

Changing pitch

Shane Barratt had spent many years suppressing memories of a disastrous folding camper test... until he saw an ad in a local paper!

Brace yourself... I recently came close to buying a folding camper. There I was, excitedly flicking through our community newsletter, holding my breath until I found out who had won the Women's Institute's over-60s Sudoku competition, when I came across a picture of what looked like a melamine Wendy house on wheels.

My eyes hovered on the price of this strange contraption: '£450 or Yoko'. Actually it said '£450 ono'. That's just a little joke of mine.

In a collector's item case of impulse buying I picked up the phone to arrange a viewing. But why, I hear you ask, would I want to swap our faithful old Swift caravan for something that is neither trailer nor tent, fish nor fowl, Abbott nor Costello?

The answer is our daughter Louise, deep into teendom and hell bent on attending every summer pop festival within 150 miles of Norfolk. I'm not keen at all on exposing the caravan to all that mayhem. The last time we did we were picking bits of mud and Thai food out of the furnishings for weeks. And I'm afraid my camping days are over. Back ache and condensation might be good enough for millions of bohemian Brits, but not me.

I figured what we needed was a smaller, cheaper version of the caravan; a ready-made dwelling we didn't mind getting filthy and where we could get a bit of privacy and a bit of comfort amid the carnage of the average shanty town festival field.

Within hours of spotting the ad, I was on the driveway of a nice, helpful couple, inquisitively perusing their folding camper. I have to say I was smitten. It had a clever little layout, was spotlessly clean and in great nick.

Then came the disassembly! "With a little bit of practice you can have this packed away in the trailer in 15 minutes," insisted the seller, valiantly folding and chirpily oblivious to how one man's quarter-of-an-hour is another man's hour and forty-five. That man is me.

As he worked on, pausing now and again to grease a rusty hinge, my mind took me back to a field in Staffordshire in the mid-1990s and a photo-session for an outdoor leisure magazine. The star: a folding camper. The lonesome photographer and note-taker: me. The horror: getting the damn thing back



Illustration: Andy Robert Davies

into its trailer. No matter how many permutations of folding and unfolding I tried, I just couldn't cram it in. It ended up looking like an oversized cartoon suitcase, one where the clothes are hanging out all over the place, just one buckle holding back an eruption of nylon and denim. In this case it was canvas. I was forced to drive back to the dealership with the lid at a grotesque angle, canvas billowing in the air and a mysterious pole poking out at the side threatening to decapitate an innocent pedestrian. When finally I crawled into the dealership courtyard, the owner's face was a picture. *The Scream* by Edvard Munch comes to mind.

By the time I dragged myself back into the relative safety of 2010, the vendor had finished the job and I

hadn't listened to a word of his learned advice. My mind was made up but I didn't have the heart to tell him the bad news, and instead took him up on an offer of taking the folding camper back to my garden for a day's trial.

Chugging back to Chez Barratt, I talked myself round. I was older and wiser now. All that was needed was a lot of patience and a bit of grease. I pulled into the driveway, set to work in the garden and called Sandra with an enticing, "Come and take a look at this, and bring the bike oil with you!"

"What is *that*?" she exclaimed as her eyes alighted on the camper.

"This is our luxury festival accommodation. Don't you like it?"

"It's a bit... pokey." But then she was in, fingering bedding and yanking

at the over-bed pocket storage as if Everest base camp awaited its first folding camper.

"Is it quick and easy to pack away?" she said a few minutes later, her cold heart seeming to have melted ever so slightly.

"Well, it takes practice, but you can have it down in 15 or 20 minutes," I replied, staring at my hands.

An hour and 45 minutes later Sandra took what was left of the bike oil indoors and I was driving, defeated, back to the vendor's house, towing an over-sized cartoon suitcase behind me.

That evening, a chastened but free man, Louise's nagging saw me searching Google for two pop-up tents in eco-warrior camouflage. Erect in seconds, fold away at your leisure. I'll believe it when I see it!

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