

A Day Trip to Oxford

Fun Facts

- ★ Oxford is older than Cambridge (founded 1209) but has no official foundation date.
- ★ The world's first sub-4 minute mile was run at Oxford University's athletic track.
- ★ Penicillin was developed at Oxford as the world's first antibiotic.
- ★ Alice in Wonderland, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and The Lord of the Rings were all written by Oxford University teachers (known as 'dons').
- ★ More than 500 novels have been written about Oxford - four times as many as Cambridge.

Words of Warning

Don't ask where the University campus is. There isn't one. Oxford consists of 39 colleges scattered throughout the city. But some of the most iconic buildings belong to the University itself, rather than the individual colleges. These include the Bodleian Library, the Sheldonian Theatre (not a theatre but for degree ceremonies), the Radcliffe Camera (a library), the University Church of St. Mary and the Clarendon Building (original home of Oxford University Press).

When visiting colleges KEEP OFF THE GRASS!

Some oddities of language

Magdalen is pronounced 'mawdlin'. Christ Church is never called Christ Church College, just Christ Church. (If you are actually a member you can call it 'The House'). Colleges are typically built as a sequence of courtyards, known as Quads. If you want to tell a Bod card from a bop and the difference between Mods and Greats please peruse the guide to Oxford slang thoughtfully provided by Corpus Christi's JCR (Junior Common Room) (www.corpusjcr.org).

Oxford Colleges

Undergraduates apply to a specific college, not the university. Most colleges taking undergraduates offer teaching in most subjects. (Some colleges only take postgraduates and others only teach theology.) Undergraduate courses are more focused than American degrees, though there are some joint honours offerings such as Mathematics and Philosophy or Classics (Ancient Greek and Latin) and Oriental Studies (Middle Eastern or Indian languages and cultures). The most famous is P,P,E (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) which is regarded as a golden ticket for going into politics. Altogether there are fifty different Degree courses and combinations.

Colleges vary greatly in age, size and prestige. Christ Church is probably the grandest. St. John's is the wealthiest. Magdalen has huge grounds. Balliol, Merton and University each claim to be the oldest. Final degree performance is ranked annually in the Norrington Table. Currently the top three are Merton, New (founded in 1379!) and Magdalen. Sports are played on an inter-collegiate basis and there is a longstanding sporting rivalry with 'the Other Place' (= Cambridge).

Visiting the Colleges

Colleges take pride in their Library, Dining Hall, Chapel and Gardens, which are what visitors go to see. The Library is not normally open to visitors and the Dining Hall obviously not at mealtimes. The Dining Hall is usually hung with portraits of famous alumni. Colleges are normally closed to visitors during exam times and degree ceremonies.

Christ Church - architecturally the most dominant - charges a hefty fee to visit (have your student ID with you for the concession rate) but it is very grand and its impressive chapel doubles as Oxford's cathedral. Harry Potter fans will want to savour its cavernous Dining Hall which, with the imposing steps leading up to it, featured in the first Harry Potter film as Hogwarts' Dining Hall. Apart from the many portraits in the Dining Hall Christ Church also has its own Picture Gallery with Old Master paintings and drawings. Alice Liddell - the real Alice in Wonderland - grew up here when her father was the Dean. The book was written for her by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) who taught Mathematics at the college. If you can wait until 6.00 pm you can go in free by attending Choral Evensong in the Cathedral. This is a 45 minute service, unique to the Church of England, almost entirely sung by a top class choir. Other Colleges also have an Evensong service but you will have to check their own websites to find out which and when.

The following colleges are FREE to visit (but check college websites for opening hours and occasional closures for college events) :-

All Souls (Mon.-Fri. 2.00-4.00 p.m.). Unique in Oxford for having no undergraduates. Every year two Examination Fellowships are awarded to successful candidates passing "the hardest examination in the world" - a combination of written papers and interview - leading to a seven year appointment with no teaching duties but freedom to research. 2 specialist papers are taken from a list of classics, English literature, economics, law, history, philosophy or politics. There are also two general papers one with questions like "Does the moral character of an orgy change when the participants wear Nazi uniforms?", the other a response to a single word, such as 'water', 'miracles' or 'harmony'. Impressive architecture.

Corpus Christi (1.30-4.30 p.m.) - small; beautiful main quad with spectacular sundial; James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia was an undergraduate.

Exeter (2.00 - 5.00 p.m.) - central location; stunning neo-Gothic chapel modelled on the Saint Chapelle in Paris; illustrious alumni include Roger Bannister, the first 4 minute miler, author J.R.R. Tolkien, designer/writer/artist William Morris and film star Richard Burton

Keble (2.00 - 5.00 p.m.) - on the northern edge of the city centre; one of the larger colleges, with 800 students; describes its own chapel as 'extraordinary'; polychrome architecture you cannot ignore; you can bed and breakfast here if you want to make a weekend of Oxford.

