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ED SHADOW MINISTER PLUNGES IN THE DAGGER

Now Tristram Hunt joins
Labour revolt... as poll
says Miliband is liability

ED MILIBAND'S position as Labour leader is hanging by a thread after one of his key allies plunged the knife in.

Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt blasted Mr Miliband's desperate attempt to revive his flagging personal ratings by 'getting closer to voters' as a 'total failure'. The blow

By **Simon Walters** POLITICAL EDITOR

from such a senior Shadow Cabinet figure added to massive pressure on the Labour leader as:

● A Mail on Sunday poll suggested the

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UNIQUE NUMBER COLLECT. PRIZE DRAW. TERMS APPLY

Harry Potter star Bonnie Wright heads for a beguiling corner

CHENGDU, the capital of Sichuan province in south-west China, is not the most obvious choice for a holiday destination. 'The weather here is mostly grey and raining – just like England!' our guide cheerily told us on arrival.

However, for those looking for an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime adventure into what feels like unexplored territory, this exciting city and the surrounding countryside certainly fit the bill.

So often in this world, when you travel somewhere new, you already have a sense of what you are in for, perhaps having seen it on the internet or in a film beforehand. It is difficult to experience a truly 'foreign' land.

I have been very lucky to have travelled to many places thanks to my career, and more and more I am looking for a sense of adventure and discovery when I go abroad.

Until last year, when British Airways introduced the first direct route to Chengdu, this area of China was relatively closed off to Western tourism. The city prides itself on preserving the ancient aspects of Chinese culture, while also trying to embrace the modern.

To my delight, there was something amazing and new to experience every moment of our whistlestop three-day tour – from the deliciously spicy local cuisine to the mesmerising ancient art of bian lian (the region's famous 'face-changing shows'), and to the extraordinary process of having our 'ears picked'.

The region's most famous residents are, of course, its pandas. When you arrive in Chengdu, you quickly realise that these comical creatures are the local mascots. Their faces are every-

You can hug the pandas – but don't tease them!

where – on the bright green taxis, as souvenirs on every street corner, and even incorporated into the architecture. No one in our party ever tired of cracking the inevitable gag: 'It's panda-monium here!'

The giant panda is an endangered species – there are only 1,500 left, and more than 85 per cent of those are known to be in the Chengdu area.

A visit to the Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Research Foundation is a must. It is situated about six miles outside the city although, due to the notorious Chengdu traffic, the journey takes about an hour. More like a nature

reserve than a zoo, this peaceful research centre with bamboo arches, wind chimes and signs such as No Teasing The Pandas was undoubtedly the highlight of my trip.

For a donation of 2,000 yuan (about £200) you can be escorted into an enclosure and pet and hug a baby panda. It might be slightly expensive, but it is worth it. And Chengdu really is the only place in the world you can do this.

To me, pandas have always been mythical creatures, so I never thought I would actually one day get so close to one and interact with it.

The bears are so gentle – they're not scared at all, and their fur is slightly coarse, like horsehair. There really is something of a comic flair to these animals and I was surprised by how lethargic they are. They seem to shuffle or drag themselves everywhere.

BUT pandas are not the only reason more people are visiting Chengdu – the city has seen a 20 per cent rise in tourism in the past year. The region is famous for its spicy Sichuan cuisine. We sampled all sorts of new delicacies, such as vegetables called 'fiddle-head' and lots of fungi.

I love cooking and, having recently won The Great British Bake Off for Sports Relief, I

thought I would try my hand here. I had a lesson with one of the region's top chefs, Zhang Wei, at the traditional Chengdu Impressions restaurant in the Wide Alley, Narrow Alley district.

We cooked mapo tofu, a vegetarian dish. Seeing the amount of spices the chef put in was quite a shock – there were more seasonings than there were ingredients. But there was clearly a ritual to the order of the ingredi-

ents. Ritual seems very much ingrained in the culture of the city, especially in the preparation of tea, and it was nice to see that these traditions have not been lost.

Traditional Chengdu restaurants are set up with a stage to show opera or the ancient art of bian lian. Only a handful of local men are trained in this secretive tradition, which involves an elaborate matador-like performer miraculously changing painted masks in the blink of an eye. It was quite scary, actually – especially when he came up to me at the dinner table and performed it next to my face.

