

It would be a crime not to give murder mysteries a shot

Professor Plum with the lead piping in the conservatory? If only it was so simple. **ROB COWEN** turns sleuth at a country house hotel



WHODUNNIT? Albrighton Hall Hotel and, below, part-time Poirots Rob (with hat) and James

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THERE is something scary about being late for a murder mystery weekend. You tend to wonder what the punishment might be.

But the M40 was inescapably gridlocked. My friend James, army captain, and I sat in the traffic jam, he in his dress blues and me in a not-too-convincing costume of naval jacket and sailor's hat.

Two tickets for the "Whatnot Society" annual dinner were burning a hole in my pocket.

This fictional soirée we were attending was actually a cover story to explain why a bunch of strangers aged between 18 to 80 might meet in a country hotel in Shropshire. In reality, we were all part-time Poirots.

Eventually, our headlights

considerably, as had my head. However, Saturday morning was scheduled as free time, so we worked off a colossal breakfast in the hotel gym and swimming pool, before visiting Shrewsbury.

We went over the evidence while walking through the beautiful Quarry Park by the river before visiting Shrewsbury Abbey, home of fictional sleuth Brother Cadfael. But we had our own investigation to conduct, so it was back to interviewing suspects and studying evidence. Sadly, this was all to no avail and another murder rocked the hotel after lunch.

In the lulls between sleuthing and bloodbaths, guests were divided into teams and kept busy with singalongs, games and quizzes. Staged scenes would disrupt many of these, meaning one minute you could be playing air guitar to Status Quo, the next rushing down a corridor to catch



(A little ray of sunshine in these dark winter months)

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revealed the impressive Mercure Albrighton Hall Hotel, a perfect Cluedo mansion that sits in lavish grounds near Shrewsbury. Now over two hours late, we rushed through the wood-panelled interiors into the dining room to be met by a roar of laughter as we took our seats. I soon realised why... everyone else was in normal dress. We looked like Popeye and Colonel Mustard.

OK, I admit it, the uniforms had been my idea - partly to conceal my identity as a journalist, but also to help us to get into the spirit of the weekend. Unfortunately, they instantly sent the other 50 amateur sleuths into overdrive and it was clear we had incriminated ourselves already.

Our situation wasn't helped when a row started right next to us. The room hushed as insults were traded between two ladies, culminating in a very real slap. My mind was racing and I quickly consulted the rules: "The cast will be acting in character the whole time," they reassured me.

No sooner had I read them than a scream ripped through the hotel. I followed the crowd to find one of the women from the argument seemingly bleeding to death from multiple stab wounds. Seasoned murder mystery weekenders whipped out their cameras but I was rooted to the spot... it was my friend kneeling over the body. Suddenly, his ceremonial sword didn't seem like such a good prop.

This intense introduction meant we now had 36 hours to identify a killer. A police inspector duly arrived to do some questioning and announced that an Incident Room had been set up.

By morning, new evidence meant the plot had thickened



two actors in a bedroom romp. Saturday night was a fancy dress dinner. Dancing, drinking and an amazing rib of beef gave way to

more revelations and another corpse. This time, I was on the scent like a bloodhound and became convinced that I had worked out both murderer and motive. Unfortunately, that was at 3am and in the cold light of day even a walk around the atmospherically misty hotel grounds

and picturesque private lake wouldn't coax it from my memory. As required, we submitted a name to the inspector, but the motive was dodgy at best.

GATHERING for the final police report on Sunday, I marvelled at the well-written story. The criminal mastermind behind these weekends, Joy Swift, is worryingly adept at creating brilliant murderous twists and I was amazed that a mum, daughter and grandma team had managed to work it all out... until I saw their flow charts and post-it notes.

Far from being traumatised by the orgy of murder, we left with fond farewells. In fact, I'm willing to testify that there's nothing like a weekend of death and suspicion to make new friends.

● **GETTING THERE:**

Joy Swift's Original Murder Weekends (0151 924 1124/ www.murder.co.uk) run year round at numerous Mercure hotels around the country. Price from £240pp, including two nights B&B, dinners, and lunch on Saturday.