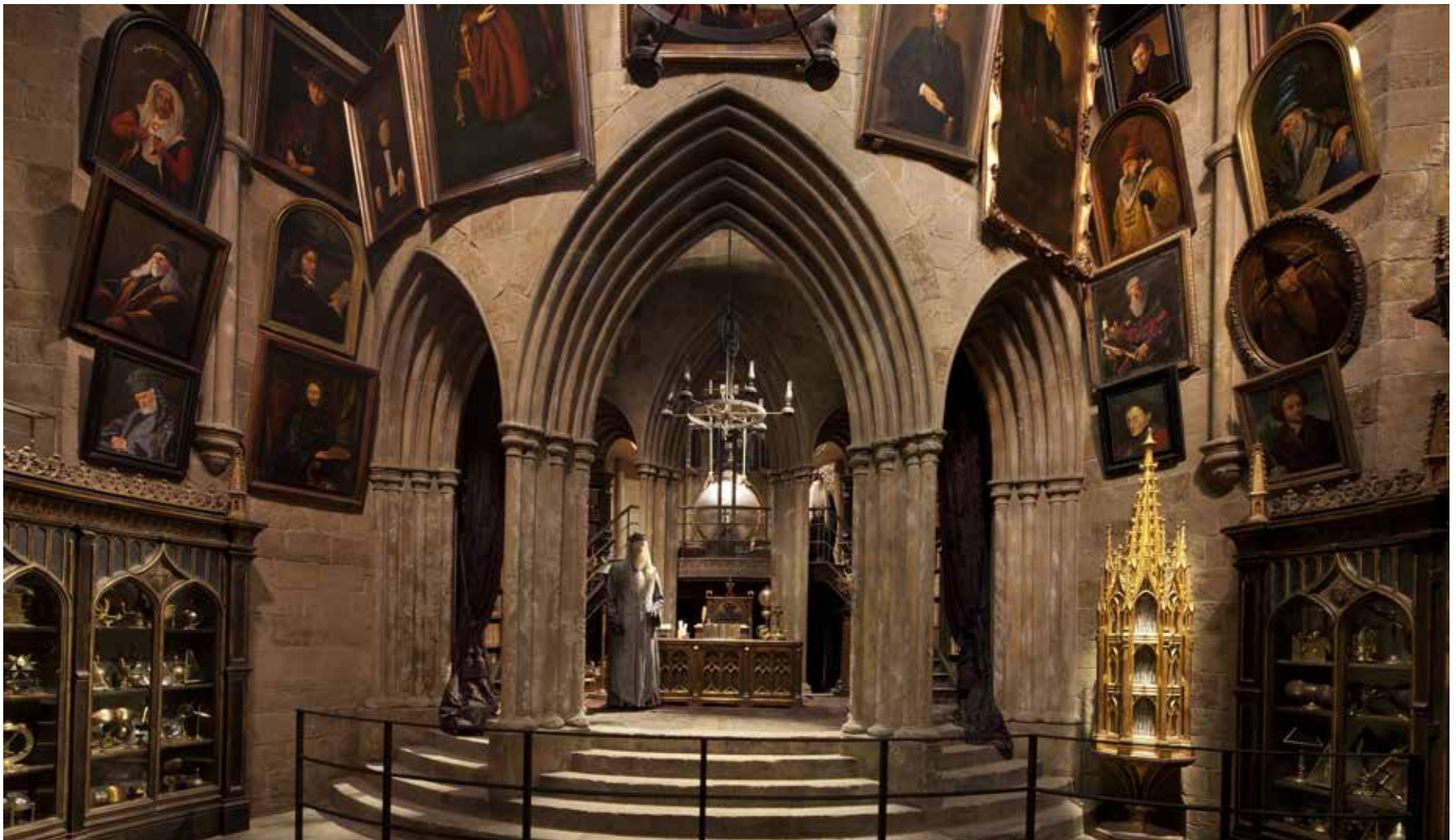


Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



The magical wizardry tour

A new attraction at Warner Bros. Studio Tour London The Making of Harry Potter is causing a stir, write **Christian Sylt** and **Caroline Reid**

Train journeys in the UK aren't famous for being magical. Our four-hour ride from Waverley to London Kings Cross had a comfortable clean seat with free WiFi and, crucially, it was on time. Hardly the lap of luxury but just what was needed.

