

Let's Hit the ROAD!

*Travelling in a motorhome
gives you the best of both
worlds—home comforts and
a sense of total freedom*

BY Susannah Hickling

Camper van converts:
Marc Stoesser and
Selena Zeller from
Munich.



WHAT RIKO RIŽNAR and his wife Alenka love about their motorhome is the flexibility. “We can take our house with us,” says the 64-year-old retired publishing executive from Vrhnika in Slovenia. “We are independent. We don’t need to make a reservation. We can change our mind two hours before going or we can go back or go somewhere else.”

Riko bought his first motorhome in 1995 after a life-threatening tumour meant he had to have his stomach removed. “I thought, if I come out of this, I’ll buy a camper,” he says. “At times like that you decide what you want and what you need, and what’s really important.” He decided he wanted a better quality of life.

He and Alenka, 60, have travelled by motorhome to many countries in Europe, including Italy, France, Spain, Germany and Greece, often stopping for the night by the roadside, in towns and countryside alike.

Sometimes they have even parked up overnight outside a good restaurant. But these days they love to spend their summers parked on farmland they own near the sea in Croatia, relaxing and gardening. In winter they take their Hymer motorhome skiing in Italy.

One of their best ever holidays was a New Year trip to Livigno, in the Italian Alps. While temperatures

plummeted to -27°C and three metres of snow lay outside, the couple were warm and cosy inside their centrally heated van, chatting with friends, eating pizza and playing cards.

Sociable, adventurous and lovers of nature, the Rižnars are typical of the increasing numbers of Europeans who are taking to the open road in a motorhome, or in the motorhome’s little sister, the camper van.

IN 2017 THERE were nearly 1.87 million motorhomes in use across Europe, according to the European Caravan Federation, and new registrations were up almost 15 per cent on 2016. In fact, there’s a clear move away from traditional towed caravans

to motorcaravans: in 2017, close on 111,000 new motorhomes were registered across Europe, compared with just over 79,000 caravans.

Germany, France, Italy and Britain are the countries with the most motorhomes. But



Riko and Alenka Rižnar are part of a growing lifestyle trend.



wherever owners live, their favourite destination is the Mediterranean, according to leading motorhome manufacturer, the Erwin Hymer Group.

Claude and Françoise Jaffrot, both 64, are even more intrepid. The couple from Brittany in France have been taking touring holidays in a motorhome since 1989, when the arrival of a baby daughter made camping holidays with a motorbike “a bit complicated”, as Claude puts it.

Having criss-crossed Europe from Norway to Portugal, and Ireland to Albania for a few weeks at a time, they decided to embark on a much more ambitious trip once their daughter had grown up and they had retired. And so in November 2015, Claude

Alenka Rižnar (above right) with friends on a motorhome journey in Sicily.

and Françoise drove their Rapido motorhome onto a cargo ship bound for Montevideo, Uruguay, and spent a year exploring South America.

They hatched the idea several years before retirement, he from a career in food supply and she in the printing industry. “We met some people who’d travelled in South America and thought, Why not us?” says Claude. “We also said we wouldn’t wait for years. If we were healthy, we’d go immediately after retiring.”

On arrival, they discovered wide open spaces but few other motorhomes. Even endless kilometres on

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PHOTOGRAPHS LEFT AND ABOVE COURTESY OF RIKO RIŽNAR



English couple Derek and Christie Leary, proud owners of a 1979 VW camper van.

bumpy tracks in Argentina and Chile did not diminish their delight in the vast landscapes, mountain ranges, immense glaciers and absence of traffic. “There were no cars sometimes—it was the back of beyond,” says Claude, laughing.

The couple and their motorhome were a talking point wherever they went and they were welcomed by local people. Even police checks were simply an excuse for officers to visit the interior of their mobile home. “Each time they would climb in and were amazed,” recalls Claude. “They didn’t even ask for our papers.”

THE COMPLETE ABSENCE of facilities for leisure vehicles meant that the Jaffrots wild-camped throughout their 40,000km trip, which also took

in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. But they found it safe and straightforward. For example, they were able to get water from roadside taps and fountains, and service stations.

It was a far cry from their experience of travelling in Europe, where the explosion in numbers of recreational vehicles has led to more restrictions on where mobile homers can camp. Riko Rižnar likes Greece. “You won’t be evicted from car parks near beaches if you stay two or three nights, and you can get water there,” he says.

But the camping vehicle craze means that facilities in many countries are now very good. Throughout

France, for example, there are “aires”, dedicated motorhome stopovers that are cheap or sometimes even free, and which offer water and toilet-cleaning facilities. Riko Rižnar also cites Germany, Spain and Italy as countries that cater well for motorhomers.

The Jaffrots have noticed more retired people enjoying holidays in a home on four wheels. “They’ve got more time and they’ve got the financial means,” suggests Claude. He points out that the average price for a new motorhome is 50,000-60,000 euros. Germany’s caravanning industry association confirms that the sector is benefiting from Europe’s ageing population, buyers being typically over 50.

