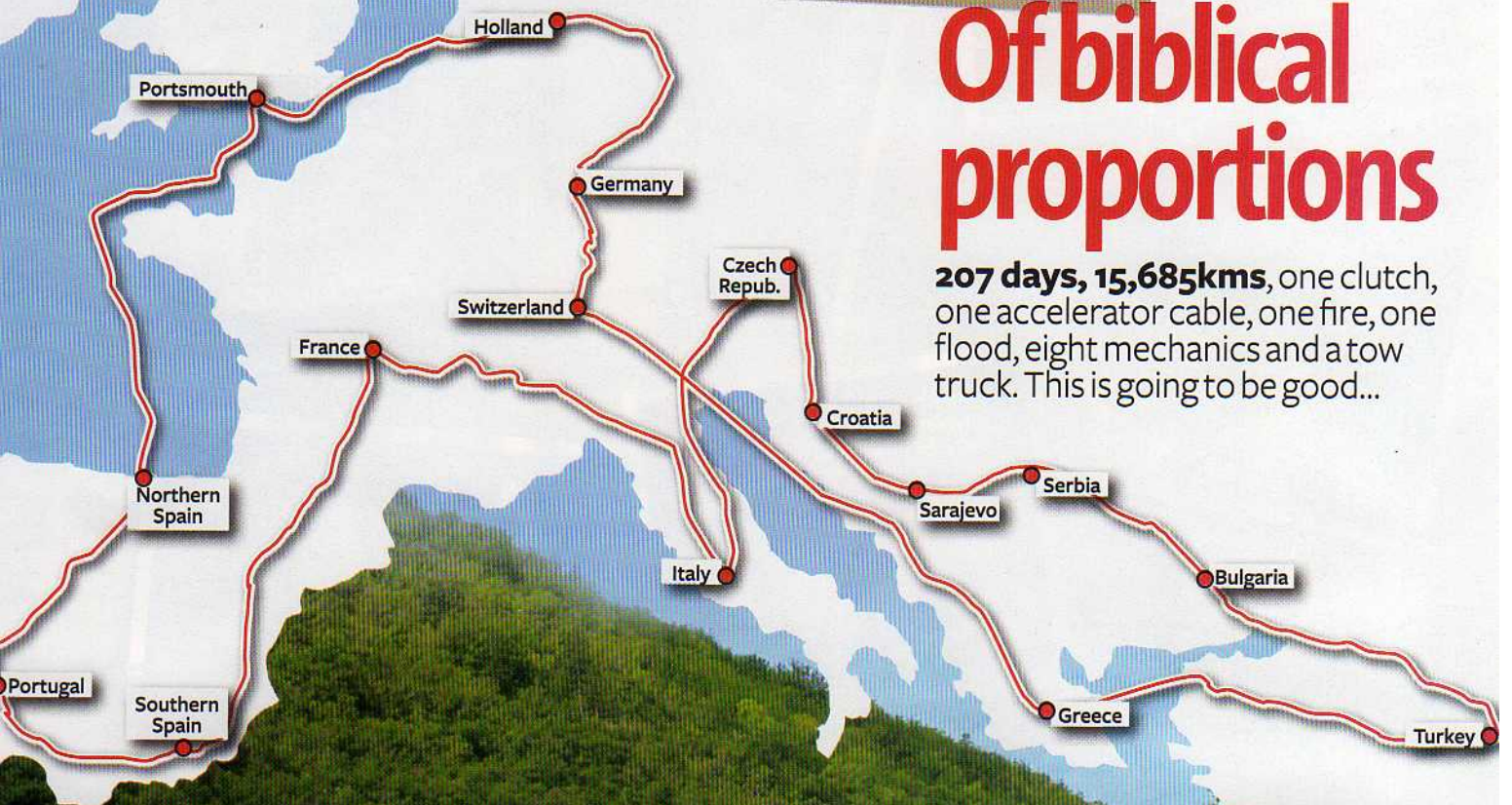


Road trip

part one

Of biblical proportions

207 days, 15,685kms, one clutch, one accelerator cable, one fire, one flood, eight mechanics and a tow truck. This is going to be good...

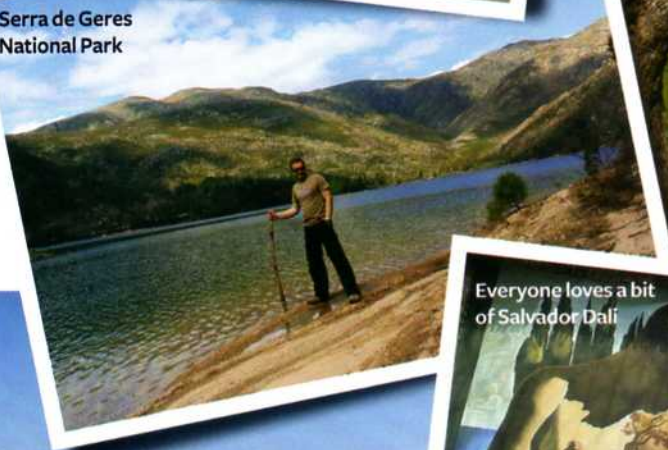


Free campsite overlooking the sea – result!

