



Edwina relaxes with a book in Cong



Recreating a scene from *The Quiet Man*



The dogs didn't mind the weather



The Man still trying for a catch...

WHEN I last wrote about the adventures of Vanessa, our Benimar Anthus motor caravan and her virgin caravanners (March 2009 issue), the fridge was warm, the shower was cold, the roof leaked, the awning was nearly wrecked by rainwater and the plug-hole was blocked with hair (somebody else's).

Two years on, we're happy veterans of travels across Europe. We know to stop in Luxembourg for laughably cheap diesel. We don't get things wrong – or rather we do, but not so often.

It's the unexpected that catches us out. On our first trip abroad we fretted about the dogs' passports – might they end up in quarantine for ever? We needn't have worried, as vets near the ports have the procedure off pat. But trouble loomed in Caen as customs officers decided to search the vehicle just as the ferry was boarding.

"Ave you bought wine?" we were asked. "We've been in Bordeaux, of course we've bought wine." The shower was stacked to the ceiling. "Receipts?" Somewhere among all the other rubbish.

"Ave you bought cigarettes?" On top of the van. Suddenly we were the last vehicle on the jetty. Our protests – "We're in the Common Market now, you know" – fell on deaf ears. At last they accepted we were not international smugglers and let us go. Hours later, on the M3, cars were flashing us: the rooftop box was open, scattering cartons of ciggies all over Hampshire.

Our third trip to Ireland should have been a doddle. The Man wanted to fish the Shannon, so after an overnighter near the ferry we booked five days beside Lough Derg in a beautiful location offering views of Holy Island and its ancient ruins. Ducks quacked round Vanessa each morning. The Man tried his luck, and tried, and tried. He managed one nice perch; anything edible, like trout or salmon, remained elusive.

The summer had been so dry that the rivers were low and water quality had

In good spirits

Former MP Edwina Currie is now a seasoned motor caravanner. Here she takes on the elements – and some ghosts – on an Irish tour

suffered. So to greet our arrival the heavens opened, and then it rained hard for three weeks. Terrific! We moved on to Cong on Lough Corrib. This is another exquisite place, at the junction of two lovely loughs in unspoilt territory. In 1951 it was the location of the John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara Oscar-winning film, *The Quiet Man*, which is broadcast every St Patrick's Day on American TV.

I spotted a notice about ghost-hunting. That sounded fun! The site owner, Gerry, told us we could join in as the Irish Ghost Hunters investigated the museum where many of the film's artefacts are exhibited. He had asked them to contact the spirit of the late, great John Wayne.

The enthusiasts were in black T-shirts sporting 'IGH' letters that glowed in the dark. They wired up several rooms with

infra-red cameras (never mind that the property is a replica of the cottage in the film, so JW was never there).

The medium was a handsome woman with a strong estuary accent: "Come on, darlin'!" Computer screens showed flashes of light – "orbs" (static electricity, I muttered) – then the spirits made themselves felt. A ouija board skittered under our fingers, the table tapped and danced across the floor. The girl next to me was convinced her dead grandfather was present; she was shaking with emotion. I reckon everyone was just a little bit too suggestible, but then I'm a sceptic. Mr Wayne may be too, as he stayed away.

Back at the motor caravan, there was an awful smell of burning. Had the departed souls come to wreak vengeance? We wafted away smoke, hearts pounding. I checked the microwave, and there was the tea towel I left in it to stop the rattling, smouldering malevolently. When we hooked-up there must have been a minute or two left on the dial – we were very lucky not to have lost Vanessa. I hung my head in shame and thanked our guardian angel.

Things started going missing: my chopping board went AWOL; I couldn't find my heavy sweater so bought another only to have the first turn up immediately after; the gas tank was suddenly empty – it was okay when we left home. We wondered about poltergeists, maybe?

Gerry arranged for a chap named Harry to take *The Man* out fishing. From early morning they were at it, as I huddled under a sodden umbrella trying to keep my book dry (I'm not an angler; my bet was on the fish). At lunchtime they gave up. Later in the afternoon, Harry waved us over and showed us the splendid salmon he'd caught – after *The Man* quit, naturally. But Harry didn't mock the supernatural, did he?

Next day the angry spooks were back, this time making grinding noises by the front wheel. Vanessa had only just been

serviced and passed her MoT so we thought it was probably a bit of sand in the pads. We drove on, until it was obvious that we had a problem. The mechanic showed us: the brakes were rubbing bare metal. It was going to take two days to get new pads and fix it. We were stuck in the rain with two smelly wet dogs and no fish.

Thank heaven for the football World Cup. At Mountshannon we had watched as England were hammered while Irish campers cheered German goals ("Anybody but England!" they grinned). At Kilcornan our companions were German, from the 'Rolling Hotel', a red coach with its own enormous trailer sleeping over 40 people. We were outnumbered, so clinked glasses and hid our satisfaction as Germany went down to the Dutch.

We decided to confront the spirits, or at least consume them. It was music night at the bar so we settled into a corner as the fiddles flew and the bodhrán belted out its eerie rhythm. Tom the singer is a street-sweeper by day, but at night, trilly by a rakish angle, he's a troubadour.

The Guinness went down sweetly, on top of a bottle of wine at dinner. Then The Man ordered a Paddy. That's whiskey; we were being made very welcome and the measures were generous. I hitched a lift back to the site. An hour later, The Man and the spirits came home together, and he slid happily under the van, singing lustily.

It was a memorable holiday, even if the weather was horrible. The ghosts were laughing; back home the temperatures were in the 30s and there was talk of a hosepipe ban. But in Ireland, the west is stunning in its beauty and grandeur, the food (oysters in particular) is memorable, the campsites are clean and well-run and the locals are humorous and helpful.

On the way back we stopped on the off-chance where I thought I might have left the chopping board. The wind had dropped and the sun was out. And there it was, on the draining-board where I forgot it. I heard a ghostly chuckle. Next time I'll keep my scepticism to myself, make the spirits a small peace offering, and maybe we'll have sunshine the whole way. ■

CLUB SITES IN IRELAND

The Caravan Club has a number of Affiliated Sites in the Republic of Ireland. For more details see pp279-284 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2011/12*. For a feature on Fleming's White Bridge in Co Kerry and Glen of Aherlow in Co Tipperary, turn to pp22-24 of the December 2010 issue of the magazine.



The Curries' trusty Benimar Anthus