

Subscribe for just £1 a week for 8 weeks.



## Princess Elisabeth is in for a magic time at Atlantic College, the Hogwarts for hippies

No cold baths but a shower of warm ideals await the heiress to the Belgian throne at Wales's Atlantic College, says Louise Callaghan, who went there too

Louise Callaghan

September 2 2018, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



Elisabeth: will move into a dormitory  
WALES NEWS SERVICE






Share Save

There's a place on the cliffs by Atlantic College where you can look out over the school campus: a 12th-century castle, its grounds rolling down past the rose garden and the swimming pool into the slate-grey water of the Bristol Channel.

From there, it looks idyllic. But this is not a normal British boarding school. There are no matrons or cold baths or

housemasters. Instead there are vegans and houseparents. The aim, broadly, is world peace.

This week, Crown Princess Elisabeth of Belgium will be the latest to join this international school in the Vale of Glamorgan, home to 350 pupils between the ages of 16 and 19, from 90 countries. When I started, 12 years ago, there were no royals but there were a lot of pan-Africanists and radical knitters.

For the princess, who I imagine has grown up with people gawping at her, it will be a relief to find out she's the most normal person there. But she won't get any special treatment.

Once she moves into her dorm — there are four to a room, usually from at least three continents — she will learn the rules quickly. Her clothes will be damp the whole time from the Welsh rain. There will be no phone signal. Laptops are discouraged — at least they were when I was there — under a policy to prevent the excessive display of wealth.

The school was started by the educationalist Kurt Hahn in 1962, with the aim of forging international understanding during the Cold War. He bought it from William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate said to have been the inspiration for Citizen Kane — and turned it into a boarding school.

Then, as now, it is a bit like a hippie Hogwarts: full of oddballs who think they are fighting the forces of darkness. There are also ghosts. Lady Stradling haunts the history tower, and the smell of lavender and a lilac mist precedes her apparition.



Atlantic College: damp clothes and no phone signal  
 GARETH IWAN JONES

The ethos is, broadly, that people from all over the world can get along if you shove them together in a castle. That much we proved, some very passionately.

In my job as a foreign correspondent for The Sunday Times, I've found that friends from Atlantic College (AC) are extremely useful in a pinch.

Had the princess gone to a normal boarding school, her classmates might have helped her get a job at a bank. But would they have taken her out drinking for her birthday in the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour, rescued her when she was lost in blood-feud country in Albania or — years after she left — picked her up on a motorbike in Phnom Penh with an hour's notice and taken her racing around the city at night? I can confirm AC people would.

In 2006, I went to AC from a state school near Hastings, wanting to be a hairdresser (I never managed it — shaky hands). It was a huge culture shock. Everyone actually wanted to learn. They came from places such as Tonga or Rwanda or, strangest of all, Kentucky. They had big, international ambitions.

A large proportion of the college's students are on a full scholarship, funded by benefactors from around the world. Some — such as former students Willem-Alexander, now the Dutch king, and Princess Raiyah of Jordan — are obviously enormously privileged. But the thing about AC is that it forces you to get very used to being around, and getting along with, people who are nothing like you.

Refugees from west Africa, Brits from across the social spectrum, California hippies, religious Malaysians, secular Israelis, nationalist Palestinians and evangelical Americans are forced together. Learning how to interact with all of them is a useful life skill — one, I imagine, you do not gain at a normal private school.



You find out that some stereotypes are true: the English can't dance, Italians really do say *mamma mia*, Norwegians are all obsessed with cold-water swimming. Others get blown apart: funny Germans, hard-drinking Muslims, Valley girls who do calculus for fun.

In these divided times, when everyone seems so deeply suspicious of each other, it's a small good thing that gives me hope.

A few weeks ago I went back for a reunion. The castle was still there, immutable and solid in the freezing wind. So was the mildew in the showers. And the people, streaming back from across the world, they too were still the same: hopeful and insane.

[@louiseelisabet](#)

Education



Share

Save