

Bella Italia

Camping editor **Iain Duff's** family enjoyed a dream camping trip round Europe. Here's the second half of their Grand Tour, from Lake Garda, through Germany and the Netherlands and back to Britain

Before we visited Italy, I knew roughly four words of Italian: *ciao, grazie, pizza* and another that is definitely not suitable for inclusion in a family magazine. By the end of our stay at Lake Garda my repertoire had expanded to include *gelato, birra* and *pomodoro*... plus a couple more that definitely, definitely, can't be included here.

And that pretty neatly sums up the Italian leg of our European Grand Tour. Ice cream, beer and tomatoes (on pasta and pizza, of course), along with lots of sunshine, swimming and even the occasional bit of culture.

SWITZERLAND TO LAKE GARDA

To recap, I was spending the summer on a camping tour through Europe with my wife and two sons, travelling from Holland through Luxembourg, Switzerland, Italy, Germany and back to the Netherlands. If the first half of our road trip (see the March issue of *Camping*) was all about towering mountains, breathtaking views and white-knuckle

driving, the second part gave us a chance to unwind and chill out.

After an adrenaline-charged crossing of the Swiss Alps, and a chaotic drive on the motorways round Milan, the gentler roads of Lake Garda came as something of a relief. And once we got off the dreary and uninteresting main highway and into the pretty towns and villages on the shores of this vast expanse of water, it was easy to understand why people return to this beautiful part of the world time and time again.

Our home for the next five nights was Camping Eden in San Felice del Benaco, on the south western side of Lake Garda, a popular destination for campers. Part of the Eurocamp Independent network, it was a bustling holiday park with excellent facilities, including a pool, restaurant, mini-supermarket and, best of all, its own private beach on the shores of the lake. The site was on the side of a hill and offered amazing views over the lake, particularly in the evening as the sun set behind the mountains on the opposite shore.

Having mastered the tent pitching in Switzerland, my wife Georgia and I had our Vango Rosewood up in a matter of minutes this time, and with the temperatures soaring into the 90s it was just as well. There wasn't much respite from the afternoon sun, so with everything set up, the four of us took a walk down to the lake. The campsite's slice of lakeside territory includes a grassy hill with trees that provide some shade, a stretch of sandy beach and a wooden jetty. Diving into the cool water on that first sweltering hot afternoon was one of the highlights of the trip.

If the Swiss part of our tour had been a bit of a whirlwind, the plan for Italy was to take it easy. We quickly settled into a daily routine: breakfast; a couple of hours at the lake before the sun got too strong; early lunch back at the tent; another couple of hours at the pool; an afternoon drive (taking advantage of the car's air con, natch) to somewhere not too far away; then, as the sun set and the temperature dropped, back to the site for dinner.

Lake Garda in the sunshine





Magnificent sunset over Lake Garda



The Camping Eden's private beach

There's a good road network around Garda, so exploring the area is simple. Public transport is also worth exploring, with a decent bus service linking the villages and towns dotted along the lakeside. For an unforgettable day out, it's possible to take the train to Venice from Desenzano de Garda. The journey takes less than two hours and isn't too expensive – and if you've never seen Venice before then I'd highly recommend it.

If that seems a little too adventurous, Desenzano itself is a charming lakeside resort with lovely views out over the water, two harbours and two public beaches. A medieval castle overlooks the town and provides panoramic views of the lake, while the narrow, pedestrianised streets in the historic centre are lined with fashionable boutiques, *gelaterias*, cafés, restaurants and bars. The weekly market takes place on the lakefront and there's a real feeling that this is a vibrant Italian community, as well as a tourist attraction.

Desenzano is a place to enjoy the simple things in life, so it fitted perfectly with our plan to relax and unwind – a gentle meander along the esplanade, a stroll round the shops (window

shopping only, it has to be said) and, of course, *gelato* in one of the many smart cafés dotted around town.

For further retail therapy, a couple of miles from the centre of Desenzano is the Il Leone shopping centre, a massive, modern mall filled with stylish shops of every kind. Yes, I know going to a shopping centre on holiday isn't

everyone's idea of a good time, but

if you want some respite from the intense afternoon heat,

this air conditioned retail palace is the place to go.

