

Edinburgh Scholars Participant Comments Fall 2021

Camila Buitrago '22 – EAS major & ESE minor Caltech/ Geosciences Edinburgh

When I found out about the study abroad program, I knew I had to participate. I had been told by many of my peers that time abroad is always worth it, and I can confirm they were right. Studying abroad is a rare opportunity to experience a new country with new cultures and foods and people. You get to travel and have fun new experiences while not disrupting your studies, but rather enriching them with unique classes and academic perspectives.

Before my study abroad experience, I had never left the Americas and the University of Edinburgh has a great science/engineering program. These were the main factors in choosing my study abroad program. In terms of the location Edinburgh did not disappoint. Our location is right in the center of the city with food, campus, and nightlife all in walking distance. As someone who grew up in the suburbs of Georgia, I was amazed at how I could go find ice cream at 9pm when I had craving or not need a car to go to a party. The setup of this city allowed me and my flat mates to explore the city easily on foot; however the public transportation of the city is very accessible and easy to take as well. Just a twenty minute walk outside of the city you can find Arthur's seat which is nice area of nature for when I need an escape from the noise of the city.

The university itself was also a great place to be immersed in. Since Caltech classes lean towards more the theoretical science, the applied sciences courses at Edinburgh were so refreshing. I got to take courses not offered at Caltech like Conservation Science, which is now my favorite class I've taken in all of my undergraduate studies. The work is also more spread out at the University of Edinburgh which allowed me to really learn how to manage my time and pace my work. I also got to schedule some time to travel when I got ahead on my work.

Edinburgh is close enough to Europe that I was able to find cheap flights and visit Paris and other parts of Europe. The extensive train system also allows you to explore all of the UK and even take an underwater train to France. I was also able to the rugged natural areas of the Scottish Highlands and hike around the beautiful lands. We got lucky with a couple days of sun during our highlands adventure, although the weather is usually much less forgiving in Scotland.

Another perk about the location was the 12-person flat accommodation. Living with a dozen other international students made it very easy to socialize and make friends. I liked having my own room for my privacy and space, but the shared common room allowed me to make some great friends with people within and outside of my flat. Overall, the amazing new classes and people I met made my study abroad experience one I will cherish forever and will go down as one the best decisions I made during my time as a Caltech student.

Sasha Fomina '22 – Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

The beautiful, gothic architecture all around Edinburgh is something that you notice right away and something that continues to wow you as you continue exploring the city. Living in Kincaid's Court, I got to be right in middle of a bustling area in Edinburgh's Old Town close to the adorable, winding shop-lined Grassmarket Street as well as the picturesque Royal Mile, where you can find a lot of examples of the iconic architecture Edinburgh has to offer. I also really enjoyed the proximity of my flat to the main university campus facilities as well as many quaint

coffee shops, as these provided me with a nice setting for study dates with friends. As an avid eater, I was pleasantly surprised by how much of a foodie-city Edinburgh is; from Korean to Italian to Lebanese cuisine as well as a variety of yummy dessert and hot chocolate spots, I was always excited to try a new restaurant. Something I was also very excited about when coming to the UK was the much greater number of charity and vintage clothing shops and Edinburgh did not disappoint on this front! In fact, there's a street nearby Kincaid's with at least 5 charity shops in a row.

Another benefit of studying in Scotland is the chance to explore some of the most unique, scenic bits of nature. Some of my flat mates and I went to the Scottish Highlands and Isle of Skye with an international student group just before it got too cold (early October), and the sights were definitely a highlight of my study abroad experience. However, you don't even have to venture too far from Edinburgh for a nice hike as the peak of Arthur's Seat is a classic hike that I found myself returning to a couple of times along different paths. I, personally, didn't have hiking boots, but it can get pretty wet along the paths, so I would advise bringing them if you want to do more advanced hikes. I will note that towards the halfway point of term it starts to get a lot colder and the sun starts to set at about 4:30pm and earlier, so I would make the most of the daylight while you can!

