



DISCOVERING OXFORD

by Sharon Hudgins

If London is all you've seen of England, there's much more waiting for you to discover. Branch out beyond the borders of the capital by heading for the university town of Oxford, only 90 minutes from London by bus or an hour by train.

You can easily spend a week in England's "City of Dreaming Spires," wandering through the winding medieval streets, touring the famous colleges, visiting world-renowned museums, boating on the Thames and Cherwell rivers, relaxing in the colorful gardens, and enjoying the lively pub culture.



Getting Started

Begin at the **Oxford Visitor Information Centre** on Broad Street, where you'll find a wealth of information about the city as well as a good selection of souvenirs and gifts. Buy a copy of the **Oxford Visitors' Guide** booklet, which includes a short history of the town, a map, a brief description of the colleges and their opening times, suggested Top 10 Things to Do, a self-guided walking tour, and vignettes of Oxford's most famous characters. Priced at only £1, it's the best bargain in town.

A fun way to learn more about Oxford is to take one (or more) of the **Official Guided Walking Tours** offered by the Visitor Information Centre. To get your bearings, start with the "University and City Tour" through the heart of the historic city center. Then select other theme tours based on your own interests: "Inspector Morse"; "Literary Tour"; "Gargoyles & Grotesques"; "Religion at Oxford"; "Science at Oxford"; "Stained Glass"; "Pottering in Harry's Footsteps"; and many others. All tours last for two hours and cost £6 to £12 per person.

Oxford Colleges

Oxford's claim to fame is its **38 independent colleges** that make up the **University of Oxford**—and the many famous writers, artists, scientists, and statesmen (and women) who have graduated from them. Mostly constructed in honey-colored limestone, the colleges are located throughout the city, not at one central campus.

The three oldest colleges—**University College**, **Balliol**, and **Merton**—date back to the 13th century. The largest and probably best known college is **Christ Church**, established at the time of Henry VIII, in 1524. Today it welcomes 300,000 visitors a year. On certain evenings during the week, you can also hear its famous choir at evensong in the magnificent chapel, the only college chapel in the world designated as a cathedral.



Many of the colleges offer guided tours. Check with the tourist office or the college's porter (at the entrance to each college) for specific times and prices. For the most popular colleges, it's best to make reservations in advance. And when the university isn't in session, you can even stay in the student dormitories instead of at a hotel. Make reservations online at www.oxfordrooms.co.uk.

Magnificent Museums

Oxford is the site of several world-class museums, none of which charge an entry fee. The recently renovated **Ashmolean Museum** is the oldest museum in England, established in 1683. Today it's a treasure trove of beautifully displayed art and artifacts from ancient times to the 20th century. Whether you're a connoisseur or just curious, you can easily spend a whole day (or even longer) viewing the rich variety of exhibits. When your energy flags, go down to the basement cafe for a pick-me-up coffee or tea with freshly baked cakes and pastries, or dine upstairs at the **Ashmolean Dining Room**, Oxford's only rooftop restaurant.



The **Oxford University Museum of Natural History**, located in a handsome neo-Gothic building erected in 1860, houses a superb collection of zoological, entomological, and geological specimens, including the best exhibit of dinosaur skeletons outside of London. In the rear of this museum you'll find the entrance to the eccentric, eclectic **Pitt Rivers Museum**, stuffed to the gills with more than 400,000 objects from all over the world, displayed chockablock in old glass-fronted wooden cases. You'll wish the exhibits were better lighted, but don't despair: just borrow a torch (flashlight) from the museum shop at the entryway and shine it on whatever display piques



your interest. For museum-goers who are tired of 21st-century "mediated experiences" via computer terminals, smartphone apps, and holograms, you can step back into the past at the fascinating Pitt Rivers.

Around Town

There's plenty more to do in Oxford. Wander through the colorful **Botanic Garden**, the oldest garden of its kind in England, founded in 1621. Or stroll along the river walk and through the deer park on the grounds of **Magdalen College**. Rent a punt for an afternoon of rowing on the Cherwell River, or take a trip on the Thames River, offered by **Oxford River Cruises**. Visit the **Bodleian Library** and its majestic circular reading room, the **Radcliffe Camera**, in the historic city center.

Take a guided tour of **Oxford Castle**, the remains of medieval defensive towers and moats, which later became the city's prison. In its most recent reincarnation, it has been developed for tourism, with a hotel, restaurant, and several cafes on site.

Opened in 1774, Oxford's venerable **Covered Market** is one of the city's most popular tourist attractions. In addition to its fruit, vegetable, meat, fish, and cheese stands, it includes several little shops selling cooked foods to eat on site or take away, as well as stores ranging from upscale clothing boutiques to typical souvenir shops. And colorful open-air markets can be found on **Gloucester Green**, in the city center, every week. The **Gloucester Green Market** offers foods, flowers, clothing, and household items every Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The weekly **Antiques and Collectors Fair** is held at the same place on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a **Farmers Market** there, too, on the first and third Thursdays of every month, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Dining Out

All that sightseeing is bound to work up your appetite. Oxford offers a wide range of eateries to fit every budget, from funky little food trucks selling takeaway fare from Asia and the Middle East, to Raymond Blanc's Michelin-2-star-rated restaurant, **Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons**, just outside the city in Great Milton.

