

CAMBRIDGE MICHAELMAS COMMENTS FALL 2024

Nachiket Bhanushali '24, Physics, Cambridge Michaelmas/Pembroke College

I have had an incredible experience in my first month at Cambridge! Pembroke College is a great place to live. It is located in the city centre, which makes it easy to get around Cambridge. It has beautiful lawns and magnificent architecture – exactly what one would imagine Cambridge to have. But most importantly, the people here are all very friendly, which makes it easy to integrate into the college. I was assigned to a 'college family' (as do all of the new first year students) – which involves 2-3 new students being assigned to a couple of 2nd year students at Cambridge who periodically plan casual social events to check in with you about how you are settling in. Furthermore, I have had the chance to meet several visiting students from the US and also elsewhere in Europe at Pembroke.

As a senior majoring in Physics at Caltech, I am taking a mix of Part II (3rd year) and Part III (4th year) physics courses at Cambridge. The courses I am taking are equivalent to different advanced physics electives or physics major requirements at Caltech and this allows me to get equivalent credit at Caltech. The workload is similar to what I usually experience at Caltech, except that it is structured differently. While at Caltech, we have weekly problem sets in all our classes, here at Cambridge, we have two weeks to work on a problem sheet (every class still has a problem sheet assigned). As a result, the problem sheets typically have ten questions compared to the five questions in a typical Caltech problem sheet. The majority of work on these questions is individual and while people do discuss particularly difficult problems with peers, collaboration is not as prevalent and frequent as at Caltech. Since one has to do most problems on their own, the average difficulty of each problem is a little lower than at Caltech. These problem sheets are discussed in supervisions, where a supervisor (a professor or a graduate student) and typically 2-3 students go over the problems and the students get an opportunity to go over problems they couldn't solve and to ask questions about the course material. Supervisions involve a lot of active discussion of the course material and they have been very useful in helping me consolidating my knowledge of new material. They are the cornerstone of what makes the Cambridge academic experience unique and have been a positive learning experience for me. One thing to note is that 4th year classes may have larger group sizes (5-6 students) for supervisions with some classes having larger example classes (which are like recitations) instead of supervisions.

Another way in which Cambridge stands out from Caltech academically is that there is not as much pressure to have perfect solutions for every problem set. While at Caltech, we get credit for our problem sets and our score goes towards our grade, here the problems are assigned purely to help you consolidate your knowledge. So while it is not uncommon for Caltech students to spend several hours on a difficult problem when they get stuck, here at Cambridge, if one has made an honest attempt at a difficult problem and is not making any more progress, it is normal to move on and to leave

that problem for the supervision, where students can get help from supervisors. There is also noticeably higher lecture attendance (despite no formal attendance requirement), which is not the case at Caltech, where lecture attendance for several classes often drops off a couple of weeks into term. All of the 3rd and 4th year physics lectures are at the Cavendish Laboratory at the West Cambridge site, which is a 10-15 minute bike ride (or a 30 min. walk) from the city centre. Consequently, I recommend renting a bike for the term as it makes commuting to classes a lot easier. There are multiple shops that offer termly rentals – I rented my bike from Kingsway Cycles. With Cambridge being a much larger university than Caltech, there is also no shortage of libraries and study spaces, ranging from college libraries with their stunning, old architecture to very modern study spaces in one's department (such as at the west hub). It has been a great privilege having easy access to such varied workspaces.

The typical work-life balance at Cambridge is better than at Caltech. Cambridge's large size also helps the variety of clubs and societies on offer and students are typically involved with 2-3 societies, each having regular programming. Michaelmas (fall term) is a particularly great time to study at Cambridge because one gets to participate in Freshers' week (a fresher is a first year student), which involves a lot of different icebreaking, orientation and welcome activities. These are a great way to get introduced to the new Cambridge environment and to get to know other incoming students who are also new to Cambridge. Freshers' week also involves the big university wide club fair, which makes it very easy to get involved with different clubs and societies. The colleges also put on social events for the new students and college level societies have introductory events where you see what that society is like. College level sport is very popular amongst students and is a great way to take a break from work. From sports like ultimate frisbee and netball to Cambridge classics like rowing, there is a lot on offer and as a result, lots of opportunities to try something. Sports are particularly easy to pick up in Michaelmas as this is when all the new students are trying them out and joining the college sports societies as novices. I am really enjoying rowing for the Pembroke College boat club and as someone who has never rowed before, this shows that there is no skill barrier to try a sport. I have also been attending events organized by the Stokes Society (Pembroke's science society), ranging from science talks with wine and cheese to pub crawls and these have been a great way to interact with other Pembroke students.