Along with the more natural environments, there are also many urban landscapes to explore in addition to Edinburgh itself as Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, is only a 45-minute train ride away. I was able to travel to Glasgow for COP26 (climate change conference) and it was very encouraging to see how seriously many people in Scotland are taking sustainability initiatives. Moreover, there are cheap plane tickets to a lot of major cities in northern Europe. With COVID restriction on the more lax side this year, I was able to take advantage of this with a trip to Paris during my time abroad.

In terms of classes, there is substantially less assessed, regular coursework. Most classes do have lectures and some assignments that the professors advise you keep up with, but many of these assignments are not graded and instead are mostly to monitor your own learning and progress. Most of my classes were well taught and organized, with one unfortunate exception. To this point, when choosing classes, I would highly advise talking to others in your major who may have studied abroad here and using good judgement during your first two weeks of class to scope out if a class seems well organized. However, my other classes were very interesting and challenging only in a productive way, without being excessively stressful, so it does seem like this, in my opinion, poor class (Natural Computing) was an exception! Also, the humanities offerings are quite vast and diverse, which makes for a nice supplement to Caltech. The Migration, Diaspora, and Exile course that I took was fascinating and provided me with some really important perspective on very relevant issues – I really enjoyed it! Overall, I think the slower, less intense pace of work at the university opened me up to really enjoying many different parts of city life and I think it was a nice contrast to Caltech.

There were no comments in 2020 due to the pandemic.

Edinburgh Scholars Participant Comments Fall 2019

Zafir Abou-Zamzam '20 – Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

When I first arrived in Edinburgh, two things immediately stood out to me: 1) the beautiful stone architecture lining the city, and 2) the distinctive Scottish accents of people walking around. Even after a month of living in Edinburgh, both of these characteristics continue to stand out and contribute to the novelty of my study abroad experience.

One of my favorite aspects of Edinburgh is that the university is very integrated into the city. You end up covering a lot of ground while attending courses, making it quite easy to stop by a café or grocery store on the walk to and from class. Most students typically live away from campus, and you tend to see familiar faces roaming the streets of Edinburgh. The city is quite supportive of the 30,000+ students. Nearby establishments offer student discounts, and cost of living is generally much lower than in Pasadena and other parts of the US.

Courses in Edinburgh are significantly different than those of Caltech. Rather than assigning extraordinarily long problem sets every week, the majority of courses I'm enrolled in rely on students to learn by completing readings, attending lectures, and taking comprehensive notes on the material. Arts and humanities are quite diverse, and course choices much broader. Due to this, you're very likely to meet a student studying a subject not offered at Caltech.

A side effect of the lighter course load and larger student body is the presence of many student run societies across campus, and a semester abroad is a great way to try something new at a reasonably low commitment level. During the first few weeks of classes, many of the societies even have free "taster sessions," and I've met plenty of people who have joined groups after trying them only once. Personally, I've joined the Muay Thai society, and have been working out with them 1-2 times a week (though I'm not planning on competing). At Edinburgh, if there's an obscure sport or activity you've been wanting to try, you can probably find a group committed to it.

In terms of location, Edinburgh is quite far north, making it easy to find direct flights to various destinations across western and northern Europe. Traveling within Scotland and the rest of the UK is even more convenient, and I would highly recommend taking a student-led trip up to Isle of Skye or quick train down to London. The one drawback of being this far north is the poor weather, so expect cold and windy days. By the end of this term I'll definitely be looking forward to the sunny weather of Southern California.

With so much to do on and off campus, it can become a little difficult to balance coursework and life, and there are still some stressful nights spent finishing up course projects. However, the term abroad has definitely been worth the minimal added stress, and I would highly recommend it to anyone looking to experience something different than Caltech.

