

sun, sea, sand...

...eventually. But first our Merc Surrey left the Editor stranded in the middle of France

BLUE skies from dawn till dusk. The calm, warm waters of the Mediterranean. A shady pitch just a couple of minutes' walk from the sand. Temperatures of around 30 degrees every day. St Tropez clearly in view across the bay and the picturesque village of Port Grimaud a short stroll away. It was as perfect as it looked in the brochure and on the website. And the Auto-Sleeper Surrey again provided comfortable accommodation with a good shower, spacious lounge, comprehensive kitchen and a near instant single bed for your Editor, plus an overcab den for little Ariane - 'I'm two-and-a-half' - and her collection of teddy bears. Fabulous.

It started off so well, too. We'd managed to get everything we wanted for two weeks for one and a half people on board the Auto-Sleeper, despite the lack of a big fixed bed type locker. That skirt

hatch really is amazingly commodious and we stuffed the top lockers full of clothes, while not even beginning to fill the kitchen cupboards. My big lounge had to stand behind the passenger seat but apart from that the only compromise was washroom stowage - towels and toilet rolls simply have to go elsewhere.

P&O had whisked us across the Channel in their usual comfortable and efficient style and we reached Champagne country right on cue for a first night stop at the canal side aire at Mareuil-sur-Ay (as recommended by Michael Le Caplain in our August issue). It was the perfect start to a much-needed holiday, with the Mercedes Sprinter proving an effortless companion with the air-con set to chill, the cruise control holding a steady 70mph, and my trusty Pioneer sat nav counting down the miles. A long way to go but this seemed easy.

PRICE FROM £55,795

PRICE AS TESTED
£59,345

EXTRAS Anniversary Pack Option 2 (automatic gearbox, alloy wheels, cruise control, cab air-con), bike rack

ON TEST SINCE
5 March 2010

MILES SO FAR 7270

MPG ON THIS TRIP 20.5

BEST MPG 22.6

WORST MPG 18.9

FAULTS Intercooler hose failed in France resulting in four days of holiday lost, plastic end-caps on bed frame keep falling off, TV won't let us have our DVD back, passenger's door blind rattling after screw fell out

LATEST TRIP

The Editor went to the South of France for his summer holiday, then Michael Le Caplain took the Surrey to Scotland for our Essential Guide series



Words & Pictures | Peter Vaughan

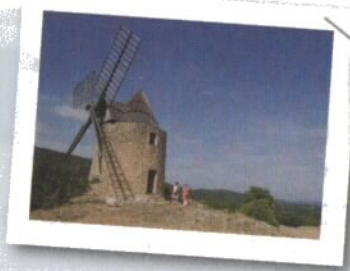


It's a pity that this experience marred my impressions of the surrey, which builds its appeal on that expensive merc base

site in the sun

Prairies de la Mer is idyllically situated right on the beach at Port Grimaud. It has themed toilet blocks – our favourite being the Egyptian one, complete with sphinxes – that almost made me think we were back at Disneyland, plus three restaurants and two supermarkets. There are static caravans and chalets on site too, and in July the beach was very busy, but the setting is just unbeatable and almost worth the 50-odd euros a night cost. With the Med just 100 metres from our shady pitch, no roads to cross and predictable weather we just stayed put for the duration, only moving the 'van to empty the soon-filled waste water tank.

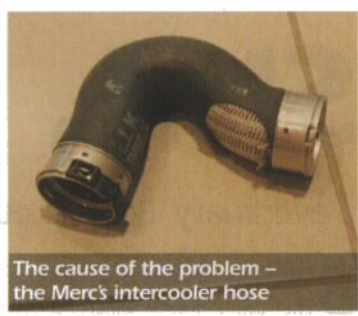
We did take the 'petit train' to the village of Grimaud with its ruined castle and working windmill (above right), as well as walking in to Port Grimaud (below right), which is a sort of 1960s Venice with beautiful holiday homes and restaurants surrounding the canals. But here you don't take out a mortgage for a gondola but instead hire a self-drive electric boat for 20 euros. More serious watercraft can be found in the harbour at St Tropez (left), which is just a short ferry ride from Port Grimaud.



Finding a beachside campsite on the Côte d'Azur was surprisingly difficult. Neither the Caravan Club nor Eurocamp Independent had a site in the right region with direct beach access, so we cast our search a wider. We liked the look of Agay Soleil but this small site was already fully booked, as long ago as February! Then we found a lovely looking site called Camping Caravanning Le Pansard at La Londe les Maures but found this was seemingly impossible to book from the UK! It is listed by Alan Rogers but they have no links to book it either, suggesting a nearby campsite called Beau Veze instead, though this isn't on the beach. Alan Rogers' Campsite Director said he had heard good reports of Camp du Domaine at Le Lavandou but Les Prairies de la Mer won the day for its superb position.



