds anything to the peace and tranquillity of the campsite as the restaurants and swimming pools are still open and children make as much noise as they do at any other hour! The weather was still dull but did clear up a bit later but certainly cooler than when we were at Lake Garda. We had already chosen our pitch and I left Margaret with the bikes as I went to collect the van. Immediately I arrived we moved one place to the left as we had seen some rather large fir cones on the trees above which we thought would tumble down on the van if the wind came up. We thought a pitch was delineated by the trees either side of the pitch but the pitches were larger than that. However we had pitched in the middle of two pitches but could not really be bothered to move and reception did not seem too bothered about the exact location.

Saturday was a much brighter day although the shade of the trees made for a nice temperature. Because of the weekend and pending of yet another Bank Holiday we thought we should visit the local supermarket. However before we went we drove down to Punta Sabbione and in the last nine years there have been many improvements made. On our previous two stays in this area we had used a campsite called

Camping Miramare but had been tipped off that there was a lot of work going on outside the site due to the construction of the flood barrier to protect Venice. Most of the work near the site seemed to be complete so how much noise and disruption it would currently cause was a bit uncertain. Hence the reason for going to Ca Savio and the jury is still out on whether that was the right decision. Back to the same supermarket we had used on our last visit so we knew where we needed park. Inside was chaos and noisy but we managed and made our way back to the van. After lunch we rode the bikes into Ca Savio. One pitch away from us is an English van, the owners of which had also stayed at Bella Italia before coming to Ca Savio. Further away from us we were aware of a sizeable number of UK vans arriving which seemed to be part of a rally, in fact there may have been two rallies. I did make an effort to set up the satellite but as we got not a hint of a regular UK programme I gave up and concluded we were too far east even for an 80cm dish!

Sunday was not as bright and could almost be described as chilly. Ideal temperature for a bike ride. Punta Sabbione was the destination again and a longer distance than we usually do! Apart from crossing the road in Ca Savio it was cycleway all the way. We made good progress on the outward lap but coming back was a bit more difficult as we were heading directly into the wind and I am hardly aerodynamic! After lunch I went off in search of internet access as it was costly and slow to use my Vodafone dongle and the 3 dongle had no connectivity to the correct network. Things are not simple in Italy. Firstly I could not pay for internet until later and when I returned I was told to go to a different place but they told me I must pay at reception and then they would issue the ticket. It was enough to make you want to give up the internet for life! Eventually armed with my log-in details I went to the WiFi area and connected OK. However, as I have discovered before, Vista does not like unsecured networks and closes down the log in page. This is no problem if you use all your time but if you want to log out its not easy to do. I did find a work round which said I had 50 minutes left which will be fine for my next session. I much prefer to have site wide WiFi access but so many sites want to restrict access to a place you could be made to feel guilty about staying without buying a beer or a coffee!

Today we decided that a trip to Venice was in order. We have been several times before but the magic of this City brings us back for more. In some quarters Venice gets a bad press. People say it smells, well in many visits I have not experienced that and my sense of smell is as good as the next man. I suspect its the over crowding at the popular points that puts many people off. However unless the local authorities take some action to restrict access the problem will remain and I am sure that would be equally unpopular.



We made two decisions, one to park at Punta Sabbione and the other to buy our tickets at the landing stage rather than from the campsite reception. As I would be walking around Venice for several hours I did not wish to agitate my hip more than necessary hence parking near the ferry rather than catching the bus. Initially we tried the regular €5 parking but that was full so we had to return to the €7 parking which was at least shaded. For those not familiar with the parking at Punta Sabbione I should explain that as you approach the ferry you are waved into parking areas. Now unless you do want to park here you should ignore the 'waving in' as it has no official backing, its just individual parking lots trying to get your business. As we were now coming the wrong way the guy waving people in was taken a bit by surprise as we approached him from behind! A little reminiscent of the opening scene from the film M.A.S.H. when they were watching for the helicopters but they came in from behind them!

