

A-PUNTING WE GO ON THE CAM

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI SPENDS A DAY IN UNIVERSITY TOWN CAMBRIDGE AND IS FASCINATED BY ITS SPIRIT, ITS ARCHITECTURE AND — MOST OF ALL — THE PUNTING

A scenic view of a Cambridge river with punting boats and a wooden bridge. The river is filled with several punting boats, each with a punter standing at the back using a long pole to navigate. A large, ornate wooden bridge with a complex lattice structure spans across the river. In the background, there are lush green trees and a large, historic brick building with many windows, some of which are arched. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

As the guide spoke on, my mind wandered to the old Hindi film song from the 1950s, which warned the young and innocent about the big, bad city that Mumbai (then Bombay) was. That, it seems, was just what London meant to the authorities at Cambridge — a corrupting influence on students who had to be kept virtuous by all means.

So there were the bull dogs, as the local rectors used to be known, maintaining strict vigil at the railway station to catch students going to London for a night of debauchery. That was a hundred years ago. Today, Cambridge itself boasts of over 120 watering holes; not surprising, considering it is primarily a university town.

Given that I was there just for the day, I first chose to take in the main sights quickly through a walking tour. And that was how I had the pleasure of being the solitary member of an hour-long walking tour conducted by Emily. A grandmother of six who was born in Cambridge, Emily had travelled around the world and come back to retire in Cambridge, her “favourite



place in the whole world”.

The walk was mainly a whirlwind tour of the famous colleges set along the river Cam. On some days, visitors are allowed inside the college buildings at specific times, but ours was strictly a “look from the outside” mission, to get a sense of what to see on my own later, as Emily said.

There were also a few pit stops at Cambridge’s fine chapels, including the one at King’s College, St Johns’ College and the quirky round church. At the end of that walk, I went back to not the colleges or the churches but the interesting small bookshops set in a neat line along the main road. And then, stopped for lunch at the open-air market in the town square.

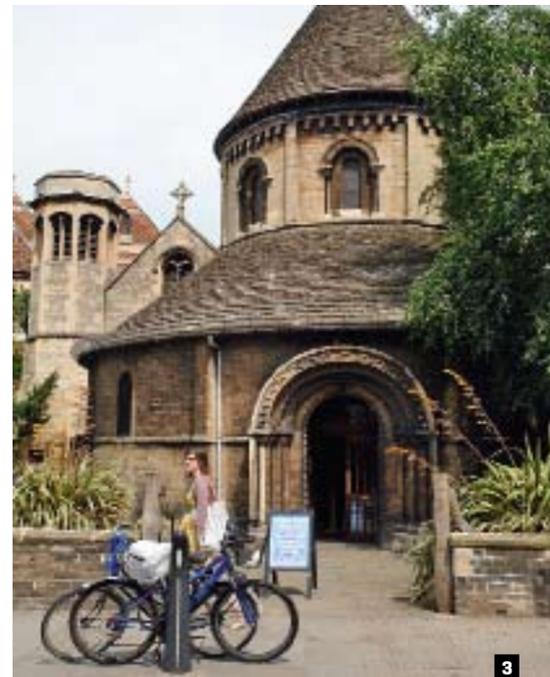
My primary interest in Cambridge was to find myself a punt and take a spin on the river Cam... rather, be taken on a spin that fine summer day. A punt is a flat-bottomed boat, propelled by a long pole about ten feet long, slicing through the water. Punting looks deceptively easy but is very difficult and requires a lot of skill and stamina. Often, students take on jobs as punters during the summer months to earn extra pocket money.

At fresco lunch over, I immediately found myself a seat in a punt along with an American family of three and a group of four students, two Japanese and two Italian. On the pole was young Rosie, with amazing energy levels that her slight frame gave no indication of. In fact, what she lacked by way of skill, Rosie made up for with enthusiasm, which as I found out, was sadly not quite enough.

On crowded days on the river, there are traffic jams and accidents on the Cam, just as there are on the road. Unskilled or negligent punters also face the likelihood of getting their poles stuck in the water. While it is possible to get the pole free by twisting it skillfully, most punters do not manage that. They utter a muted prayer or a loud oath, according to their preference, and then try to use the paddle provided in the punt to reach the stuck punt.

Rosie certainly did not manage; in the course of half-a-dozen accidents with assorted walls and punts on the way, managed only thanks to a miracle, not to capsize the punt. The fourth time it happened was also the only time the great patriarch of the American family opened his mouth, to drawl “women drivers!” Almost simultaneously, one of the Italians began his story of an earlier ride where his punt turned over and passengers found themselves exercising their swimming skills vigorously in the water. Everyone in the punt laughed heartily at this story, but for the non-swimmers in the group – me – and I guessed by the look on his face, the American dad.

On this slow and relaxing ride, we floated past the grand



college buildings of Cambridge on either side of the river as Rosie doubled up as tourist guide and rattled off the names of the different college buildings and their famous alumni and the various bridges we passed under. From Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon to Jawaharlal Nehru, Stephen Hawking and Douglas Adams, the list was very impressive.

The more famous bridges are the “Bridge of Sighs” and the “Mathematical Bridge”. The former belongs to St. John’s College and is supposed to be named after the Bridge of Sighs in Venice. However, unlike in Venice, this bridge has far less

CAMBRIDGE CALLING:
 ❶ A punt floats under the elegant Bridge of Sighs, named after the famous one in Venice
 ❷ Gliding past an al fresco riverside restaurant on the punt
 ❸ The Holy Sepulchre Round Church in Cambridge town
 ❹ The imposing facade of King’s College
 ❺ Students have a fun time on punts
 ❻ In summer, everyone in Cambridge is outdoors through the day
 ❼ The river is narrow in the inner parts of the town, where punting takes place



romantic connotations. Local folklore says that the name is derived from the sound of the sighs of students crossing the bridge on their way to and back from their examinations. I cannot say this was hard to believe.

The ‘Mathematical Bridge’, belonging to Queen’s College, also has several stories around it. Made almost entirely of wood, it was built in 1749 and rebuilt in 1867 and 1902. Popular myth has it that the bridge was constructed by Sir Isaac Newton, and held itself together without any bolts or screws. Which is unlikely since the bridge was built 22 years after Isaac Newton passed away.

All along the riverbanks, I saw students who were out enjoying the fine summer day that comes by so rarely in that country. The air was thick with the smells from the open-air cookouts and barbecues, and the sounds of raucous afternoon parties. And in the midst of all this were the loners, perched on the low walls by the banks, a book in one hand, a can in the other.

I know that big, bad London was waiting for my return. But right then, I could not think of a better way of enjoying a late summer afternoon in England than sitting back on one of these punts (being ferried by a sweating student, of course) and feeling the cool Cambridge air on my face. **W**

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