

the revenge of the nerds

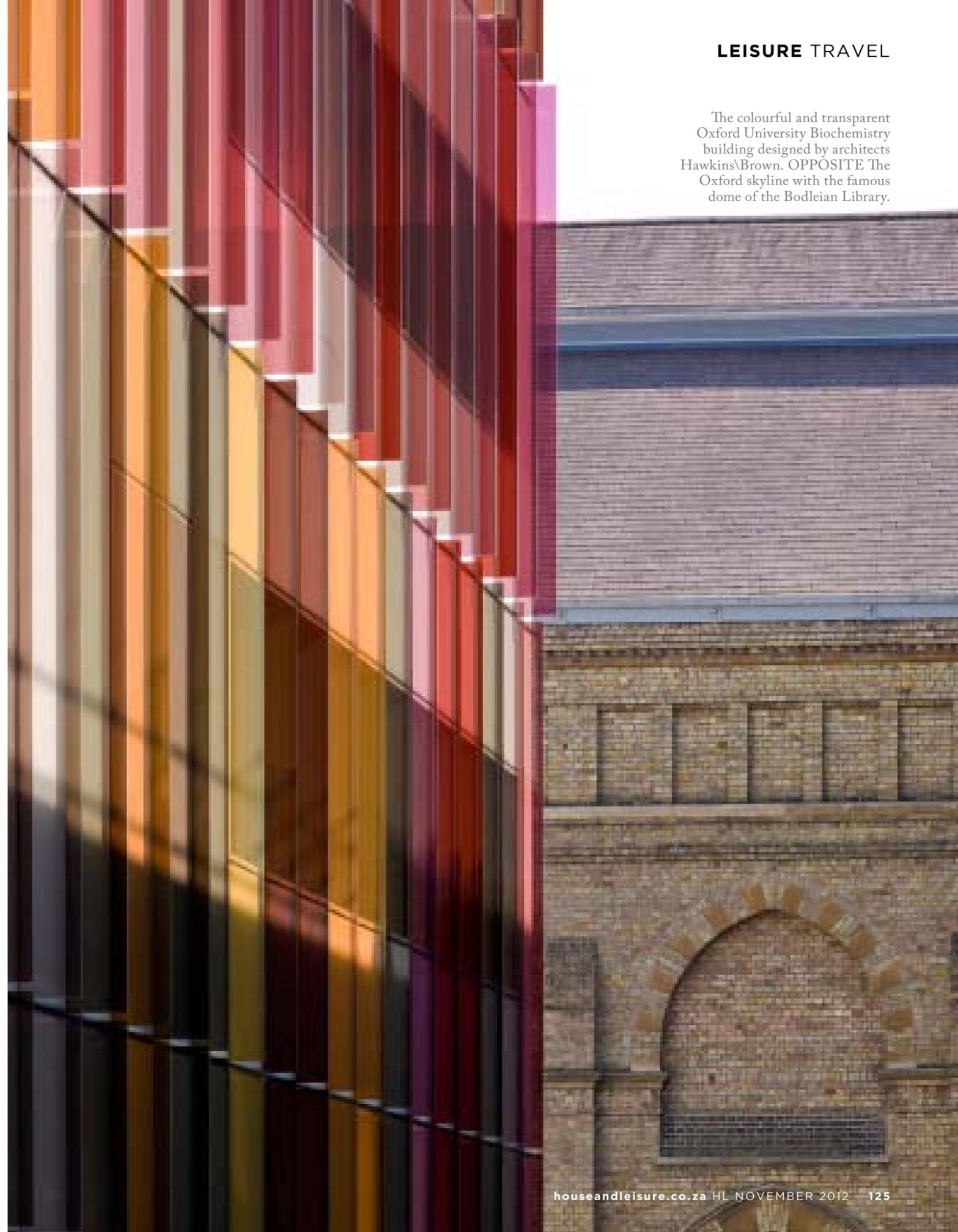
You don't have to be an academic to enjoy a sojourn in the English university city of Oxford – though it helps, finds Jonathan Cane

Text and photographs **Jonathan Cane**



LEISURE TRAVEL

The colourful and transparent Oxford University Biochemistry building designed by architects Hawkins\Brown. OPPOSITE The Oxford skyline with the famous dome of the Bodleian Library.



