The Towns Times

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And they're off.... oh no they're not.... oh yes they are !

By our reporter Keith Towns

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. As I write I am sitting in our caravan, in a pine wood, it's early afternoon, the sun is shinning in a beautiful blue sky and I have just been for a bike ride with James in our T-shirts.

However, getting to this state of relaxation has been one of the most difficult journeys, both physical and psychological that I have undertaken in a long time.

It all started back in England in the week we were due to leave for an evening stopover in Brighton to test everything before sailing from Portsmouth. I had to turn down a offer of work for a few days from BT.

I didn't really want to go back to work, but as I was in the fortunate position of having knowledge they were desperate to get (for the first time in my life), and I managed to negotiate a really good rate by being disinterested.

However as I said, a combination of not really wanting to do it and too much to do to get away meant that I could use delays on the contract coming through, not to do the work. Luckily they have agreed I can do the work from Portugal.

So after all that we are ready for the off then. Oh no we are not, with too much to do, I have to cancel the overnight stop in Brighton, as I had slept in the caravan for many nights the only thing that we would be testing anyway would be the water system and what could go wrong with that?

Just as you thought it was safe...

So the next day we can get up early and leave for the boat then. The caravan toilet has other ideas and broke on the morning of our departure. So I spent the morning with my rubber glove clad hands in a Thetford container that although rinsed, had contained material I shall not burden you with a description of.



The 'Outfit'

This was a big problem, no toilet meant middle of the night trips to freezing cold camp site facilities for us and the children. Fortunately a call the friendly people at Cranham caravans and an anti-clockwise trip around the M25 to Portsmouth (the opposite way that we wanted to go) and we had a replacement cassette. Unfortunately this meant we missed the fire at Hemel Heampstead that was to be out first vista point, but never mind.

So we arrive at Portsmouth in plenty of time ready to go. Yes plenty of time for the 5 hour delay on our departure that they had called us about on our now disconnected phone line.

Why you should listen to announcements

Still never mind, we can sit in the caravan. We were third in a queue of a surprisingly large number caravan and motor homes. Despite my reassurance to Debbie that we had plenty of time before the boat sailed, our outfit (I am getting into the terminology of the caravan club) was left sitting dark and obstructive in front of the queue of desperate 'outfits' waiting to board the boat as we returned from a wee in the terminal. We were very popular and they all waved as we approached.

On to our luxury cruise liner then. I must say the cabin was, by ferry terms, excellent. Dead centre, under the bridge, at the front (the bow?). We had a family room about the size of one in Travelodge, from the doors that were open in the cabins we passed on the way, this was massive.

So, on to the evenings entertainment. We were told to meet in the Silverstone bar for a description of the entertainment ahead. Should we wear black tie? we could be meeting the captain to personally apologise for the delay.

We decided on casual attire having not packed anything else. Lucky we did. What greeted us in the Silverstone bar could best be described as the Essex crew that Butlins threw out for drinking them dry and taking binge drinking to new depths.

Some people do this for fun!

Apparently, if you do not have a life, you can book a 'mini-cruise' that involves sailing from Portsmouth to Spain, a FOUR (yes 4) hour excursion on land, and then sail back to Portsmouth for only £52 for two. No wonder these people got drunk if this is their only entertainment. We gave our excuses and wished them a pleasant evenings shouting at passers by and dancing when there was no music.

But wow what a breakfast, I know we said we would get fit and eat healthily (yes Mum, I will) but we had coupons for the best breakfast restaurant on the ship and I had to get my moneys worth. The children and Debbie also enjoyed watching me eat it.

We then went and spent an hour listening to a man tell us how he sits

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on the ship Dolphin and Whale watching ALL day, EVERY trip, for pleasure. Waking up from his talk we felt obliged to go to the observation deck and look out to sea for anything mammal like, even though he told us after the hour was up that this was not the best time of the year for it.

After getting our free glass of champagne each we retired to the observation deck. Not more than two minutes later a cry of 'DOLPHINS!' went out and we were witness to one of nature's spectacular shows, wild Dolphins chasing the ship just for the fun of it, amazing.



Sun Deck

That evening we decided to go up market and Debbie and the children watched from behind a glass screen as Daddy tried to loose all his money playing roulette. Actually, as Daddy had great help from James and Hazel picking the numbers, Daddy came away £10 up.

Given the Silverstone bar clientele had a different agenda to ours we decided to give the 'Posh bar' a try, only to find some of the mini-cruise had washed over there too, time for bed.

Into Spain

We arrived in Spain and immediately cancelled our plans to stay locally as it was cold and get to the sun as soon as possible. On to the Spanish motorways then.

Things were going really well, we were making good time and everyone was happy. Until I overtook a large articulated lorry. A combination of speed, going down hill, wind from the valley and air pressure from the lorry sent our car and caravan into a wobble.

The word wobble does not do the event justice, it was the kind of wobble that was more of a swerving motion that made you realise the colour of adrenalin is brown. The car rocked from side to side and I am sure it almost came off the ground.

