

# CAMBRIDGE MICHAELMAS COMMENTS FALL 2024

## **Jena Alsup '26, Computer Science Part IB/II, Michaelmas Term/St. John's College**

Studying abroad at Cambridge during Michaelmas Term has been such a memorable experience. The whole college feels like it's buzzing with energy, especially at the start of the year, and there's this warm sense of community that makes it feel almost magical. St. John's does a great job of helping you settle in quickly, with Freshers' Week packed with activities like trivia nights in the college bar and punting on the river. It's a perfect time to meet people, try new things, and dive into the Cambridge experience — there's genuinely something for everyone.

Getting involved in Cambridge life has been a highlight, and joining the rowing team is one of the best decisions I've made. John's has a dedicated novice season in Michaelmas, which makes it easy to jump in as a beginner. They have four boats, each with eight people, and they organize them by commitment level, so it's easy to find a team that fits your schedule. I picked the second-most committed team, which meets three times a week, and it's been the ideal balance. With the guidance of experienced upperclassmen rowers, learning the techniques feels doable and fun. The socials outside of practice make it easy to bond with teammates, and being part of a boat has definitely been one of the most rewarding parts of my time here. Alongside rowing, I've been attending dance classes with CUTAZZ, the Cambridge dance society, and joining 5k runs with the university's running club, Hares and Hounds — both great ways to connect with people beyond St. John's and my major.

Life at John's itself has been another high point. The college grounds are beautiful, with stunning architecture and peaceful gardens, and my accommodation has everything I need. Having my own suite with a living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen has made it feel incredibly homey and great for hosting friends. The town of Cambridge also has this historic charm that's hard to describe. Wandering through cobbled streets, discovering bakeries, or running along the River Cam all feel like an experience in themselves. It's a mix of history and coziness that makes every day feel unique.

Academically, Cambridge has a different rhythm than Caltech. Instead of weekly problem sets, supervisions are spaced out every two weeks, which lets you really dive into the material. This more self-paced approach has been refreshing. Supervisions themselves are a core part of the Cambridge experience — they're small group sessions with experts who genuinely care about helping you understand the material. It's inspiring to get that focused time for exploring ideas, asking questions, and getting personalized feedback.

I really enjoy spending time in the Computer Science building in West Campus. The space has everything you need — a cozy café with great food, comfortable study spots, and plenty of people around to chat with. It's a relaxed, welcoming environment,

perfect for meeting friends for coffee or even striking up a conversation with someone new in my field. The 30-minute walk to get there has even become a nice routine, giving me time to clear my head before diving into work. Cambridge's location also makes it easy to explore beyond the city. The train station is just a 30-minute walk from John's, and from there, it's only a 45 minute ride to London. It's perfect for day trips — I've loved wandering through museums, discovering different neighborhoods, and enjoying the shift in pace, knowing I can still make it back to Cambridge by evening.

If you're considering studying abroad, especially at Cambridge, I can't recommend Michaelmas enough. The term is packed with opportunities to meet people, and the traditions — like matriculation dinner and college chapel services — give you a sense of history that's hard to find anywhere else. Between the lively social life, academic depth, and beautiful surroundings, Cambridge offers an unforgettable experience that's both enriching and fun.

### **Gabrielle Chang '25, Computer Science, Cambridge Michaelmas/Corpus Christi College**

If you're thinking about studying abroad at Cambridge, I highly recommend it! It has been my favorite experience in university so far.

The computer science tripos lectures are extremely well taught, and my supervisors really know what they're talking about. Some of them used to be researchers, software engineers, and even startup founders. I was initially nervous about supervisions, since they sounded so different to anything we have at Caltech. Now that I've done a couple, I've found them to be a great way of learning. They provide a comfortable space to ask questions with an expert on your subject, and I've always left feeling more confident than before.

Michaelmas Term, in particular, is a fantastic time to study abroad. At Corpus Christi College, the first few weeks are filled with social events, giving you the perfect opportunity to make friends before the term ramps up. Corpuscles (those in Corpus Christi College) are known to be friendly, and I can confirm this reputation is true. There are only 2-3 computer science majors in each year at Corpus, so it didn't take long for us to get acquainted. Our housing is also generously-sized and nicer than my past Avery dorm rooms.

No matter what college you're placed in, at the Fresher's Fair you can learn about the wide variety of societies (AKA clubs) at Cambridge. Many societies offer "taster sessions," so you can try out activities for free before fully committing. I joined the Bird Watching Society and the Blind Wine Tasting Society, both of which introduced me to new people outside my college. Some societies organize day-long or weekend trips within the UK, which is a great chance to get off campus without worrying about having to plan something yourself. For example, the Hillwalking Society does weekly trips to the English countryside.

