

we bought a tardis



A proud moment in distant, child-free days was driving my own metallic-blue Ford Escort Ghia, complete with 'look I'm new' number plates, out of the showroom on August 1.

How life changes. A year later, I was walking down the aisle with the owner of a red Ford Sierra (4x4); two years on, he had pranged his flashy set of wheels, and I was sharing my lovely car with him and assorted baby paraphernalia. Funny how much luggage an eight-month-old-baby needs – apart from commandeering our

bought a tardis. It has never let me down. I can cram any amount of stuff in, and it just disappears. On our way back from two weeks' camping in the Loire, already laden with wine and cheese, we made the mistake of killing time in a Superstore. Suddenly we had a 15-litre tin of paint, eight rolls of wallpaper, a new carpet and a DIY loft bed. After a lot of rearranging, we made it home.

Similarly, when my Dad downsized from London townhouse to small flat and kindly suggested we helped ourselves to

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largest suitcase for his abundant clothing, he couldn't do without his own highchair, travel cot and bedding, pushchair, baby rucksack (in case we can't use the pushchair), plus crates of supplies, in case Holland doesn't sell baby food. We bought a roof-rack.

As children arrive so your money goes, and a new car moved down the list of priorities. By the time our third baby arrived, my faithful Escort was feeling the strain. Finally, after a camping holiday in Brittany with room for no more than a pair of shorts each and the essentials – tomato ketchup and baked beans (France does not sell Heinz), I rebelled. I told Sierra man that I wasn't travelling more than ten miles with the children until we got a bigger car.

First stop: people carrier showroom. Very plush, if you transport seven adults without so much as a handbag between them. Quite honestly, I felt my four-year-old could do without heated seats and coffee-cup holders. His only requirement is enough space to access vital journey equipment – teddies, books, cassette player and a medium-size doll's house with furnishings. My need, on the other hand, is to have the children sitting far enough apart to scuttle any opportunity to inflict Actual Bodily Harm on excursions such as school runs.

I've always secretly entertained the idea of

grabbing my toothbrush and hitting the open road à la Thelma and Louise – perhaps more often than is healthy since having three children, but you can escape in comfort if you take your house with you. The only vehicle that would fit the bill was a camper van.

What I didn't realise is that most campervans are sold to people who are nearly too old to drive anyway, and they require lots of nice cupboards to store china tea seats, en-suite bathrooms, fully-fitted kitchens, but no more than two seats. Yes I could see the advantage of being able to dampen my temper with a cold shower on a stressed school run, and the toilet would definitely help on long journeys, but otherwise I wasn't going to fit in three children and assorted friends.

Finally, I found a small company converting Volkswagen Transporters into basic campers, fitting in fridge, cooker, sink and some cupboards, but still leaving five seats which cleverly convert into two double beds. Having persuaded them to add a couple more chairs, we drove our van home, with children arranged in separate rows. Bliss! We then added a large, hairy dog to add pile and texture to the upholstery, and to bark at people who drive too close.

What I didn't realise was that I had actually

excess furniture, we loaded in a table, set of dining chairs, bed, a large Victorian dressing table, chest of drawers and still had room to stuff in the children, clutching plant pots.

My only trauma so far is being caught in a torrential downpour after music kindergarten with my three-year-old; the soaked key failed to activate the immobiliser. A two-hour wait for the RAC could have been a disaster, but for our tardis. We wrapped ourselves in piles of towels from an overhead locker, brewed up a couple of mugs of hot chocolate, and my daughter settled down at the table with paper and pens to draw the entire character range from Children's BBC.

An unexpected advantage, apart from having incredibly cheap holidays where I don't have to say, "No, you can't take that!" is that I benefit from White Van Syndrome. People see me heading towards them down our leafy Surrey lanes and immediately hurl themselves into ditches, convinced I am a nasty builder-type going to scratch their nice BMW. As I trundle past with kiddies and dogs waving thanks, it is a joy to see the bewilderment on their faces. The only disadvantage to owning a campervan is that I can no longer fit into multi-storey car-parks, but have to be chauffeured to the shops. Sorry, did I say disadvantage? ■