Lincoln (Mon-Fri 2.00 – 5.00 p.m. Sat/Sun 11.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m.) – central location, near Exeter; the room occupied by John Wesley, founder of Methodism, can be viewed through a glass door; well preserved medieval buildings; alumni include Dr. Seuss and TV anchor Rachel Maddow

Nuffield (9.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m.) – post-war, postgraduate college ; built in a pleasing pseudo-medieval style; specialises in social science; founded by British motor mogul William Morris, creator of the MG sports car; notable modern art collection; alumni include 3 winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics.

St. Anne's (9.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m.) – north of the city centre; large (800 students); pioneering women's college, mixed since 1979; interesting mixture of traditional and modern architecture; alumni include Helen Fielding author of Bridget Jones's Diary

St. Catherine's (9.00 a.m. – 5.00p.m.) – modern (1962) college with celebrated Grade I listed architecture by Danish architect Arne Jacobsen, who even designed the College cutlery; largest undergraduate numbers (500); alumni include Joseph Heller, author of Catch 22

St. Edmund Hall (10.00 a.m. – 4.00 p.m.) – a bijou gem; the Library is in a former medieval church; alumni include Oronhyatekha, a Mohawk physician and philanthropist.

St. John's (1.00 – 5.00 p.m.) – central location; visitors may see Front Quad, Canterbury Quad, Kendrew Quad and the Chapel and Gardens; excellent architecture from the 15th to the 21st centuries ; notable alumni include former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson.

Wadham (1.00 – 4.15 p.m. in term time; out of term 10.30– 11.45 as well) – elegant 17th century architecture in golden stone; self-styled 'stunning' gardens (agreed); free visitor guide; alumni include Sir Christopher Wren, novelist Monica Ali and actress Rosamund Pike. Look out for the astonishing statue of former warden Sir Maurice Bowra.

Worcester (2.00 – 4.00 p.m.) – central location; only college with a lake and swans – and 26 acres of gardens; architecture includes a medieval monastic range and elegant Georgian blocks; notable alumni include actress Emma Watson (who also attended Brown).

Also...

Blackwell's Bookshop – even if you're not a book buff you have to check this out, if only for the shock value. Outside it looks like a normal-sized Bookshop. Go in and find the basement Norrington Room. It's MASSIVE – 3 miles of shelves.

The Covered Market What it says – alleyways of 50+ traders on this site since the 1770s. Food – including cafes, Chinese, Greek, Thai and Korean food – fashion, bags, cards, crafts, jewellery, souvenirs.

The Ashmolean Museum is world class, like a slightly scaled-down version of the British Museum. (Find out about the Alfred Jewel and why it is so important.)

The Museum of Natural History is housed in a striking Grade 1 Listed Victorian Gothic building; the interior is spectacular, too. Dinosaurs, a million British insects and, most famously, a Dodo.

Pitt Rivers Museum - half a million items of archaeological and anthropological interest.

History of Science Museum - including a blackboard with Einstein's writing on it.

Oxford Town Hall - houses a museum of the history of Oxford as a city rather than the University. Usually overlooked by visitors. Shouldn't be.

Eating

The Turf Tavern takes some finding but it's worth it. Tucked away beneath a surviving stretch of the twelfth century city wall, it can be found down a narrow passageway by the Bridge of Sighs or from the opposite side, opposite the Holywell Music Room. Excellent selection of beers, good value pub grub, snug sixteenth century building (best for short people), covered garden. A gem.

The White Horse - historic pub, next to Blackwell's; much featured in Inspector Morse TV series and sequels, Lewis and Endeavour (There are Inspector Morse tours of Oxford for fans.) Noted for fish and chips.

Cafe from Crisis - located on the Old Fire Station, 40 George Street. Snacks, sandwiches, salads and the legendary Fireman's Breakfast, served all day. (2 sausages, 2 bacon, 2 fried eggs, beans, mushrooms, grilled tomato, toast.) Staff are homeless in training to learn cooking and service skills. Open 8.00 a.m. - 3.30 p.m.

Other Stuff

Picture this - you will probably want to take some photos. Postcards on sale at souvenir shops will show you the most celebrated views. You can also buy a postcard with all the College coats of arms on. The following are just my personal suggestions: The Bridge of Sighs, Hertford College; The Sheldonian Theatre; The Broad; The High; The Emperors' Heads and Clarendon Building; The Radcliffe Camera; Carfax; Tom Tower, Christ Church; View from Magdalen Bridge; The Martyrs' Memorial

Getting There

Train (about an hour) from either Paddington or Marylebone. Considerably cheaper if you book at least three days in advance. The station is about ten to twelve minutes' walk from the city centre.

Coach There are competing coach services from London to Oxford - the Oxford Tube and megabus. Both have charging points and free Wi-Fi. Although the coach takes longer than the train the service is more frequent and there are various pick-up points on the way out of London (Baker St., Notting Hill etc.) so this may be easier for you than going to Paddington or Marylebone. Likewise there are several drop-off points going into Oxford, so you wouldn't have to trek in from the station. The Coach is always MUCH cheaper than the train. The saving would pay for your lunch. Your budget, your choice. Worth researching.