After a short walk to Euston station we grabbed the early morning train to Watford Junction on the outskirts of the capital and on the way something spellbinding happened.

As we walked to our seat we realised that the carriage was full of children and giddy adults wrapped in long black robes and thick scarves even though the sun was beaming down outside. The cloaked passengers appeared to be on a pilgrimage and there is good reason for this.

At the end of the line is the world's only tour behind the scenes of the Harry Potter movies. Mega fans flock there from all over the world

dressed as the boy wizard and his fellow students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

They are out in force to see a new attraction on the tour set inside a supposedly enchanted greenhouse. Thanks to some technical wizardry you can uproot a squealing green shrub, known as a Mandrake, just like Harry and his chums did in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

It's a far cry from the early days of studio tours. Anyone of a certain age will have fond memories of walking through warehouse-like buildings only to get a fleeting glimpse of some props in cabinets followed by a film about how special effects were made. DVD extras and YouTube videos about movie-making brought the curtain down on most studio tours

As the host says "Welcome to Hogwarts," the crowd gasps



Spectacular sets await at the Warner Bros. Studio Tour London - The Making of Harry Potter, main and above

but like every good Hollywood story there was a sequel.

It came in 2012 when the doors swung open to the Warner Bros. Studio Tour London - The Making of Harry Potter. It only takes a few minutes inside the hangar-like structure to see that it's nothing like its predecessors. Painted in the same sand-colour as an actual movie soundstage the similarity is far from skin deep. The tour sits on the site of Leavesden Studios where hits like Bond flick Goldeneye and this year's Batman movie were shot along with all eight Potter films and the three Fantastic Beasts spinoff movies. It

shows. Once the huge wooden doors at the entrance swing open, guests are plunged inside the Great Hall, famous in the movies for its floating candles. As the host says "Welcome to Hogwarts" a wave of gasps ripples through the crowd.

Stretching out ahead of us are the same long wooden benches that the wannabe wizards ate from in the Potter films. They are decked out with ornate metal plates and goblets and lit by cauldrons hanging from the mouths of stone badgers lining the walls. Mannequins wearing Potter's robes stand behind the benches, just out of touching distance, and at the front, a group of them has oversized toads in their hands to recreate the students' frog chorus from the films. The Potter tour takes around three hours at walking speed but you can spend as long as you want in each area.

Within a few minutes the hosts had told us that we were walking on the same York paving stones which lined the Great Hall in the movies. In fact, the only area of the soaring room which doesn't look like its silver screen counterpart is the ceiling.

It is covered with spotlights and scaffolding which we were told was replaced with computer graphics to make it look like a star field.

The next part of the tour is packed with elaborate displays of props next to panels about them. We spotted several of the cloaked commuters from the train journey peering at every word. Even if you're not a die-hard Potter fan it's hard not to be enchanted by the attention to detail. There's a recreation of a make-up room with actual wigs from the movies hanging next to it including one worn by Robbie Coltrane. He played half-giant Hagrid and according to the panel, his flowing brown locks were actually made of itchy yak hair.

Then come the wands. Rows and rows of them. Every item is meticulously labelled with details of the film it was used in, the character it was used by and even the fictional materials it is meant to be made of.

Fancy peering inside Harry's dormitory at Hogwarts? It's on the tour. Ditto the full-size carriages of the Hogwarts Express steam train used in the movies. Guests can walk through them before strolling down the spooky Diagon Alley with models of towering colourful characters embedded in the wonky buildings.

There are no rides and therefore no queues. The only way to get in is by booking a ticket in advance so guest numbers can be carefully managed which you'll be thankful for when you get to the new greenhouse. From the outside it appears to be rusted and in the grip of a giant vine. It looks so realistic you can't help but tap it to see if it's real. Remarkably it feels hollow but even this doesn't shatter the illusion as you walk through the doors and under the vines which cover the walls and spread into flower boxes in the middle.

Cheese plants seem to be sprouting from them but when you grab them you find that an angry sprite is meant to be growing underneath. No stone has been left unturned and the plant boxes have even been filled with gravel which cascades off the roots when it is pulled up making the photo



look especially authentic. The finale of the tour begins when guests find themselves in the gleaming full-size lobby of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. There's an intricate tiled floor and golden columns soar up to the ceiling where shimmering chandeliers hang down. Just like in the films, goblins with quills in their hands sit at wooden desks but the serenity doesn't last for long.

