

## AGENDA

### GERMANY

This year's Oktoberfest saw the lowest number of visitors since the one held in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, in 2001. About 5.6 million people attended the festival, a drop of 300,000 on the previous year. In 2001, there were 5.5 million guests. Security concerns were heightened ahead of this year's festival, following a series of terror attacks in Germany.

### AUSTRIA

Scientists develop a "washing machine" for books, to protect them from decay. The contraption has been made by researchers at the University of Graz and is designed to "clean" paper, which has only a limited shelf life, due to its acid content. Books are put in the metal cylinder, where a mix of solvent and nanoparticles is enriched with nitrogen and pressurised, so that de-acidifying particles cleanse the pages.

### POLAND



Teachers protest in Warsaw against government plans to overhaul the public education system. Similar protests also took place in several other Polish cities.

Photo: AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

### DENMARK

The country's security agency blocks the publication of a book on its former director. The Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) secured an injunction against the release of the work 'Seven Years with the PET', which is based on interviews with Jakob Scharf, who left the organisation last year. The agency argue that its publication would damage its work in preventing terrorism.

### FINLAND

The Finnish Air Force holds its largest tactical exercise of the year, involving 2,600 personnel and more than 50 aircraft, including fighter jets from Sweden. The five-day operation includes simulated attacks on the country. People were warned about the use of flare countermeasures, which could be seen as bright spots of light in the sky, and low-level sorties.

### THE NETHERLANDS

Plans to close five gas-fired power stations are announced. The sites are to be shut over the next 16 months, as they are no longer considered profitable. The five are at Moerdijk, Erica, Klazienaveen, 's-Hertogenbosch and Bergen op Zoom.

### LIFESTYLE

**Fed up with Facebook, DAVID HURST and his family decided the best way to keep in touch with his friends was to log off, get a camper van and drive round Europe going to see them all**



Facebook was already beginning to get tedious: its initial attraction of staying in touch with family and friends from miles away being replaced by mates down the road posting a photograph of something they were about to eat or someone attention-seeking by writing cryptically such as: Cannot move my big toe...

Then my best friend in America unexpectedly died. Tim took his own life.

We were numb and felt as if we'd seen Tim just last week as we knew what his new house looked like, how his son and he had visited their hometown of Chicago a few weeks previously, what his new glasses looked like and how he still frequently wore his customary claret Brooks Brothers polo shirts. But when my wife Debs and I worked out how long it was since we'd actually seen – and hugged – Tim we were aghast that it was five years.

There were reasons: we'd moved from London to Devon and had two babies – our sons Daniel and Darley, now aged seven and five. When Tim died in 2012 they were both still in nappies and so life was ever hectic. Tim had been like my soul mate and big brother rolled into one ever since we'd met travelling in the Caribbean 25 years previously. But he'd not even met our boys.

A few months later we hired a motorhome to finally drive to Alicante in Spain to see where Debs had grown up after her parents moved there in the 1980s, just after Spain had joined the European Community (now EU). It gave her an idyllic childhood in an endless summertime, plus the opportunity for her to become fluent in Spanish.

As we drove home three weeks later we made a radical decision: we'd sell our cottage so we could buy a motorhome, like the Swift Escape we were in. We realised life didn't always go as expected and that there were too many people like Tim that we loved, but who we hadn't hugged for too long – much to do with the fact that Facebook makes us feel as if we're in touch, but of course we're not actually in touch.

We were starkly aware of life moving along quickly. Daniel was already due in school in a few months. In fact, by the time everything worked out and we had bought our motorhome he was due in school. But by then we'd contacted about 200 of our friends on Facebook and arranged to visit them. So we told his Dartmoor school he wasn't starting until January. (In Britain, parents have a legal duty to educate their children "by regular attendance at school or otherwise" – we decided to try "otherwise".)

So in 2014, using a carefully planned itinerary we drove around England, Scotland and Spain visiting almost 300 Facebook friends and family in three months. Some of these friends we hadn't seen for 30 years, others for just a few weeks. There were many who hadn't met our children, nor we theirs; a couple of our elderly friends maintained rheumy-eyed looks that lingered full of love on us right up to the final second as we drove away.

It was emotional and it was awesome, and we can tell you now as an indisputable fact that a one second hug is worth a million Facebook posts.

At the same time, this was teaching our children a most valuable life lesson: that the most precious things in life are not things at all. It is friends and family. It is people and it is being kind to people.

We also made another wonderful discovery. Our children were loving learning as we travelled. And it was a very natural learning, as they asked questions about things we saw and people we met.

So learning was exciting, and as with all of us, if something is fun we're more likely to remember it and to want to do it again.

So we decided to stay on the road – to tell the school that Daniel would be learning with us for the rest of the school year. In the end, this stretched on, again, to another year – when Darley would otherwise have



# “A one second hug is worth a million Facebook posts”

(1) Daniel in Chefchaouen, Morocco (2) Daniel and Darley on Dartmoor (3) The boys at the Alhambra palace, Granada (4) Daniel and Darley on the beach near Montpellier (5) Daniel in Rhonda, Spain (6) Darley at the Alhambra palace (7) Dog Colin, Daniel, David, Debs and Darley (8) Our Swift Escape motorhome in Andalusia

Photos: Contributed

also been starting school. We were lucky that my job as a writer could continue on the road, and Debs' pre-school teaching experience meant she devised some great ways of learning, such as spelling games on the beaches where we'd write letters and challenge Daniel to spell a word by jumping on the correct letters before the tide washed them away. Here was PE and English in one.