Luckily the lorry driver realised we were up a certain creek without a paddle and braked, also there was an exit that meant I did not have to get around the motorway bend and could escape up it. It even woke Hazel who said 'that was fun Dad, lets do it again'. We now never go above 55mph while towing.

A sign of things to come

As we drove over the hills the indicator for frost came on in the car, that's weird I thought. Then there was a white dust on the road, that's not dust its snow!

We arrived in Salamanca which is north east of Madrid in the late afternoon, with 400 miles on the clock and decided after setting up we could visit the town. However, as I was doing my bit outside, I noticed a leak from the bottom of the caravan.



Our washer uppers

Further investigation showed a melted high pressure hot water pipe behind the heater. So I spent the whole night until gone midnight wrapping amalgamated tape around the holes and fixing the shelf that collapsed when I lent over to find the leak, great fun. The next morning we packed away in the frost and ice that the minus 4 Spainish weather gave us. Let's get to Portugal.

Warm weather as last

We drove to Figueira de Foz through the wonderful green fields of Portugal. It looks a little like England, but with sun.

We set up camp in a small site set in a forest. Excellent, we are now set to relax. However, a call to home soon put a stop to that as I found out my Mum was in hospital, she was okay but its still very worrying when you are so far away. Okay then, lets go to the town so I can drown my sorrows with some local wine and get something to eat.



Our Forest Camp

We ended up at Pizza Hut as Debbie is very adventurous. Just as the pizzas were delivered, James commented he did not feel too good. A trip to the toilet, cold white skin and lethargy later and he was in an ambulance to hospital.

The Doctor, who could not speak English called him a fish as he was so cold and pale. Anyway, it turned out to be a non-specific virus that had spread to a nerve that no-one could pronounce in English. They kept him in overnight for observations.

As James stayed in overnight with Debbie, Hazel and I slept in the caravan by ourselves which was quite an adventure for us. The next day we went to the hospital to pick James and Debbie up. While waiting, the nurse told us they have Christmas early in the hospital and a small band was coming. As James was the only child in the ward, the band played just for us and we were introduced to the hospital director and his entourage. As this man walked along the corridor, lights were switched on in front of him and switched off behind. Anyway James and Hazel got presents and we were treated to we wish you a merry Christmas in Portuguese.

When we all got back to the caravan we decided to take thing easy for James' sake. The next day both Hazel and I were ill and I did not get out of bed for 36 hours. As Debbie disinfected everything she touched as well as everywhere she didn't, she managed to (thankfully) avoid getting the virus.

When I next surface, I notice more water leaking from the caravan. The tape has not lasted, I try more. It

does not work. We comb the shops for 'tubo' and find a variety of different things that I try. Even the plumber opened his shop for me. None of them work

So as I said, here I sit in the sun relaxing at last, what will the coming days bring?

Let's go South

A combination of no hot water, no friends for the children and the shade of the trees from the sun made us decide to get to the Algarve for Christmas so we pack up and go.

Although very nice, the campsite was very quiet and unless you could get out of the shade, a little chilly. So the promise of the warmer Algarve made us move even though we had not seen a cloud for 5 days.

About 50km down the road I slam on the brakes. I can't believe it, a caravan and motor home sales and service point. €20 later and I have high pressure pipe (tubo), connectors and gas from a man who had not been to a dentist in a long time. This is REALLY good, no hot water would really have been a pain and I had visions of having to get it all posted from England after the Christmas break. Things are looking up.

After 540km we arrive in Albuferia on the south coast of Portugal. The camp site is expensive but really good. We have now set up the awning now so we have a great deal more space which has really made a difference.



Our little England

We have ALL been for bike rides, played on the beach and Hazel and I sung Bohemian Rhapsody at the Christmas eve Party. It is more cloudy here and it did rain over Christmas but it is never cold. During the day you can wear just T-shirts and at night a light coat is required for those who do not contain any blood (Debbie).

Things are really good now and we are settled in after our trials and tribulations of getting here.

We missed everyone at Christmas but every time the sun comes out it reminds us why we are here.

Gallery



Satellite on the move?



Jump



Sir Ranulph Fiennes (+1)



Christmas Dinner



Our Everest



Santa has been

All our love,

Keith, Debbie, James and Hazel

Did you know?
The expression 'to freeze the balls off a brass monkey' comes from the time when cannon balls were stored on brass trays called monkeys, after the young boys who scampered on all fours fetching the powder. When it was cold, the brass contracted quicker than the iron cannon balls and the stack of balls would collapse.

Thanks!
Many thanks to Brian for servicing the car and making sure it got us here. Julie and Kerry for getting me the ultrasound scan at VERY short notice. John for the gas bottles and drill. Pete and Irene for letting us park in their drive while homeless (get a drive in your new home, we may need it again) and Stephen for the help with James' and Hazel's Kumon.