

First-timer's guide to:

Camping villages

Expert **Andrew Day** makes his pitch for these family-friendly European holiday homes

I'm not sure they're for me...

Hear the words 'camping village' and you might be tempted to run for the nearest hotel. But it's not all dreary British caravan parks — kitted-up holiday villages in Europe are perfect for families seeking an old-school stay with activities on tap, featuring swimming-pool complexes, adventure playgrounds, swanky spas and good restaurants. Plus, with prime locations — in wooded Italian valleys in the Dolomites, say, or by the sea near Saint-Tropez — they provide a cheap ticket to the continent's top beauty spots.

How can I spot a good one?

The key is to review each village's features online before booking: what activities are included? Is there a well-stocked shop for supplies? North of Royan, on France's Atlantic coast, Bonne Anse Plage is ideal for families, with a free kids' club and pool complex (siblu.

fr/camping-bonne-anse-plage; seven nights in a mobile home from £296 for four). Couples should try Camping Vidor in the Dolomites. It's big — 150 pitches — but has woodland nooks for solitude, plus a wellness centre, cinema and pizzeria (campingvidor.it; pitches £8pp). Other top spots include the Algarve's Turiscampo (turiscampo.com; pitches from £16 for two), which thrills tweens with its lagoon; and, up the coast from the Hague, Duinrell (pictured; duinrell.com; family pitches from £34), which has an on-site amusement park.

Anything more upmarket?

Cala Llevado, on the Costa Brava, has luxury chalets with comfy beds, a kitchen, en-suite bathroom and outdoor space for alfresco meals (calallevado.com; seven nights in August from £958 for four). And it blows the competition away on price. A poky room in a nearby three-star hotel costs £1,769 a week in

did you know?

Gents, be warned: loose-fitting trunks are often forbidden in French campsite swimming pools. Don't forget to pack some Speedos!

August — £811 dearer. If you *have* to have that beachfront bungalow, gather a crowd: there's less demand for large units, so they work out cheaper per person. Try Kon Tiki Riviera Village (riviera-villages.com; seven nights from £559 for six), with tiki-style cabins lined up a beach near Saint-Tropez. Guests love this place particularly for the power showers and shaded verandas.

So, how do I book?

UK-based operators make it easy: arranging ferry travel, providing on-site reps and laying on English-speaking children's clubs. They don't actually run the campsites; instead, they own an allocation of pitches with pre-erected tents or mobile homes. Many operators sell the same villages, but rates vary, so shop around. Al Fresco Holidays (alfresco-holidays.com), Eurocamp (eurocamp.co.uk) and Canvas Holidays (canvasholidays.co.uk) are the big players, with locations throughout Europe. There are good European operators, too: Siblu (siblu.com) owns more than 20 villages in France and the Netherlands; Human Travel (humantravel.com) specialises in Italy; or try Yelloh! Village (yellohvillage.co.uk) or Firefly Holidays (fireflyholidays.co.uk). Book at least three months in advance for the best prices and choice of sites.

I'd prefer to go direct...

You can save up to 30% by booking directly with the village, but there are a few things to consider. You'll need to clean the unit thoroughly before checking out, or pay a steep fee — this can be up to £126 (UK operators are more lenient, but you'll still need to pay a refundable deposit, usually £42). Book direct and you may find your arrival-date options limited, as some villages only allow weekend check-ins; operators tend to be more flexible. Also, ferry prices are higher when booked independently and you won't get access to that kids' club run by the UK operator, but most sites, such as Croatia's Camping Village Simuni (camping-simuni.hr/en; from £2pp), have their own 'continental' entertainment, eg, toddlers' talent shows.

That said, direct bookings are valued by camping villages because they don't have to give a cut to an operator. Once you've found your site, call to see if they'll upgrade your accommodation or throw in an extra night's stay if you book direct. Chances are, they'll say yes. ■

