

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PROGRAM PARTICIPANT COMMENTS LENT 2024 & 2023

Thomas MacLean '25 Mathematics / Mathematics Part II, Cambridge Lent Term / St. Catharine's College

I have found my time at Cambridge both enlightening, fascinating, and rewarding. I can with confidence say that it has been the most growth-inducing time of my life. Socially, there are a lot of clubs, social groups, and events that are in the midst of their activity during Lent. Unlike during Michaelmas, the Lent term is in the middle of the academic year, but it makes it so that, with some effort, one can become a part of large social groups because many social activities are ongoing and have frequent activities. Watching the Winter shift into the Spring is also quite incredible, and while the winter season is itself a uniquely beautiful time to be at Cambridge, the season shift to the beauty of Spring and the blossoming flowers felt analogous to the growth I experienced. Lent term offers a unique set of classes as compared to Michaelmas, so checking which courses would be the most interesting (and noting that there were unique opportunities during Lent) was important in making the decision to come during Lent.

I run track and field and cross country at Caltech, and while at Cambridge I have been a part of the university running club, the Hares and Hounds. The team is accessible both for new and experienced runners, and there is a wide mix of race opportunities during Lent since cross country continues into Lent term and then a shift to track occurs. The club is built on a social atmosphere with frequent events both inside and outside of running, and there are both new runners and experienced, elite runners. I have made many friends through the running club, and bonded over deep conversations on long runs with some of the other runners. There is also a refreshers' fair during Lent term which is a club fair that demonstrates what clubs are ongoing, and in many ways, it is a fair representation of clubs because only the truly active clubs appear at the club fair. That is, out of the clubs at the club fair, they all have well-established events and social activities as well as open arms to having new members. I also took part in the Climbing Club, Algorithmic Trading Society, and the St. Catharine's College Math Society (The Hyperbolics). Many of the societies also have formal dinners in order to get to know others, as was the case for The Hyperbolics.

Cambridge itself also has incredible heritage, traditions, and opportunities; some of which are unique to each college or club, but there is always a chance on any given weekend to look for new experiences and the people are friendly and inclusive. The town is bustling with activity and has felt to me like a medieval-modern mix of adventure; I enjoy frequenting the nearby town center during the weekdays and weekends alike to go to shops or food, or to just enjoy the environment.

The growth I have experienced, particularly with the environment of Cambridge and with choosing to come during Lent, makes me excited for what I can bring back to Caltech in the spring and for what I bring forward with me in life. It has also made me a much more confident and independent individual. It truly is unlike anything one could anticipate.

Angel Wang '24, Computer Science Part IB/II, Cambridge Lent, Pembroke College

Wow, time really does pass by when you're having fun. It feels like I only just checked into my room and was feeling all the nerves because I really wasn't sure how my experience would go in Cambridge. I had never been to Europe before, and this was my first time travelling so far on my own. Though Caltech is very challenging already, hearing about the work here also seemed so daunting, but I never knew I would enjoy this time abroad so much.

Lent term is unique because you come to Cambridge during the middle of the year, so everyone has already found their own friend groups. Unlike in Michaelmas, where you matriculate and meet people more easily because the first years are also coming here for the first time, you definitely have to be more open and willing to start conversations with people. It was a bit challenging in the beginning, but I have definitely become more extroverted during my time here and enjoyed my experience more as a result. I also found it very helpful when Cambridge hosted the Refresher's Fair, which allowed me to meet more people and discover societies I may be interested in joining for the term. People here are very friendly and want to help you feel as comfortable as possible when settling in, and the people I met during my first week introduced me to other people I now enjoy hanging out with regularly.

When I walk outside every day, I still can't believe I'm here. It seems like everyone else is so used to the beautiful architecture and perfectly-green lawn, but Cambridge is really something I have never seen before. I love how Pembroke is in the middle of town, because it is so convenient to grab some pastries from Fitzbillies, take a quick gelato break at Jack's Gelato (which I have probably gone to at least 8 times now), or eat lunch with friends at the market. There are always plenty of tourists around too, which makes the town so much more lively.

The weather could definitely be better. Given it is winter, it actually doesn't snow or rain as much as you would think. However, it gets pretty cold in the mornings (especially when I bike to my 9am lectures), and you can even see frost on the road and fields. I would highly suggest bringing a big coat, warm hat, boots, and some gloves. The weather seems to get a bit warmer later in the term (or maybe that's just

me getting used to the cold temperatures), and some days there is only a slight breeze with plenty of sun.

