

With the October half term fast approaching, **Jon Stock** suggests a novel, traffic-free approach to exploring Cornwall. Overleaf, **Judith Woods** describes a memorable – and affordable – family holiday with friends in adjoining rented apartments close to Venice

Taking the waters around Falmouth

Think of holidays in Cornwall, and what springs to mind? Flat beaches, rolling surf, slate-roofed fishing villages, Roskilly's ice cream, translucent rock pools and... traffic. The county's narrow winding lanes and stone hedges pricked with yellow gorse have an earthy charm, redolent of ancient field patterns, but they don't mix with modern caravans and 4x4s weighed down with bikes.

So it was with some satisfaction that on our most recent family trip to Cornwall, we decided to spend three days without a car, exploring Falmouth and the surrounding area entirely by boat. We were staying in St Mawes, at the tip of the Roseland peninsula on the south coast, which felt vaguely disloyal. We have always taken our holidays in Mousehole, towards Land's End, where my wife's mother and grandmother

grew up. But St Mawes is a village that I'm growing to love. Perhaps it was our location, a spacious self-catering house called Moonrakers, just above Tresanton, Olga Polizzi's signature hotel. From our landscaped garden, we had uninterrupted views across the bay towards St Anthony's Head, a stretch of timeless, unspoilt coastline.

It was the owner of Moonrakers who first told us about Fal River Links, an innovative transport scheme that lets you travel around by boat. "You can go everywhere on it," Amanda Selby said. "All the way up the River Fal to Truro. It makes sense – we're surrounded by water here."

We made some inquiries and wondered why Fal River Links and its Mussel Visitor card weren't more widely known. For £71, our family (two adults and three children) could enjoy unlimited hop-on, hop-



HELENY STOCK



off ferry journeys for three days on a network of ferries and boats linking St Mawes, Falmouth, Truro and the Helford River. What's more, we were also entitled to free travel on local bus services and the train linking Falmouth to Truro.

We began with a trip from St

Mawes to Falmouth on the Duchess of Cornwall, a stylish wooden 60ft ferryboat that was launched by Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall in 2008. Our card was already feeling like a bargain. A normal family return ferry ticket from St Mawes to Falmouth costs

Essentials

• The King Harry and St Mawes ferries run 364 days a year. Other ferries generally run from Easter to the end of October, but check first.
• For booking and information about the Fal River Links scheme, the Mussel Visitor and Visitor Plus cards, see falriver.co.uk.
• Visitor cards are only available until November 4 and can be bought online (falriver.co.uk/mussel - five per cent discount), or from ticket offices in

St Mawes, Truro and Falmouth.
• A one-day Visitor card for one adult costs £18; a three-day card costs £27; a six-day costs £42; for a family (two adults, three children) it costs £45. A three-day family card costs £71; a six-day card £115.
• Jon Stock's holiday house was booked through St Mawes Retreats, a group of five self-catering houses in St Mawes and Fowey (0845 319 0412; stmawesretreats.co.uk).
• Rick Stein's Fish, Falmouth

(01841 532700; rickstein.com/Rick-Steins-Fish-Falmouth.html)
• Tresanton Hotel (01326 270055; tresanton.com)
• Trellisick Garden (01872 862090; nationaltrust.org.uk/trellisick)
• For details of private tours at Tregothnan botanic garden and tea plantation, see tregothnan.co.uk
• For local information about the Roseland peninsula, see roselandonline.co.uk

Jon Stock and his family take a ferry across Carrick Roads near Falmouth; the Polish tall ship, the Fryderyk Chopin, is moored in the harbour there

October 2010, it was dismasted in a storm off the Scilly Isles and towed into the harbour, where it remained for many months while it was repaired.

After lunch at Rick Stein's Fish

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Family holidays



The Duchess of Cornwall ferry in the harbour at St Mawes

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(smaller queues than in Padstow, better fish and chips – £12.75 for two courses), we took in the National Maritime Museum, using a Mussel Visitor Plus card. For £38, it gave us free access (but no free transport) for three days to the museum, Fendennis and St Mawes Castles, Glendurgan, Trellisick, Lamorran and Carnivon Gardens.

Having clambered over the museum's Sea King search and rescue helicopter, we took the ferry up to Truro, heading across Carrick Roads, the name of the estuary's outer tidal basin, and up the River Fal. Our boat was a 1961 ferry called Enterprise 1, part of a fleet owned by two local families – the Johns and Berrymans – who have been operating on the Fal

'The Duchess of Cornwall, with its old-world charm, proved to be our favourite'

since the Fifties. The on-board commentary was informed without being intrusive. We learnt about the working sailing boats that harvest Cornish native oysters in the Carrick Roads reach, by hand-hauling traditional small dredges. The vessels race competitively in the summer and work in the winter in what is the last oyster fishery in Europe harvested under sail. We also passed mussel beds in the estuary, the shells clustered on ropes dangling in the water. Next to them was a great bulk of a car ferry, the blue-and-white Norman Bridge, laid up in the recession because of rising fuel costs. This deep stretch of river has a number of "lay up berths" and acts as a local barometer of the global economy. Farther up river, past Mylor and Restronguet creeks, we came across Trellisick gardens. A number

of passengers disembarked here to explore for free the deep-wooded valleys and elevated gardens, using their Mussel Visitor Plus cards. You can also pick up a regular ferry to Smugglers Cottage at Tolverne. This 500-year-old establishment served as an embarkation point during the D-Day landings and was once visited by General Eisenhower. A terraced, riverside restaurant, currently closed, will reopen in 2014. We decided to head towards Truro. On our right we passed the Tregothnan estate, home to Britain's first tea plantation. Through the trees, we caught glimpses of the 9th Viscount Falmouth's magnificent stately home, the family seat of the Boscawen family.