Since Cambridge is a university town with a substantial student body, there is a noticeably bigger night-life scene here, with clubbing being a big part of Freshers' week and something that is available during the term, if one is interested. The college traditions are one of a kind here and it has been great to participate in them. One tradition unique to Michaelmas is matriculation, which is when new students formally become members of the college for life by signing their names in the college register. It felt great to become part of the rich history and scholarly tradition of Cambridge and I am glad I got to take part in this. Additionally, enjoying candle-lit formal dinners in ancient, architecturally stunning dining halls while being dressed up in a fancy suit and

gown is very commonplace at Cambridge and I can't imagine ever getting bored of this amazing experience.

I would highly recommend studying abroad at Cambridge. Cambridge is a unique place and has its own charms, much like Caltech. Studying abroad at Cambridge is a great way to get out of the Caltech bubble and get a feel for what student life is like elsewhere. It is a very fulfilling academic experience accompanied by countless social opportunities to try something new and discover new things about yourself.

Julia Gao '25, Computer Science, Cambridge Michaelmas/Corpus Christi College

I can't believe I'm already going into the 5th week of Michaelmas term! Time passed by in a blink of an eye. It feels surreal to be living in what looks a castle that has so much history especially the entrance of Corpus Christi and looking into New Court with the chapel in the middle. There are so many tourists everyday just strolling through the historic town. It is a great place to stay.

Since I'm considered an international student, I came earlier to participate in the early arrival events organized by the JCR (Junior Combination Room). Those were nice as I was able to meet a lot of students from diverse backgrounds. I also never imagined I would speak more Chinese here than back home. On 1st October when all the students arrived, I participated in Fresher events held for the first years. I met so many new people and made lots of new friends. I got to embrace what it was to be a first year coming to a new school. I attended the matriculation ceremony in a gown and got matriculated. There was also a matriculation dinner in which you sat with people who were studying the same courses as you. In addition, I went to Freshers' fair where all the different clubs/societies were. These were all university wide clubs. There was also college fairs where you join college clubs. It was honestly amazing. I'm part of the Corpus Christi rowing club where you go on an outing every week. Ultimate Frisbee where I attend the beginner sessions in which everyone is welcome. Also I am part of Rambling Club which is where you go on walks to the countryside and visit lots of new places every weekend.

For my stay here at Cambridge, I'm living in Corpus Christi. I live in a single at the top of the staircase facing Trumpington Street and across the Taylor Library in Library Court. Below me is the Pelican Bar. Instead of the long hallways at Caltech, there are spiraling staircases that go up. There is at least one bathroom/shower per floor where individuals live. There are formal meals every Friday and Sunday starting at 20:00 (8pm). Everyone wears gowns and dress up formally with a three-meal course. The dining hall is set up differently with long tables and candle lit chandeliers. It looks very similar to the hall in Hogwarts. Halloween formal is especially cool when the menu is Halloween themed with dish names that don't allude to what is served.

The location of Corpus Christi is very nice. It is in the city centre which means everything is very close by. It is about a 5-minute walk to M&S (grocery store), the Market Square, and Saint Mary's Church which is worth climbing up to the top. Walk a little further and there is Sainsbury's. It is worth going out everyday and having meals outside since there are so many good bakeries and restaurants to eat at that are all close by and decently priced. The only downside to this is where Computer Science lectures are held. The lectures are held mostly at Computer Laboratory which is about a 40 minute walk from Corpus. Would recommend renting a bike! It isn't too expensive and well worth it. There are many other places that are a bit further such as the boat house and the railway station which were places that I often visited.