It also boasts a fantastic supermarket where you can stock up on no end of Italian cooking specialities at a fraction of the price you'd pay at home – or in the lakeside

tourist shops. Ideal for a spot of campsite cooking.

Speaking of food, while

some campsite restaurants can be overpriced or offer uninspiring

fare – and more often than not, both –

the diner at Camping Eden was as good as any local eatery and excellent value for money, so much so that we ate there every evening. The menu offered all sorts of pasta, pizza, salad and meat dishes, so there was never any chance of boredom setting in, and the staff were friendly and efficient. And to top it all, the views out over the lake were spectacular.

NEED TO KNOW

Iain and his family travelled on the DFDS overnight ferry between Newcastle and Amsterdam. Prices for the 15 hour crossing start from £70 per person each way, based on four people travelling in a car with trailer and sharing an inside cabin. The breakfast buffet is £8.75 per person (when pre-booked) and all-you-can eat dinner at Explorer's Kitchen for £19.95 per person (when pre-booked).

For more information visit dfdseaways.co.uk

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

STAY AT CAMPING EDEN

Via Preone, 45, 25010 San Felice del Benaco, Brescia, Italy

+39 0365 62093

campingeden.co.uk

Perched on the side of a hill, just a couple of minutes' walk from its own private beach on the shores of Lake Garda, this is a bustling campsite with excellent facilities and is a superb base for exploring the area. The site features an excellent outdoor pool with slides, a bar, restaurant and takeaway and kids play areas. The mini-supermarket is well-stocked with fresh bread, fruit and veg and barbecue ingredients as well as a selection of beach and camping essentials. The camping pitches are terraced, separated by hedges and offer wonderful lake views.

CAMPINGPLATZ FRIEDRICHSHAFEN-FISCHBACH

Grenzösch 3, 88049 Friedrichshafen, Germany

+49 7541 42059

camping-fischbach.de

Located in a small village just outside Friedrichshafen close to Lake Constance, this site has a sandy beach on the banks of the lake and a playground as well as cycle routes. You can swim in the lake as well as taking part in windsurfing and waterskiing. The site has a snack bar and self-service restaurant and you can buy fresh bread in the morning.

CAMPINGPARK BAD LIEBENZELL

Pforzheimer Str. 34, 75378 Bad Liebenzell, Germany

+49 7052 934060

campingpark-bad-liebenzell.com

Part of the Eurocamp Independent network, this site boasts flat, spacious and grassy pitches with electric hook-up. The campsite has a bar, restaurant and an outdoor terrace for live music. Although there's no shop onsite, there are two supermarkets within walking distance. Next door to the campsite is a large swimming pool complex with a fun pool and a paddling area for young children. Campers are also issued with a card providing free and discounted travel on bus and rail routes in the Black Forest area.

CAMPING KONINGSHOF

Eerste Elsgeesterweg 8, 2231 NW Rijnsburg, Netherlands

+31 71 402 6051

koningshofholland.com

A handily placed campsite to visit nearby Amsterdam and for overnight stops if you're catching the ferry. A family site with excellent facilities, including a beautiful indoor pool complex with waterslide, a modern children's play area, a fishing pond and cycle trails. The camping area has flat and grassy pitches, which are neatly separated by tall hedges, and there is a traditional Dutch tavern which is a popular spot for a meal or drink in the evenings.



NEED TO KNOW

eurocampindependent.co.uk
rac.co.uk

visitgarda.com

bodensee.eu

blackforest-tourism.com

iamsterdam.com

INSPIRATION Continental camping



Pitched up at Camping Eden



Head first into the pool



Camping pitches at Camping Eden



Cheers!

LAKE GARDA ESSENTIALS

GARDALAND

gardaland.it
Italy's most popular amusement park, with more than 30 rides including roller coasters, themed lands and a Sea Life aquarium.

LAKE GARDA CRUISES

navigazionealaghi.it
The best way to explore Lake Garda is by boat and you can either travel from one place to another on board a hydrofoil or catamaran or enjoy a gentle cruise on one of the slower pleasure boats.

ISOLA DEL GARDA

isoladelgarda.com
Take a boat trip to Garda island to visit the majestic Venetian Gothic style villa, still occupied by a family of Italian aristocrats.

