

## UK


**EMMA'S  
ECCENTRIC  
BRITAIN**
**Bat safari,  
Cambridgeshire**

I'm at Duke House, a rare boutique B&B in the heart of Cambridge, and the owners, the irrepressible Liz and Rob Cameron, are about to take me on a bat safari. They've only been running the B&B since Easter. Liz used to be a teacher - "But I didn't feel committed and was crap at it" - so they decided to open their home to strangers instead. They're clearly doing a good job as they're already listed as one of the top three B&Bs in Cambridge. "We're on the podium," says Rob, with a grin.

They're great company and I'm looking forward to our evening out. We're going up the River Cam on behemoth punts, grander than average, and shall be striking away from the city towards the village of Grantchester. Our punter is Saad Tahir: he's a second-year economics student and his slight frame has

me wondering whether he's going to manage to shove the behemoth anywhere, let alone to Grantchester.

"I fell in on my test day," he tells me, but it was very windy, and raining."

I stare at him.

"I didn't fall in on the re-test though," he adds, quickly.

As dusk is drawing in, Saad shoves us off. It's a fine evening but blankets and umbrellas are provided in case it turns chilly or wet, and we're each handed a bat detector. It's a bit like an old-fashioned handheld transistor radio, and it converts sonar signals into audible frequencies.

Different species of bat operate at varying frequencies and a trained ear is able to distinguish each bat's call. There's no hope of me being able to do this but, thankfully, we have a member of the Wildlife Trusts on board who is able to do all the explaining.

"Bats," Deborah Marchant, our expert guide, tells us, "are vital to the ecosystem. They control crop pests, they pollinate



**'This is how horror films start,' I mumble. I keep expecting a face to appear from the undergrowth, with a killing tool'**

flowers and they drop fruit seeds."

Turns out it's the International Year of the Bat and this safari is part of a drive to raise awareness of a maligned, misunderstood and often persecuted small mammal. We have Bram Stoker to thank for their terrible reputation, along with their endless association with witches and other murky things of the night, but the truth is that the only thing bats in the UK are interested in eating is vast quantities of insects.

"They need to consume 3,000 insects a night just to stay alive," Deborah tells us. "This summer has been terrible for them. It's not been warm enough to generate enough insects. We've had a lot of dehydrated, exhausted bats. You often find them on the floor. They're disorientated. If you find one, you can call the Bat Conservation Trust (0845 1300 228, bats.org.uk), and they will come and save it."

Suddenly, there's a loud chatter on Rob's bat sensor. It's a rapid clicking noise and we all crane round to see a fast-darting black smudge sweep across our field of vision. "That's a Daubenton's bat," Deborah tells us. "They can live for 22 years."

As it gets darker and the water turns the colour of treacle, our bat sensors come alive. Deborah leans forward and shines a torch out across the water and as she does so, the river surface becomes animated with thousands of flying insects. It's wonderfully gothic: gnarled branches of low-hanging trees dripping over the shoreline, bats diving all around and the single beam of light stretching off into the darkness.

"This is how horror films start," I mumble to Rob as we silently glide

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past dense undergrowth. "I keep expecting a face to suddenly appear. And then disappear. And then reappear but with an idiosyncratic killing tool."

"First rule of horror films - don't split up. We'll be fine," says Rob, reassuringly.

"Watch out, Saad," says the punter to our left. "Dead Man's Corner coming up."

"Don't worry," says Rob, turning to me. "It's only called that because of all the dead men."

"Oh look," says Liz, pointing, as we round the corner. "That's something you don't see every day."

There's a cow standing on the towpath and she's eating out of a bin. It's like a secret insight into what cows get up to at night.

"Vampire cows," I whisper and make a mental note to turn that into a film idea immediately.

The bat safari lasts around 90 minutes and despite being eaten alive by insects (top tip: take insect repellent) it's a gloriously peaceful and relaxing way to spend an evening. Children will love it too, especially the bat sensors, so all in all, a top-notch family outing.

Now then. Vampire Cows. I'm thinking George Clooney and Ermintrude? Who's in?

● *Book bat safaris at scudamores.com. The safaris run every Friday until 21 September, and will start again in May 2013, adults £15, under-12s £7.50. Accommodation was provided by Duke House (1223 314773, dukehousecambridge.co.uk, doubles from £120), dinner by Fitzbillies (51-52 Trumpington Street, 01223 352 500, fitzbillies.com)*

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