I decided to choose Lent because while I really wanted to study abroad, I didn't want to miss out on playing volleyball at Caltech (which is during first term). The great thing is after my season there, I was also able to participate in the Cambridge volleyball team, which has been a really unique experience. During this term, the Blues Women's team travelled to places like Durham, Cardiff, and Norwich, which are places I never would have been able to visit if I hadn't joined the team. Through this experience, I made so many friends, many of whom are from various other countries, so I get to learn more about their culture and traditions. One time, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to our coach in Romanian in the middle of a pizza restaurant. Some highlights of the season were definitely when we made it to the national quarterfinals (first time since 2014!) and defeated Oxford (twice). Even outside of practice/matches, we have held many socials together, and I've loved spending my time with this team.

In terms of the social life, I found it surprising how often people go out during the week. At Caltech, most of the time people go out only on Friday or Saturday nights, but here, people go clubbing and to the pub any day of the week. The formals also occur much more frequently here (Pembroke has three a week), and the food is delicious, while the dining halls are beautifully lit with candles.

Supervisions are unique to Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge), and they are the best way of getting the most out of your Cambridge academic experience. I've found that because I don't have to worry about the exams, I have been learning for the sole sake of learning, and it's been quite enjoyable because I can take it all in at my own pace (I also find the content much more interesting that way). The work is not bad, as everyone is able to do the work on their own, but even if you can't solve everything (which you aren't expected to), you can ask your supervisor and they will do their best to help you understand. Supervisions are much more relaxed than I expected them to be, as supervisors are really just there to help you learn as much as you can. I would say they are comparable to office hours, but instead of everyone coming to a specific TA at a certain time, groups of 2-3 students are assigned a supervisor and you get a much more personalized (or "personalised" as they write it here) session.

In addition, this was a great opportunity to truly get out of the "Caltech bubble". While I knew Caltech was heavily focused on STEM, I never realized how much I only talked to other STEM students until I arrived here. I have met considerably more humanities majors, and they are actually surprised when they hear I am studying computer science. Unlike at Caltech, CS isn't a very common subject to study. It's a very interesting change to meet people who have more varying perspectives and interests. This truly has been a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I would have never imagined meeting this many friends, all while learning so much in just 8 weeks. Rather than just

hitting all the touristy spots when on vacation, living in a new place for an extended amount of time really allows you to immerse yourself and learn about the culture and history around you. I was honestly not even sure if I was 100% into studying abroad when I applied, but if you are considering, just do it. You will not regret it, and you will have so many memories to cherish afterwards.

Iris Xiang '23, Computer Science/Computer Science Part II & IB, Cambridge Lent Term/St. Catharine's College

In the weeks before I went to Cambridge, I worked hard to temper down my excitement. I had been looking forward to this for such a long time, that my expectations were surely too high for any place to meet. Now, as I pack my bags, and say my goodbyes while blinking away tears, I can honestly say that I have never ever been so sad to leave what has been the best experience of my life thus far.

Soon after arriving at Cambridge, I realized two things. One, no wonder Harry Potter was based off Cambridge, because it's magical without spells. As I sat in formal hall in my raven gown at a long mahogany table decorated with flickering candles and red roses, sipping port from a miniature Riesling glass and chatting with my collegemates about where to go for the weekend while waiters in tuxedos delivered cheeseboards to each table, I felt like I must've been either a wizard or dreaming. A similar feeling passes through me whenever I walk down King's Parade, enthralled by new details every time. The Tudor roses etched into every column of King's College, with spears and vines underneath, an emblem of Henry VIII. Or the three founders outside the windows of Gonville and Caius' college, guarded by gryphons protruding from above. My favorite, the wheel echoed throughout Catz, a quiet symbol of strength and resistance as Saint Catharine of Alexandria was tortured using a spiked wheel after refusing to renounce her faith and marry Emperor Maximian.

Two, I see now what every renowned higher institution in America was envisioning when they shaped their campuses, but as is the case with copies and sequels, it's almost impossible to beat the original. Cambridge isn't just a university, or a college town, but an actual, walkable, wonderful town. I wake up in the morning excited to walk to Sainsburys to get milk. Never mind that just a few months prior, I would've rather starved than make the trek from my room in Dabney house to Target for groceries. I even loved cycling to lecture, as my path would give me a continuous view of gleaming fields covered in frost as the sun peaked over the horizon.

After being at Caltech for so long, I realized I had gotten used to a certain pattern of lectures, sets, midterms, and finals with teaching styles of professors that I was used to. Cambridge forced me to get out of this bubble academically and adapt and double-down on the basics of good studying habits and really engaging with material. Lectures move quite fast since there aren't that many lectures for any class. The problem sets are based directly off of material covered in lecture, so you can't rely as much on previous knowledge, and there are more

problems per set than Caltech so they are able to cover more topics—although each one is less difficult on average. During supervisions, supervisors will go over problems that the group had trouble with and direct discussion on difficult topics, which helped me uncover holes in my understanding that I didn't even know was there.