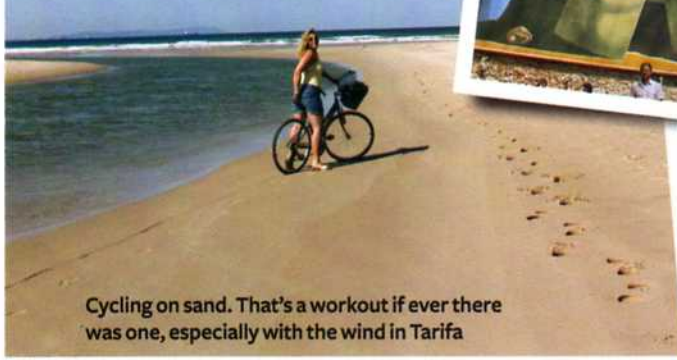


It could be England, but it's Thermas de Azenha in Portugal

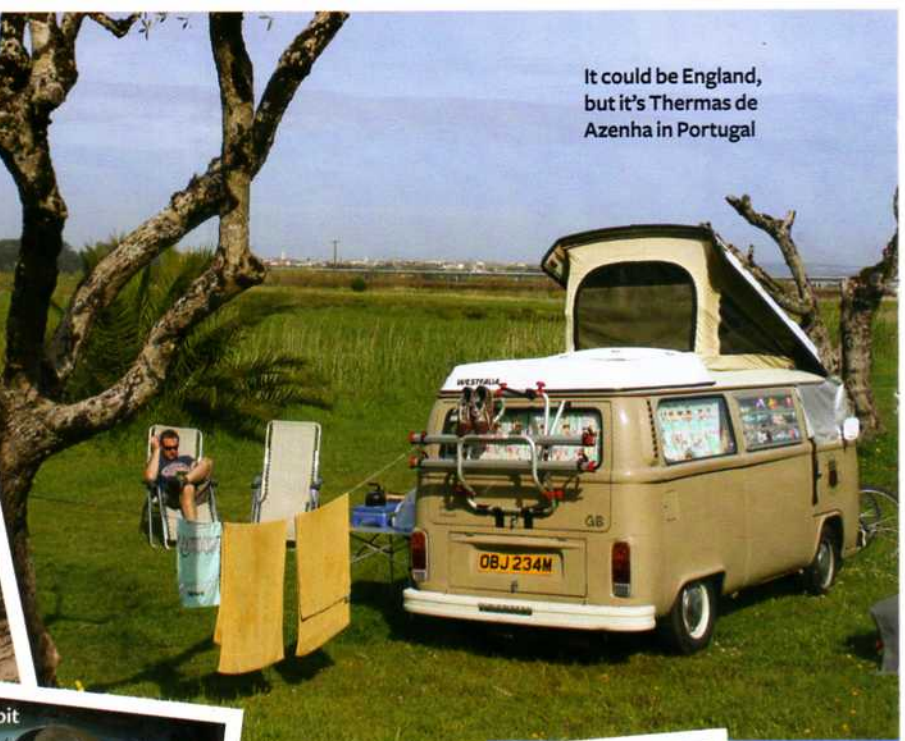
Serra de Geres National Park



Everyone loves a bit of Salvador Dali



Cycling on sand. That's a workout if ever there was one, especially with the wind in Tarifa



The aliens have landed! The Science Park, Valencia

Words and pics Jane and Paul Watling

If you're reading this, you might know what it's like to drive or be a passenger in an unmodified VW Camper. 'Numb bum' is a phrase that springs to mind. It's also possible to completely lose the feeling in your feet as, for the past seven months, we have travelled through 15 countries, three principalities and five islands in our 1972 Westy, Colin, and had the time of our lives!

It didn't take long in the planning. We had just finished the restoration of a house when Paul received a small inheritance from his Aunt Shirley. We decided she would have loved us to spend it on having fun, so we quit our jobs, rented our house and booked a ferry from Portsmouth to Santander, then told our friends and family we were off! I was keen to do the trip without a sat nav, but everyone we spoke to said we would be mad not to have one so, after a little persuasion, I came round to the idea. I trawled charity shops for travel books, while Paul spent a day brushing up on how to service the Camper with Paul Miller (aka Harry Harpics in Southend).

Northern Spain - viva Espana!

