

The cream of Coastal Cornwall

 **Phil Curry** winds his way westward to England's southern-most point, and encounters industrial heritage, epic scenery and a pineapple pit...

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE SMITH

The bridge across the River Looe connects the East and West towns. Orange skies at dusk are a regular treat



Main pic: Fishing has been the principal occupation in Polperro for generations, and the harbour is still dominated by the local fisherman's boats

To my left is a lighthouse, to my right some fields and rock faces. In front of me is nothing but blue ocean, while behind me lies 909 miles of land. Right now, I am the most southerly person in the UK.

My trip will put our new long-term Excel 600B motorhome to the test, travelling along the south coast of Cornwall, home of spectacular coastal scenery, wild landscapes and quaint villages. My mission? To discover Cornwall's epic, rugged nature without succumbing to a single pasty, tin mine or visit to the Land's End 'theme park'.

Why Cornwall? Well quite simply, I believe it has the best coastline in the UK, not to mention some fascinating heritage. While it is recognised as part of England, it strives to maintain a sense of independence. Cornwall has its own flag and its own language which, although rarely spoken today, has many devotees who wish to bring it back into use. Cornwall has prospered throughout history by using its industrial expertise to export goods around the world. China clay and tin were both famously produced here, and the mining gave the world access to another staple of Cornwall, the Cornish pasty.

While many will head for the tourist hotspots, especially Newquay and Land's End, I decided to do the opposite, and take my latest adventure as far south as possible. And so I ended up at Lizard Point, looking out at the Channel, with the wind blowing, waves crashing below me – like a spring-clean of the senses! There is no one else here. No sign to indicate the significance of where I stand. It feels like true exploration. While I sit here, the sun shining down, I get a sense of wonder. Just how far is the next landfall? How many people have stood here before, wondering what is out across the vast expanse of water? I feel truly inspired.

The journey begins

My trip to Cornwall started well from the moment I entered the county. Crossing the Tamar Bridge brought me close to one of my all time British heroes, the great engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The Royal Albert Bridge runs alongside the road, and carries the majority of Cornwall's rail traffic. Designed by Brunel and completed in 1859, the year of his death, it is another lasting monument. It celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, and on 3 May, it will be opened to the public to walk along for the first time. ➡



Bottom row l to r: Saint Piran's Flag, a white cross on black background, is the flag of Cornwall; Phil and Liz enjoy breakfast in the Excel's half-dinette, at the Polborder House site; many pubs, like the Three Pilchards in Polperro, celebrate nautical ancestry



Main pic: Charlestown's Shipwreck, Rescue and Heritage Centre is home to many impressive old vessels

Right, top to bottom: A river runs through the tiny town of Polperro to the harbour; a view of Fowey from St Catherine's Castle, which is built on a hill overlooking the town; Liz and Phil discover the Lost Gardens of Heligan

Way to go

If you want to see the best of Cornwall, you should enter from the south, either via the Tamar Bridge (A38) or you could take the Tolpoint Ferry from its port in Plymouth. There are no motorways in the county. However, the major A-roads are good, and most of the uphill sections branch into a dual carriageway for slow moving vehicles. The minor A-roads and B-roads are also fine for 'vans. You can access Looe and Polperro by the A387, but to travel from there to Fowey would require going back up to the A38, and then onto the A390. This takes you around the Fowey estuary. You can follow this to the A390, and then the A394.

Take heed of road signs when entering villages, and do not rely on sat-navs. Many towns are unsuitable for large vehicles. There are often large pay-and-display car parks a short walk from the centre, so leave your motorhome and walk in.



There is a toll to pay for the privilege of crossing the bridge, and considering you could travel into the county from the north for free, why pay? Because you are so close to the coast here, and in my view the crossing fee (£1 up to 3500kg, or £2.50 over £3500kg) is more than worth it. Had the weather been clement, I would perhaps have taken the Tolpoint ferry from Plymouth, and enjoyed a water crossing over the Tamar instead.

