

Orion adventure

Winter sun, snowboarding, a spa, and kitesurfing. There's only one way to combine four holidays, and that's with a caravan **WORDS AND PICTURES** Andrew Ditton



Andrew hits the slopes with his snowboard

Camper vans are great fun, but they are expensive and sometimes cramped. What about if you could create an affordable tourer with all the convenience, space, and home comforts of a caravan, yet keep it light enough, small enough, and agile enough to tow with a family car like a Focus or a Golf? Bailey Caravans made it its mission to produce such a caravan, hence, the Orion was born. To put the concept to the test, we decided to experience four kinds of holiday in seven days. We booked a Skoda Superb for the job and started to plan.

Everything fell into place. Sites and ferry were efficiently booked by the Caravan Club Travel Service. Our pre-production Bailey Orion was winging its way to us under cover of darkness. Photographer, co-pilot, and old school chum Steve had arrived from the USA. We were all set.

Unfortunately, the Skoda arrived late. As if to demonstrate the flexibility of a caravan holiday, the Caravan Club rebooked

everything with one quick phone call. Four hours was all it took to pack, zoom to Halfords for snowchains and Continental driving necessities, and board P&O's Pride of Canterbury bound for Calais. Phew! Never have I enjoyed a meal as much as I did my lovely late lunch in Langan's Brasserie on board.

As the ship pulled in to harbour at 6pm, our destination of Sazos in the Pyrenees seemed to be an awfully long way away. The intention was to save money and use the toll-free National Roads, but that only lasted about 30km to Boulogne-sur-Mer where I treated the town's good citizens to a sneak preview of the Bailey Orion cruising down the Rue Principale whilst cursing the signage and wondering which town name to follow. Note to self: French roads can be dark and confusing at night.

Ten minutes later I gave up on the free roads and was knocking down the miles and stacking up my credit card bill by using the péage (toll motorway). Everything



Vilanova Park is an idyllic spot for some winter sun

Four holidays over four weeks: holiday cost breakdown

Caravanning holidays give you more for your money, and the longer you stay, the cheaper the holiday.

Camping Vilanova, for example, offers 21 nights for the price of 14 during the winter, which works out to about £100 per week per couple. This makes for a saving of more than

£2000 over taking the same four holidays without a caravan, and there are no nights spent on the airport floor!

We've costed out four holidays over four weeks using the same itinerary as Andrew, so you can see how much you can save when you take your caravan.

Caravan holiday costs

Ferry	£125
Fuel	£600
Tolls	£200
Campsites	£575
Grand total	per couple £1500

Non-caravan holiday costs

Cheap week in the sun	per couple £1000
A week's skiing	£1400
Weekend spa break	£400
Weekend in Barcelona	£800
Grand total	per couple £3600

BAILEY ORION 430/4

Price	£12,995
MTPLM	1247kg
MIRO	1100kg
External length	6.39m
Width	2.19m



The Orion made short work of the Spanish roads

Barcelona factfile



Barcelona offers culture galore

Chic and cosmopolitan, the Catalan capital exudes style and affluence. Culture vultures will be in seventh heaven admiring the weird and whacky Gaudí architecture in the city that Picasso regarded as his home town. A pleasant vibe permeates and it is a charming place to discover at your own pace, be it on foot, bicycle, or soaking up the ambience from a pavement café.

The campsite is 40 minutes away, but transport links to Barcelona are simple and superb. A direct bus runs from the campsite gates into the heart of the city, or for a more frequent service take the local bus to the railway station, and hop on a train. Further practical guidance is available from the wonderful people at Vilanova Park's reception.

Free maps of the city are available from the campsite, but a decent guidebook is a wise buy.

BARCELONA HIGHLIGHTS

Rambling up the Ramblas

A great way to start your visit to the city is to promenade up or down the Ramblas, a vibrant pedestrian boulevard crammed with chic cafes and street entertainment.