Next up was the magical King Harry Floating Bridge. Tucked away on the river where the banks are cloaked with sessile oak trees, this famous chain ferry was established in 1888 and links the parishes of Peack and Philligh on the Roseland, saving a 27-mile detour via Truro. We decided to turn around at Malpas, one mile short of Truro, and head back down the river. The journey from Falmouth to Truro takes between 75 and 90 minutes, bringing you into the harbour, next to the bus station.

Over the next few days, we took the passenger boat from St Mawes to Place, from where we walked the south-west coastpath. And we went back and forth to Falmouth – the Duchess of Cornwall, with its old-world charm, proved to be our favourite ferry. We also hopped across from Falmouth to Flushing, characterised by its fishing quay and elegant, sea-facing town houses that were once owned by captains of packet ships. As for the Visitor card, now in its third year, we couldn't fault it. "The idea is to create a sustainable transport network... while reducing the number of cars on already congested roads," says Tommy Tonkins of Fal River Cornwall. Anything that reduces the number of cars on Cornwall's lanes floats my boat. **JS**

Venice from afar was child's play

Two Italian men were nodding in respectful approval at my husband as we stepped off the Venice vaporetto. "Forza," they muttered. "strong." A gaggle of women were clapping their palms together and crying "Complimenti! Complimenti!" The reason we were being feted is in Fred and Angeline? Like them, we were travelling around with an enormous brood of children.

As we shepherded five children around – three strapping boys, two winsome girls – we were congratulated at every turn. The passers-by weren't to know that the boys belonged to our friends, who had sloped off to The Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

Italy is suffering a major decline in the birth rate – just 1.23 babies per woman, compared with 1.98 in the UK and 2.03 in France – so it was really rather lovely to be treated as a novelty rather than a nuisance. But of course, some of you will still be choking over the fact we took a gaggle of children to Venice.

Enter madness! To be fair, we weren't staying in Venice, but on the mainland, 20 minutes away in the handsome little market town of Mirano (not to be confused with the island of Murano, famous for its glass making).

On our numerous visits to La Scerifissima, however, I can report that although by day it was busy in St Mark's Square and insanely crowded on the Rialto Bridge, by late afternoon, when the tourists had departed, it was as deserted and breathtakingly atmospheric as a sequence from *Don't Look Now*. I'd visited Venice more than a decade ago, and was eager to return. But with two daughters aged 10 and

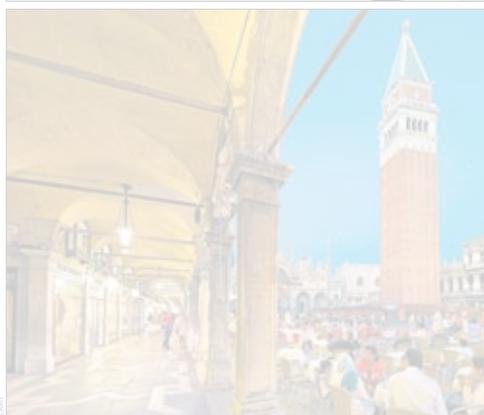


three, I felt that leisurely day trips, interspersed with beach outings, would make for a more relaxing holiday than an exhausting full-body cultural immersion in the city for several days at once.

Our friends, who had lent us their three boys, were also keen to join us, and by a stroke of good fortune (i.e. a 72-hour marathon spent trawling the internet), we found a villa online which comprised two identical but separate apartments, with a garden.

Having holidayed with friends a few times, my conclusion is that the key to harmony is ensuring each family has its own space (however small) and can close the door without causing offence when there is a need for sulking or napping.

Best of all there was a kidney-shaped swimming pool, big enough to keep the children happy; not so large that they'd refuse to leave it. While the decidedly suburban Casa Lila wasn't the sort of remote Italian retreat surrounded by Lombardy poplars most of us dream of, it was not only great value for money, but with a total of five children to feed, it was darned handy for the local supermarket, restaurants and bars – and the mandatory stop-offs at the gelateria. The Veneto itself isn't regarded by



Clockwise from above: cafe life in the Piazza San Marco; the view towards Venice from the Lido; golden moments in a gondola

the British as a must-see region of Italy; not as pretty as Umbria, not as unexplored as Calabria, it reaches from the Dolomites to the Adriatic. But its highlights – apart from the glittering jewel that is Venice – include Padua, Verona, Vicenza and (for a day trip) Lake Garda.

We flew to Treviso airport from where a half-hour's drive took us to Mirano. At the top of our road was the best butcher's in the area, so we stocked up on fabulous meat for the barbecue, popped open a bottle of prosecco – and loasted la dolce vita. Our mornings were typically frittered away lounging by the pool and as the children entertained

each other, we were actually able to read the books we'd brought. Some afternoons we would drive north to Lido di Jesolo, or perhaps south to the beach at Chioggia, a little fishing port with canals and narrow streets, billed, over optimistically as "Little Venice".

One day we made a trip to Padua to see the breathtaking Giotto fresco at Cappella degli Scrovegni and visit the excellent museum. On another we ventured to Vicenza to admire the Teatro Olimpico and other buildings by Palladio. We also headed off early (but as it transpired not early enough)

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