Practical Motorhome's Liz Paterson joined me for a few days on my journey; she would be meeting me at my first stop near Looe. Even after a five-hour drive I felt fresh thanks to comfortable cab seats in the Excel, but nevertheless I was glad to see the signs for Polborder House, my first campsite. With darkness falling, I settled down for the night, eager to start my drive west.

"[Polperro] has a river running through its centre, which seems to symbolise a slower pace of life."

The following morning, with Liz on board, we set off down the road to Looe. This is a spectacular coastal village with a strong fishing heritage, being set slightly inland, with its own estuary. It's a narrow market town with a Tudoresque look to it, popular with tourists, and a great place to pick up the South West Coastal Path around the base of the county. Off the coast is Looe island, which is accessible by land when low tide permits. As we would find with many places along our way, the town was too narrow for the Excel to navigate its way through. However, like most of the places we found, a large car park was within walking distance of the town centre, so we parked up the motorhome and walked in.

Polperro is just along the road from Looe, and appeals with its beautiful landscaping and tranquil setting. It has a river running through its centre, which seems to symbolise a slower pace of life.

However, the peril of satellite navigation raised its head once more in this tiny harbour village. I could not get through it in the Excel. There is no way any motorhome could thread its way through the village's narrow, winding roads. Take my advice: when the road signs warn of narrow and steep roads ahead, they mean it. Again, we decided to leave the 'van in the car park, and walked the 500 metres or so 



IN THE KNOW

Dale Byers,
from Polborder House campsite

"The beach at Seaton is a great place to go for walks, and it is easy to get to from the main roads. Seafront parking is also available, with great views out across the ocean. There are also a couple of nice bars on the sea front if you fancy enjoying an evening meal out."



into the village. There is, however, a bus service next to the car park, or you could even take a horse-drawn cart into the centre!

At the top of the hill in the village is an old lookout point, from which there are great views of the dramatic coastline. We visited during the early morning sunshine, and the people we spoke to during our walk around the village told us that the most spectacular views come at dusk, when the sun is setting low and the sky lights up orange to provide a breathtaking backdrop to the shimmering sea.

Sailing back in time

From Polperro, we took the road back to Looe, and joined the main road around to Fowey, with the intention of exploring the Fowey river estuary. Fowey (pronounced 'Foy', as Liz kept reminding me) is an ancient river town, built on a hill. It is not the easiest place to access, with narrow roads, many steps and few footpaths. With many tall houses built on the river front, the locals we spoke to told us that the river is lit up at night, making for a spectacular scene. While it is still a commercial port, this is hidden from view, making a picturesque setting with the old stone-walls running down to the yacht-filled water. Above Fowey,

"The Lost Gardens have a historical story woven into their vines and branches"

on the hill overlooking the area, is St. Catherine's Castle, built by Henry VIII as one of his many defences along the coast. Below it is a sandy beach with great views across the water.

Having travelled a little further west, it was time to head for our second campsite of the trip. I'd booked a pitch at Sun Valley, on the road between St Austell and Mevagissey. After a good night's sleep at this five-star campsite, the following morning, on the advice of our hosts at Sun Valley, we decided to visit Charlestown. As you drive down the hill one thing becomes clear: this is a village with a strong maritime heritage. To start with, you will notice the tall masts of elegant sailing ships, which are now set as a centrepiece in the main square. It is still a working port, exporting the China Clay that once made Cornwall so famous around the world. ➡



IN THE KNOW
Sarah de Courey,
from The Lost Gardens

"The Jungle at the Lost Gardens offers visitors the chance to enjoy an exuberant garden with a riot of luxuriant foliage, outstanding trees, exotic plantings and inspiring views. It draws the imagination on a journey far from our temperate shores."



Clockwise from left: One of the many greenhouses at the Lost Gardens of Heligan – many of the plants grown here are unique to the south coast; The Northern Summerhouse, one of the oldest structures in the gardens; the compact Excel took the narrow, twisting Cornish roads in its stride; stacked lobster pots line the wall at Charlestown harbour



1 Polborder House

Bucklawren Road, St Martin, Looe, Cornwall, PL13 1NZ
Tel 01503 240265
Web www.peaceful-polborder.co.uk

A charming campsite situated near to the coastal town of Looe. It is an open site with fields all around. The owners are very friendly and are always happy to do their best to make your stay more pleasant. When we visited, they were in the process of renovating the toilet facilities. There are three shower cubicles, five toilets and sinks with soap provided. The site shop is located in the reception area and carries a range of basic food stuffs. The entrance to the site is down a narrow road, and while it has plenty of passing places, it could be tricky for very large 'vans or RVs.