We devised a travel plan that we dubbed Education By Astonishment that so far has taken us on 34,000 miles through 13 countries including France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal and Morocco. It included visiting dozens of people, places and things that had the wow factor for two little boys – consequently that would bring learning to life.

Our trip has been awesome: from spotting dolphins and a minke whale from the Brittany Ferries ship to Spain's Sierra Nevada mountains to Malaga's Picasso Museum; and Morocco's Volubilis Roman ruins and the Medina of Fez, we've become rich beyond belief.

In Britain we've seen Stonehenge, the Palace of Westminster, Roald Dahl's Wendover Woods, and Old Sarum.

We have been invited into the stunning home of the writer Peter James, an old acquaintance, for an English lesson for the boys, and – through him – met Norman Cook, or Fatboy Slim, who gave them a music tutorial.

We also took some English and maths books for good measure. But as we travelled, staying mostly at campsites but also wild camping, we were overjoyed seeing our boys' self-confidence grow. We are thrilled they can now get on with a 90-year-old from across the world just as well as they can with someone their own age from across the road.

They've also taken part in real-life problem-solving, such as when I got our motorhome stuck in mud, or when we became so lost in Bilbao that we saw its busy centre five times.

We still see friends from Facebook, if we can, on our travels and we have in our sights trips to Australia and America. But



## Ten Great People, Places & Things We've Seen So Far

### Alhambra palace & fortress, Granada, Spain

Simply the most jaw-droppingly stunning set of buildings, both inside and outside, that we've ever seen. This Moorish creation from when Spain was a Muslim country needs a day to take it all in, and another day to recover.

### Cascada de la Cimbarra, Spain

A beautiful waterfall that drops 40 metres from stunning scenery, close to Jaen. The land around was so quiet the silence spoke to us.

### Fez Medina, Morocco

Wandering around some of the 9,000 streets in this medieval layout was a travel back in time. The array of sights was mind-blowing: from donkeys running through the narrow streets to beggars in djellabah to spices galore. And leather Arsenal slippers.

### Meeting people

We have met some wonderful people: the author Peter James, musician Fatboy Slim, presenter Zoe Ball, renowned tailor Edward Sexton and Olympic diver Tonia Couch. All these achievers were so friendly with us and offered essential lessons for our children: that self-belief is all-important in making dreams come true, and that you can make not only a living but a very good living from your passion. As Fatboy Slim wrote on Daniel's ukulele: "Remember you can do whatever you want to do!"

### Wildlife

Spotting a minke whale and dolphins, Bay of Biscay. Seeing these amazing creatures clearly from on board the Brittany Ferries Portsmouth-Santander ship was a definite inspiration. Within a week Darley could recognise and name about 20 different cetaceans.

### Paris, France

From standing under the Eiffel Tower to standing atop the Arc de Triomphe to seeing the Mona Lisa, it is undoubtedly an astonishing city.

### Cordoba, Spain

A beautiful historic city, the highlight of which is its mosque-cathedral, which was for many years shared by Christians and Muslims. Inside is like being lost in a forest of columns and arches (more than 850 of them).

### Salamanca, Spain

Spain's first university started in this laidback city with its wonderful Gothic cathedral and Roman bridge, all viewed to a background of buskers wherever we wandered.

### Chefchaouen, Morocco

Nestled among the Rif Mountains, this tranquil town is painted light blue, even tree trunks – apparently to keep mosquitoes away as they think it's a river and don't like moving water.

### Campsites, everywhere

We've stayed on about 100 campsites during our travels – they are fantastic for discovering nature and stargazing, plus meeting friendly interesting people from all over Europe.



## What our children have learned most from travelling

### Languages

Daniel is getting quite fluent in Spanish and knows how to say 'hello' and 'thank you' in several languages. Even Darley (who's just turned five) knows a smattering of Spanish and is fascinated that people communicate by using different sounds.

### Cultures

They've seen first-hand that our world is an amazingly diverse and fascinating place – from the modern bustle of London and Madrid to the djellabah-wearing shepherds waving at us in rural Morocco.

### Foods

Their tastebuds are alive and tingling – and open to trying new tastes. The boys' favourites so far include snails, couscous and squid. Plus fish fingers in mashed potato.

### Geography, geology, biology, science, maths & history

What better way to get a sense of geography than covering thousands of miles with its changing geological features. Other subjects are learned naturally and not from a book, such as maths, from paying a bill in a shop or restaurant; science and biology in nature; and history from city buildings, from Stonehenge and from Roman ruins we've seen in England, Spain, Portugal and Morocco.

### People

Our two little boys know that people are generally wonderful, kind and friendly; they know of people's similarities not differences (even if some might look different or talk differently). They have seen with their own eyes that when working together we're stronger and more productive. And that it's much more fun than being in isolation.



we've slowed down a little now as we've spent much time in southern Spain – where, as with all the countries we've visited, we have been warmly welcomed with open arms. We discovered from both of our projects that many parents are concerned their children are stuck behind their desks too much and that they as parents feel sad and perhaps guilty they don't have time to play a part in their children's education.

So our next exciting project is to create an Education By Astonishment campsite in Spain with the wow factor in a breathtaking setting where families can come and have lots of learning fun in the sunny outdoors all year round. Our dream is that friends and family who haven't seen each other for too long can meet up here too with their children – so combining both our amazing projects for others in one inspiring place.

Oh, and if Fatboy Slim would play an opening day set, that would be our wildest dreams come true.

Follow the family's adventures at @david-hurstUK

