



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## EXPLORING THE SPIRIT WORLD A HAUNTING EXPERIENCE

MAYBE interviewing Dan Aykroyd and the news that Ghostbusters III might become a reality 30 years after the last installment of the franchise was released was an inspiration, or perhaps it's just me. The first ghost tour I signed up for was in York which set off from The Shambles, once renowned for the blood-stained shelves of its butcher shops, and I've been hooked ever since. Almost every major city in the world now boasts ghost tours that trawl through its grim and grisly past and I've sampled more than a few.

Eastern European folk tales are full of hobgoblins and witches that date back to pre-Christian times, so the spirit world has particular resonance in countries such as the Czech Republic. McGee's (mcgeesghosttours.com) is run by an American ghost-buster and his Czech-born wife, and offers four ghost tours of Prague year-round. The most popular is Ghosts and Legends of Old Town but there's plenty

*And the Ghostly Underground Tour weaves through the sort of cobweb-strewn chambers and gloomy passageways that are the stuff of childhood nightmares.*

of takers for the Ghost Boat Tour, Prague Castle After Dark and Underground Walk by Lamplight, where you can quaff beer in the traditional bars frequented by the city's medieval executioners after a hard day's work at the chopping block.

Germany and England were the main centres of the witch-hunting epidemic that swept Europe from the Middle Ages to the 17th century. And the Munich Ghost Tour points out many of the sites where hundreds of poor women (and children and men, too) met their grisly ends. Voted the best ghost tour in Germany, you follow a night watchman swinging a lantern through the narrow laneways and haunted squares of the Old Town to hear tales of gruesome murders, bloody executions and unsolved mysteries that "no other tour dare tell". To punch home the message that life is fleeting, the tour starts in the Marienplatz under the Glockenspiel to witness the famous figures jerking along in the Schallfirtanz (cooper's dance) - first choreographed to celebrate the end of a devastating plague in the early 16th century. Then pop downstairs to the Ratskeller am Marienplatz, one of the most authentic beer cellars

in the city to blot out the morbid thought with a stein or three. Go to [munichwalks.com](http://munichwalks.com)

The Endless Night Vampire Ball of Paris has become a much-anticipated in the French capital. Mysteries of Paris ([mysteriesofparis.com](http://mysteriesofparis.com)) is a tour company that helps to organise the fake blood-drenched event and also conducts ghost tours year-round. Owner Sebastiaan Hoyt founded the company a few years ago because there were no real ghost walks of Paris amid the dense scrum of Da Vinci Code and Catacombs tours on offer.

You won't encounter a ghostly crowd of be-wigged aristos moaning about their one-off meeting with Madame La Guillotine, though. Instead, there are plenty of potential sightings of more modern wraiths such as the woman who had an affair with a German officer during World War II and the so-called Vampire of Paris, a serial killer who terrorised the city in the

1990s. For those who want a tangible memento of the experience, Hoyt is also a master fangsmith and makes custom fangs to order as a souvenir to take home. Or, leave them in and head for Le Coq near Republique, one of the hottest new bars in town, where the cocktails are made from "forgotten" French liqueurs and "secret lab ingredients".

You would think that Salem in Massachusetts, famous for its witch trials, would have a tour that clinched the accolade of top ghost tour in America. But that honour belongs to Haunted Vegas Tours ([hauntedvegastours.com](http://hauntedvegastours.com)). It's tempting to think that Elvis fans swayed the vote but the amazing guides are responsible for the number-one rating. Robert, Jac and Levi are all seasoned entertainers, of course, and Jac is also the only ghost tour guide in the US who is also a trained mortician and embalmer.

The tour is pretty pricy but it's worth it to visit a large slice of the 21 places where paranormal activity has been officially documented in Las Vegas. Elvis is a major pull but gangster Bugsy Siegel, Liberace and comedian Red Foxx are among the famous names that have never left town, either. There's a drive-by

of the so-called "Motel of Death", where several celebrities met untimely ends. If you can't sleep, head for the Downtown Cocktail Room, aka "the place that brought real cocktails back to downtown" for a Don't Fig With Me cocktail (apple brandy, fig, oranges and molasses) to soothe your nerves.

Marie Laveau, the voodoo queen, Lestat, the central figure in Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* and the ghosts of the beautiful quadron mistresses who once lived in the fancy houses of the French Quarter are just some of the spectral figures that go bump in the night on the Ghost and Vampire Tour from French Quarter Phantoms ([frenchquarterphantoms.com](http://frenchquarterphantoms.com)). There's also a Cemetery Tour where you can stand before the elaborate grave of Marie Laveau and the future resting place ear-marked for Oscar-winning actor, Nicholas Cage.

If that's not enough to send chills down your spine, the True Crime Tour revisits the exploits of The Axeman, one of America's early serial killers, and the murder site of Kate Townsend, the famous Storyville brothel owner who was killed in her own boudoir. Keep up the zombie apocalypse mood with a visit to Snake and Jake's Christmas Club Lounge, an ultimate dive visited by George Clooney and Anthony Bourdain. A shack that looks like it's on the point of collapse and illuminated year-round by Christmas tree lights, the signature drink is the Possum Drop - a shot of Jagermeister in a pint of Schlitz beer.

Anyone with a Scottish grandmother knows that the "second sight" is a widespread gift in Scotland. And there's plenty to catch your inner eye when you participate in one or all of the five ghost tours run by Mercat Tours ([mercattours.com](http://mercattours.com)) - the only tour company in Edinburgh with a five-star scare factor rating.

Gary Goldthorpe, aka the Ghost Creeper, has been leading groups of tourists through York for 17 years and his tour is widely acknowledged as the best on offer. ([insideryorks.co.uk/ghostdetective](http://insideryorks.co.uk/ghostdetective)). Kitted out in Dickensian garb, Goldthorpe is also one of the few actors anywhere to hold a Master's degree in science, which lends a scholarly air of inquiry to the proceedings. To be honest, I didn't want the 75-minute tour to end because the suspense didn't let up for a second. York at night is as spectacular as it is by day but as Goldthorpe points out - Many of its sites, even on the sunniest of days, will be forever in the shade.