Gaudí architecture

Seek out the Sagrada Família, Gaudí's magnificent cathedral still under construction, and La Pedrera apartment building.

La Boqueria

Even if you don't need any of the fresh produce on offer, it is worth visiting this bustling and colourful market hall to admire the lavish displays and discover new culinary experiences.

The harbour

Head to the harbour for a cooling drink and take a ride in the iconic cable car.

Tapas

Back in Vilanova i la Geltrú, home town of the campsite, is the best tapas bar ever: El Giralddillo. Ask the campsite staff to direct you; they all go there themselves.



Vilanova Park offered a really friendly welcome

seemed to be fine until the motorway spat us out into a suburb of Paris and some dramatic roadworks. Undeterred, the super Skoda and the unshakeable Orion cruised their way around the Périphérique until, somehow, we reached the safety of that region of France known as 'The Other Side of Paris'.

From Paris the straightforward journey was punctuated by frequent stops to have my credit card abused by péage machines, my laughable inability to obtain a decent cheese baguette, bucketloads of French coffee, and far too many fresh melt-in-the-mouth pastries. Twenty-eight hours after disembarking from the ferry (including a good night's sleep in the Orion), a couple of very wobbly Brits arrived at Camping Pyrénévasion, sparked up the Whale heater, collapsed into bed, and slipped into sleep.

Hit the slopes

Nothing could prepare us for the sight that greeted us as we blearily raised the blinds the following morning. Majestic, awe-inspiring, snow-capped mountains towered above the site defying us to find superlatives that would do them justice. It was the kind of view you could sit and admire for days.

Suitably breakfasted on fresh baguette delivered personally by the site owner, it was time to hit the mountains and enjoy the little-known ski resort of Luz Ardiden, about

eight kilometres from the site. There was some fantastic snowboarding to be had. Come lunchtime, my consistent ability to ask for a simple cheese sandwich and receive a very Gallic 'non' in response became legend. It can be tough being a vegetarian outside the UK, but not if you have a caravan with you! Snowboarding was therefore rounded off with a hot cup of tea and buttered malt loaf in the Orion.

Normally, you would spend at least a week in such a beautiful area enjoying all the winter sports on offer as well as taking in the nearby city of Lourdes. But we had a point to prove and a tight agenda. Next stop, Barcelona.

Despite the fact that the Orion has a spacious lounge, fixed bed, and an end washroom, it remains eminently towable. Therefore we suffered no reservations about going over, not around, the Pyrenees into Spain. Our reward was a magical mountainous journey packed with spectacularly stunning scenery. Come lunchtime we simply pulled over, drank in the view, sparked up the oven, and baked some rolls. They went down a storm with the stinky French cheese purchased the day before. At last, I got my cheese sandwich. Thank you Bailey.

Vilanova Park campsite, to the south of Barcelona, is possibly one of the largest and most organised campsites you will ever encounter. But don't think that its size



Pyrénévasion was very close to the ski slopes

makes it impersonal. Lydia, the warm and friendly receptionist, gave us a hearty welcome even at 9pm, and provided some top tips about what to do in the area.

Sunny side up

As Britain shivered under a blanket of snow, Barcelona basked under a warm sun. Caravanners were taking morning coffee outside their vans, soaking up the rays as their troubles melted away. To further encourage relaxation, Vilanova Park offers swimming pools, a fitness room, exercise classes, aqua-robics, golf, and tennis. A spa break indeed!

But it would be a shame not to take in the cosmopolitan city of Barcelona. Besides, having now dispatched Steve to enjoy the rest of his European trip, it was time to meet my friend Tracy in town who was accompanying me on the way home.

There's a gorgeous beach near Vilanova Park. But for us there was no time to bask in the sun, despite wanting to spend a fortnight here. Needing wind in my kite I hooked the Orion to the Skoda and off we went to Leucate in South East France. Enjoying the combination of the Tramontane wind and an enormous lagoon, Leucate has made a name for itself as a kitesurfing and windsurfing paradise. However, the Tramontane wasn't playing when we arrived. Barely a breeze rippled the surface of the water, but we found somewhere suitably scenic to park up the Orion and enjoy a leisurely lunch while we waited, in vain, for the wind to kick in.