We spent the first night of our trip camping next to a multi-storey car park at Portsmouth port. I woke to Paul singing happy birthday to me, then we boarded the ferry for the 24-hour journey to Santander. Paul felt fine but I had seasickness and spent most of the journey trying to sleep, so was very glad to finally reach Spanish soil.

Our first stop was a beautiful village in northern Spain called Santillana del Mar and it was here the first people asked if they

could take photos of us and Colin. This was the start of our new found celebrity status! At first we found the constant beeping, flashing and waving strange, and constantly thought something was wrong with Colin so kept stopping to check, but we became used to it and found it was a great way to meet people.

We travelled some beautiful mountain roads to reach the Picos de Europa National Park and our first night on the road. Here we also had our first problem – so soon! The smell of petrol and rapidly decreasing petrol gauge turned out to be a melted fuel filter. Why did we decide to fit heater control valves? We could never put the heating on anyway as we would have died from the fumes, so Paul ripped it all out there and then and threw it in the bin. We followed the pilgrims' route to Santiago and then got lost in the city, finding out that our sat nav loved city centres – frequently taking us there successfully then leaving us stranded!

Portugal, hola!

A new country and our first border crossing, with nothing more than a welcome sign. We headed up into the mountains again, this time to the Peneda-Gerês national park, which turned



Bamboo rocks!



What a great place to break an accelerator cable!



Airstreams at Belrepayre in the Midi-Pyrénées. The best campsite in the world?



Found at last! The elusive flamingos of The Camargue

out to be one of our most amazing driving experiences of the whole trip – the road getting narrower and narrower, then turning into a goat track. With a sheer drop to the right of us and a Portuguese man waving and telling us to be careful, there was no turning around and poor Colin was cooking. I ended up in tears but, as we reached the top, the views were amazing. It was only then that Paul admitted he should have said no to unpaved roads on the sat nav...

After spending some time walking and cycling up in the mountains, Paul tuned Colin and we moved on, only for disaster to strike while coming back down the mountain. With smoke coming from under the dashboard, it looked like Colin was about to catch fire, so Paul turned off the ignition and we jumped out, clutching our passports and the sat nav. Luckily,

the smoke stopped and it turned out to be burned out ignition wiring, so Paul set about re-wiring it and, a couple of hours later, we had a Camper that starts by a switch, and still does.

On we went to Porto, with poor Colin backfiring after the ordeal. We met some fellow travellers, Australians, here and had some good nights with them but needed to get Colin serviced, though finding a garage that could help wasn't easy. However, at the next campsite we found a wonderful little man willing to help. Helena, the Dutch campsite owner, translated for us but even we knew changing the spark plugs wasn't going to sort the problem out! Still, Colin kept plodding on and we explored Lisbon, went boogie boarding in the south west and then onto the Algarve where we found our saviour, Lorenzo. We were put in touch with him by a guy called Lloyd from Siesta Campers, a company who rent VW campers in the Algarve. He serviced Colin and even changed a couple of parts, all for just 30 euros. He even had a copy of *Camper&Bus* on the side. We were saved! We asked if the Camper could do another 7,000 miles and he just laughed and shrugged his shoulders...

The only bad thing about Portugal was the amount of stray dogs and cats we saw. I will never get over how many I saw dead by the side of the road.

Collioure in France. Somewhere we'd definitely like to live



Southern Spain, siesta!

With Colin feeling like a new Camper we explored Seville, and then went on to windy Tarifa, with literally hundreds of kite surfers. This was the nearest to Africa we would get on our trip, our campsite being only 15kms away.

By this point in the trip we had experienced some great Camper cooking – fresh fish, fruit and veg from roadside stalls. We even grew our own strawberries in the Camper! In fact, the only unhealthy thing about our lifestyle was the amount of wine we were consuming.

From there it was on to Gibraltar, and what a let down that was! We queued for hours to get in, only to find a Morrison's supermarket and the place looking pretty grim. The only good thing about it was cheap fuel, so we filled up and quickly moved on, heading to Ronda and Cordoba, both of which were amazing places. Colin was going well, but was blowing a lot of fuses, particularly whenever Paul indicated. We made sure we had lots of spares, but something wasn't right.