Andrew Chan '21 – Geophysics + English Caltech/Geophysics Edinburgh

Since before I'd started college, I'd always known I'd wanted to study abroad in the UK. Many years ago, my dad spent a year in Durham, and to this day he still ranks it as one of the most influential experiences of his life. Beyond location though, my priority when choosing my study abroad program was finding unique and challenging courses, both in terms of geophysics and in terms of English literature, my 2nd option. As a result, Edinburgh made natural sense – the school has a rich history as one of the founding locations of geosciences and is also one of the only study abroad programs that will let students cross-enroll in literature courses. I'm currently taking an applied hydrogeology near-surface geophysics course, land atmosphere interactions, a probability class and a lit class, "Heroes, Wonders, Saints and Sagas: Medieval Literature in Translation.

But now, having now spent 6 weeks in Edinburgh, I don't think there's any place that I'd rather be. The academics are everything that I could've dreamed of. For me, a lot of this boils down to the teaching. Sure, there aren't weekly sets and you have time to think about information and truly absorb it. Sure, the graded homework you are assigned is more formative. But what really sets the quality of these classes apart is how specified the teachers are. I'm always excited to go to lectures (and not just because they're required). The benefit of being at such a large school is that there's a big enough faculty that each and every one of my professors here is passionate about the *specific topic* for which they're covering material. My hydrogeology professor likes to use memes in his lecture slides, my Celtic literature professor will read old Welsh and Gaelic to help us better understand the flow of poetry, and my professor for Land-Atmosphere interactions is on a first name basis with everyone in the environmental sciences program. Caltech classes are excellent for material covered and the pace at which they're covered. Edinburgh classes are excellent for the thought put into them.

Funny enough though, the actual culture in Scotland isn't a culture shock in and of itself; Scottish culture is wonderfully different from that in the U.S., but still subtly similar. The people are one of the things that constantly surprises me. All of my best experiences so far in Edinburgh have come from the people, whether that's my friends from different societies (clubs) I've joined. Everyone here is wonderfully pleasant and friendly. It has been an easy adjustment to making friend groups with Scottish people and other international students, and the social life is rich and fulfilling.

I often used to think that there was always something happening during the week at Caltech, but at Edinburgh there's something happening every single night, without fail. The clubs themselves are amazing too. I'm part of 4 different societies where I've met tons of people with similar interests. I've also had the unique opportunity of joining the men's first team for fencing, which means I've been travelling around the UK with a group of 9 other guys and have had specific coached performance conditioning. Participating on a sports team at Edinburgh is like being on an NCAA Division I squad, and it's been everything I have wanted from college athletics.

So, beyond all that, the accommodations in Edinburgh are a great way to experience living *truly* on your own for the first time. They're all self-catered, which means you prepare your own food. But also, at the same time you're living with 11 other people which allows you to expand your interpersonal skills and develop as a roommate, and as an adult.

The last note I'll touch on is the convenience of location, and the ease of travel to everywhere else. For the program we live in the postal code EH1, which means that we're the most central point in Edinburgh. It's a 10-minute walk to the train station, a 30-minute trip to the airport, and no more than 15 minutes to get anywhere else you'd want to go. It's ridiculously easy to travel around Scotland or beyond. There are always organized group bus trips to explore the Scottish Highlands, I got a flight to Dublin for \$25, and you can travel to mainland Europe for similarly low prices. Furthermore, I also got a rail pass and have been exploring Scotland by train. There's lots of wonderful places within an hour or two of Edinburgh by train, like North Berwick, that you wouldn't usually go if you were on a tour of Scotland. The charm of these little towns is underrated and can only be matched by the charm of Edinburgh itself. I truly don't think there's a better choice for a study abroad experience than coming here.

Isabella Camplisson '21 – Computation and Neural Systems Caltech/Biological Sciences Edinburgh

There is nothing better to push yourself out of your comfort zone after two years of acclimatizing to Caltech than to go on exchange. Edinburgh has such a different atmosphere and culture to Caltech that it's impossible not to experience new things and see the college experience with a fresh perspective. From the size of the university to the multitude of things to do in and around the city, almost everything is different.