- FOR**
- AUTOMATIC AND CRUISE CONTROL
 - L-SHAPED SETTEE
 - GOOD SHOWER
 - KITCHEN WITH FULL COOKER AND MICROWAVE
 - SURPRISINGLY CAPACIOUS SKIRT LOCKER
 - INTEGRATED AWNING
- AGAINST**
- IT BROKE DOWN AND PARTS TOOK AN AGE TO ARRIVE
 - BED BASE END CAPS KEEP FALLING OFF
 - RATTLY CAB BLINDS
 - SMALL WATER TANKS
 - WASHROOM NEEDS A WINDOW
 - DATED FABRICS



The cause of the problem – the Merc's intercooler hose

And so it was until we found the Surrey was suddenly flat out at 45mph. Pulling off the Autoroute, so as not to be restricted to using the motorway's own costly breakdown services, we quickly had a local 'garagiste' diagnose a failed intercooler hose and tell us where the nearest Mercedes dealer was located. As it was described as a 15-minute job, we thought we'd soon be back on track. What we didn't know – and were incredulous to hear – was that the relevant part did not, apparently, exist anywhere in France or Germany! Quoted time to get a simple hose? Perhaps three days, possibly seven!

Cutting a long story short, we then had to hire a car and book a hotel (after one worrying night on a noisy industrial estate in our broken 'van' while we waited for the repairs to be carried out, eventually escaping to Disneyland Paris in a rented-at-great-expense Renault Laguna to keep daughter Ariane amused. We had to keep constantly chasing Mercedes-Benz Assistance for updates by phone but finally got the Surrey back on the fourth day – not long after I'd got stropky on the phone the part arrived at the dealer by taxi, which they said they'd never experienced before! More worryingly, they had experienced a similar hose failure on a vehicle with just 1500km recorded. I was just pleased to be back on the road and can report that M-B UK say I should have been offered a replacement vehicle under their Mobilo assistance programme. More importantly, perhaps, their attention to my complaint has been first-class and a full refund of my out-of-pocket expenses has

SITES BY THE BEACH

Agay Soleil
Agay, nr St Raphaël
www.agay-soleil.com

Camp du Domaine
Bormes-les-Mimosas,
Le Lavandou
www.campdudomaine.com

Camping Caravanning Le Pansard
La Londe les Maures, nr Toulon
www.camping-pansard.com

Les Prairies de la Mer
Port Grimaud, nr St Tropez
www.riviera-villages.com

TEST ROUTE

➔ We headed down to the Med by Autoroute, taking the Calais, Reims, Dijon, Lyons, Aix-en-Provence route recommended by the sat-nav – around 726 miles, without deviations for overnight stops. Coming back we headed for the mountains, stopping at the stunning Lac de Sainte Croix for lunch before taking photos of the lavender fields and heading north towards Grenoble. The steep climb out of the town of Gap is a work-out for your engine, while the citadel at Sisteron is worth a stop. Our penultimate night was at the wine town of Beaune (in Burgundy) – the aire is a short walk from the centre.



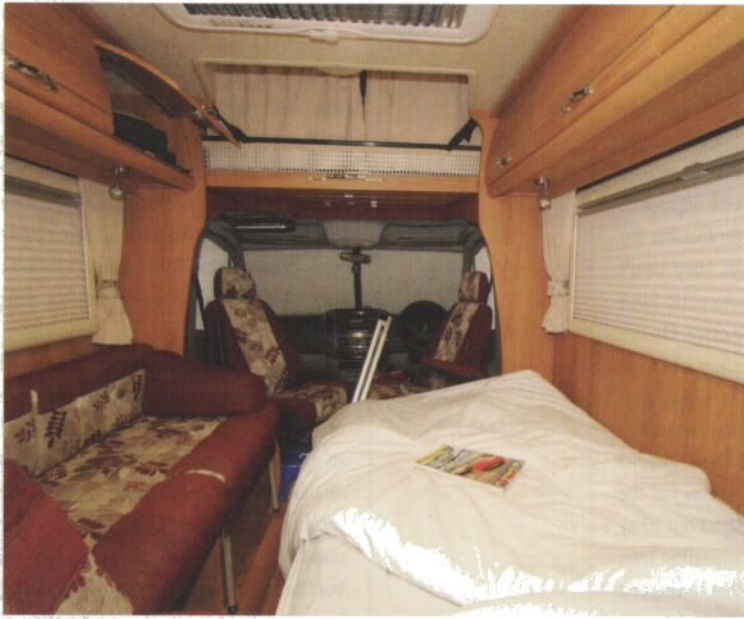
Free overnight stops like the aire at Mareuil-sur-Ay in the Champagne region seriously cut the cost of touring in France.