Price £10/£18.50
(van, two adults and electric hook-up, in low/high season).

OUR 'VAN
Auto-Trail Excel 600B
Price £35,258.00
Base Fiat Ducato
Berths Three
Engine 2.2-litre 100 MultiJet
MTPLM 3300kg
Unladen mass 2750kg
Payload 550kg
Length 5.99m
Width 2.32m
Height 2.79m

FUEL FOR THOUGHT
Total distance 1043 miles
Total fuel used 174-litres
Average diesel price
 £0.99 per litre
Total fuel cost £176.82
Economy 27.2mpg

Main pic
 Mevagissey must be the most colourful village in Cornwall. The buildings are painted a mixture of whitewash and pastel shades of yellow or orange

Bottom left
 One of the four ponds within the Lost Gardens of Heligan's jungle area *Bottom right*
 The gardens have miles of walkways to explore



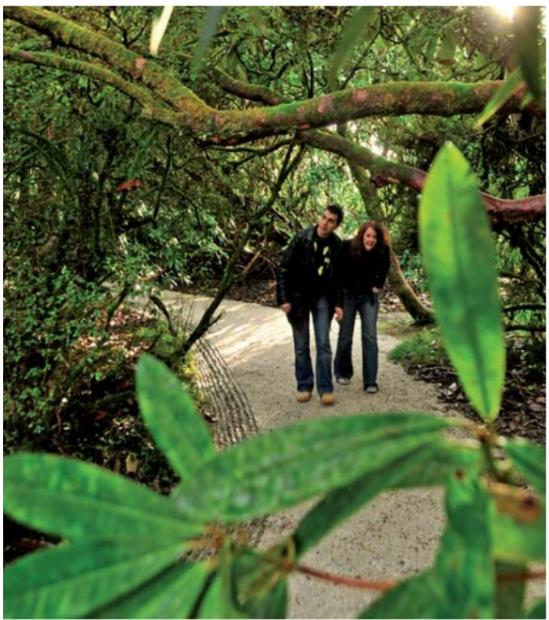
"[Mevagissey] boasted long sea walls, offering up great views over the bay below."

Housed in one of the old China Clay buildings is the Charlestown Shipwreck, Rescue and Heritage Centre (www.shipwreckcharlestown.com), where a large collection of artefacts are on show from many famous shipwrecks, including the *Mary Rose* and the *Titanic*. I must admit that this was the most fascinating part of the trip for me. I am a huge fan of maritime history, and I'm especially interested in the period of the late 19th and early 20th century. Therefore, seeing these tall ships on the harbour as I drove up over the hill was truly special; it felt as if I were driving back in time. One can only wonder how busy this port would have been back in the days when these vessels sailed the seas. The Heritage Centre does a good job of reminding you just how dangerous travelling the open seas was in the past, and can still be.

The discovery of a secret garden
 As we had stayed close by, we decided that a trip to the Lost Gardens of Heligan (www.heligan.com) was in order. We took the road toward Mevagissey, and followed the signs for this wonderful, if sometimes forgotten, tourist attraction. While the obviously man-made Eden Project is nearby, the Lost Gardens have a natural beauty, as well as a historical story woven into the vines and branches. The gardens were discovered in 1990, after almost 75 years of neglect, and have been restored painstakingly by a small band of volunteers. Today, they are a monument to the natural beauty of the coastline, boasting many plants and trees not found anywhere else in the UK due to the unique climate of the south coast. The garden's demise was caused by the onset of WWI when the workers went off to fight. With many large areas, a full day is needed to explore the surroundings, walk through the jungle, take in the fantastic melon gardens and enjoy the largest restored garden in Europe. You can also buy furniture made from the local woods, and have a cream tea in the wonderful café. Another interesting feature is the only working manure-heated pineapple pit in the UK!
 With lunch fast approaching our resolve to avoid the obvious was weakening; while we had been in Cornwall for a couple of days, we had not yet sampled the traditional Cornish pasty. We headed for Mevagissey town centre. Once again, we put the motorhome in the car park, located just outside the main part of town, and made the short walk towards the harbour, which boasted long sea walls, offering up great views over the bay below. 