Firstly, Edinburgh is a much bigger university than Caltech (about 50x the student population!) which means that there are hundreds of student clubs and societies with lots of involved members. I've joined a few societies in my time at Edinburgh, and really enjoy going to the pub to hang out with the Surf and Windsurf Society, in which I've made some of my best friends here, as well as the Feminist Society and Sustainability-focused Conscious Change. The huge student population also means that you have the opportunity to meet so many new people and get to know a real variety of students, and I'm happy to say that I've made friends at Edinburgh that I can't wait to visit as soon as possible!

Edinburgh as a city is also extremely different to Pasadena, with a never-ending list of things to do and explore. Arthur's Seat is a must for anyone that loves a short hike, and apparently the castle is incredible (although legend has it that if you visit after the end of Fresher's Week, you won't graduate). There are also an abundance of charity stores that I love to peruse, and the nearby Meadows and Hollyrood Park which are great for enjoying nature in the city before it gets too cold.

In terms of the classes, I've found the content to be as challenging as that at Caltech, although you have a much greater range of classes to choose from for the semester. For example, I decided on a whim to take introductory Arabic and am absolutely loving it! Classes are also an excellent way to meet new people – and people your age, as the majority of students participating in Fresher's Week and living in student housing are freshers.

Speaking of Fresher's Week – I can't think of a time I've had so much to do and been so excited about all of it! Fresher's Week is the week at the beginning of term that is absolutely packed with things to do on campus, from vintage sales to vegan walking tours, so there's an activity for everyone during the week! It's another awesome way to meet people, which has definitely been my favourite part of studying abroad.

I truly never want my time in Edinburgh to end, as I'm having so much fun experiencing such a new environment. I really would recommend going on exchange to anyone who's even remotely considering it, as it is an experience you will never forget.

David Kornfeld '20 – Electrical Engineering Caltech/Electronics and Electrical Engineering Edinburgh

Studying abroad when going to Caltech might seem like a difficult task, given the academic rigor. However, it is not only very possible, but incredibly worthwhile. Living and studying in Europe brings an entirely new perspective to the college experience that absolutely cannot be had in America alone. The country is beautiful; the culture is exhilarating, and the people are extremely welcoming.

After studying at Caltech for multiple years, one begins to get accustomed to the small-school environment and, while studying at Caltech has been a wonderful experience, the University of Edinburgh adds an entirely new dimension to the experience. There are 40,000 undergraduates, which means that social circles are ever-expanding. Every day, you'll meet someone new, whether it's in one of the multitude of academic clubs, in your classes, or even just on the bus.

The University of Edinburgh operates at a lower stress environment during the weeks leading up to finals. Much of the work is individual, allowing students to do the work on our own time in a manner that best suits our learning style. Additionally, the workload tends to be lighter, allowing for more time spent on personal enrichment and just enjoying the experience of being in a new country.

The university is right in the heart of Edinburgh, a city bustling with people in a gorgeous location. Whether you're doing the standard touristy activities or finding a small independent coffee shop, Edinburgh has something for everyone. Anything you could want to do is within walking distance and, with the extra free time allotted by the university, there's time to do it all.

Additionally, the proximity of everything, not just to the university, but to the country of Scotland is an immense privilege that should not be understated. While getting to Europe in the first place is a lengthy and expensive endeavor, once you're there, you have a base-station which can be used to easily and cheaply reach almost any other European country. Travel while abroad is not only enticing, but also enriching, as it allows for an even wider range of cultural experiences to be had.

Studying abroad in Edinburgh has been one of the best decisions I've made. It's allowed me to grow as a student as well as an individual, learning my place in the world as both a university student and a global citizen.

