

Travel / CAMBRIDGE

Head to the river for some oarsome fun

by Mary Novakovich

BOW three, five, seven! Go! Catch! Drive! These cryptic commands echo along Cambridge's River Cam as I inexpertly attempt to row with seven strangers in a long, thin boat that looks too flimsy to support us all.

But, miraculously, it does, and there's even a ninth person tucked into the bow – the cox and owner of Cambridge Rowing Experience, Omar Terywall, who's giving this slightly nervous gang of newbies a crash

Ever fancied your chances in the Boat Race? Here's the way to turn fantasy into reality

course in learning how to row. We start in the clubhouse of the City of Cambridge Rowing Club with a quick lesson on the rowing machines before carefully carrying the boat towards the water. This deceptively heavy craft is worth thousands of pounds.

Omar then begins to teach us the commands and technique, guiding us through every step as we practise outside the clubhouse.

I've been in a kayak twice and a

canoe once, when I was a teenager, so I'm not exactly handy with an oar. But before I know it, we're off, slowly getting to grips with the technique and even slipping into some sort of rhythm. Omar's calm, confident calls to us are keeping us afloat – much to everyone's surprise – now that we've figured out what they actually mean.

Since he set up the Cambridge Rowing Experience in 2021, he's found the easiest way to get people rowing is



Historic: Cambridge's handsome university colleges are at the city's heart

to simplify the learning process and cut out unnecessary jargon.

We're all given numbers – I'm five – and divided into two groups: bow and stern. Omar calls our numbers and we then row, sliding our seats into the tracks, turning the end of the oar at the right moment to 'catch' the water.

We all go wrong at some point. When strokes go awry and the boat makes a heart-stopping wobble, I have visions of us all tipping into the Cam.

But if there's one thing that instantly creates a sense of teamwork and camaraderie, it's getting a bunch of novices to work together to stay upright. No wonder Omar has a lot of corporate team-building groups.

The son of Indian-Pakistani parents, he's on a mission to change common perceptions of rowing – that it's not just an elite, varsity sport. Cambridge has town rowing clubs as well as college ones, although they're not the ones that usually spring to mind.

'My main goal is to make rowing more accessible to everybody,' he says.

'I am still one of the few brown people in a club of 300 or so members. And it's not because we're made to feel unwelcome but I think there are people like me who used to stand on the bridge and think, that's not for me. I can't do that.'

One of his favourite customers is a man of 82. 'He said to me, "I always thought it was a university sport. But am I too old for it?" And I thought, if you can walk up and down the stairs, that's good enough for me.'

'The only challenge was getting in and out of the boat. But he got in and he absolutely loved it. For him, it was a bucket-list item, not something he wanted to continue. I'd love to make it more available for people like him.'

And me. I'm one of the countless people who for years have strolled past all those boathouses, thinking it's another world. Now, after about an hour of rowing, I can see why the sport is so seductive – wobbles and all.

The team spirit continues with the post-row ritual of washing down the



Don't rock the boat: Join the crew with Cambridge Rowing Experience

boat before it goes back in the clubhouse. Everyone mucks in cheerfully, flushed with relief and a real sense of accomplishment.

We're still buzzing when we eat in the evening at The Orator restaurant. It's in the historic Cambridge Union Society building, with its impressive debating hall.

Handily, after a tiring day, it's across the street from one of Cambridge's newest hotels, Wilde Aparthotels. These stylish studios and apartments with bijou kitchens are reasonably priced, from £153 per night.

I come to Cambridge often but I never thought I could try something that's so much a part of its soul. 'For many people, it's something they want to do as a one-off,' says Omar. 'And for those who actually enjoy this, we do the lessons.'

Individual weekend rowing with Cambridge Rowing Experience, £65pp; £175 for a two-person boat, £350 for four and £595 for eight. See cambridgerowing.com



Slow boat: Tourists and students can also enjoy traditional punting on the Cam

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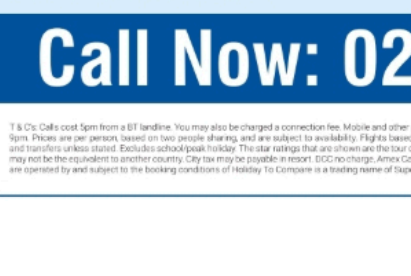
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