They seem to have graduated to a new electronic system with their ticketing so instead of punching the ticket in the date machine you scan it against a reader. Logic suggests that if you have say a 12 hour ticket you only need to scan it on first use but passengers seem to scan them all the time. On the final sector of our trip I did try this and all you get is a green light confirming the ticket is still valid. One thing that has changed since our last visit is that they now have direction signs so you know where the boats are going! There was a lot of people waiting for the ferry so as a result it was pretty crowded and not many opportunities to take photo's. I am always telling people the only way to arrive in Venice is by boat. I still maintain this to be true but people might disagree when they see the crowds at busy times! And our arrival was at a busy time.





Something else which is new this time, and you get a good view from the ferry, is the construction of the tidal barrier to protect Venice from flooding. It is a massive project and has changed the appearance of the outer Lagoon. It is not yet finished but work is, it seems, making good progress.



We made our way along the quayside to St Marks Square, or Piazza San Marco which is usually shortened to San Marco in Venice on signs. We passed the long queues for the Palazzo Ducale and the Basilica di San Marco and I am sure there were also hundreds of others wanting to go up the Bell Tower but they might not have been so keen had they seen the picture of when the whole structure collapsed in a pile of rubble! There is no doubt that San Marco was once, and perhaps still is(?), a high class shopping centre. The cafes with their musicians and staff in liveried uniforms waiting to serve coffee from a gloved hand and extract a sum for doing so that in some countries might be enough for a deposit on your own coffee shop! Coffee in San Marco and Gondola rides are not what Venice is about to me, it is the crumbling mass of buildings gradually sinking into the Lagoon, the mass of narrow passages, the vistas opening out on canals big and small, the squares that come at you as you emerge from the half darkness of those passageways, the history of the long gone Venetian Empire and the gem that remains of that time is the City of Venice, this is what I am interested in.

I am a person who collects maps and guide books from previous adventures and often buys new ones prior to a trip. However we find ourselves in Venice without a map or guide book. Yes I do have them but they are collecting dust in my 'man room' as Michael Macintyre, the energetic comedian likes to call it far away in Milton Keynes! Without a map Venice becomes something of a maze, fortunately with not to many dead ends! We head in the general direction of the Rialto Bridge but happen upon a Square and there before us is La Felice the famous and twice rebuilt opera house. No doubt to help pay for the rebuilding they allow tours of the theatre when no events are on. What a magnificent place and given the size rather surprising that it can seat around 1000 people. One surprising little factette is that the chandelier that hangs in the main auditorium came from Liverpool. Many famous operas have had their debut performance there and it is considered second only to La Scala in Milan in terms of Italian opera houses. Apparently La Felice means The Phoenix which seems perfectly appropriate given its history! There was no extra charge for the audio equipment but I did have to leave my photo driving licence as security. As a bonus we were given a free map of the City.



After our sajour in the La Felice we made our way to the Rialto Bridge which is a fine structure spanning the Grand Canal, unfortunately it was elbow room only so we decided to make our way back to San Marco. After a slight detour into the Square so that Margaret could treat herself to a Murano Glass pendant we made our way to the quayside at San Zaccaria as we had decided to take ourselves to the Lido to get away from the crowds. The water buses they use on this service are more launch like and fast compared to the normal Vaporetto and you do have to brace yourself as it crosses the wake of other boats. The Lido is an entirely different world to Venice. It is grand and perhaps has a little faded elegance but well worth the trip. Its where many Venetians live. Another little surprise is that it has buses and cars although not in any great volume. We stop for a gelato and watch the world go by. On the way back we pass a public toilet with a bladder numbing price of €1.50. Even at my age I can clench my buttocks for a while longer! Back at the waterside we look for our ferry stop, although despite



information to the contrary we are in the wrong place. I could see our ferry approaching but it sailed by and pulled into a jetty some distance away. So off we set, fortunately it was warm rather than blisteringly hot so the walk was not too uncomfortable. The next ferry arrived on time, half hourly service, and we were soon back at Punta Sabbione.

Back at the van we sank a well earned beer exhausted from our adventure. We had noticed that the Swiss people behind us had trooped off to some friends who were staying in a static nearby. Not long afterwards we were aware of a child crying and getting increasingly distressed. The noise seemed to be coming from the awning of the Swiss couple's caravan. What could we do? The child did not know us so could become even more distressed if we tried to calm him. (and we wonder with no surprise why people in the UK are reluctant to intervene with children who are strangers to them) However Margaret launched into action and set off to find the parents who clearly had not missed him! Despite the language barrier she made herself understood and mother and child were reunited. We have noticed a tendency to allow very young children to roam around the campsite without any parental supervision, vive la difference!

