



WHAT A SHOWER

Carol Kubicki considers one's ablutions

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We have a Devon Sundowner, a long-wheelbase VW that comes with a toilet, but no shower room; we are therefore reliant on campsite facilities to keep clean, be accepted by society and be invited into other people's 'vans. One consequence of our choice is that we only enjoy the odd grubby night at other overnight spots with no facilities and mostly use campsites.

Having spent 435 nights in eight different countries on 176 different campsites in the 'van over the past three years I now consider myself something of an expert on the variety that is campsite showers.

Any first night on a site for myself and partner involves a discussion about the sanitary facilities. Whoever saunters off to have a shower first reports back to the other on the facilities, using six criteria that are important to us; the experience we have can make or break a campsite's rating.

One: spatial matters

Neither of us is beyond average in size, in fact at 5 foot 3 inches I seem to be on the short side these days, if the attendance at festivals and rock concerts is anything to go by. Or do the tall people just stand in front of me? However, many campsite shower cubicles seem to be designed for people who never even bend their elbows or try to wash their feet.

We have used shower cubicles not big enough to hang your towel far enough away from the shower to prevent it getting sodden, never mind having a patch of tiling to stand on that is dry when you get dressed. After showering the clean camper is left trying to slide damp feet through knickers without making contact!

Occasionally we find a site with spacious facilities, larger than our bijou bathroom in Salford, a delightful site at Torino di Sangro in Italy springs to mind, we showered with arms outstretched here.

Two: water issues

While I think a good shower has to be scalding hot, my partner is more of a temperate man, so we like to use showers that are adjustable and allow for the range of tastes humanity clearly has. As well as the temperature of the water, the amount of water is a consideration. Is the shower just a dribble that wouldn't wet a kitten or is it a full on downpour that small children could swim in?

Three: shower on/off controls

I am not at all keen on showers where you have to keep pushing a knob to keep the water flowing, although I did laugh the time Anthony returned from one shower looking like he was entering the wet t-shirt competition after leaning back against the knob after drying and getting dressed (yes, it was

one of those shower cubicles that is spatially challenged). These push-button controls can be set for different lengths of time, and some campsites set them for such a short time there isn't even chance to dampen your flannel before it has gone off, others keep flowing for so long you regret pressing it one last time near the end of your shower, as you wait for it to finish before you



The lovely municipal site in Vallouise in the Ecrins National Park; a campsite with such entertaining showers

can reach for your towel.

Another way for campsite owners to amuse their campers is to have sensor controlled showers. I don't really understand how these work, except that I have to keep moving to produce water and I have used showers that you have to dance under as you shower to ensure a steady flow; this can be fine and lots of fun, particularly on a site that has piped music, so long as no one is watching.

It had to be a French campsite that came up with the most difficult on/off control for a shower, in the delightful spot of Vallouise in the Ecrins National Park in the French Alps, the municipal campsite came up with a new torture. To activate and run the shower you have to continuously pull a chain, similar to an old fashioned toilet flush; try doing that with one hand while you simultaneously wash your hair with the other!

Four: peripherals in the shower cubicle

After careful consideration we have decided that three hooks in a shower cubicle is the minimum we need (please note campsite owners who might be reading this); one for your towel, one for your grubby clothes and one for the clean stuff you intend to put on, any more and we are beside ourselves with joy.

The best shower cubicles also have a small shelf for your shower gel, shampoo and flannel; this makes the shower a more relaxed experience, rather than something similar to taking part in a Jane Fonda workout... And bend for shower gel... And up to push the button to restart the shower... And bend to put down the shower gel.. And up to press the button again... And bend ...

A stool or bench to sit on while you dry your feet is such a luxury, we feel so spoilt when the campsite owner has decided to provide one.

Five: cleanliness is next to a four-star rating

It is fantastic if you can time your shower immediately after the cleaner has visited and you can enjoy the sparkling just-cleaned facilities. Otherwise it is lovely when there is a mop to clear up the muddy footprints of the person before you and enable you to leave the shower sparkling for the next camper. Of course, different campsites have different ideas of what is considered spotless and I am sure we all of our horror tales to tell of facilities that haven't seen a splash of bleach for some time.

We have shared showers with large spiders, moths, lizards, and, in France, brilliant green tree frogs that sat quietly on the top of the partitions waiting for insects to hover near. Sometimes there can be more wildlife in the sanitary block than anywhere else.

Six: if you can't stand the heat

This criterion is only an issue when the outdoor temperature stops us from wearing shorts. In many Mediterranean countries, those showers on the outside of the building with doors that end 15cm from the ground are lovely to use when it is over 20C outside, but a different prospect in February when a harsh breeze can be blowing around your ankles as you shower.

I have noticed that campsite owners in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal often build their sanitary facilities with their busy summer months in mind, with cool floor tiles, small windows to keep the hot sun out and an open, airy design, and yet will then remain open all year. In my experience, it can become quite cool in these countries December to March and taking a tepid shower when there is no heating and not even the warmth of the daytime sun is reaching the shower cubicles can be a chilling episode. It has never been quite uncomfortable enough to make us want to go home or buy a bigger 'van, but certainly occasionally has made us decide that a wipe with a flannel in the, van, with the heater on full will keep us decent for another day. ■