Local foodies especially like **Brasserie Blanc**, on Walton Street, owned by Raymond Blanc; **Jamie's Italian**, on George Street, one of a chain owned by another famous chef, Jamie



Oliver; **Gee's**, an Oxford landmark on Banbury Road; **The Old Parsonage**, on Banbury Road; and **Magdalen Arms**, a "gastropub" on Iffley Road. Stop by **Pieminister** inside Oxford's Covered Market, for a very English meal of freshly made, double-crust, meat or vegetable pies served with "mash" (mashed potatoes), "groovy" (gravy) and "minty mushy peas" (just what they sound like).



Oxford has no lack of Asian restaurants, too, from Indian to Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and "Asian fusion." Popular Asian eateries include **My Sichuan**, **Shanghai 30's**, **Majliss**, **Saffron**, **Chiang Mai Kitchen**, and **Wagamama**.

Pub Scene

Oxford's historic pubs are famous as much for their denizens as for their beer. You can quaff a pint of British bitter or English ale in the same spots where Thomas Hardy, Lewis Carroll, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Graham Greene, the fictional Detective Inspector Morse, and many other Oxford luminaries wetted their whistles. Pubs also serve food, sometimes the best bargains for a full (and filling) meal in Oxford. Typical dishes include fish-and-chips (battered-and-fried fish filets with French fried potatoes), Scotch eggs (hard-boiled eggs surrounded by sausage meat and deep fried), "Ploughman's Lunch" (thick wedges of cheese and a slice of ham served with apple slices, sweet pickle relish, bread and butter), and "jacket potatoes" (aka baked whole potatoes, in their skins) with a choice of toppings: Cheddar or blue cheese, pork and beans, sautéed mushrooms, even meaty (or vegan beany) chili.

Purchase a guide to Oxford's pubs at the Visitor Information Centre or at many bookstores. You can also buy a postcard depicting 36 classic pubs for an "Oxford Heritage Pub Crawl." My own favorite pubs include **The Bear**, **The White Horse Inn**, **The Rose and Crown**, **The Lamb and Flag**, **The Eagle and Child** and **The Head of the River**.



TOURIST INFORMATION

- **Oxford Visitor Information Centre**, 15/16 Broad Street, OX1 3AS, open Monday-Saturday 9:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Sunday 10 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., with extended hours in July and August.

- www.visitoxfordandoxfordshire.com/travel-information/Tourist-Information.aspx

WHERE TO STAY

- **Macdonald Randolph Hotel**, Oxford's venerable 5-star hotel located in a handsome stone

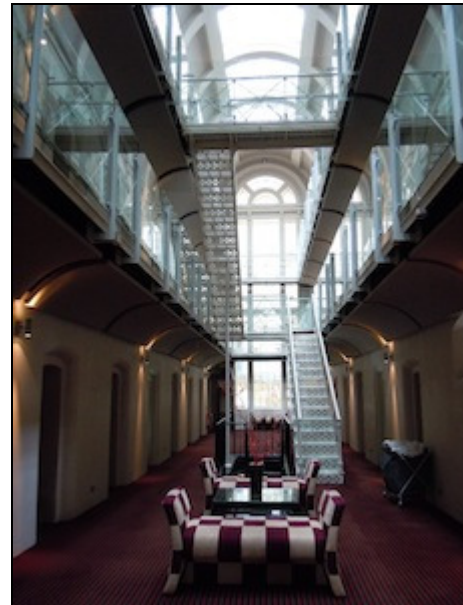


building across the street from the Ashmolean Museum. Luxury accommodations in the heart of Oxford, with an award-winning restaurant on site (www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/our-hotels/macdonald-randolph-hotel).



- **Lakeside Guest House**, a family-run, 4-star B&B (bed and breakfast) located on a main bus route and within walking distance of the city center. Comfortable rooms, an award-winning breakfast menu (with vegetarian options, too), and the friendly staff make this a recommended choice among the many B&Bs in Oxford (<http://www.lakeside-guesthouse.com>).

- **Malmaison**, the aptly named new addition to the Oxford hotel scene, is part of the city's old prison that has been converted into a luxury boutique hotel, with contemporary-style rooms and suites inside the former prison cells. Escape from captivity to the hotel's ultra-modern bar and brasserie in the prison basement (<http://www.malmaison.com/locations/oxford/about-the-oxford-mal.aspx>).



RESTAURANT INFORMATION

- www.oxfordrestaurantguide.com
- www.visitoxfordandoxfordshire.com/see-and-do/Eating-and-Drinking.aspx

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Sharon Hudgins is a food and travel writer with more than 700 articles published in magazines and newspapers across the globe. She has lived in 10 countries on three continents and traveled in 60 countries around the world. She is the author of four books, including two award-winners--a cookbook about the regional cuisines of Spain and a travel memoir (*The Other Side of Russia*) about her life in Siberia during the early period after the collapse of the Soviet Union.