

Mad about

science

Butlin's family science weekends are a great excuse for a fun - and educational - escape, finds Lee Hayhurst

When was the last time you learned what the tapetum lucidum is while on holiday?

Parents often claim that going on holiday is educational - usually to justify grabbing a great deal in term time - but Butlin's Astonishing Family Science Weekend in Bognor Regis was unarguably just that.

The tapetum lucidum, by the way, is the layer of reflective tissue behind the retina of many [→](#)

Walking on custard with Plymouth University

➔ mammals that makes their eyes glow in the dark when light is shone on them. So next time you wonder why cats' eyes glow at night, that's the answer.

This is just one of the fascinating things we found out as an expert from the At-Bristol Science Centre carefully dissected a horse's eye, neatly slicing it up into its constituent parts as we watched or, for those not too squeamish, touched.

The eye dissection session might not be everyone's cup of tea, but it was just one of a number of free workshops that took place during the packed weekend. This science extravaganza also featured live shows from the likes of TV's Brainiacs, 'Gastronaut' Stefan Gates, and Aardman Animations, the geniuses behind Wallace and Gromit.

As well as permanent installations, including one featuring the first mobile phones from the Science Museum, there were computing workshops from Microsoft and an entertaining seminar, supported by the Wellcome Trust and Glasgow University, from a 'zombiologist' on how zombie



Oh, and Portsmouth University was there to show us that it's possible to walk on custard

behaviour can be explained by damage to the human brain.

Other activities featured code-breaking by Bletchley Park, plus sound and lighting engineering from the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, and making your own lip balm with The Royal Institution's L'Oreal Young Scientist Centre.

Oh, and Portsmouth University was there to show us that it's possible to walk on custard - it's got to do with non-Newtonian fluids, apparently.

▶ LESSON ONE

This was the first science weekend that Butlin's at Bognor Regis has hosted,

after the concept was tested last year at the operator's Minehead resort. The themed talks, workshops and shows augment the array of attractions the Bognor Regis holiday park offers as standard and made for a busy weekend, as swimming, theme park rides and eating had to be fitted in between the science-based activities.

Booking the sessions is essential, a task made easier by the pink-coated butlers in the Ocean Hotel, where a simple but clean and comfortable room comfortably catered for our party of five - made up of two adults and three children under 12.

B-Line passes, which cost extra, also meant we could join a separate queue for the popular Centre Stage shows and grab the best seats.

A word of warning: there is no dedicated seating area for B-Line guests - it just entitles you to enter the room up to 15 minutes earlier than anyone else. However, this could mean you have an entire hour to wait for the show to start, a challenge for even the most patient kids. We ➔

3 OF THE BEST

SCIENCE SESSIONS

What were the top three favourite activities during the Astonishing Family Science Weekend?

Zac, aged eight
Brainiac Live
Centre Stage
show

Seth, aged nine
Eye dissecting
with At-Bristol

Millie, aged 11
Stefan Gates
Gastronaut
Centre Stage
show



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Millie at the Centre for Computing History display; Zac and Seth at the Science Museum; the fairground



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DESTINATIONS BUTLIN'S FAMILY HOLIDAYS

→ were often on such a tight schedule we couldn't take advantage of our B-Line status.

▶ MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Although most activities are included in the overall price, there is a small per-person charge for some of the science weekend sessions that require advance booking.

We chose to do one of these, the Aardman Model Making, in which a genuine model maker for the Oscar-winning animation company showed us how to make our very own Gromit.

We now have three really rather convincing plasticine dogs, not perfectly smooth and in proportion like the 'real' Gromit, but not bad for amateurs on their first go.

Okay, so the stop-motion animation that brings Aardman's characters to life is more art than science, but the idea was to make science fun, interesting and accessible to all, and on this front, Butlin's did a great job.

For our three children, aged between eight and 11, the attractions perfectly combined science and entertainment to keep them interested and engaged.

Asked for their top three sessions, the Brainiac Live show – think *Top Gear* meets *The Gadget Show* – featured highly, no doubt due to its loud explosions, silly experiments, and at least one accidental electrocution.

We also spent quite a lot of time in the Centre for Computing History display, where examples of the first personal computers from the 1970s and

1980s sat alongside their modern equivalents.

Here, visitors could try their hand at basic coding, with Raspberry Pi micro-computers set up to control robots and disco lights, and another with a banana keyboard.

▶ FAMILY FUN

The weekend wasn't all about science. A Butlin's stay wouldn't be a Butlin's stay without trying out the fairground rides and the slot machines.

Then there was the lure of the flumes, wave machine and water slides in the large Splash Waterworld and, of course, Butlin's famous entertainment.

On Friday night, the Aladdin Rocks pantomime packed them in – I'm still working out how the flying carpet illusion was done – and on Saturday, Take That tribute act Rule The World got us all reminiscing with the band's greatest hits.

All that, and there was still plenty left to do, but by the time we had to pack up and check out, we were left reflecting on all the things we had done and learnt over the past 48 hours.

One of the most striking impressions was how the modern seaside holiday park has evolved since Sir William Heygate Edmund Colborne 'Billy' Butlin opened his first resort in Skegness in 1936; it's come a long way, yet still retains something that is quintessentially British.

And what's more British than inspiring the next generation of scientists and pioneers, while having fun at the Astonishing Family Science Weekend? **tw**

WHAT'S TO COME?

Butlin's has two more **Astonishing Family Science Weekends** this year: in Skegness (June 10-13) and Minehead (September 16-19).

The resort operator is also running breaks that feature **Horrible Histories** this year, with stage show, Barmy Britain, featuring in school-holiday and term-time weekend breaks.

Managing director Dermot King says: "We are continually looking at ways to give our guests more immersive, deeper experiences that they can share as a family – and hopefully take home shared memories and new skills, having learned lots while having fun together."



AARDMAN ANIMATIONS WORKSHOP: Zac, Millie and Seth show off their Gromits



A three-night **Astonishing Family Science Weekend** at **Butlin's Skegness** starts at £79 per person, based on two adults and two children sharing a Silver Apartment, arriving June 10. **bourne** leisuresales.co.uk



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