

# How caravanning TRANSFORMED OUR LIVES



When medical results confirmed their worst fears, the Ripper family found that caravanning adventures would prove to be a wonder cure



Words and photos  
Gayle Ripper

**ABOVE** The perfect prescription – caravan, pitch and view

**LEFT** Life skills. Gutting mackerel for the birthday barbecue!

Claiming that the purchase of a caravan proved to be life changing is a bold statement, but for me it couldn't be more true.

My husband, Chris, had always hankered after a caravan. His family had one while he was growing up and, being the youngest of four boys, he has wonderful memories of long summers in France and Wales. He fondly remembers one trip to France when the family had been travelling for a very long time. It was late at night and the roads were poorly lit. His father decided it was time to stop for the night and continue the journey in the morning. Unfortunately, rather than waking to the sound of birdsong the following morning, they awoke to the sound of rush hour. They had pulled up onto a roundabout!

Chris remembers his caravan holidays as great social gatherings and opportunities to meet up with both family members and his father's business associates who lived a distance away. He was keen to give our three children, Joseph, Matthew and Esme, similarly positive holiday experiences.

Unfortunately, I wasn't so keen. My childhood holidays were very different. Brought up in a tenement in a Glasgow council estate, we didn't have a car for a start. I was about eight when my



weather, just the wrong clothing. We have only given up on a trip once. Storm Katy prevented us from using our awning and the wind that rocked the caravan kept us awake throughout the night. The site got so churned up from vehicles coming and, mostly going, that a giant mud bath was created. It delighted the children and infuriated me as it resulted in three changes of clothing in the space of an hour, leaving them nothing to wear but pyjamas. There were no washing facilities and there was nothing that would prevent a wet, muddy dog from climbing onto upholstery. It all made for a very stressful break away and nearly finished me off. It was no fun at all, so we decided to go home. But, as the ground was so hideous, we couldn't even get the caravan moving in order to leave. So we abandoned ship, or caravan, and went home. Chris returned a few days later and brought the caravan home.

Our caravan has taken us to places in the UK that we had never been to and has introduced us to things such as tree climbing and windsurfing in the Isle of Wight, pot throwing in Stoke's famous potteries, the World War One poppy installation at the Tower of London and much, much more. There are many more places, attractions and events and beaches that are on our list to visit. Norfolk. Suffolk. Pembrokeshire. Bristol. North-east Scotland. They all feature in our plans, alongside

*This whole experience made us look at life very differently. First of all, we bought a caravan...*



**TOP LEFT** Relaxing on site

**TOP RIGHT** We had a lot of fun at Surf Snowdonia in Wales

**ABOVE** Our inflatable canoe is perfect for caravanning as it's so compact once deflated. This is on Loch Lomond

**BELOW** Family ski trip to Aviemore. Yes, you can caravan in the snow!

many hidden places that we are yet to discover. We are all very much looking forward to our forthcoming trip to Ireland. We can't wait to visit Dublin, Belfast and the stunning west coast. Before that, we are planning a break to Ayrshire and will head over to Arran and Millport.

Our three-week trip to the south of France with our dog in 2015 proved to be so successful that we are planning another tour abroad in 2018, which will take us to a couple of countries, although it is yet to be confirmed.

The opportunities with caravanning are endless, and even the thought of it fills me with delight and anticipated excitement. As soon as we decide on where and when, I can't wait to plan and prepare an itinerary. It's quite a turnaround, given that it was me, initially, who was more than reluctant when Chris brought up the subject of buying a caravan. And who would believe that, in summer, I spend almost three weeks in Wales with the children, while Chris visits for long weekends?

As for Chris, he is due for another check-up at the oncology unit next month. After five years of being all clear, this appointment will hopefully sign him off for good. And what better way to celebrate than to go away in our caravan and gather with friends to one of our favourite sites? The only hard part is deciding which one it should be. <<

**UPDATE**

**The Editor:** On 20 June, I emailed Gayle with a question about this feature.

She replied: "What timing! I have just returned from The Christie in Manchester with Chris who has had the final all clear and been signed off. Lots to celebrate!"



Our children were four, seven and nine at the time and we all had so much to look forward to as a family. Miraculously, though, the day after the doctors shared their prognosis, Chris started to make a recovery. He began by being able to breathe by himself and, miraculously, just a week later, he was discharged from hospital to recover.

This whole experience made us look at life very differently. First of all, we bought a caravan. While I inwardly remained sceptical and wasn't really keen, Chris deserved it, and it wouldn't hurt to give it a try and to see if it suited us. If it wasn't our thing then we would sell it. We also agreed that we would still enjoy one holiday abroad each year. That was good enough for me, so after much research we bought a Lunar Quasar 546 from a local dealer. I loved it as soon as I saw it. It wasn't like anything that I had imagined. It was a million miles away from being cramped, drab and awkward. Instead, it was stylish, cleverly arranged and modern. It had three fixed bunks at the back, which could be closed off by a screen. Perfect.

