



ILLUSTRATIONS TONY GROGAN

The case for the mobile holiday home

Why waste cash on hotels when you can sleep in your car?

Richard Asher would rather spend the money on a slap-up breakfast.

Cars. We love them, really, we do. We keep them cleaner than we keep ourselves. We cry when they get scratched and we build little houses for them. We gobble up magazine reviews on them. We have heated debates about which ones we like, even if we couldn't change a spark plug to save our lives.

We also take them on holiday with us.

But although we're far more passionate about cars than beds – I still struggle to understand this – few of us choose to sleep in our vehicles on our travels. I too had never considered this until money got really low one night on the road, and my life changed forever.

My new philosophy is that if you can't afford to rent a car *and* pay for a hotel, take the car. When money's tight, it's an obvious choice. Think about it: You can't drive a hotel.

The satisfaction is immense. You wake up in the morning and – provided this isn't the moment you realise how dodgy the spot is that you chose to park the car – your first thought is, "I've beaten the system!"

You have money in your pocket and there are no arguments about minibar bills, and you're ready to start your day's exploring – at just about the time you'd be groaning your way to the en-suite bathroom.

And you can spend all that extra money on a good meal. Which brings me to another great

piece of wisdom: You can't eat a hotel room...

WHEN IT COMES to choosing a safe parking spot for the night, there are two schools of thought. One says stay somewhere populated but quiet, like the middle-class suburban street I once chose in the rugby-mad, dog-infested French city of Perpignan.

Yes, passers-by may see you and give you funny looks. Bored teenagers may tap on your window and pull faces. The odd scooter might rouse you, and those pesky streetlights can make things a bit too bright for nodding off. It works reasonably well, as long as you're an easy sleeper and not self-conscious, and you'll be safe.

Somehow, though, I've always

found myself leaning towards the other philosophy, which is to find somewhere secluded. Get yourself a spot that is unlikely to be visited by anybody in the dark hours.

The downside to this, which is a major con for those with a vivid imagination, is that if anybody does happen to pass such a place in the night, they're probably not the sort of person you would want to meet. And nobody will hear you scream.

It depends where you are, of course. In Western Europe, dark fields and forest tracks work well. The first time I parked in a pitch-black forest recess somewhere in northern Belgium, though, it was thoroughly terrifying. I heard footsteps and scrapings all night, and convinced myself the wolf-man

was doing laps around my car.

But when sunlight made its welcome return, I woke up to a melody of twittering birds and realised that this was Belgium. Wolf-man indeed... the most threatening person I was likely to meet on that dirt track was Tintin. Darkness plays games with the mind, but one grows out of it. Eventually.

Still, it makes sense not to arouse suspicion. You're probably harmless, but others won't know that. And in South Africa they may assume the worst. So walk the line between secluded and looking like you have something to hide.

It really helps if you find your parking spot before sunset. Poking around in the dark looking for a car camp involves much more guesswork than in the daytime, and what looks at night like an empty field can turn out in the morning to be a nuclear test site.

That said, I've never done a daylight search; I'm not that organised.

THE NEXT CHALLENGE is finding a comfortable position. It helps if you're a small person, in which case the back seat may just suffice. But you have to be microscopic to make it work. The less you can stretch your legs, the weirder your upper-body position becomes, and dead arms and neck spasms become a serious issue.

A better option is making sure you have a station wagon. These can cost a little more, but if you put the back seats down you're left with a space big enough for most people to stretch out in.

Failing that, you just have to make the best of the front seat.

Obviously it's wise to choose the passenger side – fewer pedals and more legroom. That much is simple enough. But then you have to choose your method.

There are two basic techniques for front-seat sleeping. The first simply involves reclining, aeroplane-style. Unlike on a plane, though, you can lean it back all the way without getting berated by

a wine-guzzling nitwit behind you. This can actually be reasonably comfortable, but don't park your car facing east unless you want to be up at first light.

The other style, which can work pretty well if you're sufficiently flexible, involves making use of the driver's seat too. You keep your legs in the passenger footwell and your backside on the passenger seat, but you lay your head on the driver's seat. In some cars it's possible to lie in a fairly natural face-up position, although to the casual observer your knees will look severely dislocated.

Warning: This method will probably result in punctured kidneys if you don't drop the handbrake. So make quite sure you're parked somewhere flat.

If there's more than one of you in the car, the dynamic changes completely. Two is manageable, but if you're both lanky then it's worth fighting hard for the front.

Then again, taking one front seat each is a good compromise. It's a real relationship-tester. And if you have kids, good luck.

UNLESS YOU HAVE a state-of-the-art limo, your car probably won't have a shower. This is the most serious drawback to sleeping in cars. You may not be all that dirty, but waking up in a car just makes you feel a bit rank. Especially if somebody's been eating chips and/or sandwiches in the vehicle, in which case you're guaranteed to start the new day with at least three breadcrumbs and a sprinkling of Simba detritus in your hair.

So where to get a wash? A swim in the nearest body of fresh water can do the trick, but it lacks a sense of achievement. And besides, you probably left the biodegradable soap at home. Or you may have a bilharzia phobia.

I'd recommend heading for the nearest golf club.

"I heard footsteps and scrapings all night, and convinced myself the wolf-man was doing laps around my car."

The trick is simply to look like you belong... and believe it. A collared shirt and a decent pair of shorts are essential to fitting in. You may have to talk your way past security, but that's not a problem if you look respectable.

They may expect you to furnish them with a tee-off time, but just tell them you're going for a coffee at the clubhouse. They can't argue with that, can they?

Once inside, you'll almost invariably be able to walk into the dressing room unmolested. There's nothing to stop you, after all.

A massive bonus is that clean towels are often supplied. Anyone who has spent a week in a car with a manky towel for company will know why this is a good thing.

When you're nicely cleaned up, your first thought may be to escape and hit the road, but you might want to actually have that coffee. And breakfast too; it's served without fail at any half-decent golf club.

After all, you've had a free night's sleep and a free shower. You might be feeling quite the executive by this time. An illusion, of course: You're now a fully qualified travelling cheapskate.

And there's nothing wrong with that.

I FIRST SLEPT ROUGH several years ago in a grandstand at Kyalami. I was a student with just enough cash for a weekend ticket to the superbike racing. That's when I learnt just how freezing it can get in a night between two blazing hot days. But what an experience!

True budget travel always wins hands down if you're looking for adventure. Third class always beats first class if you want to come home with a story to tell.

We all know that walkers see way more than taxi-riders do. And how will you ever get to sample fried scorpions if you ignore street food?

Yep, money can really ruin a good holiday... ■

