

Edinburgh Scholars Participant Comments Fall 2022

James Chen '24 – EE Major and CS Minor Caltech / Electronics and Electrical Engineering Edinburgh

Back when I was applying to college, I wanted to attend a large university far from my home in SoCal, yet somehow ended up here at Caltech. While I've grown to love being at Caltech, I still wanted a taste of a different college experience - exactly the opportunity that study abroad provides. With all the study abroad options Caltech presents, I could not be happier that I selected Edinburgh.

Caltech exchange students are placed in Kincaid's Court, which is in the heart of Edinburgh. Most of the city highlights are within a ten minute walk, whether that's the Edinburgh Castle and the Royal Mile to the north or the National Museum of Scotland to the south. Plus, Kincaid's Court is situated right on Cowgate, which is the street the city's nightlife is centered on. For instance, I've gone salsa dancing in a nightclub and attended live band performances in a former church converted into a music bar, all just a block from Kincaid's. The city is also very walkable, with countless restaurants, convenience stores and grocery stores just a short walk away. It is also simply a joy to wander about Edinburgh with its cobblestone-paved streets alongside its blend of well-maintained Gothic and Georgian architecture. When I do need to go somewhere further, there is an extensive bus system throughout the city and its outskirts; although it is a bit inconsistent, I at least get to ride the buses for free.

As for the academics, it's been a nice change of pace from Caltech. I ended up having to push back one of my junior year option requirements to the following year, but it is barely a concern compared to all the benefits of taking classes here. For my EE classes, I am taking Power Electronics, Machines, and Systems 4 and Digital Communications 4, both of which cover very practical content that I would not be able to learn at Caltech. In particular, my digital communications class has been a standout: we watch pre-recorded lectures at home and attend two in-class problem solving seminars – the abundance of examples really helps me learn the content, and the lecturer is very passionate and well-spoken. My other two classes are Stochastic Modelling and Introduction to Criminology; criminology has been the other standout class due to how different of a perspective it has presented me with, both in my newfound understanding of crime and justice systems outside of America, as well as the experience of being in a class dominated by students not studying STEM. The class tutorials especially have been a very novel learning experience; last week we spent the hour sentencing a hypothetical criminal according to different theories of criminology, while this week we are drafting evidence-based policy recommendations on youth criminals.

Without the constant barrage of assignments I'm used to at Caltech, I have had plenty of time to explore the vast range of clubs available at the University of Edinburgh. I became a member of the propulsion team of the Hyperloop engineering team, where we are working on having the first ever Hyperloop pod run in the UK by the end of the semester. I have also been attending salsa dance classes every week through the Salsa Society and am planning on joining some of the music societies very soon. I have also had the time to go on several unforgettable weekend trips, including to the Scottish Highlands, the Isle of Skye, and the coast of Fife. Plus, I already have future trips booked to Copenhagen and the Roman ruins near the border with England.

Notwithstanding, studying abroad has not been perfect. Settling into a new country was certainly stressful, and I've learned that making close friends at a large university requires much more proactive effort than I expected. But, I am still incredibly glad I took the risk and went abroad, even with all the doubts I had during the application process. In just over a month, I have already had so many new life experiences, and enjoyed the company of countless fellow exchange students from all over the world. And, as cliché as it sounds, I can confidently say that immersing myself in this new environment has allowed me to much better decide not only what I want out of my remaining time in college, but ultimately my life as a whole.

Beryl Hovis-Afflerbach '23 - Caltech Astrophysics / Edinburgh Physics & Astronomy

I've always known I wanted to study abroad, and while I worried that I wouldn't be able to due to the pandemic, I'm so glad I got the chance to do so this year. Edinburgh is a beautiful and exciting city where there is a lot to do and explore. I've also really enjoyed my courses here. Because they are structured around independent coursework rather than weekly problem sets and because of a slightly easier pace, I've found myself learning a lot while also feeling more relaxed and excited about my classes. Because I am a senior this year, I have fulfilled most of my specific option requirements and have been able to take whatever physics & astronomy electives most interest me. One of my lectures is at the Royal Observatory of Edinburgh, and the view from the top of the hill is incredible. In addition to the physics and astronomy courses in my own option, I'm taking a course in Scottish Studies, where I've been learning about the history, culture, and politics here.

We all live in Kincaids, which is a student accommodation divided up into 12-person flats. Having 11 other flatmates makes it easy to find a community and make friends pretty quickly, and all the other Caltech students are in other flats in the same building. Kincaids is also very centrally located, so there's always a ton going on in the area, and it's not difficult to get anywhere you might want to go. In fact, it's pretty easy to get all over the city by walking or taking a bus. There are a ton of cute, independent coffee shops all over the city where I've really loved going to get some work done.