Angela Li '20 - Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

As a computer science student in the United States, there really is no better time to live in Europe than during a study abroad term. Especially as a senior, I know that my future career and life for at least the foreseeable future will be in the United States, and this study abroad term gives me the literally once-in-a-lifetime chance to fully experience being young and adventurous in not only Edinburgh, but also Europe at large.

Edinburgh is a beautiful, multi-cultural, safe, and bustling city in the gorgeous country of Scotland, and it, alongside all of Europe, is extremely well-catered towards student lifestyles. There are student discounts in pretty much every café, gym, and pub you could go to, public transit is widespread and convenient (though nearly everything is walking-distance), and safe hostels are in every major city in Europe that you could want to go to. This is a city, a country, and a continent of adventure— don't miss your cut of it.

With all of this to be said, the academic life at the University of Edinburgh is certainly not an insignificant draw to this program. I had the good position to be finished with nearly every advanced Caltech computer science requirement and nearly every core requirement prior to coming to study abroad (and I would really recommend this approach, to enter study abroad

with course selection flexibility, if possible), and it left me with lots of freedom to choose only classes I really wanted to take at Edinburgh.

I came to Caltech for rigorous academic training, and I've received much of it in the scientific arena. However, Caltech has limited course offerings, particularly in multidisciplinary studies—and as somebody who does not intend to have a career as a pure scientist, I was eager to grow beyond that. To me, it was extremely important to expand my horizons and really push myself as a scholar by taking classes which would encourage me to develop new work/study skills, be more globally literate, and introduce greater diversity to my world outlook. And at Edinburgh, I've been able to do exactly that. I'm taking a social policy class, a human geography class, a software user-interface design class, and a class on ethics in software engineering, all out of interest. These units will count towards my Caltech degree, but the growth that I'm experiencing with classes which are rigorous and stimulating in different ways from Caltech classes is immense and far more important to me.

I feel like I'm really living my life as a student, both personally and academically, to the fullest with my study abroad experience. My bucket list is shorter, my world-view is broader and more enriched, and my skillset as a future professional is fortified. I feel more confident now than ever before due to this perfect cocktail of mixed educational experiences— at both a small research powerhouse institution and a large global university— that I finally am prepared to enter the “real” adult world.

Kelly Liu '20 – Chemical Engineering Caltech/Chemical Engineering Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh is an international hub. I get to hear different languages every day just from walking down the sidewalk, and it's a very different experience to be immersed in a town (500,000 people) with so much diversity. The vibe of the city is very different from LA. There are cobblestones that line the sidewalks, and each building makes me feel like I'm living in a different century. I can J-walk here without getting disappointing looks from my friends, all the grocery stores carry lots of cheap and tasty pastries, and it is acceptable for me to stock up on ice cream with all this walking that I do (right?). I won't say that studying abroad has been “life-changing” but it certainly is an experience that I can't replace.

I think it is important to keep in mind that study abroad is what you make of it. There are tons of opportunities to join different societies, make new friends and explore, but you have to be proactive. It's definitely easy to lounge around in the apartment all day after classes end, but the best part about studying abroad in Scotland is getting to experience everything LA couldn't offer me.

I used to dread walking to Noyes (one of the furthest buildings from my dorm at Caltech) but here, I like taking advantage of the walkable city and find myself enjoying the 30 minutes walks to get to class if the bus is too full (Although I will probably change my mind once the colder weather hits). It's nice to walk outside of my apartment and immediately be inside the city, rather than a college campus. I also enjoy the accessibility of various coffee shops at walking distance from my classes or apartment, although I must say that coffee in the US is better.

Courses here are what you make of them. There's the choice to take harder, or easier classes, but I am happy with the course load I ultimately ended up with. I'm taking a senior design course where I'm simulating and designing heat exchangers and chemical plants, a class solely

dedicated to biosensors, a social science course that criticizes humanitarianism and development in Africa, and a couple of other core classes to satisfy my degree requirements. If you're thinking about studying abroad, look into available courses early to plan out your Caltech and Abroad schedules, but also leave flexibility for possible course conflicts. It's also important to consider the pros and cons of studying abroad junior year v. senior year. I'm currently a senior and applying to graduate school while abroad, so it is really important for me to time manage well so I can finish course work as well as applications and still leave time to explore Europe. Next month, I'll be visiting Copenhagen, Netherlands, Rome, and Paris!

