

Family break

Welcome to the French beach you'll



Beach at Lacanau-Océan, main image; Château Chambord, top left; a street in Monpazier, left; Camping la Prairie, below



Finding somewhere in France without the crowds in peak season was proving tough for **Vanessa St Clair** and family. Then they chanced upon the perfect campsite

It was an unsignposted trudge through the hot pines trying to keep up the children's spirits by playing increasingly desperate word games. We had been told about the beach by locals and kept wondering if we were going the right way, but when we finally climbed our way up the last sand bank at L'Alexandre, on the coast between Carcans Plage and Lacanau, there it was, the French miracle. A stretch of glaring white sand, broken only by three other people, the sea gentle and jewelled and abandoned, in the south of France, in the middle of the August holidays.

It was worth the journey, which had begun a few years ago, when we bought into the glamping craze and got ourselves a bell-tent big enough to park two Fiat Pandas abreast. We hauled the tent around England and it was lovely, until evening — and dampness — fell. Then we'd wish for the fire we hadn't got round to making, and crawl between damp sheets.

France was the obvious answer: land of

hot summers and civilised campsites, well-stocked with croissants and kids' clubs. We set off for the summer holidays with a bohemian idea of dawdling our way south, finding great little campsites along the way.

Only it didn't turn out like that. We soon discovered that the kids had a setting of three hours in a hot car before they boiled over, putting paid to our idea of meandering. A couple of places were full: trying to

“ So much beach, even August holidaymakers can't conquer it ”

get the children back in the car while we “checked out the surrounding area” didn't go down well.

Our first stop was Indigo Les Châteaux in the Loire, near Châteaux Chambord. It was great, with a back-to-nature approach and a kids' club, except for the unlucky combination of fierce lightning storms and tents pitched beneath tall, straggly pines. So we moved on to Camping Castanet, just across the river from

Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne. Beaulieu is a gorgeous medieval city with narrow streets twisting around the old abbey church and a river beach across the footbridge on which we spent the day, running into the freezing river. It was jam-packed with tourists, though, and it was hard not to feel drearily predictable standing in a long queue for the boulangerie with other English families with kids just like mine.

After a frantic afternoon we moved down to the Périgord Noir and the Moulin de David campsite near the fancy little *bastide* (medieval fortified town) of Monpazier,

one of the “plus beaux villages de France”. Monpazier is not untouristy either in August, but with its central place surrounded by pale medieval houses it is more exotic than much of the Dordogne. The Thursday morning market is fantastic, packed with eat-on-the-street rotisseries and a band so full of French cool it made me want to move there and join it.

We wanted the sea, though, and we had heard people talk about the perfect spot: Camping la Prairie, due west of Bordeaux. It was just a field with a brightly coloured shower block in one corner, but the wind sighed longingly through the pines, the sandy earth slipped through our toes, and there were no organised activities whatsoever. We knew we had found our spot.

Along with the beach at L'Alexandre, it is easy to find other deserted places around Carcans. Our campsite was walking distance from the unpopulated side of the biggest lake in France, Lac D'Hourtin. We spent a day on our own little beach, just

Need to know

Where to stay
Camping la Prairie (00 33 5 57 17 51 09, campinglaprairie-carcans.fr) charges €16.50 (£13.10) for two adults per night, with children paying €4.10 per night. Electricity costs an additional €2.90.

What to do
Take a bike ride around the lake (vertsvillenave.chez-alice.fr/lesdossiers/velo). Book a surf lesson for the family (carcanssurfclub.com). Hire a pedalo or a stand-up paddle at Lac de Lacanau in the village of Moutchic. Go to L'île aux enfants, Hourtin Port. There's a playground with a wooden fort and an island to which children can swim

have all to yourself — in August

MAIN: ERWYN VAN DER MEER; LEFT: GETTY IMAGES



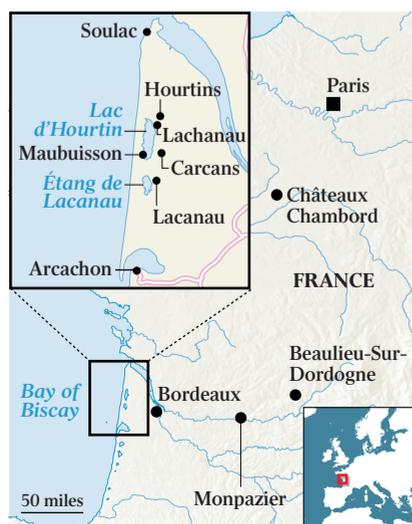
below Hourtin Port, labelled Lachanau on the map (not to be confused with Lacanau). We had the place to ourselves before the locals finished work. Our kids loved it as they could wade out for mile after splashing mile and were still only up to their thighs in water.