Across from us are two, older, German couples who always greet us as they pass and I even managed a sort of conversation with one, enough to establish that he lives not far from the Austrian border near Salzburg and that he has been here 4 weeks. Both couples have spent the last few days packing everything up as like us they leave on Thursday.



Later on Tuesday afternoon we did walk to the far end of the site, yes it is that big, and back along the beach which was packed.

Wednesday and our last full day before we move northwards and the start of our journey home, albeit three weeks to do so. Shopping again and this time to a larger supermarket near Jesolo. After dinner we put most things away so we are almost ready for the off tomorrow. Camping Ca Savio is a good campsite but a bit too busy and noisy for us. If we had arrived a week later I expect things could have been different and we will have to think carefully for next year where we go to avoid this mass German influx. You can hardly blame them as for most of them coming here to Venice is a lot nearer, and I expect cheaper, than going to the South of France.

We managed to get away from the campsite in reasonable time. We had ummed and arred on which way to go to our next site near Trento in Northern Italy. TomTom's fast route would have taken us along the Brenner motorway but we fancied a more direct route. When we tried the shortest route he seem to take us all round the houses. I was concerned when he asked whether I wanted to use unpaved roads! According to my map all the roads I wanted to use were main ones! In the end we decided on a half way house. We would drive to Padova and then take the Trento road the SP47. The first half of this route is pretty slow given that it goes through a lot of towns and villages. At Cittadella there was a bit of a delay at traffic lights for some reason. Incidentally it looks an interesting walled town and perhaps worth a visit. Once past Bassano del Grappa you start to drive through mountains in a narrow valley. Its quite a spectacular route with surprisingly no steep inclines and in places it is either two lanes each way or dual carriageway. Our campsite for the next few days is [Camping Due Laghi](#) whose entrance is situated immediately on the slip road into Levico Terme but fortunately the camping is sufficiently far enough away from the main road to avoid any noise problem. There was a friendly welcome and plenty of space but because it is a Camping Cheque site, It was fairly full mainly with Dutch campers. This seems to be an increasing feature of using Camping Cheques. We find a pitch in this well shaded site that will hopefully enable us to get a satellite picture. After setting up and lunch we went off on the bikes to find Lago di Levico which is the smaller of the two lakes in this area. Like a lot of places in Italy you have to search to find public access to lakes but we found a park although we were uncertain whether we were allowed to be there!



On Friday morning we set up the satellite and within a fairly reasonable time we actually had some BBC channels and low and behold even ITV although the picture was a bit fragile. After lunch we set off to explore Levico Terme, we found a small car park behind the church. The church is large and at the time of our visit being cleaned by an army of women of a certain age. The town itself is pretty ordinary set against a backdrop of mountains. However if you make your way to the Parco della Terme it becomes a different world. The Park is free for all to walk round and has some magnificent tree planting. The grandly named Imperial Grand Hotel Terme is equally grand to look at and it would not be out of place as a film set. After Levico we drove out around the larger lake near the campsite call Lago di Caldonazzo and back to the site. Having had dinner we thought that we could settle down and watch the BBC evening news but by now it had started to rain and soon we started to lose the picture. Switching over to BBC News, which is apparently broadcast with a stronger signal, we did manage to see the news although even here the picture now and then started to break up. Eventually it got so bad we had to switch it off. Worse was yet to come when all the lights went out about 9.30pm, there had been a power cut. I think this must be a regular occurrence as within minutes a generator had started up and the lights on the site roads and the restaurant came on but not the campsite pitch electric supply! The fridge was turned onto gas and I was running my laptop on its battery as the mobile broadband was working! As we were getting ready to go to bed the generator went off and because, when I looked, the road lights were off I imagined that power would be off some time. As I was locking up I noticed the site road lights were on again but we were still without power. Off I went to check the electric bollard. One switch, out of four, had tripped. No prizes for guessing who that belonged to!

Saturday started dull, had a few bright moments and then started to rain. Fortunately it was a bit intermittent so it did not affect us watching the GP qualifying. After lunch we nipped up to Levico to a rather nicer supermarket compared to the one nearer the site. The rain came back which ruined the TV reception but that does seem to break up in the evening, rain or not!