LEISURE TRAVEL

My last vacation was spent at university listening to academic papers such as 'Performing "Tolerance": Musical Voyeurism and the Politics of Self-Congratulation' and 'Melancholy, Ethnic Costume, and White Complexion: Disparities of Intellectual Supremacy after the Enlightenment'. This may sound dull indeed; but if there's one place in the world where 'epistemology' and 'phenomenology' are sexier than drum'n'bass, it's Oxford – the city in central southern England that is home to the famous university, one of the oldest in the world.

Along cobbled streets, church-like colleges are festooned disobediently with bicycles chained on fences, in front of 'Bicycles left here will be removed' signs like votive offerings, or prayers to St Anthony or St Peter. Cloistered inside, ancient systems of etiquette and hierarchy dictate seating plans for breakfast, the rights to walk across quadrangle lawns, and the precise colour, material and shape of academic regalia. Though it is more and more uncommon, you will

If student life is not for you there are a few luxury hotels in Oxford that recommend themselves. The Malmaison is an ancient jail in the Oxford Castle that has been converted into a luxury hotel. The £200 (R2 700) rooms have vaulted stone ceilings and crisp white linen. The Old Parsonage Hotel and Old Bank Hotel are elegant boutique lodgings. Both are very central and rooms are around £250 (R3 300) per night. Just outside Oxford, in the sleepy Oxfordshire village of Great Milton, super-chef Raymond Blanc's restaurant/guest house Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons is a charming place to escape the bicycle traffic. Your two Michelin Star bed and breakfast, at £1 200 (R16 000) a night, does not include a complimentary fellow or baked beans.

If it is the baked-bean breakfast you're looking for, St Giles Café is a popular old English working-class café with no twist and no irony. For a slightly more trendy daily hang-out spot, the Turl Street Kitchen has free Wi-Fi, professors with crossed legs talking by the fire, and undergrads reading turgid-looking books about climate



still see fellows bicycling about town in black gowns. More common are sights of old ladies in navy rain-parkas and knee-length skirts running to catch busses, and tweedy toffs parading in the drizzle with smart umbrellas and brogues. During summer most grad students evacuate Oxford, and summer schools attract packs of feral Eastern European and American teenagers who lurk in alleyways like thieves smoking cigarettes.

The vacated university students leave behind their Edwardian dormitory rooms where visiting academics and tourists can get a clean single bed with tightly tucked sheets for £70 (R930). The shared bathrooms and hospital-like accommodation may not be everyone's proverbial English cup of tea but the nice bit is staying inside a college. Generally off-bounds to travellers, the college's inner sanctums are opened to you as a resident. Your breakfasts, oppressively English – seven days of beans, bacon and pork bangers – are in the hauntingly familiar dining rooms. The eerie portraits of old white men, stained glass windows and fireplaces may be familiar because scenes from Harry Potter were filmed on site in Oxford.

change. I spent a few days happily bashing out two academic papers on art and racism for conferences at the university. This was the principle reason I was in Oxford: to talk about aspects of South African art and literature with scholars from all over the world at Mansfield College. The Oxford system is quite unique because there is a separation between the faculty and the college. This means that a student will enrol, let's say, in anthropology, but be in an autonomous college like New College or St Peter's College. Lectures are taught in the faculty but weekly tutorials (intimate one-on-one affairs) are in the college with the fellow from that college. This is a very old and peculiar system. To give you an idea how old 'old' is, New College was founded in 1379.