LAKE GARDA TO GERMANY

Recharged after five sublime days on Lake Garda, it was time to get back on the road and head north to Germany. On our way into Italy from Switzerland we had crossed the Susten Pass, an exhilarating if somewhat terrifying, mountain road across the Alps. This time the route was a little less scary, with wider roads and fewer hairpin bends. It still had its worrying moments, though, particularly on the huge bridges which allow traffic to creep up the side of the mountains towards the four-mile long, San Bernardino tunnel.

On the descent, it's definitely worth a brief detour from the main A13 at Thuisis to visit the Viamala Schlucht, a gorge that was carved through the 300-metre high cliffs thousands of years ago by glacial ice and the waters of the Rhine. More than 300 stone steps lead you into the depths of the gorge, where a visitors' platform offers stunning views.

Back on the road we whizzed through Switzerland (make sure you have a Swiss motorway pass), Liechtenstein and Austria before arriving in Friedrichshafen, on the banks of Lake Constance, known as Bodensee by the locals. This 63km-long body of water is bordered by Germany, Switzerland and Austria and is a hugely popular summer destination. The lake is ringed by resort towns, with Friedrichshafen the biggest on the German side. It's not the prettiest of towns, but it does have a pleasant waterfront, with bars and restaurants overlooking the lake and a museum dedicated to Zeppelin airships, which are built here.

It's also a good place to base yourself if you want to explore the Bodensee region, with several good campsites scattered around the area. We were only here for one night, but managed to fit in a visit to the ancient town of Meersburg, where we encountered rain for the first time in what felt like months. Having resisted the temptation



By the book



The campsite supermarket and restaurant



Eden's swimming pool



Desenzano del Garda



Viamala gorge

to enhance our wardrobes with lederhosen and dirndl, we instead found a waterfront restaurant and enjoyed a typical southern German meal of *Schweineschnitzel* and *käsespätzle* (pork escalopes and cheese noodles, yum!) washed down with a couple of glasses of the local brew, Rothaus Pils. By now the rain had stopped and we were treated to a spectacular sunset over the lake.

After stocking up on fresh fruit from an incredible roadside vending machine, we set off early the next morning for Bad Liebenzell in the Black Forest, where we were booked into

another Eurocamp Independent site. The superbly appointed site sat in a wooded valley on the banks of the River Nagold, overlooked by a medieval castle. Campers can use the adjoining heated swimming complex, which has a fun pool with rapids, a waterslide and a paddling area for young children. The pitches were flat and grassy and the facilities spotlessly clean. As we found at all our stops, there was a good mixture of nationalities – our pitch was surrounded by campers from Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, as well as from the UK. Of course, pretty much everyone



A spectacular motorway bridge



Crossing into Austria

GEORGIA'S PASTA POMODORO (TOMATO PASTA)



This really simple recipe is a firm favourite with our family and has been made in a tent in a hurricane in January and sheltering from a downpour under an awning in Jersey. I have to say cooking it outdoors in the beautiful Italian sunshine, using fresh ingredients from a local shop may be my favourite venue so far.

Ingredients

5/6 large fresh Italian plum tomatoes
1 tsp oregano
A good jug of Italian olive oil
2 garlic cloves, crushed
A splash of red wine vinegar
1 tsp sugar
Salt and pepper
A lump of Parmigiano-Reggiano

The first thing to tackle is the preparation of your tomatoes. This will very much depend on the amount of kit you have with you. If you have the facility to do so it is best to plunge the tomatoes into boiling water for 30 seconds or so to loosen the skins making them easy to remove. Personally I would then deseed them too but I realise this is a bit of a faff. Indeed, if this seems altogether like too much hard work, a tin of chopped tomatoes is ideal for this recipe but when presented with the beautiful Italian produce on offer it really would be cheating to turn to tins!

Once the tomatoes are prepped (or the tin is opened) add a healthy jug of olive oil to a warm pan. I don't like to have the pan too hot as I'm about to add the garlic and the last thing I want is for the garlic to burn. Once the garlic is in, I also add the oregano to the oil as I think it rehydrates it and gives a more pungent oregano-ey flavour.



