



Jest in Timberland

On a trip to Sherwood Forest, a boisterous night of merriment, left **Rishad Saam Mehta** yearning for more

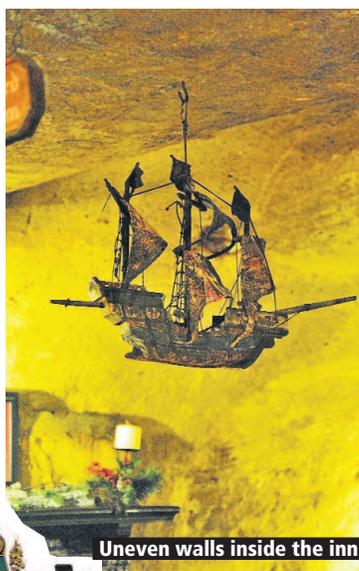
Recently, when I was at a loose end in England, I took the train up from Reading to Birmingham to spend the day with a classmate I had recently touched base with, thanks to the miracle that's social networking. The last I'd seen Arpita was in 1989 after a post-exam movie. My classmate of 12 years was now a doctor in Birmingham, the Balti of Britain, known for its fiery cuisine but I let that pass as spending the lovely day in the city seemed a waste. Instead, we headed north, on the M42, towards Nottingham.

BROTHER AND HOOD

Nottingham is closely associated with the legend of Robin Hood whose merry men (in tights, to raunchy scribes) led the sheriff on a merry dance around the nearby Sherwood Forest. It is also the birthplace of provocative writer DH Lawrence who set many imaginations a-titter with Lady Chatterley's Lover.

Sherwood Forest is 16 miles north of the city and you won't find plaques saying Robin Hood frolicked here. No matter how hard scholars have tried, they have been unable to turn up any conclusive evidence that the outlaw really existed. It only makes the first British hero that took on the evil sheriff and helped the locals, more enigmatic.

Today Sherwood is not as dense as it used to be but offers pleasant walks through old oaks and along tranquil paths. My winter visit there was a red and white affair thanks to the matured shrubbery and snow underfoot.



Uneven walls inside the inn

ALE IS WELL

But the highlight of my day was a pint at Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem, which purports to be the oldest Inn in England. Today it is the most popular inn in England as far as tourists go. Tourists form paparazzi-like crowds outside, but the star is the

pub. It was founded in 1198 when King Richard the Lionheart called for volunteers to join him in the third crusade to recapture the holy land from the Turks. The king issued the call from Nottingham castle. The young men who rallied to his banner had one for the road at the Inn before setting off to Jerusalem full of religious zeal.

The Inn itself leaves no doubt about its heritage, it is actually cut into the rocky castle ramparts and nooks and crannies form the interior. Its low ceilings and cramped layout were necessary to keep the warmth in. The staff was quite accustomed to whopping business because they pulled the draught handles with practiced precision.

The walls inside are uneven and have a rock cut tavern raucous resonance. And, guffaws and chortles turn boisterous as the inmates bounce about giving Ye Olde Trip... a vibrant buzz of happiness that compliments the fine ales on offer. That's how my day ended, sipping ale in a little corner of an ancient, noisy pub, reminiscing with an old classmate about classroom crushes and eccentric educators.

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BIG BEN

FOR SMALL WONDERS

PIC: NOSHIR MARFATIA



London delights children in a way no other city can, discovers **Meher Marfatia**

The vibe is instant. "Crackle, bubble, pop", as my daughter used to sing, a cereal ad-type ditty all her own, pudgy baby fingers waved in mad directions on hitting Heathrow airport! We visited London regularly, braced by its wide welcome to kids from trying two-year-olds to tempestuous 13s. Few capital cities buzz and brim with an energy that sweeps youngsters faster than you can say "Lego". A word uttered a lot, when compulsive kids want to revisit Legoland's wittily brick-built 150 landscaped acres near Windsor Castle. Its Dragon Rollercoaster and Pirate Falls are surefire hits. As are rides like Thunder Looper at Alton Towers, besides daredevil spins Colossus, Vortex, Slammer and Rush in Thorpe Park.

BEAR NECESSITIES

No less tame and guaranteeing nervy giggles galore is the London Dungeon. Its murky depths shoot shocker special effects, grisly collectibles uncannily coming to life when least expected. Adventurous tykes with an appetite for chills and spills stay endlessly amused at this Tooley Street hotspot crammed with nasty surprises on torturous mazes. Remember you're in museum paradise. Romp through Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood's collection of teddy bears, dolls and games dating to the 17th century. Listen for whoops of "Wow" as little eyes stare, awed at the 105-foot skeleton of Dippy the dinosaur, dominating the vaulted central hall of the British Natural History Museum on South Kensington's Exhibition Road.



PIC: SHERNAZ VASUNIA

Don't skip seasonal flower shows, Covent Garden bustle, Tudor history events, the Thames River festival and such staple stops as the zoo, aquarium, planetarium, Madame Tussaud's waxworks and Buckingham Palace to gawp at the guards. Buggy transport, nappy changing facilities, disabled access and theme cafes take the trudge out of travel with every kind of kid.

MAKING HISTORY

Having ensured they've played, eaten, then shopped their fill at havens like Hamley's, this incredible city offers ever more exciting and educational ways to keep toddlers to teens happily occupied. Alight at Charing Cross tube station for the Brass Rubbing Centre. This simple craft helps kids create charming "rubbed" medieval kings, costumed ladies or armoured knights. And as family fun never overlooks theatre nights together, current West End acts appealing across the ages include Billy Elliot, Sister Act and Stomp.

For a vantage point with wonderful views, the London Eye is unbeatable. Schoolgirl Leia Tyebjee declares, "It was scary at first.

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