

Prologue

In seven months time I was going to be forty years old. If there's ever a time to have a mid life crisis it was now. What do you do when you're having a mid life crisis? I didn't really know. I searched the web. The most popular choices, proving that you can find absolutely anything on the web, appeared to be; *Buy yourself a two seater sports car*. Nah, I've had one for five years; *Get yourself a younger woman*. Nah, Debbie, my wife of almost seven years is ten years younger than me; *Change careers*. I've done this several times already, but could be adapted; and, *Go on an expedition overseas*. Two weeks in Andalucía probably doesn't count as an expedition, this could be adapted too.

Yes, these could definitely be adapted. I was on to something here. I racked my brain for a few minutes and gave up, opened a bottle of red, with that one downed I opened another. Eureka! Give up work and go travelling. I've always been at my most creative after a few glasses of red. That's my mid life crisis thing to do.

The more wine downed, the clearer the idea became. I've never been camping before, lets go camping. Where? Errr, Spain. I like Spain and I've only ever been to Andalucía. Yes, lets go camping around the whole of Spain. I can speak it a bit, makes sense. How? I take my car. Errr, hang on. No. That's no good. I'm not going to fit much in my two seater. Yes, yes, yes, I could take Debbie's car. Ah, hold on, a slight flaw in my plan here. I'd forgotten about Debbie. Think, man. Right, there are no such things as problems only solutions. Think, come on, think. I poured another glass. Of course, the solution is obvious. Debbie could come too. Sorted. You're a genius. An absolute genius. I think I may have passed out somewhere around here.

Debbie agreed to come, once she'd obtained a leave of absence from work. Three weeks later the drunken idea had quickly been formulated into a

three month camping tour of France, Spain and Portugal, the majority of it in Spain. On sober reflection, camping for three months had sounded a tad excessive, so we built some hotel, guesthouse and apartment stays into our schedule and pre-booked them.

With three days to go before departure we had a mountain of camping gear in the front room, worthy of any Arctic expedition. With zero camping experience between us, we had been relying on Ray Mears repeats on satellite and camping websites to tell us what to take. Some of it we knew we'd need, some of it we were not so sure about. We'd bought it anyway.

"We've done a trial tent erection, we better do a trial pack of the car as well, hadn't we?" Debbie said to me. Good idea, I hadn't thought of that.

We had a problem. It wouldn't all fit in the boot of the car. It would all fit when we piled the remainder on the back seat. The rear suspension groaned under the weight of it all. It was also an open invitation to your average opportunist smash and grab merchant.

"We'll have to buy one of those roof box things." Debbie said. More bloody expense, I thought.

We went straight down to our local motoring superstore. A spotty kid in the store uniform was hovering about more interested in staring at his female colleague's backside than potential customers, it was waving about in the air mesmerically as she stacked some of the lower shelves. It was quite a nice backside too. No time for that just now though, I need a roof box.

"Excuse me, can you help me?" I asked him.

"I suppose so." He sighed, tearing himself away from the swaying backside.

"Can you fit one of these to a Fiat Punto?" I asked pointing to the display of roof boxes.

"Not sure. I'll have to check." He said displaying excellent product knowledge. He walked off to find out and returned a few minutes later.

"Yeah, you can fit these to a Fiat Punto."

"I'll have one then."

"You'll need roof bars."

"Okay, I'll have some roof bars too."

"And you'll need brackets."

"Right, roof box, bars and brackets. I still want one."

"We might not have the roof bars or brackets in stock, though."

"Can you check, please?" I said, trying very hard not to sound irritated. He walked over to a computer screen. I followed him. He started tapping the keys.

"We've got the roof bars."

"Excellent. And the brackets?" I said trying to hurry him up.

"No, we haven't got any" He said after tapping away at his stock screen again.

"Can you get them in?" I asked.

"We could get you some in from our Canterbury store."

"And when would that be?" I asked hopefully.

"Sometime next week, I guess."

"How about if I drive up there and pick them up myself?"

"Yeah, that's cool, I suppose. Unusual but cool."

"And then you can fit it today?"

"No, the fitter called in sick this morning."

"Tomorrow?"

"I doubt it."

"Could your other store fit it today or tomorrow then?"

"I dunno, I'd have to phone them." It sounded like way too much trouble.

"Forget it," with my patience tested way beyond normal human endurance I gave up. "I'll sort it out myself, pal."

I tried their other store. They were ever so, only ever so, slightly more helpful but still couldn't fit it for us until we'd be on the other side of the

Channel. I got the Yellow Pages out, found a back street motor factors in Canterbury and gave them a call, explaining what I was after and the speedy fitting requirements.

"Yeah, no problem, mate. We've only got the larger boxes in stock at the mo', but we've got all the bits for a Punto. Get down here tomorrow morning and we'll fit it for you," said the helpful lad on the end of the phone.

The next morning, Debbie, the two lads from the motor factors and me stood back and admired their work. Our red Punto now had a great silver box attached to the roof. It was big. Seven hundred litres had been difficult to visualise on the phone. It was bigger than big. It was absolutely enormous.

"Looks like a spaceship mate." One of the lads said.

"A bloody big spaceship." His mate added.

"It looks stupid." Debbie said. It looked ridiculous.

"At least we can take everything with us now." I offered.

We loaded the car on Sunday afternoon, getting a much better weight distribution than when it was all in the back, sort of. We now needed a name for our expedition transport. I looked up the Spanish for Silver Spaceship. It was a bit of a mouthful. We lost the silver and shortened it to the spaceship. *El Astronave* was named in a brief ceremony with half a bottle of cheap own brand supermarket Spanish lager. To use the correct Spanish it should have been named *La Astronave*, but there's no way I'm driving around Spain for ninety days in a female spaceship.