

A woman in a red bikini is sitting on a large, mossy tree branch that extends over a turquoise lake. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a dense forest with vibrant green foliage. The water is a clear, bright turquoise color.

TAKE A DIP *on the* WILD SIDE

With vast areas of land to provide everyone with their bit of wilderness, France is an ideal place for family adventure holidays. From skinny dipping in lakes to camping out in treehouses, take a trip across the Channel this year for a magical experience for all >>

WORDS *Andrea Mynard* PHOTOGRAPHY *Daniel Start*

Gouffre De St-Sauver

ALWAYS KEEN TO HAVE ADVENTURES outside and mess about by water, I'm very grateful that I have a five year old as an excuse for going a bit wild. There seems to be a good choice of places to stay in France that positively encourage these sort of adventures.

With nostalgic memories of my own childhood reading Swallows and Amazons and the Water Babies, I was particularly pleased when my daughter declared Wind in the Willows her favourite book. Great to have a reason to revisit this gorgeously illustrated book covering the scrapes and japes of Mr Toad, Mole, Ratty and Wise Badger.

How pleased I was to see a copy of Daniel Start's Wild Swimming France

in the hot regions of the south.'

Before I was a Mum, in the days when a walk meant treks in the Lake District or attempting to climb Mont Blanc rather than getting lost in some woods while playing with sticks or finding a troll bridge, I thought it would be a great idea to mark on walking maps those easily accessible spots lower down the mountains, the ones that would be perfect to revisit for picnics, paddles and swims. Of course I mostly forgot, or can't now remember where the maps are. So I was so excited to see the numerous recommendations in Wild Swimming France for places to swim in natural plunge pools, dive into tranquil mountain tarns and dip your toes in shallow woodland lakes. Daniel gives very precise directions of how to find them, including a mention of how long the walk is from the nearest parking spot. Ideal for those with young children: you can plan your watery adventures to

'IN RURAL FRANCE THERE ARE OVER 1300 "OFFICIAL" RIVER BEACHES, ITS RIVERS ARE SO NUMEROUS THAT FRENCH DEPARTEMENTS ARE NAMED AFTER THEM'

at just the point when encouraging adventures in the great outdoors seemed appealing. And just as his original Wild Swimming had me dreaming of picnics by lovely meandering rivers in the English countryside, Daniel's new book inspired me to plan camping trips across the channel.

In rural France there are over 1,300 "official" river beaches. In fact, its rivers are so numerous that French departements are named after them and three major sets of mountains ensure, as Daniel says, 'plenty of crystal clear water to keep them flowing, even

suit the capabilities of your family.

There are of course some amazingly dramatic places only suitable for very experienced swimmers, with wonderful descriptions from Daniel: he describes a spot in the Alpes-Maritimes where the Esteron river has cut a silvery cliff in the mountains, only to emerge in a string of jade pools and white rock ledges. Very capable swimmers can continue upstream into the heart of the clue, where 'you will find yourself in the bowels of the mountains. Here, blue water gushes and thunders around and shafts of light filter >



Favourite places for a family swim

Lac D'Ilay, Jura In the waterfall country of Jura and the Franche-Comte, this shallow gravel-bottomed natural lake is perfect for peaceful swim-

ming – or splashing! It warms up quickly and is set among rolling hills with shady trees to picnic beneath.

Bord de Ceze is a great little beach, ideal for paddling and swimming after re-enacting your favourite fairy