As for my classes, since I'm a junior, I take both Part IB and Part II classes in the Computer Science Tripos. I take more Part IB since I have satisfied more of the requirements. I'm taking 5 Computer Science classes since you are not allowed to take classes outside of your tripos. It was surprising not having a mix of other courses. The courses I'm taking here fill my elective credits at Caltech. The information is presented in the same way, but instead of having problem sets every week that are graded, there are worksheets that are done for supervision which are not marked. The supervisions are there to help you learn the material. It is OK to say 'I don't know' on questions. The supervisors are very friendly and help answer any questions you have. The example sheets are a bit easier and a little bit less theoretical as you answer the questions by yourself. Some classes do have practicals (problem sets) that do get marked. There are no office hours but you can go up to the professor to ask questions. Another unique thing is students clap at the end of lectures. The hardest part for me is the accent that some professors have that makes listening and understanding lectures a bit harder.

Since we are only here for one term, I would recommend going out around and exploring different places. It is an amazing place with so much to do. I know I will miss it when I leave. Everyone here is so nice and being able to explore town on foot is one of the best reasons to stay here. The university botanical gardens is pretty nice and free admission for university students.

Teresa Huang '25, Computer Science, Cambridge, Michaelmas/St. John's

So far Michaelmas has been everything I have dreamed of and more. From the beautiful architecture to the sprawling green lawns, studying at St. John's has been nothing short of a fairytale, albeit the weather is a little gray so when the sun does come out, everything is more than stunning.

My favorite part of John's, besides the unreal campus, has been the ease of the social scene and the friendly smiles that greet you as you pass through the college. I was able to join in on the Freshers' Week activities which made making friends and meeting new people very easy and relaxing. I was also assigned a college family at the beginning of the term, with college parents that showed me the ins and outs of college. Additionally,

the plethora of societies within St. John's and the broader Cambridge community has made it extremely easy to integrate into the college. From drinks at the Hawk's Club to Saturday morning brunch to formal halls, there is a place for everyone and any interest. Michaelmas is particularly special in this regard because there are a lot of activities starting up for the first time since the summer, so there is generally a lot of participation in societies and social events. I have found that I have met some of my favorite people at events like sports swaps, or social nights organized by societies. I highly recommend joining a sport, even if you have never played it before! In addition, I believe that going into town to explore the different restaurants, nightlife, and desserts is a very special experience. There are always opportunities to meet new people and make friendships that will last a lifetime!

The classes are similar in caliber to Caltech, although depending on the course some are more qualitative than quantitative. The supervisions have been my favorite part of the Cambridge experience. It is an incredible opportunity to have time set aside where you can ask questions freely and go over the course material. In addition, the supervisors are extremely friendly and go out of their way to make sure you really grasp the concepts. There are also lots of extra lectures or talks that are given by fellows or professor for any additional topics you may find interesting. I believe that as a Computer Science student, Michaelmas is especially interesting because of the many talks that companies host during this term. There is a campus wide career fair, as well as multiple talks hosted by various companies that come to Cambridge to do recruiting. It's a great opportunity to expand your network, in addition to doing the coursework.

St. John's is specifically very centrally located so I have not rented a bike for the term. It is very easy to walk around to town (10 min), or to lecture (20 min). I specifically live in Cripps in a two-story accommodation with an ensuite, and a kitchen within the flat. St. John's is also special in the way there are formal halls almost every night. This means that you would wear your gowns and dress up formally to attend a dinner in a beautiful hall with long tables (or you can opt to eat in the less formal cafeteria called the Buttery).

I have absolutely loved my time abroad, and I really could not recommend Michaelmas term enough. This has been the experience of a lifetime!

Sulekha Kishore 2025, Computer Science, Michaelmas Term/Corpus Christi College

The first few weeks of studying abroad at Cambridge have flown by and in short, it's been a wonderful experience. I'm at Corpus Christi College, which is centrally located in the town. Cambridge is very different from Caltech, but its friendly students, strong academic culture, and an in-built community via your college reminds you of the best of Caltech despite being across the pond.