Don't worry about bringing everything from home. You can find everything you need here. Corpus's location is very central, and downtown Cambridge has all sorts of grocery stores, restaurants, and even a mall. If you like to shop secondhand like me, I've used Facebook Marketplace to buy my bike, and have bought jackets/sweaters/etc. from charity shops. Also, Cambridge railway station is nearby, making it easy to take day trips to London or other nearby places via train. I've visited friends in Edinburgh and London so far.

Every day, as I bike to class, I pass by medieval structures, scenic river views, and clusters of tourists, all of which make being here feel almost surreal. Cambridge in the fall is especially beautiful. If you're a history lover, you'll have a great time learning about the town's history. Corpus has stories of resident ghosts — look it up!

If you want to study abroad, my advice is to allocate enough time to complete the application process, pick your classes, and research how things work. Don't save anything for last-second. It's also a good idea to reach out to previous Caltech study abroad students to get a sense for what things are like. My inbox is always open, and I can point you to current students (or someone who will know someone)!

### **Lynn Feng '26, Computer Science, Cambridge Michaelmas/St. Catharine's College**

My initial motivation for studying abroad was to branch out academically by taking courses on topics Caltech doesn't offer, particularly bioengineering. I found an academic structure very different from what I was used to at Caltech. Now more than halfway through term, I still can't comment much on whether my classes were what I hoped, since both my ML and my bio labs are scheduled for the upcoming week, and my first assignment on my brain-machine interface course was only assigned a day ago. So far, I'd describe it as similar to Caltech, but you start getting sets four weeks in, and the office hours are held every two weeks, called "supervisions", and are mandatory.

In the meantime, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of interesting extracurricular and non-academic opportunities available here. I applied to and joined the local Meridian Office, a co-working space for people working on pressing global problems. I highly recommend interested students to apply: you get to talk to cool, driven people, get access to a great study space, and get free food too. Several people at the office actually know friends of mine back at Caltech – small world. Meridian also hosts Cambridge's AI Safety society, which I've been meeting with weekly for paper reading and discussion. I also often attend the Science Fiction and Fantasy society's weekly discussions and movie screenings, and once or twice a week, co-work with the society's members at local cafes. And I just finished pitching for Oxbridge AI X to hopefully get some more funding for my startup.

I spent about a week in London prior to the start of term, and I've also visited London since during term. I recommend checking out the Camden Market (and the nearby cyberpunk rave clothing store CYBERDOG), as well as the London Night Cafe – a neon-lit workspace open late that looks like it came straight out of a cyberpunk novel. It's pretty easy to get to London from Cambridge by train. I'll be going to an upcoming expo in London with the Alternative Protein Society soon. Really, you can train all over the country if you'd like. In the local Cambridge area, you can consider going punting, or visiting the many market stalls and small shops for food and trinkets.

In summary, I'd recommend study abroad at Cambridge for students who are interested in branching out socially and exploring the area. I wouldn't recommend going just for academics, at least if you're CS – just take more classes at Caltech or do research or something. It's certainly true societies here are more active than clubs at Caltech, due to the sheer number of students and perhaps, the lighter academic load, so you should get involved. There are also a lot of resources (free stuff!) available. I've already gotten a bunch of free food, event invites, and compute credits.

### **Isabelle Ragheb '25, Engineering, Cambridge Michaelmas/St. John's College**

In the weeks leading up to my departure from the U.S., I was filled with nervous anticipation about living in an unfamiliar country, immersing myself in a new culture, and, most importantly, having to start over. I couldn't believe I'd decided it would be a good idea to take this leap during my senior year at Caltech, where I had already established a strong academic foundation and support system. However, five weeks into the Cambridge experience, I can confidently say it was worth the risk.

Academically, Cambridge's engineering curriculum is quite different from what I'm used to at Caltech, and it's been a breath of fresh air. Here, there's a focus on practical, industry-relevant knowledge that I haven't experienced before. Every course has labs integrated into the curriculum, so we're not just learning theory—we're actually getting to apply it hands-on. The assigned coursework (referred to as examples papers) are designed to reinforce the material covered in class, rather than expecting students to stretch far beyond the lecture material, a marked difference from problem sets at Caltech. Overall, engineering at Cambridge is tailored for students interested in entering industry, which has allowed me to experience a whole new approach to studying engineering, and has really helped me grow as an engineer.

