



"To remember a day would take a day. To remember a year would take a year" ~ Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*

The Durham Experience

What can I say about my year in Durham? It was absolutely exhilarating, unforgettable, everything I could dream of and utterly indescribable. To me, Durham was quintessential England. Studying in the shadows of our Norman Cathedral and Castle, both built during the 11th Century, and both UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the sense of history, culture, tradition and pride was palpable. The Castle and Cathedral were on a peninsular, with the River Wear snaking around it and forest trails all around – a joy for any nature lover and physical geographer. Durham is basically a small university town. We walked everywhere, 30 minutes, end to end (partly on cobblestone roads, I might add).

Durham University is based on a collegiate system, just like Cambridge and Oxford. This means that every single student was assigned to one of 13 colleges and, as new students, we all lived in college and ate in the dining hall. This meant that the sense of community was strong and really gave me the chance to make a ton of friends.



This was one of our first group photos together as international students, taken before the English students arrived in Durham. P.S. I'm the third person from the left.

Durham and Durham University

The horrible college food was a huge bonding experience, especially when we nipped out for pizzas after particularly unfulfilling meals. Since Durham was a small town, all shops closed by 5 in the afternoon. All colleges thus had a social committee that organised parties (known as bops) and other events and everyone gathers together nightly to come up with amusements rather than splitting and going separate ways; as I would imagine more prone to occur in a large city. I went to Grey College, the best college in Durham. We had a pizza bar, a chapel, a huge plasma television in our common room, a bar, pool table, giant Jenga that sent you diving for cover, a great field to laze in the sun on and an amazing support staff. Plus, it took me a mere 10 minutes to get to my classes.

Some of our bops included the Army Bop, which was to welcome all new students to the Grey Army, and the Hawaiian Bop, to celebrate the end of term and summer sun (and lack thereof):



Durham is the third oldest university in England (after Oxford and Cambridge) and we have our traditions as well. Every few weeks, we have formal dinners, meaning that we dress up and wear our college gowns for a proper sit-down meal. The food was an improvement from our usual fare and, importantly, we had wine!



This was our first formal together – the Fresher's Formal. The only thing I remember is that we had soup. It's really fun to see everyone all dressed up and we're sitting around the table acting all high-brow.



Here I am with Laurent, one of the French exchange students, waiting for our food. You can see the bottle of wine we were sharing on the lower left corner of the table.



After our Formal dinners, we normally adjourned to the college bar just to sit around and talk some more. By this time, we would have ditched our college gowns in someone's room for the night. Trying to figure out whose gown was whose was always a challenge the following day.

The only places open after dark are the clubs and pubs, so that's what happens on a night out.



Moving clockwise from the top left, this was at the start of a night out and we're doing shots. In the next picture, we're celebrating Luke's birthday by having triple vodka mixes at Jimmy A's. Below, we're on the dancefloor and lastly this was taken at the end of a night out. All clubs in Durham are closed by 2am.

Aside from our nights out, Durham has other things to offer as well. We went to watch movie screenings at other colleges; we went out to Newcastle (just 10 minutes away by train); we hung around each other's rooms and had coffee in town.



Durham Cathedral was one of my favourite places to go to, not because I'm religious, but because it was so peaceful and beautiful inside. Bill Bryson described Durham Cathedral as "the best cathedral on planet Earth". And this was before he became our chancellor! Important school ceremonies are held in the Cathedral and there are often choir and orchestral performances there. I watched the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra play in the Cathedral. And to all Harry Potter fans out there, the Durham Cathedral cloisters were the setting for the outside of Hogwarts. You can see the cloisters in the picture above. The Durham Castle clock tower is also Hogwarts clock tower.



As I mentioned earlier, the River Wear runs through Durham. We have regattas there and on normal days, all of us can go rowing along the river (which is way harder than it looks)!

The great thing about the collegiate system is that everyone is only minutes away, so anytime I was bored in my room, I just popped by someone else's room for a hot drink, to chat or to just listen to music.





Again, moving clockwise from the top left, Laura and I are having coffee in Wayne's room. In the next picture, Wayne's teaching me some chemistry as we built molecular structures. We had some Japanese students here to learn English and there they are in my room folding origami. Finally, there are all of us sitting around chatting.



The great thing about having a college bar is that at night, when you're in your room studying and just need a break, anytime you pop down to the bar, there's always someone you know there to chat with and de-stress. You can see in the top left picture that we've all popped down to the bar from our various rooms (I'm still wearing my glasses instead of my lenses). And in the right picture, we're all just having a laugh in the Grey bar.



On special occasions, we would skip the college meal and cook or order in instead. Fortunately, Luke was in a house on college, so we had the facilities to do so. On the left, we're celebrating Martin's Birthday and on the right, it's Chinese New Year and Wayne and I requested everyone to wear red (everyone but Francois did so).

Those good days, when the sun was out, we'll all troop out to the lawn to laze there (one of the perks of Grey College). Below are just some of those days where we're bumming, having a picnic and the 2 lower pictures were taken during Grey Day, where the whole college was out on the lawn sunning.





The learning experience

Durham University has a very strong Geography Department. In the 2008 Times Good University guide, our Geography department was ranked 3rd in England. In the Guardian University guide, our department was ranked 6th. One of the greatest joys I had was being able to take modules that I otherwise would not have had the chance too – Quaternary Studies and Glaciation along with 2 archaeology modules. As a physical geographer, I've brought back great memories of working in the field as well.



Here we are soil coring at the North York Moors for a Quaternary Studies fieldtrip. By extracting and analysing the layers of soil, we can reconstruct the past environment of the area. That corer is 6 meters up.



And this was in the Lake District in the middle of winter where I was freezing on a Glaciation fieldtrip. All of us had to wear safety vests and hard hats, which was an experience in itself.

Travelling

Finally comes travelling. Being away for a year in England gave me two vacations to explore Europe. I've been on Nature walks in Wales and wandered the streets of Scotland. In winter, I travelled with some Durham friends. We met up with the Belgian exchange students in Brussels and stayed with the French students in Aix-en-Provence. Laura's aunt and uncle put us up in Amsterdam and we stayed on a Horse Farm in England with Luke. On Christmas Day, I attended Christmas mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and I welcomed in the New Year listening to live classical music in front of the Boboli Gardens in Florence. Does lunching among the ruins of Pompeii or having a gelato ice cream in front of the Trevi Fountain appeal? How about snacking at a tapas bar in Barcelona or drinking port wine in Porto?



On the right, I'm in the Roman Colosseum with Luke, Laura and Martin; on the left, I'm in front of the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam.

Parting words

It's impossible to encapsulate one extraordinary year of my life in a few brief words. Going over thousands of pictures and much reminiscing later, this was the best I could do. Just one last word – everyone's exchange experience is different, but it's always special and unforgettable. You get as much as you give. Seize the opportunity and go on exchange, you won't regret it.

