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Beaten track or back road . . . .

They Camped Their Way Through Europe

by Dr. and Mrs. E. W. Shideler

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Emerson W. Shideler, associate professor of philosophy and religion, was granted a leave of absence for 1957-8 to travel and study abroad. With Volkswagen and tent, he and his wife followed the beaten track or the back roads as they pleased. This sketch suggests some of the delights and difficulties of a method of traveling in Europe which few Americans have tried.

UNLIKE THE CAMPGROUNDS of the United States, the campgrounds of Europe serve as hotels for tourists, salesmen, itinerant workers, and visitors whose relatives or friends do not have extra room for guests.

Hikers, bicyclists, and motorcyclists often live in the equivalent of pup-tents, but this is not always true. In the Lake Country of England, we met a Scottish plumber, his wife, and two children, who had carried themselves, their good-sized wall tent, air mattresses, sleeping-bags, cooking things, clothes, and all their other impedimenta, on a motorcycle with a side car; in addition, they had brought along a neighbor boy to share their vacation.

Our average for the 76 nights that we camped on the Continent last summer came to 56c per night, and in four or five places no charge was made at all. Occasionally the facilities were terrible, although we found nothing as bad as in some places where we have camped in the United States; occasionally, they were luxurious: pink-tiled bathrooms, exquisitely clean; grocery stores and restaurants on the premises; laundry tubs and clothes-lines; postal service; superb locations; — and English spoken.

Camping in Europe, you can have almost any degree of civilization or seclusion that you choose. London has two campgrounds within its limits, Edinburgh four close to the city, and Paris a beautiful one beside the Seine in the Bois de Boulogne. Of course, there are also campgrounds high in the Alps, deep in the Black Forest, tucked among Norway’s fjords, and spread out between England’s tilled fields. The Campers’ Guides will tell you in advance, and in great detail, where the sites are located and what you can expect to find in the way of equipment, opportunities, and welcome. Great Britain alone has nearly as many officially recognized campgrounds as the whole of the United States, and most European countries, are equally well supplied.

Camping is the way that many Europeans travel, and an excellent way to meet them informally, to talk with them under circumstances that shatter reserve, where one can listen to their advice on what to do and see, and exchange notes on the weather, camping techniques, politics, economics, religion, and any other subject that happens to come up. Except for a few places at the height of the tourist season, no
reservations are necessary: one comes and goes as he will, lingering here because the days are warm, or moving on because the people across the way have told you—principally in sign language—that the Grosslockner Pass must not be missed on any account—and how magnificently right they were!

Further, the camper lives on the local economy, which is frequently inconvenient, usually fun, and always enlightening. What does it suggest about the ordinary life and culture in France that even on holidays and Sundays, the bakeries are open? Or that the banks are open for a couple of hours a day? Or that you must tell the Swedish shop-keeper what is the current rate of exchange between kroner and dollars? Or that the sign in the hostel says emphatically, in four languages, that the milk sold here is guaranteed to be adequately pasteurized—and you find that the deposit on the bottle is higher than the cost of the milk?

It would not be quite accurate to say that the multiplicity of languages is a handicap, because the difficulties of communicating are themselves sometimes an asset. My husband knew some German, both of us some French, but we were fairly often in places where neither they nor English would serve, but only the local tongue. That is the point where—given goodwill on both sides—one strips self-consciousness and learns to exchange ideas with the eyes, the hands, crude drawings, the blank look of incomprehension and the full laugh of achievement. It’s astonishing how we managed to talk to Franz and Paul, our truck driver and gardener with about ten words of English, six of Austrian German, unlimited eagerness, and the pure determination to understand and be understood whatever grinaces, flailing of the arms, or pantomimes were required.

At the other extreme was the camp director in Copenhagen, the time when we needed information in a hurry. “Do you speak English parlez-vous français sprechen sie Deutsch?” I rattled off, and he replied with a broad grin, “Take your pick.”

Some of the major differences between life in the Old World and the New we had already become accustomed to during the ten months that we spent in England before going to the Continent. There, we had lived with an English family, sharing their kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities, and with a bedroom and living room for our private use. Peggie, our hostess, introduced us to the shops in the nearby village: the grocery-store which closed every Wednesday afternoon, the butcher’s shop that closed on Thursdays, the bakery on Mondays, the small but important facts such as that green vegetables were to be bought at the florist’s, pork at the grocery, that hamburger is named “minced beef.”

All over Europe, shopping was a comfortable, friendly, leisurely business, almost as much a social affair as a simple necessity. For the housewife who has few, if any, outside activities it must be a welcome break in her day. The set-up assumes that the housekeeper limits her life to housekeeping, and it tends to enforce that limitation: unless she can afford household help, she seldom has the time or physical strength to take part in such activities as PTA, League of Women Voters, hospital auxiliaries, and such—which is probably one good reason why organizations of this type are practically unknown there. But I did have other things to do—a research project. It was only through the help of frozen vegetables and casserole meals that I managed to accomplish a great deal on it.

Living and camping in Europe by their methods requires of the American a multitude of adjustments, and most of them are major ones because the differences reflect a diversity in basic attitudes towards life. The traveller who moves between hotels, or who takes an apartment or house, has a relatively easy time because these adjustments are not required of him. Both of us suspect that if we had known in advance how strenuous this kind of living abroad was going to be, we would have hesitated before undertaking it. But having done it this way, we are overwhelmingly glad for all of it, not merely because the beauty of Europe does outweigh the ugliness, and because the warm friendliness of most Europeans more than balances the chill of a very few, but because the two aspects belong together. The contradictions and difficulties are part of the tremendous diversity of the Old World. We would not have missed any part of it, and we are eager to take our Volkswagen and our tent back for more.