There are many societies to join in Lent term, and there are events like the Winter Societies Fair to introduce new students to them. I knew that I wanted to join the Ultimate Frisbee team, so I asked around for more information and emailed them. From there, they immediately took me in and made me feel welcome, and social events with the team became a major highlight of my Cambridge experience. I also really enjoyed traveling across the UK to compete, including going to Glasgow and Nottingham. A major event for sports that only happens in Lent Term is Varsity, where each sport competes against their Oxford enemies during the day and then hangout with their newfound Oxford friends at night. For varsity, we traveled to Oxford, and I was able to see the campus, my sister college, and meet the Oxford team which was loads of fun.

Nikhil Gupta '19, Computer Science/Computer Science Part IB & II, Cambridge Lent Term/St. Catharine's College

When I first attended Study Abroad informational meetings, I was amazed at the opportunity to spend 2-3 months in another country. Thinking that this would be one of my only chances to spend such a long period of time in another country, I jumped at the opportunity to study abroad. As I looked more into it, I asked my friends who had previously studied abroad and all of them said it was one of their best experiences in college. I also realized I would get the opportunity to study at the birthplace of many of the things that I was studying at Caltech. As such, I could not pass up the opportunity.

After spending some time looking at the courses offered at Cambridge, I decided that Lent term would be a better fit for me than Michaelmas term. It meant that I could finish my last season on the soccer team. Additionally, I found that the courses offered were a better fit with my interests. In particular, I was able to take courses that Caltech does not offer in order to round out my CS education. Another fun part of Lent term was that all Cambridge CS students are working on a group project which is basically a 1 month research project in partnership with a corporate sponsor. Since this ended during Lent term, I was able to watch all of the presentations on their work and learn about many cool and interesting projects.

Academically, I found that lectures were very similar to Caltech lectures, both in style and quality. This meant that I was able to jump right in, despite joining Cambridge in the middle of the year. While there were moments lectures did reference courses that all the other students had taken but I had not, I did not feel like I was lacking any background for the courses I was taking. Students are (mostly) evaluated on exams that are given during Easter term. However, there is still work for them to do during other terms in the form of supervisions. I quite enjoyed supervisions and found that they really helped me to learn the material. The personal

interaction during supervisions meant that I could quickly resolve any questions I had as well as find out if I misunderstood anything.

There was definitely some adjustment socially given that I joined in the middle of the academic year. This meant that there were no events where I could meet other new students. However, after joining a few clubs (societies) and attending events, I quickly found a few people that I got along with and continued to meet throughout the term. Additionally, I met with Cambridge students from St. Catharine's who were in exchange programs to Caltech and they were very helpful in getting me oriented throughout the college.

One of my favorite parts about this whole experience was getting to attend a school that is so diverse. With students coming from so many different backgrounds because of the EU and students majoring in so many different subjects, it was enlightening to get to talk to students majoring in subjects that you cannot find at Caltech. I also found that there was a society for everything. I attended talks put on by many different societies, including in subjects I knew nothing about before attending. I also got to attend formal dinners at a few different colleges so got to explore around Cambridge quite a bit. Each college has a different feeling to it so getting to visit a few of them was very fun.

Dana He '20, Bioengineering/Engineering Part IIA, Corpus Christi College

As cliché as it sounds, studying abroad at Cambridge University is one of the best decisions I could have made. Every morning, I wake up to the distant sound of street musicians singing, the town always buzzing with energy. Walking along the cobblestone streets to get to class is always a combination of admiring the gorgeous architecture, peering through the windows of charming shops, and trying not to get run over by students on bikes. The city of Cambridge somehow manages to feel both quaint and picturesque, but also vibrant and alive.

As beautiful as the surroundings are, the best part about coming to Cambridge is being able to experience a completely different lifestyle. The social scene here is a lot busier and more active than at Caltech—On a typical day, I'll have dinner with friends in the dining hall, head to the Corpus bar to hang out and play pool, and then often go out to enjoy the nightlife. The Eagle Pub and Wednesday Cindies are two Corpus favorites. There are also formal dinners in which everyone gets dressed up in Harry Potter-style robes and a college fellow mumbles something in Latin; and college slacks, which are somewhat corny (but still fun) themed disco parties. I would also highly recommend two events that are unique to Lent term: Lent Bumps and the Corpus Challenge. Lent Bumps is a multi-day rowing competition between colleges, which is a huge Cambridge tradition and very enjoyable to watch. For the Corpus Challenge, about 100 Corpus students travelled to Corpus Christi in Oxford to compete in various events. The events were mostly sports, but also included things like trivia and board games. Afterwards, there was a really fun formal dinner and bop (essentially the same thing as a slack). There is a lot of fun to be had during Lent term, though you really do need to be willing to put yourself out there in order to make friends and meet new people. For the first week or two, I went to hall every day

and introduced myself to a table full of random strangers. People here were very receptive, friendly, and curious to know about my experience as an exchange student. Eventually I sat down with a group of friends who I really clicked with and began hanging out with them on a regular basis. At this point, I feel like I know most of the people at Corpus.