Studying abroad at Cambridge during Michaelmas term is, in my opinion, the best option for a smooth transition into a new environment. Although I'm a third-year student, the week before classes started, I participated in Freshers' Week, which is filled with social gatherings, introductory talks, and other events that are wonderful for meeting new people. A full week filled with learning about the Cambridge University's layout, college activities, and societies (equivalent to clubs at Caltech but with many more options) was a great way to meet people across subjects, colleges, and years. Despite being a large town, soon you will see familiar faces around the town. Although it was a little strange to be a third year among all the first years, I embraced it and enjoyed the excitement of being in an amazing town!

Cambridge is filled with history and traditions that you'll experience from the moment you arrive. A highlight of this was my matriculation dinner, where you sit with your supervisors, professors, fellows, and other students who are studying your subject. Matriculation dinner is a special formal hall, a fancy 3-course dinner during which you wear formal clothes and your college gown (yes, like the Harry Potter ones!) and eat in a beautiful dining hall (also Potter-esque). The beautiful architecture of the colleges makes everything feel so historic – more so when you're dressed up in your college gown for a formal hall.

Another upside of Michaelmas term is that the weather is (relatively) mild and you'll likely get a couple weeks of nice sunshine (which quickly becomes a scarcity) during the first few weeks of the term. I've taken advantage of this weather by exploring the city by bike as well as day trips to Grantchester, a village outside of Cambridge, and Ely, a town 1 hour away with a beautiful Medieval cathedral and the home of Oliver Cromwell. The city itself is filled with history – I took a 2-hour walking tour of the town during my first week, which was very insightful.

Academically, I am taking both Part IB and Part II classes (equivalently year 2 and year 3; remember that the undergraduate degree is 3 years here). The pace of lectures is similar to Caltech, with lots of material covered quickly as the term is only 8 weeks long. However, the supervision system is very different. Supervisions are very small group sessions (1-on-1 to at most 2 other people), where you discuss a set of problems you've completed related to content covered in lectures. Rather than the constant deluge and pressure of sets, supervisions are tailored to ensuring that your questions on any specific questions are covered. They're also a great way to review content covered in lecture as your supervisor will be someone other than the lecturer and can re-explain topics in different ways to help your understanding. I've found this system more tailored and conducive to ensuring thorough understanding of content, which I have enjoyed. Overall, the academics at Cambridge are engaging and are a fair bit of work, but with good time management, the supervision system works well to ensure understanding of the course content.

The biggest difference between Cambridge and Caltech is that the scale at which everything occurs is much larger. Take my commute for example. The Computer

Science Laboratory, where all CS lectures are held, is in West Cambridge, a 40-minute walk. Because of this, I decided to get a bike which I use multiple times a day – not only on the 12 minute bike to lectures but also to attend Ultimate Frisbee training sessions and to go rowing with the Corpus Christi Boat Team. Cycling is very common in Cambridge, something I would highly suggest as it makes commuting much quicker and efficient (just make sure to learn hand-signals and buy a helmet!). Another difference is the sheer quantity of societies (what Caltech calls clubs) available to join – from engineering, clay-pigeon shooting, to mountaineering and hillwalking – anything you can think of is available! Rowing and ultimate frisbee are typically the highlight of my day. Rowing is something I would have never experienced elsewhere – each college has its own boathouse and rowing teams, taking beginners to pros. The team taught us the basics of 8s rowing and starting the day with a 7am session on the River Cam is something I so look forward to.

I also play on the University Ultimate Frisbee Team, which I had to try out for. At Caltech, I play and captain our ultimate frisbee team, Aftermath, so it's been very nice to continue playing while abroad. The ultimate scene at Cambridge is bustling, there are multiple groups for all different levels of players – from absolute newbies to students who have played at Internationals. Some weeks I play 5 days of ultimate; the level of play is high and the women's team is such a friendly group of girls, so I love each day of it.

Looking back to last fall term, I'm very glad that I took the leap to apply for study abroad and am grateful to have this opportunity. I'm eagerly anticipating the remaining weeks of my time here at Cambridge. Studying abroad is a once in a lifetime experience and Cambridge is no doubt one of the best places to do it.

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