

LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

Laura Dixon nabs a campervan for the weekend and sets off on a leisurely tour of Somerset's foodie delights.

Driving at a top speed of 45 mph isn't normally my thing. As a repeat offender of the safety camera unit, I'm definitely a speed queen, but something strange is happening to me. I can't remember the last time I felt so happy behind the wheel - and given that the steering wheel in question is so large I can rest my elbows on it, the petrol gauge doesn't work and getting the hang of reversing is tougher than cheddar, that's something in itself.

My boyfriend and I have hired a campervan for the weekend from the Bristol Camper Company and this time, instead of burning up my car trying to get to the coast as quickly as possible, our focus is on the journey, not the destination. After a brief tutorial about how to drive it - not much to it, but given the dodgy petrol gauge, it's best to fill up as soon as possible and remember to fill up again after 150 miles - we're off.

We decide to seek out Somerset's hidden foodie delights, then drive through Exmoor to the Devon coast to have dinner by the sea, before meandering back home through the hedgerows the next day. It would be easy - and too obvious - to head straight down the M5 so we plump for the roads less travelled: the A and B roads in Somerset. And with a fridge, grill and two-hob cooker in the back, we have every excuse to visit Somerset's farm shops along the way.

Our first stop is Wilkin's Cider farm in Mudgeley, where Emily Eavis buys her local brew. It's a dark and dingy barn where sticky cider drips on the floor from the large barrels and locals queue up to fill their 10-litre buckets. According to a music magazine article pasted on the wall, the late Joe Strummer loved it here too - and I'm not surprised. The prices are refreshing, the service is slow, the accents are thick and the tasters are generous. We buy a couple of litres for later and jump back in the van.

Next up is Kilver Court in Shepton Mallet, which couldn't be more different. It's light, fragranced and full of designer fabrics. Inside, Sharpham Park Butchery and Deli sells meat from organic and rare breeds and has a specialist butcher. We explain proudly that we've got a campervan and he suggests a nice piece of pork tenderloin for dinner and some lamb and mint sausages for breakfast, all easy to



Wilkin's Cider Farm: a valuable pitstop on anyone's Somerset jaunt

PIC: LAURA DIXON

"IT'S A LONG SLOW DRIVE DOWN THE SINGLE TRACK ROADS TO NORTH DEVON BUT IT'S WORTH IT."

cook on the road.

Driving on towards Exmoor, we find Blackmore Farm Shop, a 15th-century manor house just outside Cannington, selling cheese, fruit and veg and homemade cakes. We load up on strawberries and asparagus, nick a few leaves of sage from their herb garden for the pork and head for the sea. It's a long slow drive down the single track roads to North Devon but it's worth it. The extra height give us views of dark ponies, white geese and pheasants perched on tree stumps and driving so slowly means that we spot honeysuckle growing in the hedgerow, not to mention the crucial passing places. And when we finally make it into Putsborough Sands, over a mug of Mudgeley cider and a view of the sunset, we resolve to make this an annual trip - but next time for a week. It might have taken us a full day to get here rather than the usual two hours but it was worth every second.

ESSENTIAL STOPOVERS

Wilkin's Cider Farm Land's End Farm, Mudgeley, Wedmore, Somerset. Tel: 01934 712385 • The cider is 6% and cost £3.30 for two litres.

Sharpham Park Shop Kilver Court, Kilver St, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Tel: 01749 340414 • The organic butchery sells lip-smackingly good meat.

Blackmore Farm Shop Blackmore Rd, nr Cannington, Somerset. Tel: 01278 651154 • Great value fruit and veg and award-winning ice-cream.

Putsborough Sands Beyond Woollacombe past the village of Georgeham, nr Croyde, Devon • Campervan spots here are £20 per night, including (yikes!) cold showers and toilets, but no electric hook-ups.

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The Bristol Camper Company Acacia Farm, Bristol Rd, Rooksbridge, Bristol, BS26 2TA. Tel: 0845 4674147, web: www.thebristolcampercompany.co.uk • Just off junction 22 of the M5, they can also arrange pick up at Bristol airport. A week's hire costs £525-695; a long weekend costs from £325, and sleeps 4. Also available for festival hire.