It's true that the busy side of the lake at Maubuisson does get jammed after lunch — although not with many English families — but it is another kids' paradise. No wind, no waves, plenty of crocodiles — inflatable ones. And a lifeguard, which means parents can finally get stuck into their holiday reading.

Really, though, the lake is a place to go when you tire of the beach, the long whip of sand that stretches unbroken from Soulac in the north to the Arcachon basin in the south and is, on occasion, windy. One afternoon the waves were cracking down in a white frenzy just metres from the beach. The kids could get only a toe in, but I surprised myself by pushing my way out past the breaks and teetering on the brink of the crests, being shouted instructions by my Californian husband whether to dive or ride. It was exhilarating.

A ten-minute walk along the sand away from the paths that disgorge on to Hourtin and Carcans plagues always thins out the crowd, though there are no lifeguards away from the busy part. There is just so much beach, even August holidaymakers can't conquer it.

It is easy to stay for three weeks, as we did, and not to visit the same place twice. There's another lake, Étang de Lacanau, and many other little lakeside beaches, some quiet, some not. And of course, all the fun to be had on water: sailing, windsurfing, surfing, paddle boats. Half an hour away is the Arcachon basin with its upmarket pleasures, but some days we couldn't get the kids off the campsite. They spent a whole day making mud pies, off in a gang, away from grown-ups. Most of the campers at la Prairie had been coming for years. It looks as though we'll be joining them.



The best last-minute family holiday deals

UK

Parents go free on one-week holidays starting July 19 and 26 or August 23 at PGL's **Isle of Arran** centre. Activities include abseiling, climbing, cycling and canoeing. Children aged 6-18 pay £449.

Coastal Cottages of **Pembrokeshire** has many cut-price family-friendly places to stay. For example, Granston House, just over a mile from the beaches at Abermawr and Aberbach, costs £618 for four spending a week in August, a saving of £154 (01437 765 765, coastalcottages.co.uk).

Shorthaul

There's a massive £4,012 saving for a family of four going to **Sicily** on August 24. A week's B&B at the Verdura Golf and Spa Resort now costs from £1,628pp, with flights (redsavannah.com).

Club & Hotel Letoonia in Fethiye, **Turkey**, is family-friendly and all-inclusive. Seven nights with flights

leaving August 1, 6, 12 and 27 now costs £899 per adult (down from £1,299) and £329 per child (down from £729). See: deals.atravel.com.

Kids stay free in an interconnecting room at the Anassa Hotel in Paphos, **Cyprus**, for travel before July 31. Seven nights' B&B is £4,705 for a family of four, saving £1,440 (01204 824072, destinology.co.uk).

Take a skippered yacht package in **the Med** with Seamaster Yachting (seamaster.co.uk). A week's sailing

the Dalmatian Islands in Croatia leaving July 26 costs from £723pp based on eight sharing, down from £1,505pp. Flights cost extra.

Longhaul

Kids eat free all summer at the Indigo Pearl Resort in Phuket, **Thailand**, where Turquoise Holidays (01494 678 400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk) has seven nights for the price of five. One week's B&B for adults and full board for kids now costs £1,210 per adult, £1,035 per child, with flights.

Save more than £3,530 per family on a week's all-inclusive stay at The Residence **Mauritius**, including flights, which now costs £6,590 for four (01488 689 700, baileyrobinson.com).

Visit Orlando, **Florida**, with one week's room only, with flights and car hire, from £1,015pp, based on a family of four travelling (0844 557 3859, virginholidays.co.uk).

Jane Knight



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