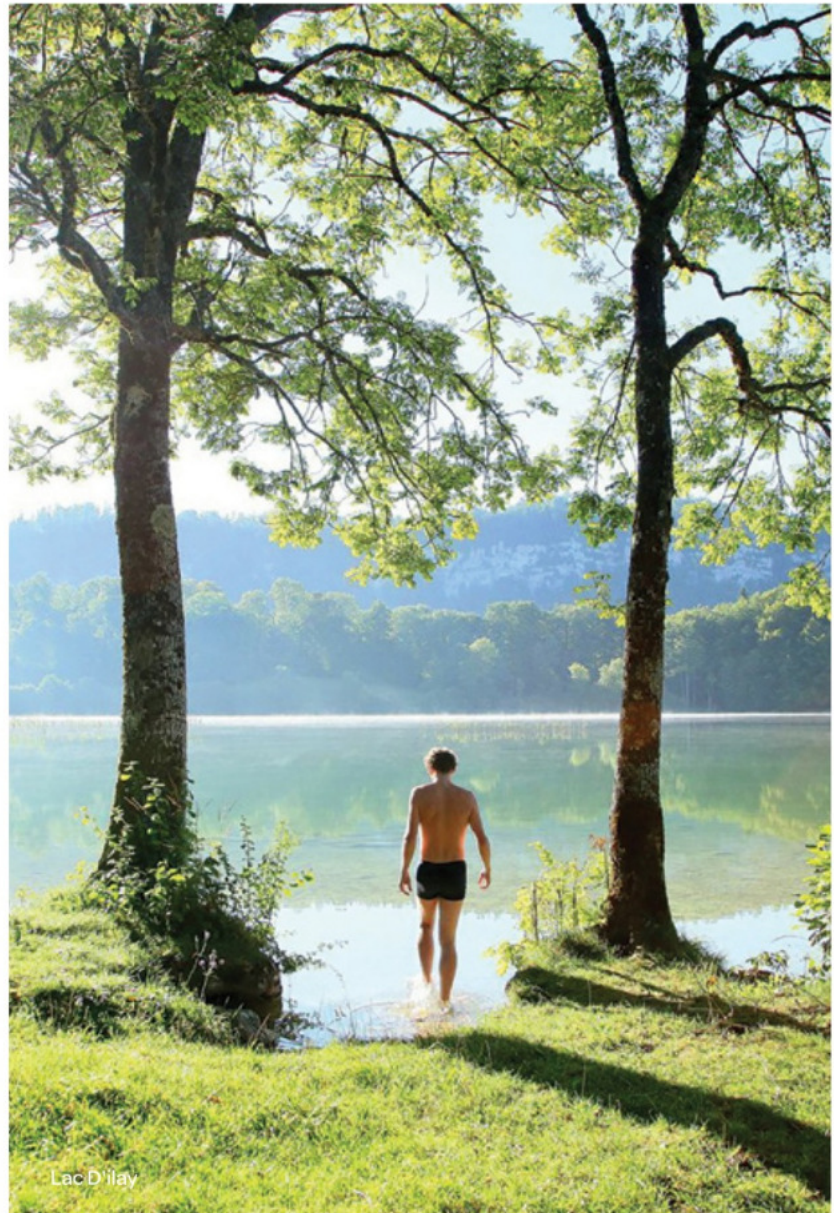
stories. And it's only three minutes walk to the beach. **Clue de Pierrefeu, Alpes –Maritimes** So close to the developed coastline of Provence, yet so wildly beautiful, many of the Clues with their spectacular

rock formations are challenging environments but this has shallow, pretty pools and small slides in a fern-filled woodland, perfect for children **Bord de Ceze, Languedoc** Both the Languedoc and Corbieres re-

gions are well watered by the Herault and Vis rivers, which 'gush out of great cave openings into enchanted fern-hung grottoes'. I think my daughter would love adventures here, imagining she was in fairyland.



Pont Du Diable



Lac D'Illy

TIPS FOR A WILD HOLIDAY

1 Skinny dipping without any kit may be good for adults but parents may need to plan a little more: depending on location, consider footwear, goggles, wetsuits for colder areas and always pack towels, sunscreen and insect repellent.

2 Consider eco-friendly transport. There are great train links to and within

France and it's often easy to hire bikes at campsites.

4 Wild camping, although tempting, is illegal in France.

3 Take care with young children and non-swimmers near water, remembering that even shallow sections of fast-flowing water can knock you off your feet. Make sure you scout out

the water first, set clear boundaries and supervise.