As Chris was still too poorly to accompany me for pick-up, a friend picked it up for us and there it sat on our drive for four months. Despite not moving an inch from the driveway for all of that time, the caravan was perhaps used at its best during this period. As Chris's mobility had been temporarily affected by his treatment, he would spend his days sitting in the front room, which offered a view of the caravan. The highlight of his day would be to shuffle out, with some assistance, and there he would sit in the caravan for half an hour and think about the adventures he was going to have with his family. He reminisced about and reflected upon his own positive family experiences, and he started to make plans for the future. This positive thinking propelled him to better health.

Our very first trip would be to Port Sunlight and Crosby Beach. It proved to be the perfect choice and we loved every minute of it. The mover was a wise and essential purchase as Chris was still weak.



**LEFT** Esme zipwires in north Wales



**TOP LEFT** Chris, Joe and Esme take the new inflatable kayak out for its first adventure at Trearddur Bay, Holy Island, off Anglesey. Wetsuits are definitely recommended

**ABOVE** Our kids love the water, whether they're bodyboarding in Anglesey or windsurfing on the IOW



Despite now being back to full health and fitness, he still uses the mover at every opportunity, accepting the fact that negotiating the caravan, even in a spot that's not tight, isn't his forte.

We have since enjoyed around 45 trips away in our beloved caravan, including a ski trip to Aviemore, surfing in Cornwall, exploring castles in Northumberland, flying kites in the wide beaches of Dumfries and Galloway, dining on mussels that we collected in the Ardnamurchan peninsula, cruising around The Needles on the Isle of Wight and eating *croque monsieur* in various French cafés.

Introducing a puppy to our family in 2015 was made easier knowing that our holidays could include her. Olga, our cockapoo, now accompanies us on all of our caravan adventures. The caravan suits her perfectly. She loves the familiarity of sleeping in the caravan near us and she, too, loves to explore new places. We haven't had any difficulty in finding sites that are dog friendly.

There is another reason why the caravan means so much to us. Our middle son, Matthew, has complex epilepsy. Sudden clusters of uncontrollable seizures mean that he has to be admitted to hospital for emergency treatment. Recently, our planned holiday to Iceland had to be cancelled at the eleventh hour as he wasn't permitted to fly. Although we were very disappointed, we were thankful that his neurologist permitted him to travel within the UK so, instead of marvelling at geysers, volcanoes and waterfalls (which we will definitely do one day), we joined friends in Wales for beach walks, fishing, BBQs and late night catch-ups. It was just what we needed after a stressful and difficult time. Thank goodness for our caravan.

Since our caravan sits on our drive, it is always ready for a trip. Beds are made and clothes are packed. All that remains to be done is to fill the fridge and prepare a meal in the slow cooker at home, which will be our dinner upon arrival at the site. Decisions on where and when can sometimes depend on the weather. Sometimes we book in advance. Sometimes we just follow the sunshine, but that doesn't mean we are fair-weather caravanners. There's no such thing as bad



stepdad passed his driving test and secured a job that came with a van, which then became our 'family car'. As it was the '70s, there was scant regard for safety. So our travel arrangements involved my two sisters and I being bundled into the back of the van, which was unseated but did have boxes of rat poison that protected bare legs from the cold metal ridges of the floor of the van. No prizes for guessing dad's new job.

Like Chris's family, though, holidays were of great importance to us as a family. Once a year we would visit Saltcoats in Ayrshire and Butlins. As we got older and the package holiday became more available to the masses, we ventured abroad, initially enjoying coach and tent holidays to Spain and then eventually enjoying a two-week, self-catering holiday to an apartment in Lanzarote.

While the appeal of the package holiday didn't stay with me, I still didn't 'get' the attraction of a caravan that Chris spoke about. I preferred to venture to more exotic places, farther afield. New York. Singapore. Florida. Chris would suggest that, as I am a teacher, I could 'take the kids away to Wales for the summer and he could visit for long weekends'. All I heard in his suggestion was, "You take the kids away and live in a confined little box,

**TOP** A simple picnic on the beach and an unforgettable childhood memory

**ABOVE** There were times when it seemed unlikely that Chris would ever enjoy moments like this again

**RIGHT** Caravanning – your passport to superdad status

*This whole experience made us look at life very differently. First of all, we bought a caravan....*

in a place where it will rain constantly and you'll have nothing to do but separate bickering, bored kids, while I stay behind in our big house with our big garden by myself and my remote control, which I won't have to share with anyone."

It was a ludicrous suggestion and I would hear no more about it, thank you very much.

However, in 2012 our lives changed. Chris was diagnosed with cancer. Despite being fit, well and seemingly healthy, the growth that he noticed the week before turned out to be malignant. We were informed on the Wednesday and he was admitted to surgery first thing on the Thursday. Six weeks of daily radiotherapy followed, with two rounds of 24-hour chemotherapy. It was a gruelling time as I struggled to manage work, three young children and driving Chris to hospital. The day after his final radiotherapy, Chris became so poorly with an aggressive pneumonia that he was admitted to intensive care. He remained in critical care for more than a month. His prognosis wasn't good. I was told that at best Chris would remain in hospital for many more weeks with up to a 12-month recovery afterwards. At worst, and most likely, he wasn't going to make it.

This was a devastating time for us.