



cheese-loving dog, Paco, was yelping to have a nibble.

Our fluffy dog, Jack, proved the biggest hit. Even when we bumped into a wealthy Parisian woman visiting her holiday home, she provide down-to-earth, friendly and charming. Another stereotype bites the dust.

THE NATURAL APPROACH

With so many days on the road, our lives became a strange mix of routine (wake up, eat, cycle, eat, cycle, eat, cycle, camp) and spontaneity (new faces, tastes and languages). But perhaps nothing was quite as unpredictable as where we'd sleep every night.

Neither Zoa nor I were interested in sticking to a schedule. Daily distances change depending on the terrain, fatigue, or a mechanical breakdown. And whether the quaint villages, or countryside were worth exploring. Besides, just feeding our ravenous appetite was a hefty expense. At around 20 Euros per night (the average cost of camping in Europe), regular

accommodation was expensive, especially as we've been travelling more than a year.

So, nine times out of ten, we camped 'in the wild', wherever we were at the end of the day. Wild camping in densely populated Europe might sound an oxymoron, but you'd be surprised how many opportunities there are to pitch a tent if you keep looking, or wait until it gets dark.

Often we cycled down quiet roads and camped in small patches of woodland or abandoned fields away from traffic. As a result, rivers became our washing machine and shower, and cafes became places to charge electronics. To leave as small a footprint as possible, any 'business' was buried, and any litter taken with us. Besides a flattened rectangle of grass, a few stray rice grains and a toothpaste stain, you wouldn't know we'd been there.

Paco, our anti-social Podengo loves being away from people, where the smells of wild animals dominate and Jack is always happy when everyone's together, often sitting at the edge of the campsite and watching over us as if we were his sheep. With so much stimulation throughout the day, both are pretty eager to curl up and sleep at night.

STRANGE TALES

During our time in the charming French interior, there were several memorably wild, and not-so-wild camping episodes.

- Taking refuge in a downpour



in a pine forest outside Champagnole — the rain lasted a couple of days during which we were squashed in a ridiculously small tent.

- Camping in front of a library, our most audacious spot yet — we pitched late and packed early.

- Taking cover in an empty field during a heavy thunderstorm — not helped by Zoa's decision to share her best 'struck-by-lightning' tales.

- Loose donkeys had Jack and Paco panting with excitement — chasing them, they pulled us all the way to a blissful site atop Saint-Nazaire where we enjoyed picture-postcard views across a plunging gorge.

- Camping to the sounds of gunfire as wild pigs, chased by dogs scuttled past our tent at the

start of hunting season.

- While eating in a park near Pardies-Pietat, France, we were surprised when a man in overalls cycled up to us with his young son and offered us somewhere to spend the night. We were treated like royalty with roasted duck and wine and were overwhelmed by their generosity.

As we continued to St Jean Pied-de-Port and joined the trail of pilgrims heading across the Pyrenees, the natural frontier between France and Spain, we realised that all these unexpected encounters have left the biggest impression — the things you can't find in a guidebook. Simple things that don't come with a price-tag, like the kindness of strangers.

