

# Believe it or not

Stephen Mulhern's magic, high-flying circus stunts, a modern-day panto and a late-night pop concert? Butlin's has come a long way, finds Stuart Parish

@StuParish

**G**rowing up in Cornwall, I was raised with a certain appreciation for a domestic break, so I've been a fan since long before a staycation was a cool thing to do.

My daughters, Layla, nine, and Chloe, seven, share my enthusiasm, and having broken their Butlin's duck last year, they couldn't wait to get back to Bognor Regis and try out entertainment both old and new. The big draw this year was Stephen Mulhern's 'Unbelievable' show, as the girls are massive fans. Having seen him supporting Ant & Dec on Saturday evening television, they were bouncing off the walls about seeing him live.

We took advantage of our B-Line wristbands, which allowed us into the Centre Stage venue 15 minutes ahead of the crowds, and took our seats a few rows back from the stage. Like every other parent in the audience, I was a little concerned about how fidgety the kids would get during the 45-minute wait for the show to begin, but I needn't have worried. There was a real buzz as the audience grew, a blend of families with very young children to those on the brink of their teens, but all busy buying their official merchandise and snacks ahead of the show.

As it was about to begin, they played a film of Mulhern being pranked during the





**LEFT:**  
Chloe and  
Layla

**RIGHT:**  
Seaside  
Apartment



Undercover section of *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway*. It was a stroke of genius, setting the tone for what was to come and keeping the kids laughing in their seats.

The show itself was a mixture of magic and slapstick that harked back to Mulhern's roots as a redcoat in Minehead during the 1990s. It was perfectly pitched for the audience - I could tell by the giggling coming from my daughters, and every other child in the room for that matter.

There were a few jokes in there for the parents - I'd glance over at my kids to see if they'd understood, and be instantly relieved they hadn't - but it was the parts of the show that played

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to younger members of the audience that really thrilled.

From making redcoats appear and disappear, to audience participation tricks and a finale that saw a thrilled nine-year-old depart with a cuddly bear bigger than she was, it was charming family entertainment that kept on coming for a non-stop 60 minutes.

## ENTERTAINING EXTRAS

Mulhern's show was the big Sunday finale, but having been at Butlin's since Friday afternoon, we'd had the chance to sample plenty more of the entertainment. The girls were particularly excited about the year-round pantomime *Cinderella Rocks*, after the high standard set by last year's *Whittington Rocks* show.

While it may lack some of the polished production of the theatre-based pantomimes that can be seen in the UK each Christmas, the show is full of fun, laughs and catchy song-and-dance numbers throughout.

The star performer was pantomime dame Baroness Hardrock, Cinderella's wicked

stepmother, whose increasingly outrageous outfits and flirting with fellow holidaymaker 'Bill' in the front row kept the whole audience engaged.

The pantomime finished at 8.45pm, with Little Mix tribute band Salute coming on stage at 9.30pm, but by that time, we had to head back to our apartment. Perhaps if they had been on a little earlier, both girls would have liked to have seen them.

On Saturday evening, we booked to see Gandeys Circus, whose red-and-white striped Big Top tent had been on display earlier in Sir Billy's Fairground. It was the one piece of entertainment we paid extra to see, but at £7 per person, it was an affordable option and brought a little variety to our weekend.

Leaning heavily on the popularity of last year's hit film *The Greatest Showman*, the cast opened with a rousing rendition of 'The Greatest Show' before settling in to more traditional circus entertainment.

From spectacular gymnastics, BMX stunts and incredible juggling acts, Gandeys Circus provided a real wow factor, while the excellent Bippo the clown kept the audience smiling and singing throughout the show.

The only disappointment was that the hour-long show was over too quickly. The kids wanted more, and the acts were certainly good enough to be worth a second viewing.



**LEFT:**  
Gandeys  
Circus

PICTURE: ANDY PAYNE

## FAMILY TIME

While the entertainment was the real highlight of our trip to Bognor Regis, there are a huge number of other activities to enjoy. We missed out on the high ropes thanks to the windy weather, and the girls weren't too keen to give archery a go, but we were never short of things to do.

Sir Billy's Fairground with carousel, helter-skelter and fairground stalls has a timeless appeal, and the arcade in the Skyline Pavilion gave the kids ample opportunity to take me for every 2p coin in my wallet.

Splash Waterworld with its large pool, lazy river, wave machine and five waterslides is always a big hit with the children. Be warned, though, that age and height restrictions apply on all but the smallest slides.

The pool gets extremely busy, especially mid-morning, but if you are happy to go later in the day it can be a little more relaxing. The plans for a new pool complex due to open in 2019 are on display throughout the resort and had the kids begging me to come back when it opens.

The pool complex is not the only area where Butlin's is investing heavily to create a fresh and modern holiday experience, sprucing up areas of the resort that were starting to look a little

RIGHT:  
Cinderella  
Rocks



## Splash Waterworld with its pool, lazy river, wave machine and five waterslides is always a big hit

dated. Since 2005 it has added hotel accommodation, starting with the Shoreline Hotel, then the Ocean and Wave Hotels in 2009 and 2012 respectively.

Having stayed in the Shoreline Hotel on our previous visit, we opted for the revamped Seaside Apartments. Our nautical-themed

ground-floor apartment had a patio leading off the lounge and kitchen, and the kids enjoyed having their own twin room in the two-bedroom set-up.

A magnetic pin the tail on the donkey kept the kids entertained longer than I could have hoped. And the patio area was worth the £30 supplement, giving us extra space to dry swimming costumes and towels or eat outside when the weather suited.

## EATING OUT

Having our kitchen area also proved a godsend, as despite taking out a dining package for breakfast and dinner, we weren't able to enjoy it as we'd hoped. Chloe has an allergy to eggs, and despite the large buffet choice, a lack of information about allergens and lack of staff confidence in establishing which foods she could and couldn't eat left us unable to make the most of the dining package.

Luckily we found some saving graces. The chef at The Diner, an American-style venue that isn't included in the dining package, reassured us about the ingredients in the desserts, so Chloe could have her holiday ice cream after all. But it's worth flagging the option of a kitchen area for guests with allergies to make sure everyone can enjoy the resort as they want to.

For the girls, though, it wasn't really about the food or even the accommodation. You can be

guaranteed the one thing they were telling all their friends about was that they'd seen Stephen Mulhern on stage in real life, and he was unbelievable!

**Book it:** A three-night weekend break at Butlin's Bognor Regis starts at £145 per person, based on two adults and two children sharing a new Seaside Apartment, arriving on August 31, including a chance to see Stephen Mulhern live.

[bourneleisuresales.co.uk](http://bourneleisuresales.co.uk)

## Dietary requirements

**Erman Housein, head of trade sales and marketing, Bourne Leisure Sales**

"Butlin's strives to cater for all dietary needs across all food outlets, restaurants and buffet dining facilities at all three of its resorts. Allergen-friendly dishes are available, and easy meal swaps mean those catering for an allergy still have variety and choice. Menus offer clear labelling and staff are on hand to answer any questions. Staff are trained in a variety of allergen needs and can advise guests on appropriate choices. Guests can also flag allergen requirements prior to arrival, on arrival and on entering any of Butlin's eating establishments."



LEFT:  
Ice cream  
at The Diner