Studying abroad can often seem highly romanticized, but with good planning and time management it is definitely an unforgettable experience. It's an opportunity you won't get in a different time of your life, so take advantage when you still can!

Karthik Nair '20 – Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

Studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh has been a great experience. Since the workload is significantly lower than at Caltech, it has given me an opportunity to explore the city more and take part in more extracurriculars. The university has a very well-equipped gym including a bouldering wall. More free time has also given me a chance to walk around the city and enjoy the architecture. Scotland is also a very picturesque country and it is very easy to take a weekend trip out to the highlands or any of the isles and try out some of the local brands of Scottish whisky.

Since the University of Edinburgh is also much larger, this presents the opportunity to meet a lot of new people. Each department also has a broader offering of courses which means you can take a course on Scotland itself where the professor will occasionally invite guest lecturers who will play Scottish musical instruments. The Informatics department in Edinburgh also offers courses that are not offered at Caltech and while the level of depth and intensity is lower, the topics covered are still widely applicable and very interesting.

Being close to mainland Europe also provides an opportunity to travel cheaply. There are often discounted flights and hostels which means you could take a trip to Italy for essentially the same price as an Uber from Caltech to LAX. Cities in Europe are also much closer together than in the US which makes it easy to take trains around and make the most of a weekend trip. There are also various societies on campus that organize trips which can be very convenient.

The weather in Scotland is a nice change from California. While it is not that much colder than the winters in California during the fall, it rains much more. The rain gives the buildings additional character and adds a greenish tint to some of the walls from the moss. Overall, visiting Scotland has been a great experience and I would highly recommend it.

Michelle Park '20 – Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

I have dreamed of studying abroad in college ever since I was a freshman in high school. I chose to study abroad in Edinburgh because all the upperclassmen raved about how amazing their experiences were and I'm very glad I listened to their advice! The city is amazing with beautiful architecture and castles, and everything is located within a walking distance. There are numerous bars, grocery stores, clothing stores, cafes, and restaurants within a short walk from Kincaid's (the university accommodation I reside in). All my classes are within walking distance as well, as the Informatics classes are all located in George Square campus.

A big difference between Caltech and the University of Edinburgh is the number of undergraduate students. Caltech has about 1,000 while Edinburgh has about 23,000. As a result, there are so many more interesting societies with very active participation that you can join. There are so many societies that you are sure to find at least one you are interested in joining. For me, the issue was that there were too many I wanted to join and was forced to narrow down my choices. The first few weeks I was here, I was busy attending a variety of taster sessions and pub nights for all the societies I was considering joining.

Another big difference between Caltech and Edinburgh is the learning style. I am currently taking 4 classes—3 informatics classes and 1 humanities course. I have on average about 2 assignments due for each course and a final. This is very different from the weekly problem sets I've gotten accustomed to at Caltech. It is great since this allows me to take more control of my learning and gives me more time to absorb information. Additionally, I don't feel overwhelmed with too much material, and I have a healthy work-life balance.

A great aspect of studying abroad is that you have lots of opportunity to travel during the weekends! I've already had the opportunity to explore various parts of Scotland, such as Isle of Skye and St. Andrews (where Prince William and Kate Middleton met!). It's also very easy to visit other countries in Europe as well since flights can be insanely cheap. I've been to Bruges and Brussels in Belgium so far and plan on visiting Rome, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Paris next!

Studying abroad at Edinburgh has been amazing and the experience is truly unparalleled, as there aren't many chances in life to fully commit yourself to a foreign area for a significant period of time. I highly encourage everyone to study abroad at some point in their college career.