5 Check official signs at bathing destinations. At "Baignade surveillee" lifeguards are provided and you can swim only when they are supervising water. At "Baignade non surveillee" authorities recognise that people swim here, but trust them to bathe responsibly. At

"Baignade interdite" swimming is prohibited by local councils but the ban is cheerfully ignored by local people! Many councils place these signs at traditional swimming places to indemnify themselves against the risk of a claim for damages.

6 Never jump into water you haven't thoroughly checked for depth and obstructions.



Cascades de Purcaraccia



Fisherman's Cabin, Dordogne



Earthship Perrine, Manche

'THE SHEER WILDNESS AND BEAUTY OF THEIR NATURAL PLACES HAS ALWAYS LURED ME TO FRANCE'

> down from the high roof above. As the water deepens and churns, you can almost imagine how Jonah must have felt as he climbed through the ribbed channels and cavities of the Great Whale.'

Powerful descriptions such as these remind me that there's something primeval about our reconnection with water. A yearning for the soothing, refreshing or often exhilarating pleasures of rivers, lakes and tarns. And while Daniel directs us to fabulous plunge pools in the "Wild Hills" around Nice (it's reminding me of the Wild Wood, can quite imagine Mr Toad toot-tooting in jaunty style around the Clues of Provence) where the adventurous can swim in waterfalls and dive into fabulous aquamarine pools, there are some great recommendations in Wild Swimming France for places with shallow water that are perfect for family fun.

There are also great recommendations for finding good waterside food, chateaux (or fairytale castles) and where to skinny dip. The pictures and descriptions of the Pyrenees with walks through meadows of alpine flowers to shimmering tarns remind me of Heidi. I know my geography is a bit askew but I can picture my daughter running through wild pastures, pretending she's off to tend to the goats. >>

THE BEST PLACES TO STAY

There seems to be a good choice of places to stay in France that positively encourage adventures. Canopy and Stars (canopyandstars.co.uk) has a great range of quirky places of the glamping kind that definitely bring out the big kid in me; treehouses, yurts, and cabins in woodland all seem perfect bases for family fun. Alastair Sawday, who founded Sawdays and Canopy & Stars says that for him France has been a personal favourite for family holidays for years, with 'generous open spaces and beautiful countryside' being a big draw. 'The sheer wildness and beauty of their natural places has always lured me to France – canoeing down the rivers of the Lot and the Aveyron, never afraid that a motorway will thunder around the next corner,' says Alastair. 'France is big – and they nurture so well what they have. The French have for years poured resources into their countryside, creating impeccable campsites, swimmable lakes galore, forest trails and long-range footpaths that rival our own. They have even stolen a march

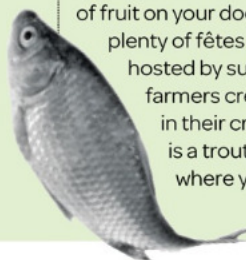
on us by creating the loveliest of treehouses and quirky places to stay – unconstrained, perhaps, by the UK's dispiriting obsession with the rules.'

Fisherman's Cabin, Dordogne

canopyandstars.co.uk/fishermans
A cabin on a private lake in the midst of oak, chestnut, wild acacia and birch woodland, perfect for wild swimming. Because of the Lake, it suits families with over fives. Eco-friendly with solar panels, a waterwheel in the woods and compost loo.

Earthship Perrine, Manche

canopyandstars.co.uk/earthship
An extra-terrestrial looking dwelling made entirely of natural and recycled materials, that conserves all its own energy and water. A jungly garden runs along the central corridor, there are three large bedrooms and extra space for a cot and you can pick from a mountain of fruit on your doorstep. In summer plenty of fêtes and festivals are hosted by surrounding villages, farmers create "maize mazes" in their crop fields and there is a trout fishing lake nearby where you can catch your own supper.