From Edinburgh, it's not too difficult to take a day trip to e.g. Glasgow, St. Andrews, the Highlands, or tons of other locations. It's also not difficult to take weekend trips to locations all over the UK and elsewhere in Europe. I've found a number of pretty cheap flights, but it's definitely a good idea to plan in advance. The Erasmus Student Network (an organization for exchange students) will offer a number of trips to places in Scotland that may be more difficult to get to with regular transit, and it's a good idea to sign up for these as soon as they're offered, because they sell out quickly.

Because there are so many more people here than there are at Caltech, there are a ton of societies (kind of like clubs in the US) for all kinds of interests. Because I have more time outside of coursework than I typically would at Caltech, I've been able to join a few. They're a lot of fun and a great way to meet more people. Lastly, if you go to Edinburgh, I would definitely recommend going to a ceilidh. It's basically a social event that involves traditional Scottish dancing (they'll teach you the steps) and it's a ton of fun.

Ankita Nandi '24 - Materials Science & English Caltech/Mechanical Engineering Edinburgh

Whenever people ask me what Edinburgh is like, I describe it as beautiful and old. The university is set in the middle of the city and you're instantly immersed in a city full of culture and sheer beauty. The buildings are Gothic and the streets are more cobblestoned than not. The Old College, housing the Law School and Law Library, is right by the accommodation and perfectly encompasses what it means to study in a historic city, looking exactly like a castle. If you're under 22, you're eligible for the YoungScot card, which gives discounts at different stores, can serve as age verification, and gives free bus travel on the Lothian buses. The bus system in Edinburgh is reliable to get anywhere within the city or out and are double deckers which is a lot of fun. There's also a lot of nature in Edinburgh alone; the Arthur's Seat hike is a first week tradition and the Meadows are a large park about a ten minute walk from the accommodations. Even if it can get rainy and windy, the weather is bearable and the city is still beautiful; it's been sunny more often than rainy.

Entering a new place is always a challenge, but welcome week is definitely well-organized to introduce you to all the societies and support systems on campus. There are more societies (clubs) than you can imagine, ranging from academic interests to sports to cultural and dance societies. The first week, a lot of societies have "taster" sessions where you can try out the different activities and get to know people. It's like rotation, but on a bigger scale simply due to the size of the university. The large university is an adjustment from the small, close-knit nature of Caltech, but I've found myself making close friends with those in my flat and meeting lots of people during welcome week and after that I still talk to and make plans with. Since the flat is big (12 people) and Kincaid's is also large, you meet a lot of people at the accommodation itself. Scottish people are all also really nice, and the slang is so different; it's been a goal to learn as much Scottish or British slang as possible during my time abroad.

The classes are distinct in both teaching style and material from Caltech. The main difference in class content between Edinburgh and Caltech is the practical emphasis, a emphasis I thought was very beneficial as the materials science curriculum in particular is slightly more theoretical rather than practical. There was also an expectation between individual and group work; as I said, learning is more independent but there is still the opportunity for collaboration in group assignments and tutorials. All the courses emphasize independent learning, without weekly problem sets that are more similar to Caltech, but all my STEM classes have tutorials/seminars that have questions similar to those that we'll see on the exam. Especially since I'm not in my exact major in Edinburgh, the classes are oriented towards mechanical engineering but are still very interesting and applicable. I'm taking an English course with a weekly tutorial and we're expected to meet with a small group of students before tutorial to go over discussion questions. While the lectures are very informational and contextual, the English tutorial is very discussion based and probably my favorite because you can actually talk to each other. That being said, the professors are phenomenal lecturers, a commonality amongst all my classes. A note about the English course, you can't take higher level English courses unless you've taken a significant number of English courses.

One of the highlights of being in Edinburgh is the opportunity to go outside Edinburgh. Scotland has a beautiful countryside and there are different opportunities to visit the Highlands or the different port towns in Edinburgh. Glasgow is only an hour train ride away, or a free bus if you

have a YoungScot card. There's also the opportunity to visit other places in Europe; it's relatively inexpensive to go to different places in the UK and both Eastern and Western Europe compared to flying from the US.

It has been an adjustment, but I'm immensely grateful I chose to study abroad. There are always things to do in Edinburgh and my classes are interesting and unlike what I would find at Caltech. It's also useful to adapt to different teaching styles since Caltech is so unique, and again, the lecturers are all fantastic. It's unlikely to find another opportunity to travel abroad and immerse yourself in another country for an extended period of time like this, so I highly recommend studying abroad if it interests you at all. This was probably one of the best decisions I've made at Caltech, and I'm excited to see how this changes how I approach things at Caltech both academically and socially.