Socially, I've found a welcoming and supportive community among the first, third, and fourth year John's engineering students, who upon my arrival, really embraced me and made me feel like part of their cohorts. One of the highlights of being an engineer at John's has been the Parson's Society, the engineering society of St. John's College. Every year the Parson's Society organizes an initiation where first-year engineering students complete a list of tasks—from designing and throwing a paper airplane off St. John's Cathedral to jumping into the River Cam—which was a really unique and memorable way to bond with the first year John's engineers. However, Cambridge's

college system and club culture have also made it easy to meet students outside of engineering.

In particular, St. John's has done an amazing job integrating myself and the first years into the college social scene. This is one of the reasons studying abroad at Cambridge in Michaelmas term is special; as an exchange student you get to experience all the orientation events with the first-years, which makes it easy to build friendships from day one. The college organized a ton of social events during the first week, such as formal dinners and traditional Scottish dances (which was similar to square dancing), and gave us "college families" where two upperclassmen act as "parents" for two new students. This has been an incredible way to meet people in a relaxed setting. I love that these social events aren't just one-time activities—they build long-lasting connections. Formal dinners, with their candle-lit tables, have been a great way to strengthen friendships, while college families make sure new students feel included and supported.

The club culture here is something I've also really come to love. There's an opportunity to get involved in practically any extracurricular, and all the clubs are welcoming to new members. I joined the St. John's rowing team, the Lady Margaret Boat Club (LMBC), even though I had no rowing experience, and it has turned out to be one of the best choices I've made here! The team is super inclusive, and the upperclassmen are incredibly generous with their time, coaching novices and making us feel like part of the club. I've had the chance to compete in races like Queen's Ergs (lovingly referred to as "quergs" here) and Clare Novices, all while forming close bonds with my teammates. Rowing has been a perfect mix of enjoying the beauty of the River Cam, getting a great workout, and making amazing friends. I also joined the Hare and Hounds, the university cross-country club, for their social runs. These laid-back runs are a fun way to meet students from different colleges, get some exercise, and explore Cambridge's beautiful streets and trails.

Cambridge is vastly different from Caltech, but in ways that I have come to cherish. While students here are exceptionally bright and serious about their academics, they also value a healthy work-life balance. College life is as much about pursuing hobbies, engaging in college traditions, and spending time with friends as it is about academics. However, studying at Cambridge doesn't limit you to the "college experience". Rather, it places you in the heart of a beautiful, bustling, historic city that's yours to explore, with the added benefit of a superb train system that makes day trips to places like London or Bath easy and convenient.

Overall, my time studying abroad at Cambridge has been immensely rewarding. I'm going to miss the friends I've made, the stunning city, and the vibrant way of life that blends tradition with intellectual curiosity. This experience has broadened my perspective and enriched my life, leaving me with memories and insights that will stay with me long after I return to the States.

## **Sophia Stiles '26, Computer Science, Cambridge Michaelmas/Corpus Christi College**

I can't believe I'm already in my fifth week at Cambridge—time flies when you're having fun! Studying abroad has been the perfect way to broaden my perspective, both academically and culturally.

I chose to study in the Michaelmas Term because the course offerings aligned more with my interests. However, it's worth noting that you're allowed to attend any lecture walk-in style as a Cambridge student! Besides classes, I also wanted to check out the Freshers' Fair, a massive two-day event. It's a great way to talk to the people running societies and to make friends with others at the fair, since everyone is new and eager to meet people at the beginning of term.

Academically, my experience has been very positive. The lectures are slower-paced and focused on practical applications rather than theory. The homework covers a broader range of content and the problems are closely tied to what's covered in lectures. The Cambridge curriculum emphasizes the importance of big-picture intuition before diving deeper into the nitty gritty details. This is further reinforced in Cambridge's supervisions, which are small group study sessions of 2-3 people led by PhD students and professors. The supervisions have been invaluable in my learning. The sessions are not as intimidating as you think, but are quite thorough. We go over homework problems, ask questions, and go deeper into new concepts out of self-interest which I wouldn't always have the time to investigate further into at Caltech.

What surprised me most about day-to-day life in Cambridge was how accessible everything is on foot—and how picturesque it all is! For study spots, the Computer Science building is open 24/7 and very accessible. Cambridge also has a central university library with beautiful collections of books and grand arched windows, making it feel like you're stepping into a dark academia scene. Each college has its own library, often private, and usually within a five-minute walk from student housing for convenience. I've noticed that libraries are utilized far more in Cambridge, which creates a great study atmosphere.