Around the corner is a set showing the banking hall being wrecked by a dragon just like in the final movie, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2. A high-resolution screen is seamlessly integrated into an elaborate smouldering set of smashed floor tiles and cracked columns to make it seem like the dragon is emerging from mist and breathing fire.

If you've got Potter fans in tow make sure you bring a well-worn pair of shoes and plan on leaving late. The place to stay to make the most of it is the Hilton Watford. It's a traditional conference hotel with pine fittings in the rooms and a grey-green sofa and carpet. It's just a ten minute drive to the tour so you'd have to stay in Harry's dormitory to get any closer. Now that really is magical.

Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter: wbstudiotour.co.uk, adult tickets from £49.95, children £39.95. Hilton Watford: hilton.com/en/hotels/wathnhn-hilton-london-watford



The new greenhouse, above and top, allows visitors to mess with Mandrakes

STAYCATION



A luxury

Take a break from the real world at Rockliffe Hall Hotel, writes Will Slater

Five star hotels are faintly ridiculous places, a fantasy construct where the buildings are too grand, the decor too plush and the staff too friendly.

They are also theatrical, frivolous and enormous fun, havens adept at helping you check out of the real world and reside, however briefly, in a place where the grass is always cut perfectly, the bed is beautifully made and the food abundant and delicious. And you don't have to lift a finger. Rockliffe Hall near Darlington fits into the model perfectly. Large impressive drive through landscaped grounds? Check.

Airy reception area and super friendly courteous staff? Check. Huge bedroom with sitting area, vast bed, gorgeous linen and an ensuite with marble everywhere, a TV by the bath and Molton Brown goodies? Check.

No sooner had we checked in (at which point we were discreetly asked if we would prefer any calls from family members to be screened or put through, suggesting that some Mr and Mrs Smiths might prefer not to answer calls) we were due at the hotel's famed spa. It is a big part of the offer here, which along with its golf course makes this a leisure

destination of choice in the North East of England.

I was booked in for a full body massage featuring Neom products. These kinds of places are not my normal habitat and pulling on a pair of paper pants before sliding under a blanket didn't really help matters. The young woman providing my treatment was professionalism itself, however, and set about reducing me to a semi comatose state, during which I'm fairly sure I didn't snore.

My wife, who generally isn't a fan of massages, loved her facial and we made our way back to our room, leaving a trail of Neom scent with top notes of indulgence through the various public spaces wearing our fluffy gowns and house slippers. You get used to seeing people wander around like this. As hotel guests we had white robes, while day guests to the spa had grey ones. It could be a practical thing, or it could be a status thing. Perhaps a bit of both.

There are three places to eat: the Orangery, home of fine dining and afternoon tea; the Clubhouse, where the emphasis is on casual dining and all-day eats and drinks; and Nu Sana above the spa, which has a terrace for outdoor eating and healthy options, including a smoothie and juice menu.

We were booked in for the tasting

leisure zone

menu with paired wines in the Orangery.

Before taking our seats, we had a drink in the bar. I inadvertently caused consternation when I asked for a vodka martini with an olive. I think delegations had been sent forth to locate one, but to no avail. It definitely upset the bartender and lovely waiting staff more than me and I was happy to swap the olive for lemon.

The dining space is lovely, with a pitched glass roof and views of the grounds.

With so many courses, eight in total including canapes and so many flavour points and styles, the wine

The dining space is lovely, with a pitched glass roof and views of the grounds

pairing worked brilliantly and saved having to work out what bottle would be the best compromise.

Wines, all introduced by our sommelier, included a Little Beauty dry riesling from New Zealand, Zero-G, Zweigelt 2019 from Austria, a delicious Bico Da Ran albarino from Portugal, a sweet, fortified Rivesaltes Ambre from Roussillon and at least one more I didn't catch.