We explored some great places on our way to Valencia but, whilst driving through a lovely national park with 16 small lakes and waterfalls, we came across a road with raised manholes. There was a horrendous noise and Paul and I looked at each other, then at the road behind us, where Colin's anti-roll bar had been ripped off! Paul got out picked it up and threw it in a nearby skip, with the cheery words, 'we'll do without that then!' 🚗

A weir, somewhere in France



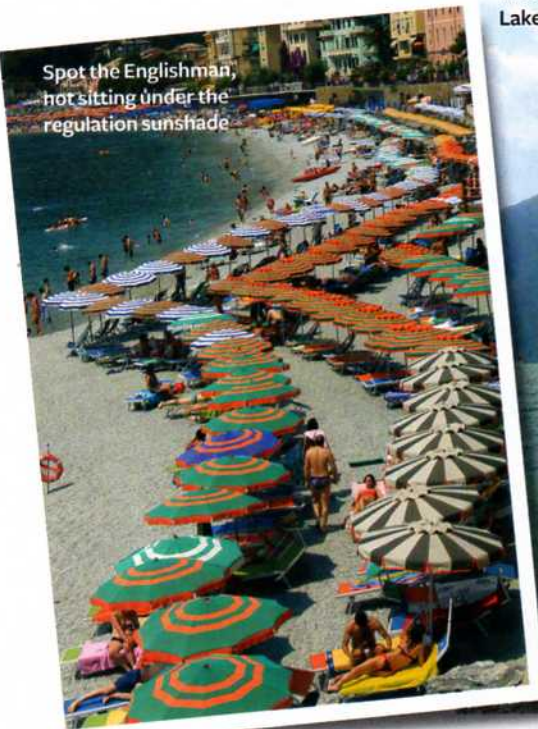
A Bus, an awning and a pop top – like a house without walls



Watersports central –
Lake Garda in Italy



Spot the Englishman,
not sitting under the
regulation sunshade



Colosseum in Rome
has seen better days...



France - viva la Francais!

We loved the Midi-Pyrénées, and Collioure is one of our favourite places in the world. We got to see the Salvador Dali museum in Figueres, then found the best campsite of the whole trip at 'Belrepayre' in the Belène forest. It's a retro campsite with 15 Airstream caravans you can rent, run by an English ex-circus clown and his beautiful French wife.

Heading off one morning up the Rhône valley another disaster, the accelerator cable snapped! Paul wasn't happy as he had just had a shower, but we had a spare so managed to fix it and get back on the road. Our mission was to find the wild flamingos we'd heard about. It became a bit of a standing joke, but we did eventually find some in The Camargue.

At St. Tropez and Cannes we experienced our first really heavy rainfall and thought nothing of it, until our families called to see if we were okay. Turns out we had camped near Fréjus, where almost 20 people had lost their lives in flash floods. We later realised it must have been the rescue helicopters we heard in the night, and we were lucky to be alive.

From there we explored the amazing Gorges du Verdon, taking Colin up to his highest point yet - 1124m - before the crazy sights of Monaco and the end of our French leg of the trip.

Italy - Ciao!

Wow! The landscape changed straight away as we followed the rocky coast through tunnels and over viaducts into Italy. Our friends, Paul and Carissa, were on the way in their Split Screen Camper, Gracie, to get married in Lerici. First we met our best mates JJ, Pippa with their two children, Riley and Annie, off the plane, collected another friend Megan from the station, who stayed in our awning, and Amanda, Ian and their son Harrison. We had a wonderful week of wedding fun and it was great to have our friends there and camp with them.

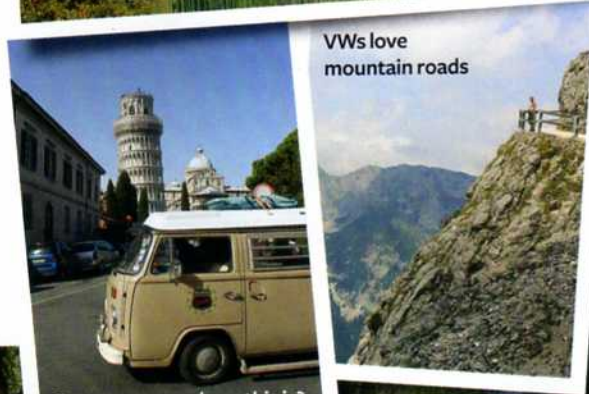
We moved on together with the newly married couple and headed for Milan, where we met up with Nick from VKS VW Parts who put us in touch with the wonderful Roberto who gave Colin another much-needed service. I really believe it was because he did such a good job we managed to get so far!

From here we explored Lake Maggiore and Lake Como before saying goodbye to Paul and Carissa who headed off on their honeymoon to Switzerland. Lake Garda and the Dolomites were fantastic, but whilst coming down the Dolomites the brakes just couldn't cope. With the smell of burning brake dust, we couldn't risk going any further and had to wait for a tow truck. The mechanic who came to help left us with the advice, 'they are mountains, not hills!' Next month, we head for the Balkans... ☹

HOW & WHY LEAVING HOME

There's never a right time to chuck in the towel and take off around the world, but if you don't do it when the opportunity presents itself then you never will. Jane and Paul Watling had been given a little inheritance, so decided to put it to good use. It was an experience they'll never forget

VWs love
mountain roads



Meeting up with
friends and relaxing
is what touring in a
Bus is all about



Can you guess where this is?