The next morning, we visited the tranquil People's Park in the



GENTLE: Bonnie gets up close to a panda. Left: Jinling Street in Chengdu



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The cruises that come

By **Caroline Hendrie**

SPOTTING a celebrity stroll past is always fun – and really thrilling if you are a particular fan of theirs. But you don't have to leave it to chance. Why not make your next holiday one where you can meet your favourite author, see a star perform up close or learn to cook with a TV chef? You can on a cruise, and here's how and when...

● Broadcaster Clare Balding will give a talk and sign her books during Queen Victoria's transit of the Panama Canal on a cruise from Fort Lauderdale in Florida to Los Angeles. The 15-night cruise sailing on February 2 costs from £4,978pp including flights, with Cunard (cunard.co.uk, 0843 374 0000).

● The Carnival LIVE Concert Series brings legendary American chart acts – such as Smokey Robinson and Journey – to ships on the Caribbean. Standard tickets for shows are from \$35 to \$60 (about £22 to



BOOK IT: Clare Balding will sign copies of her autobiography

£38) in the relatively intimate ships' theatres. Book VIP tickets (from \$125, about £78) for seats in the first four rows and you get a souvenir photograph of you meeting your heroes. For example, Smokey Robinson will appear on Carnival Breeze sailing for six nights from Miami on April 19, from £359pp excluding flights with Carnival (carnival.co.uk, 0845 351 0556).

● Strictly Come Dancing's

Artem Chigvintsev, who won the contest in 2010 as partner of EastEnders actress Kara Tointon, will be doing dazzling routines with his team on a Dancing With The Stars themed cruise aboard Westerdam next month. The cruise sails for a week from Fort Lauderdale to the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands on December 6. The cost is from £1,009pp including flights and one-night pre-cruise stay in a hotel with Holland America Line (hollandamerica.com, 0843 374 2300).

● A long cruise to Turkey aboard Saga Sapphire arrives at the First World War site of Gallipoli 100 years to the day after Australian and New Zealand troops first landed there on April 25, 1915. The great New Zealand soprano Dame Kiri Te Kanawa will be on board to give a recital as part of the commemorations. The no-fly cruise, departing Southampton on April 5 for 31 nights, costs from £5,821pp, including travel insurance and gratuities. Book

of China to discover that...



GETTING THERE

British Airways (ba.com) flies to Chengdu from Heathrow five times a week. Flights cost from £754pp. The **JinJiang Hotel** (jihotel.com), a member of Preferred Hotel Group, is the oldest five-star hotel in Chengdu – rooms cost from £90. **TripAdvisor** (tripadvisor.co.uk) lists more than 2,000 Chengdu hotels. For more information on the **Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Research Foundation**, visit pandafoundation.com.



SCARY SPICE: Bonnie was amazed at how many different seasonings chef Zhang Wei used in his various dishes

heart of the city. Among the many elderly residents playing mahjong, we encountered the city's famed 'ear-pickers'. I had never even heard of ear-picking, let alone seen it.

Using an arsenal of small instruments, the men – wearing lamps attached to their heads – set about picking their subjects' ears. Apparently people can experience 'ear-gasms' after the ten-minute procedure! Luckily – or perhaps not so luckily – those in my party brave enough to try it didn't 'ear-gasm' in the middle of the park.

We also all had massages in the People's Park, where they cracked our necks. But because I know that a lot of alternative practices stem from Chinese traditions, I think China is probably the only place in the world where I would be happy to agree to a massage in public.

Finally, on our last day, we took a trip out to the countryside to visit the ancient town of Anren. It was here, while wandering around the

little stalls and smelling the perfumed air, that I really felt we had been transported to somewhere I had never known.

This 'living museum' of a town, preserved to show what ancient Chinese eras were like, had a real serenity and calmness to it.

And later, over a glass of 'Wall of China' red wine (an industry rapidly growing in China), we understood why this province, near the foothills of Tibet, is known as the 'heavenly state' of China.

A first-class break that's just the ticket

By Frank Barrett

NOW is a great time for a UK break. Many of our major cities and towns tempt visitors with Christmas markets, and accommodation rates are usually low. Here are some cheerful, affordable suggestions.

Steaming to Christmas

When The Cathedrals Express pulled into Ludlow a few weeks ago, I was surprised at the spontaneous cheer that arose from the waiting crowd. Most of those thronging the platform were interested onlookers rather than passengers (both groups were more disparate in ages than you might expect – a collection of people from babies to very senior citizens).