As you might expect, the food was beautifully presented. From trompette mushroom and truffle

Clockwise from main: an aerial view of Rockliffe Hall; a suite in the Old Hall; the Orangery Restaurant

macarons to hand-dived scallop with pork belly, the plates kept coming, but portion sizes meant you felt able to tackle it all. Duck liver parfait with smoked eel was followed by fabulous halibut with mussels and then salt-aged venison with artichoke and goji berry (the granola served with this was the only thing that didn't really work for me). The sweet courses included a doughnut with Marmite, peanut butter and chocolate followed by house special the Chocolate Orangery, a fine dining spin on the Christmas favourite.

Tasting menus tend to be one part food and one part theatre but this memorable meal was still intimate enough for it to be about us too and not just about what chef and his brigade was doing in the kitchen. And that's the skill of a great hotel, over-the-top, ridiculous and magnificent as they are. We were there less than 24 hours, but every moment was brilliant. Make it two nights and you won't regret it.

Rockliffe Hall, Hurworth on Tees, Darlington DL2 2DU, www.rockliffehall.com; rooms from £290 for two including breakfast, though various offers are available; the tasting menu is £95pp, wine pairing £50pp or £90pp for premium pairing



CARAVANNING

Fun and affordable choice for a family getaway

Watching the pennies Claire Spreadbury and her family check-in to the newly-refurbished Parkdean Southview

Family holidays are expensive. And with the cost of living continually on the rise, taking the kids anywhere can seem like a massive drain on your finances. So, how about going cheap, cheerful and old school, with a good old caravan in a holiday park?

Caravans are actually having a bit of a moment in the sun right now. Kitsch decor and funky designs are springing up in vans available to rent pretty much anywhere, but ours sits among lines of many others within Parkdean's Southview holiday park, just a 10-minute drive from Skegness town centre.

Of course, you could be anywhere. The idea of these holiday parks is they contain all your entertainment needs, so you don't have to step outside the resort if you don't want to – but it's nice to have a beach not too far away, in case you fancy a change of scene.

I'll be honest, I'm not a caravan fan. And although we're staying in a brand new one, which looks lovely inside – all woods and natural colours, with a great use of space so you can squeeze in as much as you can – it wobbles slightly every time even my 10-year-old plods around, and the rooms are tiny.

But we're here to try and save money on a family holiday. Yes, we've taken a hit on the accommodation, but we're only really going to be sleeping in the van. Our kids, Rosie and Poppy, are 13 and 10, so they want to be out and about.

After a post-lockdown £550,000 refurbishment, as part of the £140 million investment in Parkdean resorts nationwide, Southview is stepping up in the holiday park ranks. Refurbished accommodation and facilities will go relatively unnoticed

but the new activities available here have a very Center Parcs feel.

Over at the Activity Zone, kids and adults can backflip on the bungee trampolines, hit the high ropes and wiggle up the outdoor climbing wall. There are zorbs, a football pitch-come-basketball court, nine-hole adventure golf, a craft den, archery and a Battle Zone for laser conquests. It's all suitable for kids from quite a young age, but fun enough for a teenager to forget about being grumpy for a good while too.

In Aqua Jets, the girls splash down with a mini jet, ducking, diving and spinning down and under hoops in the pool. There are only four of them taking part on a busy August weekend, and they have loads of fun with the instructor, racing each other and learning how to go fast and slow. You can do this exact same activity at Center Parcs, but it'll cost you around £7 more per child. The High Ropes course is less than half the price, and crazy golf is up to £5 cheaper per person, so savings can really add up.

We work up an appetite peddling a family kart (£12) around the park in the midday heat. It's a fun but hard work (and sometimes hairy, when the kids are driving!) way to get about for an hour. Food here is pretty good, too. We wolf down fish finger sandwiches and curly fries, feeding a family of four for just under £50 at The Boathouse, scoff KFC-style Thunderbird Chicken (£7.49 for a meal deal) and slurp at massive, dripping ice creams at Scoops – £6.49 for three scoops with sauce.

It isn't Center Parcs. And if you're hoping the experience might come close, it really doesn't. But it's a lot cheaper. With prices constantly rising, staying here gives you the option of a vastly cheaper weekend escape, where the kids will still have a ball.

A Woodhall three-bedroom caravan costs £329 (September 5 onwards) for a three-night stay. Costs vary throughout the year. Visit parkdeanresorts.co.uk



Parkdean Southview resort has enjoyed a £550,000 refurb