

Be in-spired

BY KARIN WRIGHT

Take a punt on a short trip to glorious Oxford

Traditional punting on the River Cherwell, near Magdalen College



I NEARLY had a heart attack. We were in the 900-year-old crypt of the castle, vaulted ceiling lit by flickering candlelight, as a man in 17th Century garb brought stories of monk murders, hangings and hauntings to life.

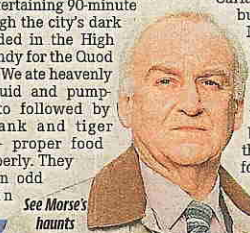
"Some people have even felt the presence of the dead while we're down here," he said... then something poked me in the back!

I whirled round to see a hooded figure gliding away. Ha, ha. Very funny - but all part of the fun and games at Oxford Castle Unlocked, an interactive experience at the city's old prison (adults £7.50, under-15s £5.35, www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk).

It wasn't our only encounter with the undead. The night before, we began our weekend in Oxford on Bill Spectre's theatrical ghost tour. Bill may not raise the dead, but he certainly raised a few laughs (adults £6, children £3, www.ghosttrail.org).

This entertaining 90-minute trip through the city's dark alleys ended in the High Street, handy for the Quod Brasserie. We ate heavenly crispy squid and pumpkin risotto followed by lamb shank and tiger prawns - proper food done properly. They also do an odd line in

See Morse's haunts



pizzas - crayfish and bacon or pear and spinach, anyone? They must be popular because the place was packed (www.quod.co.uk).

We then retired to our huge and fabulous room at The Buttery, a four-star guesthouse on pedestrianised Broad Street where breakfast is a feast in the dell downstairs. It's right next to the Tourist Information Centre too (www.visitoxford.org).

We did a jump-on jump-off bus tour, always a great way to get your bearings (adults £11.50, children £8, www.citysightseeingoxford.com). First we hopped off at the magnificent University Museum of Natural History to visit the dodo; then came our eerie encounters at Oxford Unlocked. We also said hello to the deer at Magdalen College and strolled in the lovely Botanic Gardens. Lots more attractions are just a short walk of the centre.

Back in town, the 19th Century Carfax Tower and Oxford's oldest building, St Michael at the North Gate, vie for position as the best place to look out over the city's dreaming spires - try both. But climbing stairs is hungry work, and a hearty bowl of soup with home-made bread at the Vault at St Mary the Virgin church was required, followed by cakes from the nearby covered market. Shopping in Oxford is a

treat, with side streets full of delightfully quirky local stores to pop in to as gargoyles leer at you from the ornate buildings.

The famous Ashmolean Museum is closed for restoration this year, but there are plenty of others to explore. The small but fascinating Museum of the History of Science is filled with medieval instruments, early globes and Einstein's scribbles on a blackboard. The Sheldonian Theatre next door is the first building ever designed by Sir Christopher Wren. Under Broad Street is the medieval Bodleian Library, housing every book ever published on 100 miles of shelves. It has its own underground rail system and if you order a book it can take six hours to surface.

For dinner we jumped in a cab for the short ride to The Fishes (www.fishesoxford.co.uk, 01865 249 796), a gastropub set in three acres of parkland in North Hinksey. Despite the name, we tucked in to saddle of rabbit and roast venison then

sinfully delicious warm chocolate brownies. The service was amazing. In summer, order a picnic and enjoy it in the gardens by the stream.

Next day we took the University and City walking tour, from the Broad Street tourist office (daily at 11am and 2pm). They also run special tours taking in the haunts of Oxford authors C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and fictional characters like

Inspector Morse and Harry Potter. It's worth visiting Christ Church College to see the dining hall from Potter movies as well as the 12th Century cathedral. The maths tutor here from 1855 to 1898 was Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, who wrote his famous books for Alice, the dean's young daughter.

Many of the 38 colleges are open to the public. Wander the hallowed halls and famous quads. The 20,000 students here are not just privileged - they're very lucky.

What's the deal?

● **Oxford is not car-friendly.** Take the train or use the park-and-ride. If you must brave the one-way system, park at Gloucester Green car park. Stay centrally at The Buttery (doubles from £95, www.thebutteryhotel.co.uk).

● **Info, tours and leaflets** from the Tourist Information Centre (www.visitoxford.org).



Spooked... the crypt of Oxford Castle