As you'd expect, it is an open-air architectural museum. Gargoyles stare suspiciously at tourists carrying iPhones and stone-arches support the crushing weight of 1 000 years of knowledge. But if you thought that the university's architecture was old school you'd be wrong; Oxford University commissions many world-class, thoughtful, contemporary buildings. ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Drink an artisanal beer on the heated terrace at Quod brasserie and bar, Oxford's largest and most successful restaurant; the trendy hangout, Turl Street Kitchen, offers a great espresso that you can enjoy on modern wooden stools by Ikea and silver stools by Made.com; reading room of the theology focused St Benet's Hall library; the dome of the 1861 neo-Gothic Museum of Natural History. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT High tea with scones is the perfectly English way to spend a rainy afternoon; the porter's lodge guards entry into one of the many closed quadrangles.



The recently built Biochemistry Building designed by architects Hawkins\Brown is the new home of the internationally renowned DNA and cell-growth research department. The design makes a provocative point about scientific integrity and the secretive nature of research by placing the labs around the transparent exterior where fins of coloured glass create lyrical reflections and shadows.

The neo-Gothic Museum of Natural History, built in 1861, is an enchanting train station-like repository for the queer, the old, the dead and the found. According to legend, the first-ever debate on evolution was held here, and lead gentlemen and fellows to undignified fist fights among the fossils coiled in peaceful silence. Through the generously lit cloisters and past the butterfly cabinets is the Pitt Rivers anthropology collection. This four-storey ethnographic museum is a dimly lit, peculiarly old-fashioned monument to imperial plunder. Shrunken skulls, Inuit canoes, a thousand spears, terrifying masks, stolen prayers, hair, beads, and more masks are all meticulously archived, and identified (scandalously) not by maker/artist but by the name of the British explorer who 'stole' them.

Bibliophiles should escape the rain and read a book at one of the great libraries of the world – The Bodleian Library. Founded in 1602, The Bod (as it is affectionately called) is a legal deposit library, meaning that one of every book published in the UK must be sent here for archiving. The Bod houses four copies of the original Magna Carta, a 1455 Gutenberg Bible and another 11 million maps, books, films and dissertations. There are far too many artefacts to keep in the library building, and so millions are stored outside of Oxford in special warehouses and in an unused salt mine in Cheshire. The library is a favourite location for film shoots and is almost permanently engulfed by tattooed gaffers waving scrims. It has been the setting for *The Golden Compass*, *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Madness of King George III*.

If books and butterflies get too much you could always fall in love with a fellow (which is what I did); park your umbrella; and drink artisanal Oxfordshire beer at the Turl Street Kitchen and talk about economics with a sexy nerd by the fire. ☺

WHEN IN OXFORD...

VISIT

Department of Biochemistry, University of Oxford
South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QU

The Bodleian Library Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG

Oxford University Museum of Natural History & Pitt Rivers Museum Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PW

Modern Art Oxford 30 Pembroke Street, Oxford OX1 1BP,
modernartoxford.org.uk

STAY

Oxford Mal – Malmaison

3 Oxford Castle, New Road, Oxford OX1 1ND, malmaison.com

Old Parsonage Hotel 1 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6NN,
oldparsonage-hotel.co.uk

Old Bank Hotel 92–94 High Street, Oxford OX1 4BJ,
oldbank-hotel.co.uk

Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons manoir.com

Church Road, Great Milton, Oxfordshire OX44 7PD

EAT

St Giles Café 52 Saint Giles', Oxford OX1 3LU

Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons

The Turl Street Kitchen 16 Turl Street, Oxford OX1 3DH,
turlstreetkitchen.co.uk

Zappis Bike Cafe 28-32 St Michaels Street, Oxford OX1 2EB

Gee's 61 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE, gees-restaurant.co.uk

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Raymond Blanc's restaurant/guest house Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in the Oxfordshire village of Great Milton, interior and exterior. OPPOSITE Bicycles line the streets in front of Turl Street Kitchen; spend a lazy afternoon 'punting' on the river. Hire a boat at Magdalen Bridge Boathouse (oxfordpunting.co.uk)



Additional photographs Robert Askew, Ben Mostyn