I know its dreadful but I watched the Andrew Marr show on BBC. At home it starts just a bit too early on a Sunday for me! Given the political turmoil going on at home I thought I should catch up with it a bit. We were really waiting for the main event which was the Turkish Grand Prix. Jenson Button is clearly on a roll although with Vettel on pole there might be a chance for Red Bull. In the end Jenson was able to put his authority on the race and is proving difficult to beat. At least it was second and third for Red Bull and a good result for Mark Webber in second place. After the race we thought we should get at least a little exercise so we cycled down to the lake to the private beach owned by the campsite. Back at the van I noticed a small group of children running around between the caravan opposite. The thing that really alerted me was when I heard two clicks which you get when you remove your electric cable from the bollard. When I investigated further I found that two cables had been removed by these little darlings! I alerted the Danish owner of one of the vans concerned and he plugged both back in. The same kids seemed to running wild around the toilet block a little later. They reappeared a couple of hours later so I took it upon myself to point out to them that they were unwelcome in this part of the site. I think I shocked some of our Dutch chums who seemed in the main to want to ignore the problem that had gone on before! In all the years I have been camping I do not recall an incident such as this where kids have caused this sort of nuisance. No doubt they will return to school with tales of an English Mr Grumpy!





Monday and not only time to move on but to move countries as we are heading for Austria. As we were getting ready to leave our neighbour (Dutch), who had made no effort to speak or acknowledge us during our stay must have been a bit worried about his car and asked if we wanted him to move it! Unfortunately it's not unusual for the Dutch, and Germans, to park their cars right on the edge of site roads even when there is plenty of room to park further onto the pitch. Anyway I got round him with plenty of room to spare. We were soon heading out towards Trento and so on the Brenner motorway heading north. This is a truly magnificent road which climbs to just under 1400 metres at its highest point. Despite the height you don't ever seem to be aware of climbing steeply and in the main it's quite gentle. En route we had to stop and buy an Austrian motorway sticker or vignette. For ten days it only costs €7.70 so not bad value. When we crossed the old border I did notice they were sold there as well but you can do as we did and buy one at the service areas on the approach to Austria. There is also an additional toll of €8 for using the Brenner Motorway. We were surprised on our final approach to our site, [Camping Eichenwald](#) at Stams that we had to tow the van past the monastery.



This site is terraced so there are individual pitches or just small groupings. We found ourselves a nice pitch overlooking the Inn Valley and the mountains beyond. It's quite a rustic little site which suits us fine. Nice to be away from the noise of the bigger campsites. That was until we could hear singing coming from the bar area, consider this is mid-afternoon on a Monday. It turned out to be a group of Dutch caravanners of a certain age, sort of Pensioners Behaving Badly! Some of the tunes were familiar, in fact I thought they were about to start on the Lambeth Walk at one stage but it turned out to be something similar. Like all pensioner do's they don't go on very late as they get too



tired! Think of Peter Kay's Gran! Later in the afternoon we walked down into Stams to have a look at the Monastery, apparently its now a school run by the Monks.

The following day we went to a supermarket suggested by a Dutch neighbour, a couple of villages away. It was not very large but had an amazing selection. It was also a bit surreal as twice we were discussing what to buy when two people offered us advice in English! Otherwise it was quite a lazy day but in the afternoon we did walk over to the nearby Ski Slope. It seems as if its used just for training and it also turned out to be a ski jump with no snow. Having made their jump they land on the artificial surface and the run off area is grass that is watered before use to provide the slippiness. As they exit onto the grass they sit down on the skies which somehow stops them!

Wednesday was, perhaps, our last washing day of the trip. However it did involve a few problems as we had not put enough money in to complete the wash cycle so the clothes were unrinsed and soaking wet. Margaret went off to get someone from the campsite who did not speak English but we managed to understand. We had to put another euro in and start at the rinse programme. Fortunately after a night of heavy rain it had turned out to be a nice sunny day. After lunch we had a drive out to Telfs and then towards Imst stopping en route to visit the pilgrimage church at Molz. We parked in the first car park and made the long climb on foot not realising that we could have taken the car all the way up. I know how the pilgrims feel now!