Amanda Piyapanee '23 – Computer Science Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

Studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh has been a great change of pace. With the large student body, great number of activities to participate in, and the breadth of nature and countries to explore nearby, my term abroad has looked much different than my time at Caltech while still taking a similar number of courses and participating in college athletics.

When deciding where to study abroad, the University of Edinburgh stood out to me with the quality of Computer Science courses and the diversity of the student population.

I'm extremely satisfied with my three Computer Science Courses: Mobile Robotics, Advanced NLP, and Human-Computer Interaction. First for Mobile Robotics, the material has been reworked to be extremely relevant to anyone interested in computer vision for autonomous vehicles. Second for Advanced NLP, as Caltech does not offer a course on NLP, this course introduces a novel method in approaching computing as the class covers approaches inspired by linguistics to understand and generate language. Third for Human-Computer Interaction, this course covers research methods and implementation of technology design in Figma which is a great skill to have that Caltech does not cover.

Additionally, taking Humanities and Social Science courses with people who major in those areas has enhanced the quality of those courses.

Outside of academics, our accommodation at Kincaid's Court is located at the heart of the capital in Old Town Edinburgh. Living here is such prime location as most of campus activity, tourist attractions, museums, and landmarks are well within a 30-minute walking distance. Additionally, the 12-person flat has been a great way to meet students from all over the UK as well as other international students.

As a student-athlete, playing for the University of Edinburgh gives me the opportunity to travel all over the UK to play matches against other universities and peer into their campuses including Nottingham, Durham, and St. Andrews. Playing on a new team has given me the opportunity to learn and develop new strategies. Additionally, the gym facilities are incredible and feel like you're at a D-1 college.

Socially, the hundreds of clubs/societies give you the opportunity to meet many great people from many different majors who come from many different countries. There's always something fun and exciting to do every day of the week. Many days of the week have been full of fun, spontaneous adventures with new friends.

Studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh has been exciting and rewarding. You're given the time and independence to pursue your interests to the fullest and there is limitless potential with what you can do with your time, whether it be academics, socially, or exploring the Scotland and Europe!

Emily Zheng '23 – Computer Science & Visual Culture Minor Caltech/Informatics Edinburgh

I have always wanted to study abroad and experience student life in a university unlike Caltech. The University of Edinburgh was my first choice due to its rich history dating back to 1583, urban location and proximity to gorgeous Scottish nature, and diversity in class offerings. So far, I have loved my time here! I've been able to settle into a really nice rhythm, and even with weekend trips, lectures, coursework, and plenty of social events I am still able to get my 8 hours of sleep.

My favorite part of the experience has definitely been the people. I've interacted with a lot of Brits and International Students, and their perspectives and interests have been really inspiring. I've met people who have done gap years breeding tortoises on the Galapagos, tracking species in the Mexican rainforest, or teaching English in Ghana. I've gotten to meet lots of people in a variety of different majors who share my interests in the outdoors, film, pub quizzes, museums, and more. There are societies for every interest, and I've enjoyed hanging out with FilmSoc, Dirty Weekenders, Hill Walking Club, Community BEEs, and Mountaineering Club.

Another highlight has been getting to travel and hike in Scotland. I have gone on hiking trips with the Hill Walking Society and tours with the ESN International group to Glencoe, Isle of Skye, Loch Lomond, among others. The natural beauty of the highlands is really sublime. It's completely unlike anything you can find in America. If you travel, I definitely recommend self-organized or society trips over tours, where you are stuck in big groups and only given half an hour in each place. The city of Edinburgh is also lovely in and of itself, so even if you don't get the chance to travel there are still many things to see and cafes to try out.

My computer science courses have been different as coding assignments tend to supplement the lecture material as opposed to eclipsing it. I've had short, online quizzes that have helped to reinforce course content. The coding assignments feel shorter with more time (2-3 weeks each) and detailed instructions. There is a lot more variety in topics than at Caltech, and I've been enjoying Computer Communications and Networks and Accelerated Natural Language Processing, both of which feel very practical and relevant.

I have not experienced any changes due to Covid-19, as there are no masking requirements anywhere or reported cases of Covid-19 known to me. I am living in a flat with mostly freshers, about 5-10 minutes walk from all my classes, cheap grocery stores, (very groovy) thrift/charity stores, bus stations, clubs, and more. It's definitely a party building/school, and you will hear music at night from the clubs, but it has never impacted my sleeping. You can cook or find lots

of cheap, convenient food options at the grocery stores or with TooGoodToGo. I've been so grateful for the opportunity to study at Edinburgh, and the experience has been really rewarding in both knowledge and personal growth.