Homeward bound

Twenty-four hours after leaving Leucate, including an overnight stop in Lyon, we were tucking in to supper aboard the P&O

OUR THANKS TO

Caravan Club Travel Service for making all our bookings and taking care of our breakdown insurance: caravanclub.co.uk

Skoda for the loan of the superb Superb: skoda.co.uk

Halfords for snowchains and continental travel necessities: halfords.com

P&O Ferries for their legendary hospitality: poferies.com

Pride of Calais en route to Dover. We left Barcelona on the Monday morning and arrived in the UK Tuesday evening. Those who were trying to fly to the UK during that time, when all major airports were closed with the snow, endured a far longer and less enjoyable journey than us.

Not only had we proved that caravanners can have as much fun as motor caravanners, but unwittingly we had done so at a time when the convenience and flexibility of a touring holiday could be seen in sharp contrast to the stress and hassle of trying to fly somewhere. With a Bailey Orion in tow, you always have your kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom with you wherever you are. No luggage restrictions, no timetables, and no stress. Caravanners do it with fun, flexibility, dignity, and with freedom. And, no matter where you are, you can make a cheese sandwich whenever you like.

- For a full review on the Orion, see the April 2011 issue of *Caravan* magazine.
- Orion microsite: baileyorion.co.uk
- See the video of Andrew's trip at youtube.com/andrewjdittton

Top campsites

STOPOVER SITES

Camping Hortus Le Jardin de Sully

1 Route de St Benoit, 45600 Sully/Saint Pere sur Loire, France

T 0033 238 36 35 94

W hortus-sully.com

WHY VISIT? To the East of Orleans, this beautiful campsite sits right on the bank of the River Loire. There's a gorgeous chateau nearby to discover. You'll probably want to stay longer than one night. Bookable through the Caravan Club.

Camping Indigo Lyon

Allée du Camping, Porte de Lyon, 69570 Dardilly, France

T 0033 478 35 64 55

W camping-indigo.com

WHY VISIT? Just off the motorway to the north of Lyon, this relaxed site makes an ideal place to stop for the night. Payback for its convenient location is the distant rumble of traffic noise. Arrivals up to 11pm, and a warm welcome.

WINTER SPORTS SITES

Camping Pyrénévasion

Route de Luz Ardiden, Sazos, 65120 Luz St Sauveur, France

T 0033 562 92 91 54

W campingpyrenevasion.com

WHY VISIT? Family-run campsite in the heart of the French Pyrénées. Ski area is an eight kilometre drive away up the mountain. Absolutely stunning location. Book through Caravan Club.

Camping Le Versoyen

73700 Bourg St Maurice, France

T 0033 479 07 03 45

W leversoyen.com

WHY VISIT? Very popular campsite due to its super-convenient location. The funicular to the massive Les Arcs (Paradiski) ski area is a mere five minute walk away, as is the town of Bourg St Maurice. There's a supermarket across the road.

WINTER SUN SITES

Camping Vilanova Park (Barcelona)

Apartado 64, Ctra Arbroç, Km 2,5, 08800 Vilanova i la Geltrú, Spain

T 0034 938 93 34 02

W vilanovapark.com

WHY VISIT? All-singing all-dancing first-class campsite with every facility, from a fitness room and swimming pool to a supermarket that bakes bread. Bookable through the Caravan Club, but beware, some pitches are compact.

Camping La Manga

Autovia de la Manga, Salida 11, 30370 La Manga Del Mar Menor, Spain

T 0034 968 56 30 14

W campinglamanga.es

WHY VISIT? A favourite with winter sun-seekers from the UK and the Netherlands, this huge but very friendly site enjoys a beachside location. Book through the Caravan Club, its larger pitches and long-stay discounts prove very popular.