

The Ulster Museum, Belfast

In Museums and Galleries month, young reviewers from Belfast see plenty of potential in the Ulster Museum's new backpack project.

Backpacking round a museum is certainly not the norm for a Sunday afternoon.

When you think of museums, you normally think of dinosaur skeletons and boring school trips and you'd probably be right. However, the Ulster Museum is trying to change that. On entering the museum we were greeted by two friendly staff who introduced us to the backpack system which is being piloted for the first time.

Each backpack was for a special exhibition with its own activities. These included science, the Armada, Aspects of Asia and Ancient Egypt. There was not a dinosaur backpack to be seen!

Choosing the Aspects of Asia backpack, we dashed off to the exhibition, our hopes high. We wondered if we would find an interesting side to a normally dull area that is usually full of large glass cabinets with lots of weird objects and complicated labels.

With anticipation we opened the backpack, delving in to the unknown and pulling out a selection of activities. Sadly we were a little deflated, finding them maybe a little frustrating for younger children and a little too easy for older children.

So it was back to the entrance hall for another go: this time an expedition to ancient Egypt. Wary that it might be another letdown we made our way to the ancient mummies. But the activities were interesting and enjoyable. It was not long before we found ourselves trying to put together a puzzle of the Egyptians relaxing, smelling their perfume and finally measuring a mummy's coffin.

Leaving our backpacks, we were able to express our views to staff who were very open to feedback. The backpacks were a really good idea but could be developed a bit more. During the afternoon many of the backpacks were out which is a good sign. We suggested short haul backpacks when time is limited and long haul backpacks, so if you had loads of time you could backpack all day.

The backpacks are not the only new things in the museum as it has also revamped the science section. We were pleasantly surprised how interactive it was with computers and pull out drawers with creepy crawlies and other creatures on display.

We couldn't complain about the staff who were helpful and approachable. All in all the Ulster Museum has come a long way. We brought along a friend who had never been before and he really enjoyed the afternoon. If the museum keeps up the good work it could be on track for changing what young people think about it.

About the team

This review was produced by Chris and Patrick Neilands, 12, and was published in the Museums Journal.

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