I've had a great time at Corpus Christi college. My room is in a great location—just steps away from the college library and right next to Pelican bar, the college's social hub. Corpus is one of the older colleges, with beautiful wooden architecture and packed with history. I'm lucky to live in one of the few spaces on campus with stovetops, or "hobs" as they're called here, which has encouraged me to cook more. Unlike Caltech, dining here is flexible and self-funded, giving me a chance to try cooking my favorite comfort foods. And for those times when I'd rather not cook, the college dining hall is right there, offering a setting that feels straight out of Harry Potter, with long tables and a grand atmosphere. Formal dinners are another tradition that still feels like a

dream. They're a chance to dress up, enjoy a great meal, and meet students from all years in a genuinely unique setting.

The Hare and Hounds running club has been an great way to stay active and explore Cambridge. The city is perfect for running, with beautiful trails and historic architecture everywhere you go. Running has helped me expand my "mental map" of Cambridge while enjoying the changing seasons, and it's a great way to socialize with friends and meet new people. I'm also in the Rambling Society, which organizes weekly walking trips to the English countryside.

Cambridge itself is a charming city and every corner is photo-worthy. It's a bustling college town filled with cozy cafes, historic bookstores, museums, and gardens at every corner. One of my favorite things to do is go for an evening walk by the river; the way the buildings reflect on the water creates a double-image that's so pretty. And Cambridge's central location makes it easy to take a quick day trip to London. You can easily take the train there which is especially affordable if you buy the railcard. There are so many places to explore!

I'm so grateful for the chance to study here and if I could stay forever, I would. I encourage anyone considering studying abroad to give it a try. Cambridge, with its traditions, beauty, and vibrant student life, has been more than I could've imagined. It's truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience!

### **Bharathan Sundar '25 Mathematics / Mathematics Part II, Cambridge Michaelmas Term / Pembroke College**

My experience at Cambridge so far has been unforgettable and refreshing. During Michaelmas (fall) term, school is just beginning here at Cambridge, so I have found it easy to make friends. On any given evening, I have found it easy to join a new group of people, whether undergrad or even postgraduate students. Coming from Caltech, which is so small, this is a singularly unique and exciting feeling. Academically, I have found Cambridge stimulating and exciting without being too overburdening. The supervision system for math classes has helped me learn effectively and complements the challenging material well. I will definitely use some of the techniques I have learned for studying more effectively when I return to Caltech.

An aspect that has made Cambridge so enjoyable is the extraordinary spectrum of different people I have met here. I have had the fortune of sampling numerous societies, spanning sports, music, hobbies, and cultural groups, each as welcoming as the next. These have given me a window into life not only beyond Caltech, but also the US. I have found it incredibly easy to make friends based on common interests, just due to the sheer diversity of activities and experiences available here. From southwest Indian cultural societies and philosophy reading clubs to steel pan drumming groups, Cambridge has everything you could possibly want in an existing, active form. From the very first week, Cambridge makes these opportunities accessible through the Fresher's

Fair, a university-wide symposium for the different societies. People are so inviting and enthusiastic about their interests that it makes it hard to narrow down which clubs to devote the most time to.

For myself, I have found a lot of excitement through a mix of activities on the college level and the university level. At Caltech, I compete on the tennis team, but I wanted to try something new here. I have been able to try no less than four new racket sports, some of which are hundreds of years old. I have been playing matches for Pembroke College's squash team, against other Cambridge colleges, which has been a fun and active way to meet new people. I have also joined the Snooker society, which is a British version of pool that is much more challenging. Opportunities like playing snooker and squash do not come easily at Caltech, which is what makes it so amazing that they are readily accessible here. I have also joined Pembroke College's Stokes Society, which is a STEM society aimed for a general audience. They have some amazing lecturers who talk about complex topics in interesting and engaging ways. Stokes Society also hosts many social outings, trivia quizzes, and other activities, making it easy to bond with people over a mutual love of science.

Of course, Cambridge itself has an amazing amount to take advantage of. From the pristine architecture in the different colleges to the winding, serene river, it is an amazing place to go for a walk or run. I have particularly enjoyed its selection of restaurants, which are surprisingly high quality for a small city. My personal favorite is Indian food (I recommend Tiffin Truck or Dishoom), but there are also amazing Mediterranean, pizza, Chinese, and Korean places here as well. Pembroke College has also been amazing in this regard, as it is located right in the center of the town, just a two minute walk from all of the restaurants, malls and stores.

Studying abroad at Cambridge is a truly one-of-a-kind way to meet new people and pursue new interests you might never have time for otherwise. I am so grateful to Caltech for this opportunity and cannot recommend pursuing this program enough.