

Oxford: City of Spires (Part 1 of 3)

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Universities have been part of people's lives for nearly 3,000 years and perhaps it's for exactly that reason that they've become much more than just places to learn. These days, the most exclusive universities in the world are also tourist destinations -- the likes of Harvard in Boston and Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom are perhaps three of the most famous education names in the world.

Over the next few months, I'll be taking a look at each university in turn, comparing and contrasting them and looking at what to visit if you happen to be in one of the cities that's home to these great institutions.

Of the three, the first to be established was Oxford, which can trace its educational beginnings back to the late 11th century, although no one seems sure of the exact date the University was founded. Consisting of 39 colleges, each one is a hall of residence, but is also responsible for teaching its students. Of these, the vast majority are open to visitors, although groups need to book in advance and visitors hours do vary from college to college. It's always best to check ahead and the Oxford University web site can help out with answers to most questions.

Having had friends who've attended Oxford, it's fascinating to wander around some of the lesser known colleges. The students often outnumber the visitors, giving you an interesting insight into student life. If you visit early on a Saturday or Sunday morning, you may spot one or two students suffering the after effects of the night before!

Unfortunately, when most people visit, the students aren't there. Universities aren't known for lengthy terms and this applies even more so to Oxford and Cambridge, which have even shorter ones, although students tell me they work exceptionally hard when they are there. Holidays include a six week period around both Easter and Christmas, with the summer holidays beginning in mid June and lasting until early October. It's worth remembering that many exams are held between mid May and mid June, which may affect your visit.

Even when the students aren't around, the place will still be busy -- Oxford is a popular destination for both visitors from abroad and within the UK. It's only an hour from London on the train and it doesn't take much longer to drive there, although driving is something you won't want to do when you get to Oxford. Not only are many streets in the city closed to traffic -- which makes it a very pleasant place to walk

around -- but parking prices are astronomical. The only realistic option is the Park and Ride bus services from outside the city center.

Once you arrive, where should you start? Perhaps the best way to get oriented is to head upwards. Sadly the Radcliffe Camera, with its dramatic circular dome that can be seen in any aerial shot of Oxford, is no longer open to the public, a real shame, as the views from here were spectacular. The only way these days to see why Oxford is called the "city of dreaming spires" is to head up the 99 steps at Carfax Tower, which dates back to the 14th century. Originally this was attached to St. Martin's Church, but the church was demolished more than 100 years ago to try and improve traffic problems in the city center. Needless to say the traffic problems remain, while the church is long gone.

The most spectacular of the University colleges is undoubtedly Christ Church, helped by its setting amongst beautiful gardens, which burst with color in the spring and summer. Not only is it Oxford's largest college, but it boasts the city's cathedral and it's also a famous movie star, having portrayed parts of Hogwarts Academy in the Harry Potter films.

But perhaps it's Christ Church's link to a children's classic immortalized in Disney animation for which the college is most famous. Lewis Carroll studied mathematics at Christ Church. While there, he met Alice -- the young daughter of the Head of the College. He went on to use her and Christ Church as inspiration for many of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

Most of Oxford's colleges boast one of the city's famous spires, many with stunning courtyards. You could easily spend a day or two visiting every one that's open to the public. If your time is short and you need to be more selective, then take a short walk from Christ Church to Corpus Christi, which overlooks the same gardens and meadows that make Christ Church so picturesque. Founded in 1517, it's among Oxford's oldest colleges and one of the smallest, with just 300 students. The courtyard here has a unique addition, the Turnbull Sundial which, as well as being a calendar, also tells the dates of the Oxford University terms.

Head up to the High Street of the city and you'll soon come across Brasenose, one of the closest colleges to the beautiful Radcliffe Camera. Here, it's worth looking out for the large "Brazen Nose" door knocker above the gate. Another one hangs in the hall -- safely recovered after going missing for more than 500 years in a student prank!

Nearby is Hertford College with its own Bridge of Sighs, but unlike the

.....

one in Venice, this one is built over a road. And here is also where you'll find the Bodleian Library, a lovely domed building that's home to around four and a half million books. But the unique difference to most libraries in the world is that you can't borrow any of them. They all have to be read on the premises.

Nearby New College is a contradiction in terms. Founded in 1379, it gained its name when it was built, 200 years after the University was founded. Its gardens are bordered by the old city walls and every three years, the Mayor, Sheriff and councillors of Oxford have to march in procession to inspect the walls, following an agreement made 600 years ago that they would keep them in good order.

Continuing along High Street towards the River Cherwell, another not to be missed Oxford University college is Magdalen. Set in 100 acres of grounds alongside the River Cherwell, you can enjoy a beautiful riverside walk.

As you'd expect, Oxford is also home to a range of museums, including the Ashmolean, the oldest public museum in the world, which houses the University's collection of art and antiques. With museums of Natural History and Science, you can certainly learn a lot here, but if you want to learn about Oxford itself, the best place to go is the Oxford Story, a "dark ride" exploring how the University began and recalling the people who've shaped the city over the years.

And there have been plenty of movers and shapers in those many centuries. The list of former students at Oxford reads like a who's who, with four British and eight foreign Kings educated here, 25 British Prime Ministers and almost 30 foreign presidents and prime ministers. They've even had a role in teaching seven saints and one pope! In recent years, famous names have included actors Dudley Moore, Richard Burton and Hugh Grant and from the writing world, Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde.

Surely nothing can better the beauty and fame of Oxford? That's debatable, as you'll see when we come to look at its bitter rival Cambridge and America's oldest university, Harvard.

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!](#)

.....

Article last updated: 03-22-2011

View the latest version online at:

<http://www.passporter.com/articles/oxford-city-of-spires.html>

Copyright by Cheryl Pendry. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act. Resale of this guide is strictly prohibited without the copyright holder's permission. If you purchased this publication from someone other than PassPorter Travel Press, please call 877-929-3273.

View more PassPorter Articles online at <http://www.passporter.com/articles/>