Academically, adjusting to Cambridge did take some getting used to. I took five Part IIA classes in the Engineering department, two of which were more business courses than engineering courses. On average, I found the lectures here to be more engaging and organized than what I'm used to. At Cambridge, engineers don't specialize into bioengineering, mechanical engineering, etc. until Part IIA (their third year), so I personally struggled a bit with math and physics topics but excelled in biology and chemistry topics. I would also say that the workload is heavier than what I had expected, though still lighter than a normal term at Caltech. Each of the classes had three or four supervisions, in which you discuss a problem set in small groups. The problem sets can vary quite a bit in difficulty, though the business classes were a lot easier than the rest. The non-business classes also had a lab report to complete, which also varied a lot in difficulty.

Overall, I would highly recommend studying abroad at Cambridge, and don't be deterred by Lent term—The weather is actually quite beautiful, and it's easy to meet new people if you're willing to make an effort!

David He '19, ACM/Mathematics Part II, Cambridge Lent Term/Pembroke College

At the start of my junior year, I did not plan on studying abroad. Having lived near Pasadena my entire life, I saw Caltech as a familiar place and felt comfortable there. The idea of being tossed into a foreign environment and knowing hardly anyone was daunting; plus, I was extremely hesitant to leave my friends during my last year of college. Ultimately, I made a last minute decision to step outside my comfort zone by applying, and I am so glad that I did. Studying abroad not only opened my eyes to see more of the world but also challenged me both academically and socially. In a just few months, I have grown into a more independent individual as well as experienced a completely different system of education.

Prior to arriving at Cambridge, I was worried about settling in. Coming during the middle of their school year, I would not be having a formal orientation, a club fair, or a clear opportunity to meet and befriend other students. However, looking back, I have realized that these challenges are what make studying during the Lent term special. First off, since all the first years have already been on campus for a term, you are one of the few new faces in college. As a result, the administration is much more attentive and focused on making you feel at home. This was also true with the students. Throughout the term, I would have people on my floor or in my classes approach me to introduce themselves simply because they knew I was a newcomer. Another advantage of the Lent term is that you have the opportunity to quickly expand your social circle. By the middle of the year, friend groups will have formed, so it is likely that befriending one Cambridge student will allow you to easily meet a lot more.

Additionally, societies are no longer in their initial stages, which gives you a better sense of what activities are actually committed and worth getting involved in. It was super exciting to be surrounded by students who actively pursued interests outside of academics; on any day of the week, there would be always something to do, from theater shows to wine tastings to formal halls. There is also a benefit of the Lent term that is specific to Pembroke; the college offers a spring semester exchange program with other American universities (Lent & Easter Terms so they take exams & only HSS oriented), so there were forty-five other exchange students arriving at Pembroke during Lent. Meeting people in the same situation as I was in made adjusting to the new campus much easier.

But the best part about the Lent term was that it forced me to take the initiative in meeting new people, finding opportunities to get involved, and fully integrating myself with the Cambridge community. With only two Caltech students abroad and none staying in Pembroke, I truly had to escape the Caltech bubble and actively introduce myself to other students on my own. This allowed me to work on my social skills, and now I have become much more comfortable and confident when speaking to new people. Furthermore, simply living in an environment so different from my home has inspired me to be more adventurous and open to new experiences.

To my surprise, the most difficult part of studying abroad for me was adjusting to the academics. Caltech ACM students generally take one or two classes outside of mathematics a term whereas Cambridge students can only take classes within the mathematics tripos. It took some time for me to get accustomed to only learning about math. The Part II math courses also moved at a fast pace and built off of topics from previous years, and the example sheets were quite long. Fortunately, the supervision system and the absence of exams allowed me to really focus on understanding the big picture behind the course concepts rather than simply learning how to solve specific problems on sets. In addition, my peers were absolutely brilliant, and I really enjoyed having the chance to interact with and learn from them; it was clear that the specialized curriculum at Cambridge had given them a very thorough understanding of the different fields in mathematics.

I am very grateful to have studied at Cambridge during Lent. The change of scenery was incredibly refreshing, and I had an unforgettable experience. In nine weeks, I explored the surrounding shops, saw snow falling for the first time, learned an enormous amount of academic material, and most importantly, made great friends. By the end, I truly felt like a part of this quaint, magical town.