

Croissants and Calvados: camping with a Gallic twist

A far cry from the bland mega-parks which France is known for, one Normandy site has put the chic into 'le camping', says Keith Didcock

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- Keith Didcock
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Discover a whole other camping experience in the forests and farms of France
Photograph: Mina Chapman/Corbis

There's a popular misconception that French campsites are all huge corporate parks full of husbands in socks and sandals and wives jiggling their bingo wings at a mass outdoor aerobics class. But there's a whole other camping experience waiting to be discovered in the forests and farms of France. There are sites in the grounds of old chateaux, on organic fruit farms and in the hills above the Riviera. There are tipis and tree houses, Airstream trailers and Romany roulottes. And with the opening of the new Eurostar terminal in London, it's now just a short hop from St Pancras to one of these cool French campsites.

Le Brévedent, deep in the Normandy countryside but only half an hour from Le Havre, is one of these hidden truffles, and one of the classiest sites in France. In the grounds of a Louis XVIth hunting lodge, it combines all the features of that different French camping experience - a quiet country location with church bells tolling in the distance, a beautiful historic house, a mirrored lake, apple trees and a little wood. And then there's all the fresh local produce - moules and crevettes, organic fruit and vegetables from surrounding farms, freshly baked bread and of course apples, fermented and fortified into cider and calvados.

If you crave bright lights and a bit of buzz, you're in the wrong place. The noisiest thing about the village of Blangy-le-Château, a sleepy one-street affair, is the trickling fountain that feeds a small stream running down the street, past houses with painted wooden shutters, past the boulangerie and patisserie. You won't find teens drinking cider from cans and flicking two fingers at the gendarmes

round here. It's more the kind of place where you buy yourself some bonbons and get home in time for thé.

Over at Le Brévedent, beside the lake or beneath the trees, you're bound to find a spot to suit your mood. There's a kiddies' play area away in one corner with a wonderful old tree that is nature's own climbing frame and maze, a stylish pool, and a facilities block that could grace the pages of an interior design magazine, with its fresh azure tiles, terracotta fittings and pearly white sinks. It's a place made for the French word élan

Le Brévedent has been in the Gurrey family for 400 years and has been run as a campsite for four generations. Camping came about here in part because of the Second World War. The lodge was badly damaged when a passing Allied bomber inadvertently dropped its payload before crashing in the woods. To help pay for the repairs, the owner, the Marquis de Chabannes La Palice, began to harvest the fruit from the apple trees, extracted lime from the woods to sell to local farmers, and invited campers to stay in the grounds.

Of course there was a little added cachet at Le Brévedent: the Gurrey family can trace its history back a thousand years (when some of them probably 'relocated' to England with the Norman Conquest). The idea of staying with a French marquis proved an unsurprising hit, though it did give some campers delusions of grandeur. One early visitor assumed dinner with the Marquis required a certain degree of formality and was discomfited to discover that dinner jackets were not obligatory evening attire. The Gurreys are discreet enough hosts not to confirm or deny that this guest was English, though you can imagine him - a colonel probably, old-school with a walrus moustache, and no doubt a little put out that you don't get to camp on the lawns at Chatsworth or Cliveden. Rest assured there's no dress code here now, and you'll find a welcoming, laid-back attitude from everyone you meet.

The family are entertaining companions at the bar in the lodge, which young Raphaël Gurrey opens every night at 9pm, and where you can sample the region's favourite tippie. Cider is Normandy's nectar, and Raphaël sells an interesting brew that is mixture of cider, calvados and blackcurrant. It might sound suspiciously like a snakebite but is far classier. And the Gurreys will chat away in embarrassingly fluent English about the history of the lodge - or French politics, or who'll win Euro 2008.

Raphaël's also a talented musician, partial to jamming with anyone who happens along with a guitar, castanets or panpipes. He's even organised musical evenings in front of the floodlit house. The sessions don't last too long into the night, though: your sleep's more likely to be disturbed by the plop of the occasional apple dropping from the trees onto the grass than by anything else. And when morning comes, you'll probably be roused by the sound of the baker's van arriving with the first batch of crusty loaves and knobbly baguettes. If the sound doesn't get you, the smell will. Try staying in your sleeping bag when the aroma of warm pains au chocolat, still soft and gooey from the oven, is wafting across the grass. You'll be up like a shot and clambering into your culottes before you can say 'ooh là là.'

Still, it'll be the only time in your stay at Le Brévedent when you break into more than an amble. That's just the kind of place it is. Because when you've been around for as long as this place has, what's the hurry?

• Pitches at Le Brévedent (00 33 2 3164 7288; campinglebrevedent.com) cost €9, plus €6.70 per person.

Sources : <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2008/mar/02/camping.france>