 **Sun Valley**

Pentewan Road, St Austell Bay, Nr. Mevagissey, Cornwall, PL26 6DJ
Tel 01726 843266
Web www.sunvalleyholidays.co.uk
 This is a five-star Best of British campsite and it is easy to see why. Site facilities include: tennis courts, swimming pools, a small farm and kids club, an outdoor adventure area, games room, laundry room and camp shop. As well as luxury shower facilities, with each shower cubicle boasting its own toilet and sink. There are five hardstanding touring pitches with free electric hook-up. The site is easy to access from St Austell and is ideally situated for Mevagissey, The Lost Gardens of Heligan, the Eden Project and St Austell itself, all of which are a short drive away. The on-site restaurant also serves fantastic food.
Price £16.50/£32.50 (van, two adults and electric hook-up, in low/high season).



 **IN THE KNOW**
Emelie Rowland, from Sun Valley Holiday Park

"Both Mevagissey and Charlestown have nice little ports and harbours to visit when you come to the area. There is a large car park in Mevagissey. It's best to park there when visiting because the streets are quite narrow. From there, it's just a short walk to the water's edge."



After visiting the local bakery, we were soon sitting by the water's edge tucking into our lunch. They can hardly be called traditional, though. In fact, a true pasty would have meat in one end and sweet apple in the other, separated by a layer of pastry. This was so that tin miners could take a full meal down into the pits with them. Still, they were delicious all the same.

Mevagissey must be the most colourful village in Cornwall, with buildings painted half white and half pastel-shades of yellow or orange – it was a great sight in the warm sunshine. Walking past the local museum, and out onto the sea wall, it was a true delight. Mevagissey was, and still is a fishing port, however, it also has a background in smuggling, something which was rife in Cornwall during the early 19th century. With these images recorded in my mind, I turned the Excel to starboard, and set off full sail toward the horizon for our next port of call.