The German motorhome opposite has an unusual resident, a cat! Its always on a lead and seems purrfectly at home in the camping world. The motorhome is pitched on a terrace with quite a drop on one side. I noticed that he was creeping along the pitch low down and obviously with a bird in his mind. Anyway he reached the point where he thought he was in with a chance! He launched himself off the edge of the terrace and whilst the bird flew away I had visions of the cat hanging himself on the end of his lead, you could almost hear the trap door open! Fortunately, for him, he was secured in a harness so he lived to tell the tale.

Its a Bank Holiday today in Austria. Clever really having it on a Thursday as you can make a long weekend of it! Mind it was typical Bank Holiday weather! At least by lunchtime the sun had come out although the clouds were never far away. Given the changeable weather we had a pretty lazy day, easy to do!

Friday was our last full day at Stams. We needed to return to the supermarket and fill up with fuel. Interestingly we have been getting slightly better fuel economy since leaving the UK. Speed limits dictate that we travel at a slightly slower pace so I suppose this could be a contributing factor. I got a bit of a surprise when I went to reception to pay as in addition to the 5 Camping Cheques we had to pay €3.40 per night in local taxes which I thought was a bit of a rip off. Whilst we have enjoyed our stay in Stams I don't think the site owners have contributed to that in the way that they run the site. An example would be that late on that evening several outfits arrived and there were limited spaces available but the owner just stayed in reception leaving people to sort themselves out!

We were up early on Saturday, at least by our standards. Today we cross into Germany. Our route will take us across the Fern Pass. We have done the Pass before but only coming from the direction of Germany. We left Stams and crossed the motorway and headed up past Molz to road 189 which we followed towards Imst but at Nassereith you head north towards the Pass. Thinking we would miss the traffic was a bit of a false hope as cars streamed from the direction of the German border. It was slow in places and also twisty but perfectly doable with a well match outfit. In some ways the worse part of the journey is when you cross over into Germany towards Fussen. The A7 motorway is still not complete to the Austrian border which requires a detour through places that are totally unsuitable for heavy traffic. One of the reasons for leaving earlier than usual was to get to our site [Camping Waldpark](#) in Hohenstadt before they closed for lunch at 1.00pm. We arrived in plenty of time and received a very warm welcome from the couple that run the site. Later when we were cycling around the site we were talking to another English couple who suggested Laichingen as the nearest place for fuel. So later on we drove over to the town. At least the price of diesel is about 6 euro cents cheaper than on the motorway. Camping Waldpark seems a nice site and as a bonus it has free WiFi.



Sunday was a very lazy day mainly spent around the van. We sometimes feel a bit guilty about lazy days but we do occasionally have then at home! We packed everything away in the evening just before it started to rain!

Monday and the next stage of our journey. This time to a place called Trippstatt near Kaiserslautern. We rejoined the autobahn, which was only just over a mile from the campsite. The motorway here is unusual in so far as each carriageway goes round the hill on different sides. From Stuttgart we headed towards Karlsruhe which you have to traverse, although all on motorway style roads. We knew that our next site was in the middle of the countryside but had not appreciated how 'interesting' some of the roads would be. By now it was raining quite heavily and TomTom was leading us along roads that many would consider unsuitable but he got us there. Our new campsite, [Camping Sagmühle](#), is large but the pitching areas are divided into reasonably sized chunks. There is nothing worse than trying to find a pitch in the rain, especially as some pitches have standing water. In the end we select one near the site entrance. Included within the campsite area is a caravan dealer and accessory shop. I did purchase some flush tank deodoriser and would have purchased one or two other items but, of course, being Germany, they don't accept credit cards or even internationally recognised Bank Cards! I suppose one day Germany will become a modern country but its taking a long time.

The rain had continued on and off through the evening and night and in fact on Tuesday morning the site road was like a river. Fortunately the clouds started to break up before we went in search of a supermarket. We drove to Kaiserslautern but could only find Aldi/Lidl/Netto type supermarkets, not my favourites. Netto was certainly better than Aldi but you have guessed it no bank cards. I assume that personal robbery is unheard of in Germany and they all carry huge amounts of cash!