ADVENTURE HOLIDAYS

for 7-17 year olds



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Le Moulin de Cost



Ravine de Redebraus



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FAVOURITE CAMPING SPOTS

Cool Camping France has enticing pictures of places to camp and a good range of campsites that offer a suitable base for wild swimming/adventures holidays too.

Camping La Cascade The campsite's hospitable French owners, Marie-Hélène and Eric Marilou, have kept it deliberately natural, with just a smattering of wooden chalets (13 to be exact) and a huge amount of space for campers. There are 50 pitches in total, split between two main fields (plus a couple in a delightful little hidden area next to a stream). Wherever you pitch your tent you'll get lots of space and lovely open-sky views, either of the handsome Causs Méjean or the fresh, towering pines on the other side. In the morning the first sounds you're likely to hear are bells and sheep. **Nearest Wild Swimming spot:** *Cascade de Tapoul*.



'WHEREVER YOU PITCH YOUR TENT YOU'LL GET LOTS OF SPACE AND LOVELY OPEN-SKY VIEWS'

Mille Etoiles Experienced campers who celebrate the great outdoors, who like being active, and who can always opt for a little luxury (a proper bed to sleep on) get the most out of a stay here. Five natural canvas forest yurts on pine platforms are scattered decent distances apart. The Village, a tent-only camping field, is situated near a facilities block and all guests share the kids' playground, camp café, and paddling pool. If wildlife is all the luxury you need, bag one of the 20 pitches there or in the woods. **Nearest Wild Swimming spot:** *Pont d'arc*.

Camping Moulin de Cost These site-owners are so welcoming you'll feel as though family friends have invited you round to use their pool: a trickling river runs along the foot of a track. A cavernous dining room

is tucked inside, a hop and skip from the courtyard bar. Camping Le Moulin de Cost is the genuine – French and uncommercial – article. **Nearest Wild Swimming spot:** *Lower Toulourenc*.

MORE INSPIRATION

READ For more magical wild swimming locations in France see wildswimming.com

VISIT For details of over a thousand formally monitored (by French authorities) swimming spots in France, see Baignades.sante.goux.fr (In English as well as French)

SEE Andrea Mynard's blog is full of gorgeous photography and ideas for family activities and adventures - shabbychick.me.uk.

MOTHER & SON *Adventure*

Catherine Mack takes her son on their annual cycling trip and discovers a circular route around Ramsgate



AS I LOOK OUT AT THE CALM WATERS AROUND Ramsgate in Kent, I should keep my eyes peeled for lurking gremlins apparently. Or 'Goodwins', to be precise. The Goodwin Sands is a ten mile sand-bank just off the coast which has to be remapped every six months due to its constant movement. There have been numerous wrecks over the years. 'These sands can swallow up ships in seconds,' says Dr. Alasdair Bruce, our walking guide for the day. 'Sometimes, when the sands suddenly shift, an old wreck is regurgitated. We get a U-Boat popping up every fifteen years or so along here.'

This concept of movement fascinates me as I continue my stroll along the coastline from Ramsgate to Broadstairs with our guide who is otherwise known as the Rock Doc. Alasdair is the fossil expert of the area, a coastline which is a gorgeous stretch

of white cliffs and sands to me, but to him is one big, geological piñata. Bash it a bit and treats fly out at you in all different directions. And judging from the bits of chalk everywhere, some in small scattered piles, others in giant rock falls, these cliffs are also constantly moving. This pedagogical promenade is thanks to a superb initiative called Active Ramsgate (ramsgatetown.org) set up by Ramsgate Town Council to show people the walking and cycling possibilities on this fascinating stretch of coastline. They offer regular and free guided walks, making this one veritable treat filled town. Because not only does the Rock Doc have us picking out vertebrates and plant fossils; he also shows us bee colonies thriving on coastal flowering ivy and has us foraging for wild sea spinach, samphire and rocket. This man is not just a rock doc. He's a gem. >

PHOTO: CATHERINE MACK