Castles, kings and pirates

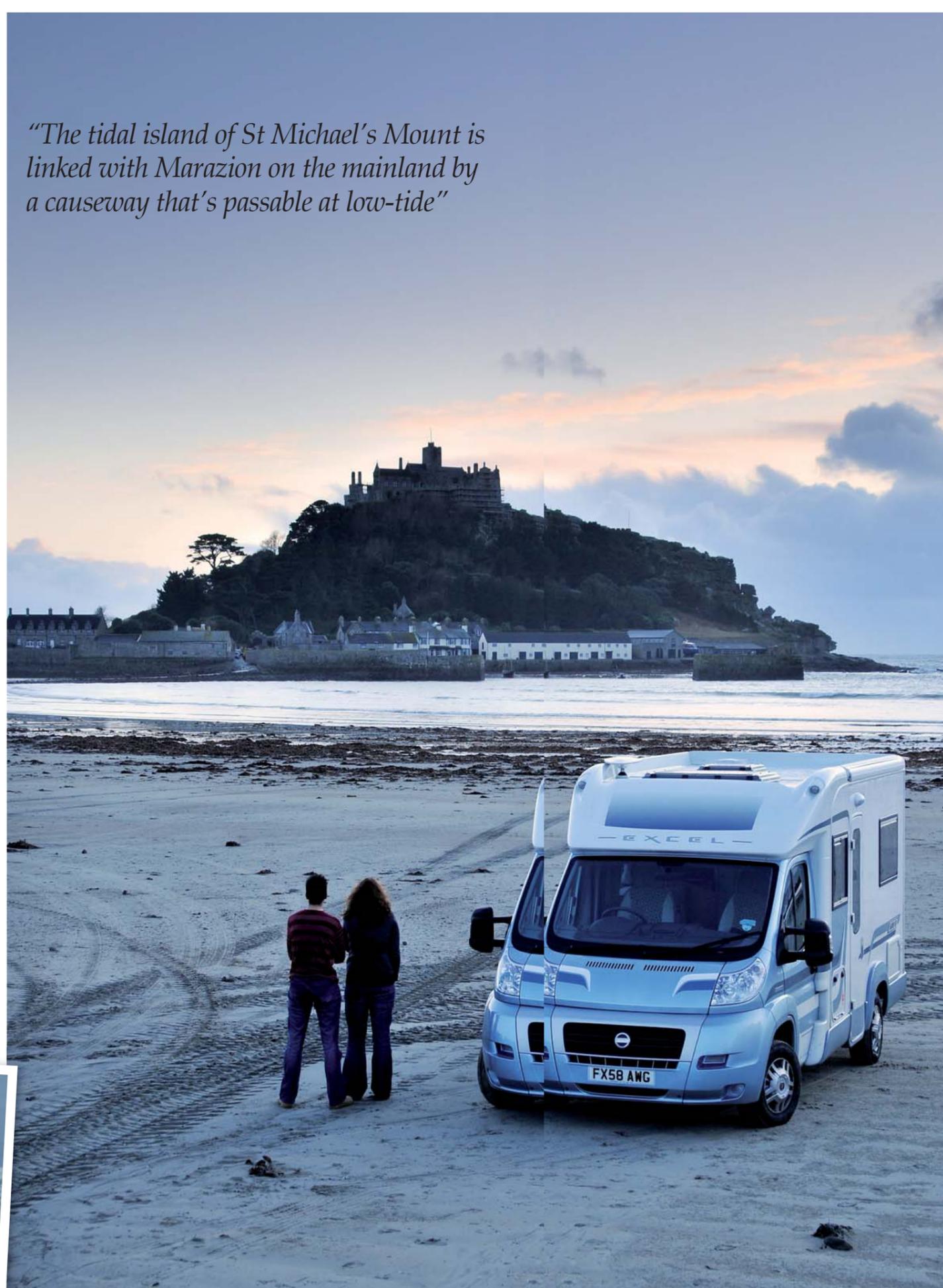
We ploughed on further west to Falmouth, one of the larger towns in the county. We parked in the station car park, and walked into the centre to explore further. Falmouth is another tourist favourite and it is easy to see why, with the maritime museum, lots of independent shops and the docks. Up on the hill above them is Pendennis Castle, a fort built by Henry VIII to protect England against attack from France and Spain. A little further up the road was a parking area at Pendennis Point, where we sat and had a coffee, while watching the local coastguard practising rescue operations in the caves that surround the bay.

We then set off to our next campsite, Pengoan Farm in Helston. We pitched up for the evening, and were awoken in the morning by the call of a rooster, a charmingly rural alarm clock. Pengoan Farm is a working egg farm, and I visited the little on-site shop to buy some lovely eggs and butter to cook a nice breakfast.

We then headed towards Penzance, the town made famous in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera 'Pirates of Penzance'. Perhaps the opera was inspired by the area's reputation for smuggling. Today, Penzance is the capital of West Cornwall, and is mainly noted for its shopping, and its views over the bay towards St Michael's Mount (www.stmichaelsmount.co.uk).

On the way we decided to take a detour to Marazion, a small village just before Penzance. Here you can access the island, either via the causeway at low

"The tidal island of St Michael's Mount is linked with Marazion on the mainland by a causeway that's passable at low-tide"



IN THE KNOW

Lyn Perry, from Bodmin, Cornwall

"There is fantastic scenery all along the Cornwall coast, and no matter where you go, there's always something new to see. I may live in the centre of the county, but I'm always going to the coastal path to walk my dog, because the views from the path are so spectacular."



