

I wanted to experience the cherished caravan holidays of my childhood again. This time, I brought my son

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Adjusting my bright red clown nose under the hot spotlights, I waited patiently to hear the announcer declare the winner of the week's fancy dress competition at the caravan park. It was 1988 and I was thrilled to get my prize: a cuddly toy and streams of tickets I could exchange for more novelties at the arcade.

Then an independent eight-year-old, I loved the freedom of our family vacations in seaside caravan parks, which are a quintessential part of working-class British culture. Full of quirky charm, they have a traditional appeal similar to legion halls with their singers, games and silly events. These affordable holidays also epitomize multi-generational travel:

Grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and all the kids are invited.



Writer Fiona Tapp, left, at a caravan park in 1988, with new pals during the fancy dress contest. They competed together as the three clowns.

Courtesy of Fiona Tapp

These safe, self-contained communities would let us kids roam freely. We could run errands to the camp shop, play penny slots at the arcade, build sand castles, or join Nan for bingo as the caller cried, “Two fat ladies, 88!”

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The park’s static caravans — similar to small trailers, with just one or two bedrooms each — were arranged in rows, with washing lines strung between, where damp bathing suits would hang fresh from the sea. We would visit the beach and local town, but we didn’t need to leave camp at all, as the entertainment ran day and night.

Our holidays were incredibly economical. We would stay with Nan for free at her trailer in St. Osyth or rent a caravan, often with coupons we collected from a newspaper that ran a holiday club. When I was a kid, a weeklong caravan vacation for a family of four could cost as little as \$160 or so. And all the on-site entertainment, from discos to singing performances (and compulsory audience participation), was included in the price of a stay.

This past summer, feeling nostalgic for the cherished holidays of my own childhood, I returned to experience it all again. But this time, I brought my 10-year-old Canadian son on his first-ever British caravan adventure.

Along with my husband, my parents and my brother, we stayed in Dorset, on the southwest coast of England. The caravans at Parkdean’s Sandford Holiday Park looked much the

same, although travellers could choose to upgrade to lodges, or fancier caravans with ensuite bathrooms and a deck.



The writer's 10-year-old on the ropes course at Parkdean's Sandford Holiday Park.
Fiona Tapp

The on-site amenities, also upgraded, now included an enormous treetop ropes course, a zip line and bungee trampolines. There was an ice cream parlour, a fish and chip shop, and a fried chicken shack, as well as two swimming pools and, of course, the ubiquitous clubhouse, where the indoor entertainment took place.

Nightly amusements included impersonators belting out Elvis tunes, bingo games, a kid's disco and various funny events, like the knobbly knee competition, where grown-ups were dragged on stage to make fools of themselves, to the kids' delight.

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Just as I did at his age, my independent son loved being free to explore the camp by himself. In his words: "It was really fun to go off on adventures, or even just errands, without having an adult with me all the time."

On a day trip to Durdle Door, an impressive limestone arch off the Jurassic Coast, I saw his blooming confidence as he braved an icy dip in the English Channel with my brother, and they giggled and played before going off in search of ice cream.



The writer's son, dad and husband, skimming stones on their intergenerational family vacation.
Fiona Tapp

The entertainment on our last night was a wrestling match starring a handsome local sheep farmer and a professional wrestler who had been named Mister International England 2024. The crowd delighted in the spectacle, and my son was in hysterics at his nanna's reaction as she covered her eyes, as if watching a horror movie.

The only thing that was different from the trips of my memories, apart from upgraded facilities, was the price: These days, a weeklong summer stay at a caravan park could run closer to \$1,600 per family. Even so, the utterly unique experiences are, for me, priceless. As I glanced around the clubhouse — babies in their strollers, kids twirling on the dance floor, teens pretending not to laugh as their mum swooned at the star wrestler — it struck me that this was the messy fun of a real family vacation. I do hope these caravan parks endure, as a colourful example of working-class British culture.