

Cambridge, England: City of Dreaming Spires

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

The world's top universities attract more than just students these days. They are also magnets for visitors, with hundreds of years of history on display in buildings still used for learning. Institutions like Oxford and Cambridge in England and Harvard in Boston have plenty worth seeing.

Having already taken a detailed tour of Oxford in the first part of these features, it's only right that we look at Oxford's biggest rival -- the **University of Cambridge**.

Like Oxford, Cambridge is about an hour north of London on the train and it too is often referred to as the "**city of dreaming spires**." Like Oxford, if you have a car, the only realistic option is to abandon it to a park and ride bus service, as parking fees are high and getting around the narrow streets is not a simple task, with many closed to traffic.

Perhaps all these similarities with Oxford can be traced to Cambridge's history. Founded in 1209 by scholars who left Oxford after a fight with local townsmen, a fierce rivalry grew between the two universities. That rivalry remains to this day and is put to the test each year in sporting fashion with the **Oxford Cambridge Boat Race** along the River Thames.

This year's Boat Race was on Sunday, April 2. It was the 152nd in the series and more than a century on; the results are always close. Oxford's victory this year was their fourth in five years. Despite that, overall Cambridge is still in the lead, having won 78 races since 1829, compared to Oxford's 73.

Perhaps Cambridge's success on the water is partially explained by the River Cam, which flows past most of the University's main colleges. This offers visitors a unique view of the colleges that you don't really get in Oxford. **In the summer months, the river is full of punts**, a flat bottomed boat without a keel, which is propelled by pushing a pole against the river bed.

First introduced as pleasure craft in the early twentieth century, punting may sound simple and you can hire your own, but trust me, it might be safer to hire one that's chauffeured for you. We've seen the problems that some people get into, with their punt going round and

round in a circle. There are many companies offering punts for hire, some of which are crewed by students in the summer months. If you want an extra bit of tradition, then go for a company where the chauffeurs wear straw hats and waistcoats. It's like stepping a hundred years back in time.

And as you cruise along the River Cam, you'll cruise back in time even further, seeing colleges that date back more than 550 years. Operating in a similar system to Oxford, **Cambridge has 31 colleges, with a population of around 20,000 students.**

Of these, the most visited is King's College, mainly due to the spectacular chapel, which took over a century to build. Today it's the home of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, a Christmas Eve tradition that is broadcast across the world and often sees people queuing for up to 12 hours to get in to see it live. There's a lot to see at this college and there is a charge for admission.

Another world famous Cambridge college is Trinity, where Sir Isaac Newton made calculations that changed our understanding of the universe, although the actual falling apple incident is said to have happened at his home some miles away! Like Christ Church in Oxford, this college has also taken a starring role in films, most famously in the Oscar winning *Chariots of Fire*, where it was the setting for the race around the courtyard.

Something else similar to Oxford is the **Bridge of Sighs**, based on the original in Venice. The difference here is that while Oxford's spans a street on dry land, Cambridge went for the more traditional approach and built theirs over the River Cam. It's part of St. John's College. They had to adapt the design slightly though, adding bars to stop students trying to climb back in after a late night out!

Other colleges can be seen from the River Cam and the fields behind the river, which are known as the Backs. **Clare College**, first founded in 1326, had to be completely rebuilt between 1638 and 1715 after the mediaeval buildings were destroyed by fire. At the south end of the Cam is **Queen's College**, home to the Mathematical Bridge. Originally built in 1749, it was rebuilt to the same design twice, most recently in 1905. At first, it was believed that this wooden bridge was built without screws or bolts, but that's not actually the case. Other myths include the idea that Isaac Newton was responsible for this bridge -- something he'd have been hard pressed to do, as he died 20 years before it was built! It's also been claimed that the odd design of this bridge is something to do with students taking the bridge to pieces and then being unable to put it back together again, but there's no foundation to those claims

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either.

Away from the River Cam, as there is in Oxford, there's the option to head upwards and get a bird's eye view of the city spires. To do so means climbing up 123 steps to the top of the **Church of Great St. Mary's** in the main market place, but it's a climb worth making for the superb view.

In the square below, there's a market every day of the week and although offerings do change from day to day, there's usually food and crafts of some kind available daily. On Saturdays, this market is complimented by a market in **All Saint's Garden, opposite Trinity College**, which is full of artists and craftspeople selling their homemade goods.

This is one of the main differences that we noticed between Cambridge and Oxford. Although Oxford seems to have a better range of big name shops, it lacks the unique markets that Cambridge offers. Cambridge seems to be a more vibrant city, whereas a lot of Oxford life is based around the colleges. Although the colleges do dominate parts of Cambridge, it's a city that attracts a lot of local people, as well as being home to students and welcoming visitors. On our visits to Oxford, it seems to have a bigger proportion of visitors and students.

So which of the two do we prefer? This is a difficult question to answer. My heart will always lie with Oxford -- and I'll certainly always support them in the Boat Race -- something to do with having a close friend who studied there. If I had to just pick one of the two beautiful university cities to visit on a day trip out from London for example, I think Cambridge would just edge Oxford out for its vibrant markets and the amazing views from the Backs and the River Cam, something that Oxford sadly can't boast.

Whichever you choose to visit, you'll certainly be swept away by the dreaming spires of the colleges in each city, something very different to Harvard, but there are similarities between all three, as we'll explore in the final part of this series.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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