CORNWALL

Main pic
Phil and Liz on the beach at Marazion, overlooking St Michael's Mount



Left, top to bottom:
Phil and Liz look out over Mevagissey harbour; a room with a view; the colourful port at Mavagissey



3 Pengoan Farm

Nancegollan, Helston, Cornwall, TR13 0BH

Tel 01326 561219

Web www.pengoan.co.uk

This site is set on a real working farm and offers 25 grass pitches with electric hook-up. It is situated near a busy B-road, which although quite noisy, isn't too intrusive. The farm shop is well stocked with local produce, as well as various accessories. The toilet block benefits from five shower cubicles, and was rebuilt recently to cater for the growth of the site (it was originally a small CS). With plenty of open space, and a pleasant and easy-to-reach location, this is one of the nicer farm sites in the county. The site is very popular, so booking is advised.

Price £8/£10 ('van, two adults and electric hook-up, in low/high season).



tide or by ferry. The castle – now maintained by the National Trust – has for centuries been the home of the St Aubyn family, and there is still a busy working community living on the island. Originally, the building was used as a Benedictine Priory which had religious links with the famous Mont St Michel in Normandy. The island also has an attractive little harbour with some shops and the Sail Loft Restaurant (tel 01736 710748).

Onwards to Lizard Point

For the final trip of the day we went up the hill again, past Penzance to Mousehole. It also offers spectacular views of St Michael’s Mount. The small fishing village is said to take its name from nearby caves (mouse holes) yet it is pronounced differently ‘Mouze-le’. As we approached we realised that the Excel wasn’t going to weave its way through the narrow streets and between the granite-built houses, so we parked up

“Mousehole is very quiet, but the location is stunning, with a small, secluded beach”

nearby and walked in. The village was very quiet, but the location was stunning, with its small, secluded beach behind us. Strolling through the village, we found a number of arts and crafts shops. It’s still very traditional, with locals running the major businesses, inns and guesthouses.

It was here that Liz and I said our goodbyes, and she headed back to London. I wasn’t finished, however, as I wanted to continue west to Land’s End. I didn’t expect to find anything undiscovered here. After all it is a major tourist attraction. I just wanted to be able to say that I had walked to the end of England.

Following a long drive I finally arrived at my final campsite. I’d chosen Little Trethvas Farm, a Camping and Caravanning Club CS, which is located about two miles from Lizard. I wanted to spend as much time on the point the following day before heading back.

And so here I am. Lizard Point is not accessible in a motorhome, but for those who enjoy a walk, I can recommend it. Peace, quiet and spectacular views. Right now everyone in the UK is behind me. It’s not a busy tourist spot; it isn’t a heavy industrial area. It is coastal, an area where you are surrounded by the sea, by spectacular views, and where you can fully appreciate the wonderful county of Cornwall.

The one thing to remember about the county is that its roads are more suited to horses, small cars and people. But, in general, car parks are motorhome-friendly and often a short walk outside of the towns and villages. The majority of the roads are easy to navigate, too – providing you’re happy to stroll down to village harbours – so it has to be one of the most motorhome-friendly counties I’ve visited.

For me, Cornwall was – in more ways than one – a long way from my home in Essex. But that’s all part of the spirit of adventure; going further than you think you can, and – to mark this new season – I really wanted to explore. A five-hour drive may seem like a long trip, but for me, it was all worthwhile because it offered the chance to discover an area of the country I hadn’t seen in many years, and which offered many surprises. That’s what motorcaravanning is all about. For me, this was not just the beginning of a new season, it was also the start of a very different one. 



Main pic
Phil and Liz strolling along the small, secluded beach at Mousehole

Bottom left
Don’t try this at home... Phil attempts to squeeze the Excel along the narrow streets of Mousehole
Bottom right
A traditional Cornish inn in Mousehole



④ Little Trethvas Farm

The Lizard, Cornwall, TR12 7AT
Tel 01326 290344
Web www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk
 This CS is just two miles from Lizard, and eight miles from Helston. If you want a quiet, tucked away site then this is perfect. The five pitches are all available with electric hook-up, and there is a small tea shop offering light lunches, which are exquisite. There is a single combined shower and toilet, but this should not pose a problem on a small site such as this. In case of bad weather, there is one handstanding area across from pitch one. The site owners are friendly and always happy to help. Water and chemical



disposal points are available on the site, and there are dishwashing and freezer facilities. The entrance to the site is a little tight, so owners of bigger vehicles may need to take care when swinging in.
Price £11 (van, two adults and electric hook-up).