Wednesday and a pretty lazy day as well as being sunny and hot. In the afternoon we did get the bikes out and explored the campsite which is pretty large although most is taken up by permanent caravans. The site is in several sections and divided by what seems to be public access to the lake and the woods beyond. We did ride up into the woods but it was a bit steep for us so we headed out of the campsite to a small hamlet called Neuhoef where there is a small Chapel. Further on we were surprised to discover another campsite although I am not sure it accepted tourers. In the evening we noticed a fire engine heading down to the lake but some of the firemen seemed a bit on the young side. It would seem that the local Fire Service encourage youngsters to get involved in their work and seem to have a group rather like the Scouts or Sea Cadets. They were obviously having a good time setting off the fire hoses which created an interesting rainbow effect.



Thursday and our final day at Trippstadt. We headed back to Kaiserslautern not only for some shopping but also to fill up with fuel. We stopped at the first Netto we came across but soon discover another supermarket called Wasgau which we had not come across before. It looked encouraging as it started with a 'W' and everything was green but not quite a Waitrose! It even took credit cards. After a slight detour (!) I managed to get on the right road out of town and I pulled into a Shell garage to fill up. I went to pay and for some reason I was asked if I was a member of the ADAC, not quite sure why unless they get a discount! I offered my credit card and motioned as to whether I should put it into the reader. I was told to press the green button and then sign, not use the pin. The young lady at the desk was very charming and when I said that 'Chip and Pin' is not widely used she explained that sometimes it is but not always.

Our day of departure was a bit dull but at least it was dry. Not long after 8.00am I went to pay in my Camping Cheques and €1.20 in local taxes. I even got the money back on the tokens I purchased to get extra kilowatts as we managed perfectly well with the 4 amp supply. By 9.00am we were heading along the narrow roads that access the site with a long day in prospect as we were heading some way into France. The journey from Kaiserslautern to Reims is fairly monotonous, especially when you have travelled that route before. You do traverse one of the major First World War battlefields at Verdun but of course not much is revealed from the motorway. After Reims we cut across country via Soissons and Compiègne to our site for the next 3 days at Orvilliers Sorel, a total distance in one day of 275 miles.

[Camping Sorel](#) seems to be a very nice campsite in a traditional French sort of way. One strange aspect however are a couple of dozen Dutch caravanners who seem determined to stay hitched up so they can make an early start the following day, despite there being other suitable pitches available.

On Saturday we went off to Roze in search of a supermarket and found one near the junction with the A1 autoroute. Its interesting that Margaret commented that France just seems so much more relaxing than other countries and I can see her point but can't quite put my finger on why this should be so. Not that we had a lot of time to explore as we wanted to be back to watch the qualifying for the British Grand Prix. Vettel on pole and Jenson uncharacteristically lower down the order.

When we left the site this morning it was only about 10% full but from mid afternoon the Dutch have been rolling in and again pitching so that they can remain hitched up. Its difficult to tell whether they are returning to Holland or en route to their holiday destination. It does make you wonder why they don't just use a motorway service area!





Sunday and the Grand Prix, another excellent result for Red Bull with Vettel winning and Mark Webber second. Afterwards we went out on the bikes to explore the immediate area around the campsite. Within a 100 metres of the site is a rather grand Chateau. As with the two previous evenings there has been an influx of Dutch caravanners. Whilst its not unusual to have a high percentage of Dutch tourers on site I don't think I have experienced this phenomenon of being reluctant to unhitch. When we don't have the in transit Dutch the site has mainly Brits staying a few days. One resident of the campsite is a Westie type dog who roams the site without any obvious owner. He is very friendly and will come and sit with you. He is a bit of a scruff and a shampoo would work wonders but not part of my job description!





Our routine for moving on is now well practised and we were on the road by 9.00am. Using the A1 and A26 we were at our next site, [Chateau de Gandspette](#), before 11.30am, just as well as its important to secure a place of this increasingly busy campsite, especially if not pre booked. Gandspette could well be in the UK given that its customer base is about 90% British. Some may balk at this idea but its always interesting hearing where people have been and also meeting people you have had conversations with a few campsites ago. We got a surprise when we arrived. There was another couple waiting to know which pitch they had been allocated. It turns out that we had met them a couple of times before, at Gandspette, prior to making the crossing home. They had been to Spain.

