

Travel

Bored with the same old weekends in the country? A murder-mystery break could solve the dilemma

BY MELANIE DOYLE

It's a strange but true phenomenon that we Brits like nothing more than to relax with a good murder. Our consumption of crime fiction paperbacks outstrips the romance market by four-to-one.

And I confess my only interest in Prince Charming is if he turns up with a knife between his shoulder blades in chapter two.

I'd consider myself as having a good record of "calling it" from the safety of my own sofa, so what better way to prove my natural detective abilities than in a fully immersive experience over the course of a weekend at a hotel in the beautiful Surrey countryside?

Joy Swift invented the Original Murder Weekends experience 35 years ago, and for this anniversary year we were promised that her 130th plot would be especially fiendish.

We were cordially invited to the annual dinner of the Crime Authors Society at the elegant Wotton House in Dorking. The dinner was held on Friday evening, and the dress code was "Black, White and Red All Over".

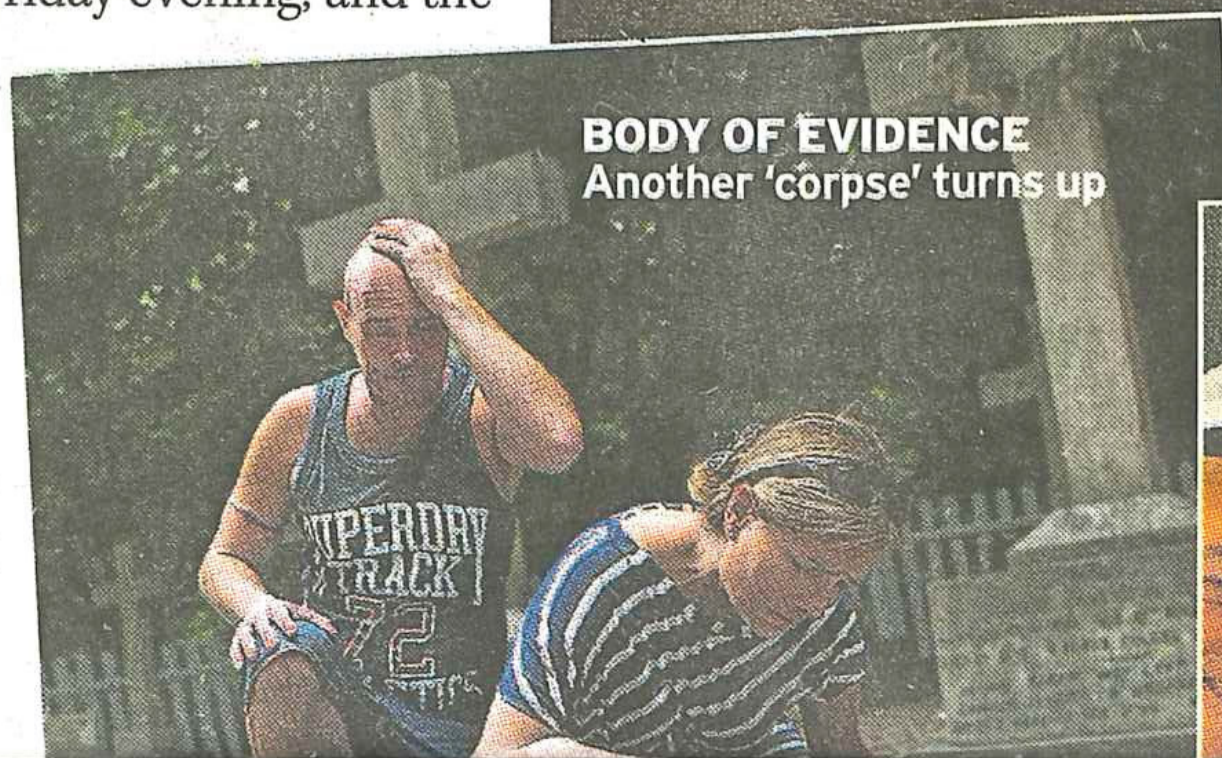
As a murder weekend virgin, I found it slightly bizarre to be approached by a total stranger and asked what book I was working on.

SHIFTY



ELEGANT SETTING
Wotton House

Wish clue were here?



BODY OF EVIDENCE
Another 'corpse' turns up



GREECE

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you are told in advance that, although not obligatory, having your own character background helps "explain why a group of total strangers would meet at a hotel".



The lie rolled off my lips and, as my husband Jason and I spoke to more people, we began to realise that the first job was to work out who were the actors and who were our fellow guests. We cast shifty glances and received them in return.

Dinner revealed who the players in the drama were as a succession of arguments and outrageous behaviour unfolded over the delicious three-course meal. Suddenly, the cry went out that there was a body in the library. Pudding was forgotten as we all piled in to take a look. The game was afoot.

On Saturday morning we had access to the police incident room with what turned out to be the first in a deluge of authentic looking clues which grew throughout the day.

As newbies we found it excruciatingly awkward to question the protagonists because it felt somehow rude. Some of our contingent turned out to be ardent fans who had attended more than 30 of the events, and so had no such qualms.

The day raced by with quizzes, games and yes, more murder, until the evening party where the theme was to come as your favourite murder mys-

tery. You haven't lived until you've seen a bride dancing with a man dressed as the shower scene from Psycho. I myself was one of three Mrs Peacocks. Note to self: must try harder.

By Sunday morning, when it was time to hand in our findings, I'd half convinced myself the culprit was Captain Hook from Peter Pan. Seriously. So much for my detective abilities. Of course the answer was far more human if no less twisted.

I was surprised at how much I wanted to have cracked the case. We've worked out what we would do differently next time – because there definitely will be a next time.

It's plain to see why so many return for perfect escapism teamed with good food, exceptionally executed gore, and great company. All in all it is, as Joy herself describes it, dead good fun.



DRESSED TO KILL Melanie is centre back

TRAVEL FILE

QUEEN OF CRIME

Joy Swift ran the first murder mystery weekend 35 years ago, and in that time she has "died" more than 1,000 times, had hundreds of affairs and illegitimate children, and personally murdered close to 1,400 people! There are four new plots every year, including one which happens on New Year's Eve.

BOOK IT

Murder Mystery weekends take place at a selection of De Vere hotels around the country.

devere.com

A two-night B&B break starts at £300pp including two three-course dinners, lunch on Saturday plus afternoon tea and full murderous entertainment up to 12.30pm on Sunday. murder.co.uk, 0151 924 1124



TEC IT EASY
In comfy rooms

Suddenly the cry went out that there was a body in the library. Pudding was forgotten

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