1st stop



It was all going so well until our Merc spent Tuesday 'til Friday waiting for a simple part at a large franchised dealership.

2nd stop



Keeping down the cost



Using the French motorway network is expensive, with our first day's hop from Calais to Laon costing a faintly ridiculous 31 euros. No wonder the Autoroutes are so quiet! We spent 122 euros to get to the Med and a further 96 euros on the return trip, taking long stints off the motorway.

If you can avoid filling up at motorway services that will save you as much as not using the motorways. A litre of diesel is typically 1.28 euros on the Autoroutes, but we paid as little as 1.14 at supermarkets, saving nearly a tenner on every tankfull. Be careful of the heights of fuel station canopies – some are unsigned and lower than the 3-metre-plus of the Surrey!

You can cut costs by staying on aires too. Due to regular stories of robberies, we would never recommend overnighting at motorway services, even though some (like the one we stopped at south of Mâcon) have so much space they've even included a mini-campsite. But aires in rural areas are a different matter.

We stopped at the aires at Mareuil-sur-Ay (south of Reims) and Tournon-sur-Rhône on the way down, with nights at Corps (near Grenoble), Beaune (Burgundy) and Mareuil (again) on the way back. Total cost for overnight stops? Rien. Nothing. Zilch. Compared with £20-a-night campsites that paid for more than half of the toll roads!



On the way back we stopped in the pretty mountain village of Corps. The seven-course dinner at the Hôtel de la Poste was truly epic.

3rd stop



Beaune's aire isn't scenic but it is just a short walk from the town, which you can get a flavour of on the Visio Train sightseeing tour.

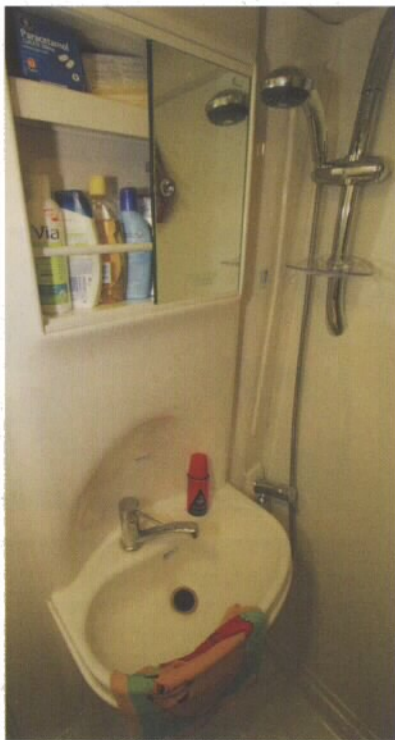
4th stop



Final stop was the beautiful town of Arras, just a short distance from the Autoroute and a wonderful break for the driver.

5th stop





been promised – though four weeks later it has yet to arrive.

It's such a pity that this experience marred not only the trip but my impressions of the Surrey, which builds so much of its appeal on that expensive Merc base. The cab seats (with adjustable lumbar support) are very comfortable for really long hauls (although they don't look that special) and in automatic form this is such an easy vehicle to drive. On site too, I loved the built-in awning, and with both cab seats swivelled the living area feels huge. And it's comfy too, especially nestled into the corner of the L-shaped settee. I'd have liked a flyscreen for the habitation door to keep mozzies out (they found my ankles a rather appealing hors d'oeuvres!), but apart from that the biggest issue of taking the Surrey to the sun was the lack of a window in the washroom – with just a small roof vent to open it gets like a sauna in there!

Still, our Merc returns to Marquis with over 7000 miles on the clock and a mixed final opinion. Those bed frame end caps that keep dropping off do not inspire confidence in the build-quality, though it's really just a nuisance and doesn't impair usage. The cab blinds have been a source of repeat rattles, while the chrome-effect trim strips on the locker doors that don't line up accurately adversely effect your first impressions.

Despite all that, the Surrey has a good deal to recommend it, but we would like to see it modernised with some more up-to-date half-leather trim and perhaps less of the dark wood panelling to make the interior feel lighter. It needs bigger water tanks too, and better washroom storage, but the Surrey's target buyer will no doubt be most influenced by the combination of those two long-revered names – Mercedes-Benz and Auto-Sleepers. Question is, is that enough to tempt you?

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