CLASSIC CAMPER VANS are making a comeback, too. Of the estimated 225,000 motorhomes and camper vans currently on the road in the United Kingdom, around 90,000 are iconic Volkswagen camper vans.

Christie and Derek Leary from Oxfordshire, a couple in their early seventies, are the proud owners of one of them, a bright orange Type 2, nicknamed Daisy, which they bought new in 1979. From the beginning she was much more than a holiday van. Christie and Derek were professional entertainers, first as a cabaret act, then as children’s entertainers and finally as disco organisers.

They used Daisy as their work vehicle for nearly 11 years, travelling, sleeping and changing in her. “Then

we used to clean out the van to go on holiday, usually in October. We would go up to Scotland and it became our holiday home. We liked walking. It was cold and dark, but there were wonderful colours up there,” says Christie.

Now Daisy is largely retired, and the Learys, who help run the Volkswagen Type 2 Owners Club in the UK, take her mostly to vintage camper van shows. A highlight was being invited to a film shoot featuring one of each of a specially selected top 50 classic

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cars. “Not one was duplicated,” says Christie. “It was a lovely day. We felt that, after all the years of looking after Daisy, it was all worthwhile.”

But often they just enjoy having her at home. “We take our lunch out and eat it in her,” says Christie. “The minute we sit in her, we relax. It’s like a family pet.”

And because the couple still love camping, they invested in a newer model, a Volkswagen Type 5, in 2009. The benefits? A loo and a shower and

a bigger bed. And better fuel economy. “But it doesn’t matter which model you are driving, you are one of a family,” says Christie. “Even people who haven’t got VWs stop. They turn, and wave and smile, especially children.”

The Learys find UK campsites more expensive now that motorhoming has become so popular. “But compared with other holidays, it’s still cheap,” Christie says. “If you get away at least once a month, it pays for itself.”

It’s a similar story for the more expensive motorhome. “It’s economical if you spend at least 30 nights a year in it,” says Riko Rižnar. “If you only go away for two weeks, it’s cheaper to rent.”

But it’s much less about the cost than the lifestyle. Christie Leary sums up the appeal of a mobile home in one word: “Freedom.” Younger people are buying into van life too. According to the National Caravan Council, which represents the UK leisure vehicle industry, there’s increased interest among families.

MARC STOESSER, 43, and Selena Zeller, 34, from Munich, Germany, now live in their camper van, a Citroën Jumper nicknamed Whatabus. They bought it on Marc’s 40th birthday, which was also the day he quit a stressful job in procurement at the airport.

The plan was for them both to work as landscape architects and spend more time in the mountains, hiking and cycling. But they found that their

weekends away were getting longer and longer.

“We were spending more nights in the camper van than in our apartment,” says Selena, laughing.

So in 2016, they handed back the keys to their rented flat and moved into Whatabus full-time.

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“It was never our dream to live in our camper van,” says Selena. “It just happened. We said we’d try it and see. But it’s been more than two years and we don’t want to change it.”

Moving in to Whatabus, which is also the name of the couple’s online magazine for mobile campers, was a big lifestyle change. “It was hard to get rid of possessions, including thousands of CDs,” says Marc, “but I haven’t missed them at all.” Selena agrees. “What I love is having so few belongings. You have everything you need with you. You are free. You don’t have cupboards full of things.”

Working from the van is easy with mobile phones, mobile internet and

electricity from solar panels. They rent a virtual office with desks and a mail-handling service, and use Marc’s father’s home as their address for administrative purposes and for storage.

When they visit friends and family, they bring their own spare room on wheels. “We prefer sleeping in our own bed,” says Marc, laughing. “My father has set up a small apartment for us at his house but we haven’t slept in it yet!”

Marc and Selena spend their summers in Bavaria, driving to their landscape-gardening clients and camping nearby, and their winters travelling. They have visited 41 countries so far, including Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia.

A favourite trip was to the far north of Norway, a country considered one of the world’s best motorhoming destinations for its beauty and freedom to camp almost anywhere. They arrived at the North Cape, the northernmost accessible point of the European mainland, at night.

“It was amazing,” says Selena. “We were alone in the snow. These two guys who were living out there were

so welcoming. I still have their words in my ears: ‘Hey, welcome to the North Cape. Enjoy it, you have it to yourselves.’”

The couple have encountered hospitality in unlikely places. Nervous about their safety in Turkey in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016, they walked briskly away from a group of men in uniform they spotted while walking in the woods. The couple were terrified when the men called after them, but they turned out to be both friendly and generous. They opened up their large equestrian property for Marc and Selena to park their van for the night.

They have had a handful of negative experiences too, notably someone breaking into their van in France, an attempted break-in in Sarajevo and a minor accident with a group of joyriders in Cyprus, all in the space of four months. But the good times far outweigh the bad. “It’s such a nice feeling in the morning when you open your door and look around at where you are,” says Selena.

Marc Stoesser agrees: “Life in the van is full of special moments.” ♦