Tuesday was shopping time so we headed off along the N43 (now D943) towards the Cite de Europe shopping centre. Our first problem was that they had now installed height barriers to all access points which posed us with a problem given that we had a roofbox on an already tall 4X4! We did find some barriers which although marked as 2.1 metres looked a bit higher. Fortunately there was not much traffic about so Margaret was able to get out and check whether I could get under which I could just manage. Inside the Centre we were astonished at how quiet it was. In the golden days of cross Channel Shopping it was like a bun fight every time you went. I am sure the fall in the value of Sterling is partly to blame but there must be other reasons. The wine and beer section was virtually deserted. The beer now seems expensive and if you ignore the Sterling factor a 24 bottle pack of Bier St Omer now costs €7.50 when a few years ago it would have been €4.50. Likewise the 'bladder in a box' type wines have increased in price. Given the current discounting at UK supermarkets on beer it can't be worth doing a day trip to France! After a coffee in the shopping centre we made our way back to the van.

Gandspette has a WiFi facility albeit only in the bar area run by the French company called Passman. It seems to be a widely used system in campsites across France although the prices vary a lot. Gandspette charge €5 for an hour, which is not too bad for the light user as you can log in and out as many times as you want until you have used your hour. At our previous site I purchased a Passman card for €4 which enabled 3 hours use. I started to wonder if the cards sold were linked to the individual site so I decided to hold back on some time from the previous campsite to see if it worked at Gandspette. When logging on it did think about it a while longer but it did let me in. So the moral of the story is to buy extra cards where they are cheap and use them where they are expensive!

For the first time this holiday we decided to have a meal out and used the campsite restaurant which we have always found to be very good and we were not disappointed. It was very busy and we were lucky to get a table. Everybody gets involved with the owner and his wife helping out when required. It has always been a disappointment that this site is not open beyond the 1st October and I did ask this question of the owners. She said they open for 6 months and he added that after they close they have to immediately start on the annual maintenance. Seeing how hard they work day in and day out I can well understand their reluctance to open longer, they must be shattered by the end of the season. I have always had a soft spot for Gandspette and to me its an ideal blue print for a high quality campsite, just a pity its so close to the UK!

Wednesday 24th June and time to go home, 7 weeks slips by so easily. We were up pretty early and away from the site quickly having said goodbye to our chums who we had met several times at Gandspette. Apparently the days around our departure, there was due to be some sort of big protest by some group in Calais, although not blocking the Port! However we did not see any evidence of this on our journey to the Tunnel. Using the auto booking in system I managed to get us on a Shuttle 30 minutes earlier. We made our way through the various checkins, although nearly missed the gas check. Having done that we were told to go into lane 4 and as we moved down the lane we could see the caravans and motorhomes in front of us moving forward, we were going to be on an even earlier one. Before we knew where we were we were back in dear old Blighty and sampling the delights of the British road system. To be fair it was not that bad but it always seems a long trek to MK although many more have much further to go! Simon had the day off so he had the gates open for us and within minutes we were set up in the back garden. In a sad sort of way our trip to Italy will be the last time we will use the Eccles as we take delivery of our new van in 10 days time. It was a nice feeling that this year I had made it back in one piece!





### Retrospective

The journey amounted to about 2400 miles towing, plus extra miles when visiting places of interest although we tended not to travel more than 25/30 miles to get to an attraction. We try and find sites near to where we can walk/cycle. Before we left there was much concern that the fall in the value of Sterling would make things very expensive. We were fortunate that as we left the pound started to appreciate against the euro a little so the difference between this trip and last year was not massive. In fact the price of diesel was generally lower than the year before so on a swings and roundabouts basis I suspect costs worked out about the same overall. Campsites in Italy can be expensive and €25/30 a night in low/mid season is not uncommon. Fortunately making use of the ACSI Card and Camping Cheques can reduce campsite costs considerably but of course this is not an option for those going in the high season. We did book two sites via the Caravan Club as their prices reflected the exchange rate of October last year and I reckon we saved about £50 in total on the two sites. Another issue we thought we would have with Italian campsites was pitch size. This turned out not to be a problem and on all five sites we used in Italy we had pitches that were around a minimum of 100sq mts so it pays to do some research before leaving home. Last year we ran out of tea bags but made sure we had enough this year. We discovered that the price of instant coffee seems to have gone through the roof in Europe so another lesson learnt!