

Continental

How to survive a family road trip...

Last summer, we decided to drive to Italy through France. The year before we had parked our car at the airport, flown to Italy and used a hired car. We didn't have problems, but Michael had to adjust to a strange car with driving seat on the left and we (unnecessarily) worried about the car seat's condition.

The planning of our motoring holiday took a few days. We pored over travel guides and chose the stops. Michael bought a satellite navigator and we got a road map of Europe just in case. He also bought a GB disk (we haven't got a European plate) and some headlamp converters (for info, visit <http://driving.drive-alive.co.uk/driving-in-france.htm>).

We booked all the hotels online (www.booking.com offers discounts) and got an early morning slot for



the Eurostar train. The ferry is cheaper, but the journey is around two hours.

We left Rugby on 20 August at 1.30am with Michela sleeping in the car seat. She woke up before we got to the Eurostar terminal, so we played a nursery rhymes CD – great to calm down a bored or grumpy toddler. Then we had a singalong – another good tactic. At the terminal we realised we had an overfriendly child with a penchant for strangers. Luckily, we had the reins. We didn't take the pram

as we had a child backpack and travelling cot on top of heaps of luggage, but it was a bad move as we couldn't get her to sleep while outdoors.

The Eurostar train was very comfortable, not claustrophobic at all. We arrived on the other side in around half an hour and took the motorway towards Reims. **French and Italian motorways** are not free, but they saved us eight hours each way.

Reims was better than expected for a convenience stop, except for the pricey

drift

hotels. The town suffered devastation in both World Wars but there are several old buildings left. We only had the afternoon to sightsee so we boarded a train in front of the cathedral (a tour of the landmarks) then revisited the best spots on foot. We had dinner in our room as we were shattered.

We were back in the car in the morning. We stopped at an Autogrill (a chain offering cheap but lovely grub and good baby facilities – pick up its free road map). Michela was too young for its child menus, so we bought food in shops and fed her in the car. She loved dried fruit, cereal bars, sliced ham, French bread...

We reached Dijon in the afternoon and walked around the town centre. I recommend the Ibis hotel at the Centre Clemenceau. Its refurbished double

rooms are modern and only cost 55 euros.

Dijon is beautiful and walkable. There is also a frequent, free bus stopping at the sights, with departure from Place de la Republique.

It's renown for mustard and the cassis liqueur, so get some of both. The high street, Rue de la Liberte', is full of interesting shops. I recommend La Maison de Pain, near Les Jardins Darcy, for cheap but delicious breakfasts/lunches.

In Dijon we had our first restaurant dinner with Michela. The restaurant had no highchair so we tied her to a chair with the harness of the child backpack. I regretted not



buying a portable seat as the experience was repeated in most restaurants.

At midday we reached the Alps. The view was breathtaking - the motorway runs at the mountains' feet. We drove to Italy through the Frejus.

We reached my parents' village, south of Turin, in the evening. It was very hot, hotter than in

France. We

loved ▶



it, but Michela suffered the heat.

Our Italian stay was relaxed - I met childhood friends and showed Michela off to relatives. We left on the 1 September. First stop was **Lyon**. In the afternoon, we walked around the old town centre.

The buildings are ornate and the cobbled streets are quirky.

The next morning we were back on the road. We stopped at **Troyes**, a medieval town in the Champagne region. Its narrow streets are picturesque and there are many interesting museums. The covered market by Rue de la Republique sells gorgeous food.

In the evening, we ate at a brasserie that offered a

highchair. Michela behaved and we ate a three-course regional meal at leisure.

In restaurants you can order 'une carafe d'eau' (a jug of tap water, which tastes as good as bottled



still water). Wine comes by the bottle, the glass and the 'pichet' (¼, ½ and 1 litre), even cider (The Breton one tastes more like wine) can be sampled by pichet.

Next morning we left a rainy Troyes and reached **Le Touquet** in the afternoon. It was sunny but very windy. We stayed at the very central (but quiet) Hotel Les Embruns; the pretty room with ensuite was 65 euros. Le Touquet is a seaside

town on the Atlantic Ocean. I had packed a swimming costume, but the hotel's clerk told me only people with Nordic blood could face bathing!

We visited the sights on yet another little train. If you have more time, there is a forest, a museum, a hippodrome, two amusement parks, shopping centres... The streets boasts lovely houses and boutiquey shops. There's a quaint covered market, but it was closed.

After the train we had a beach walk. I noticed an indoor swimming complex, maybe that's where the bathers were.

We dined at La Petite Charlotte and had a fab three-course meal with wine for 49 euros.

We left next morning and arrived so early at the terminal we took an earlier train.

Next year we'd like to drive to Italy via Germany, or we could take a ferry to Denmark and come down that way... We're raring to go!

Boulogne sur Mer: This sea town, very close to Calais, is full of attractions for kids and offers great shopping centres.