When you can smell the garlic cooking it's time to add the tomatoes, swiftly followed by the sugar, seasoning and a splash of vinegar. Then you let it blip away until the tomatoes have softened and turned from a bright red to a much darker shade. If the sauce becomes too thick it can easily be let down with a little of the cooking water from your pasta. Once cooked, add to some freshly cooked pasta of your choice. If you want to bulk it up a bit, fry some Italian sausage on the side, chop it up and add to the mix. Grate fresh Parmigiano-Reggiano on top and enjoy. Buon appetito

INSPIRATION Continental camping

“We had a lot of fun and were returning home with a lifetime of memories.”



View over Bodensee

speaks English, but one of the joys of camping abroad is being able to try out your schoolboy/girl language skills, even if it's limited to a quick “Morgen” on the way to the shower block.

The campsite has a bar and restaurant but, despite a sudden thunderstorm, we decided to take the short walk into the centre of town, with its thermal baths, shops and traditional inns. At the cosy and welcoming *Gasthof sur Sonne* we discovered cola beer, essentially local wheat beer topped up with Coca Cola. Yes, it sounds rank but it's actually delicious. Much to our disappointment, what we *didn't* find was any sign of that 1970s favourite, the Black Forest Gateau.

BLACK FOREST TO AMSTERDAM

Germany's autobahns are revered by some driving enthusiasts and if you want to get from A-to-B as quickly as possible, with the minimum of fuss, they



Overlooking Bodensee



Camping in the Black Forest

certainly fit the bill. But the truth is, thundering along these long, straight motorways can be pretty boring. As we zoomed north from the Black Forest towards the Dutch border, the scenery was fairly humdrum, and we started to long for some Alpine pass-style thrills to break the monotony. Instead we were rewarded with roadworks and torrential downpours, which wasn't exactly what we were looking for.

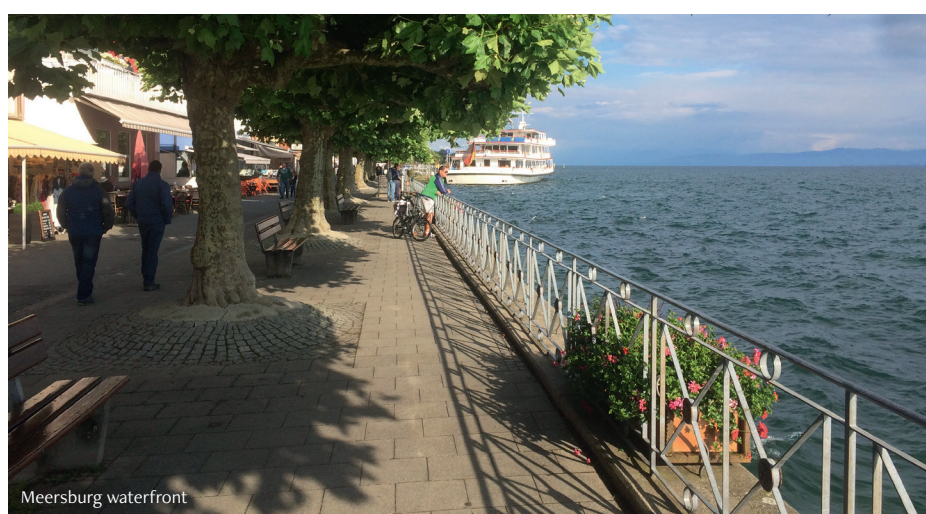
Originally we had planned to spend our final night on the Continent somewhere in northern Germany, before going straight to Amsterdam to catch the ferry home. But a last minute change of plan meant a night in Holland and the chance to



Zeppelin hangar, Friedrichshafen



Rainy Meersburg



Meersburg waterfront



Cola beer

spend the day in the Dutch capital. It was a short visit but we managed to pack a fair bit in. Parking on the outskirts of town, we took an early morning walk along the banks of the Amstel into the city centre, where we had breakfast in a coffee shop (no, not that kind of coffee shop), visited Dam Square and explored the atmospheric lanes that weave their way around the famous canals. Just enough to whet the appetite for a longer visit in the future.

And so that was it. A two-week, 2,000 mile trek round Western Europe, passing through 10 countries. We survived scorching temperatures, a couple of epic thunderstorms, a few grumbly tummies and a couple of Sat Nav-induced squabbles. But above all we'd had a lot of fun and were returning home with a lifetime of memories. And that was the whole point. All that was left now was the all-you-can-eat buffet on the homeward ferry. What a way to finish a grand tour.



Dam Square



Exploring Amsterdam on foot