And is there anything more gloriously sybaritic than eating in a railway dining car? Added to that there is that thrill of being steam-hauled: the tang of smoke, the pounding of pistons, the hoot of the whistle...

Steam Dreams outings include trips to Christmas markets in York, Bath, Ludlow and Chester, or Christmas carol services in Christchurch College, Oxford, the cathedrals in Ely and Norwich, and Sherborne Abbey. Prices in Premium Standard start at £99pp, rising to £239pp for a Pullman Style Dining trip. For further information visit SteamDreams.org.uk, 01483 209888.

Boutique London

With the Christmas lights being switched on, now is the perfect time to enjoy the capital – and to

TRIP BACK IN TIME

There's little to beat a steam train journey



explore different parts of the city, staying in smart but very affordable hotels. In Pimlico, for example, which is handy for the boutiques of Sloane Street and King's Road, you can stay in the excellent Artist Residence (artistresidence.london.co.uk), a stylish ten-room hotel. Rooms cost from £180 a night.

Some larger chains now also offer more of a boutique experience, none better than the excellent Mercure London Bridge (mercure.com), where plush rooms are available from £167.50 a night. The hotel is perfectly placed for the delights of Borough Market, Tate Modern and Tower of London.

Cornwall

For a welcome breath of sea air, head for Fowey. The Old Quay House (theoldquayhouse.com) is the ideal weekend hotel: it boasts a great location in the centre of town and a fine restaurant. Visit the Daphne du

Maurier Literary Centre or enjoy wonderful coastal walks. Rooms from £145 per night.

Oxford

A converted prison in a medieval castle: what's not to like about a short break at the Malmaison Oxford (malmaison.com)? The hotel is situated right in the heart of the city and has a great bar and restaurant: a 'cell double' including breakfast (porridge, of course!) costs from £489 per night.

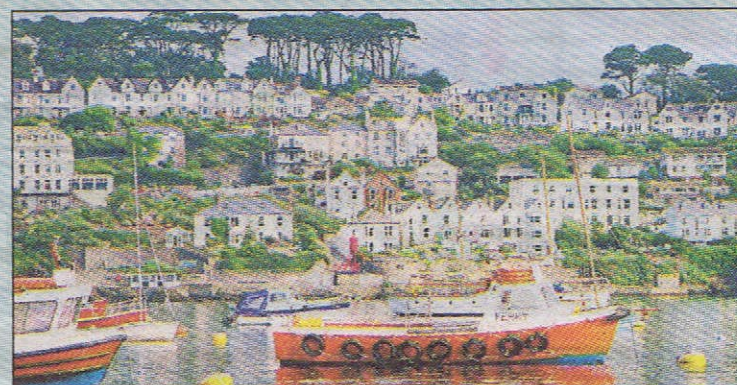
Canterbury

One of England's most beautiful and historic cities, it's difficult to imagine a better place than Canterbury for a November break. Mulberry Cottages (mulberrycottages.com) offers several attractive and affordable self-catering options right in the heart of the city. For example, Chaucer Cottage sleeps up to four people and costs £541 for seven nights.

Lake District

Brimstone Hotel (brimstonehotel.co.uk) in the Lake District is offering a Fireside Recluse Break, featuring real log-burning stoves and 'proper cocktails, breakfasts in bed and delicious dinners'.

Rooms costs from £250 on a bed-and-breakfast basis, including complimentary beer, wine and nibbles in the Reading Room, free Berghaus kit hire from The Bootroom (for walks in the area) and spa access. Book direct at brimstonehotel.co.uk 30 days in advance and get 20 per cent off these standard rates.



A BREATH OF FRESH AIR: The picturesque harbour at Fowey

with star quality

with Saga (saga.co.uk/cruises, 0800 051 3355).

TV chef James Martin, star of Saturday Kitchen, will be creating dishes in The Cookery Club school aboard new ship Britannia. The school has 12 cooking stations for up to 24 students who will sit down and eat what they've made with the chef after a two-hour lesson. James will be

taking master classes, cooking exclusive dinners for guests at the Chef's Table, hosting Q&A sessions in the theatre and signing his books on five cruises in 2015. A 14-night no-fly cruise from Southampton to the Mediterranean on June 13 costs from £1,749pp with P&O (pocruises.com, 0843 373 0111). Prices for classes and Chef's Table dinners available soon.

The Mail

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