

Washington, DC -> Leeds, UK -> Washington, DC -> New York City

16 Months Abroad



ISE Report

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1.0 - Introduction

The last two years of my degree have consisted of me being in Canada for 8 months to complete my 4th year study terms, a year in the United States for three International Co-op Terms and 5 months in the UK for an exchange term at the University of Leeds. I'm going to begin this report by saying that I did not intend to do as much travel as I ended up doing during my university career, however, it is just what actually happened.

I started university wanting to do an exchange term for sure and did all the research I could to find a great university. I finally found the University of Leeds, which had courses that would match up with what I was planning on taking at Waterloo. Additional from talking with relatives, Leeds had a very good and strengthening reputation within the UK. I managed to go through the first few years of my undergrad with a relatively normal experience. This normal started to change once I hit 3A, the most dreaded term for Civil Engineering.

At the start of 3A, I found out I was accepted to the University of Leeds for my exchange so I knew I was going to be away from Waterloo for the upcoming fall term (Fall 2016). Time came for my fourth co-op term, I ended up applying to 12 jobs including two in the US and had 10 interviews. I ended up getting offers for both positions in the US and no offers for anything in Canada. At the time, I wanted to spend the summer in Canada in order to spend time with friends and family before moving to England for my Exchange Term, that didn't happen. It seemed that once I had one international experience set up everything else just ended up being out of the country. So, long story short, I moved to Washington DC, came back to Canada for a week and a half in September to pack for my exchange, then moved to England. Exams in England ran in January making me start my co-op term two weeks late. Luckily my co-op went very well in DC and I was able to return, unfortunately my boss wanted me to start as soon as I possibly could. This meant that I wrote my last final in Leeds on a Thursday afternoon, flew back to Canada Friday, spent the day with friends in Toronto on Saturday, then packed and flew to DC on Sunday. I got to DC at 9pm on Sunday and was in the office to start work at 8am on Monday morning. Also due to my late start, I worked until the last possible day before coming back to Waterloo. So similarly, I finished work on the last Friday in April, drove back to Canada on Saturday and moved in to Waterloo and started classes that Monday.

1.1 - Things to Know

The first thing to note about the UK is that everything is accessible by train and if you're planning on doing a lot of travelling (as you should) getting a railcard is a smart choice. It's about £70 for a one-year railcard (there's also an option for a 3-year card) and it gets you 30% off on all rail tickets. If you're using an app like "Trainline" it'll automatic apply your discount and you'll save a ton of money. Another option is to "split" your rail tickets, you can find websites online to do this, basically it divides your full journey into a series of shorter trips with cheaper individual prices compared to the full journey. Another important thing to know is that rail ticket prices vary depending on the time that you're planning on travelling (especially during peak travel times such

as rush/commuting hours). If you avoid travelling during these times you can put some more money aside to do other things during your travels. Leeds was an amazing place to be located in order to travel across the entire United Kingdom by train; Edinburgh was 3 hours away, London was 2.5 hours and Bristol and Bath were 2 hours away (if the train was on schedule, which for me it never was).

1.2 - Things I Would Have Done Differently

Looking back now there is very little I would have changed in my experiences abroad. The main thing I would have liked to have changed would be to have had more time in between each experience. It would have been nice to have even just a couple of more days in between my exchange term, my term in DC and being back in Waterloo. Due to how rushed the transitions were, I didn't really have any time at all to process the experience and get ready for the next one. By the time I got back to Waterloo, I was burnt out and wasn't really able to enjoy my 4A term. I was thrown right back into the joys of studying at Waterloo while I was still trying to process all my experiences from the past 8 months abroad. Once my school term was finished I needed to get away just to be able to refresh myself, so I went on a trip back to England to reconnect with some of my friends I made during my exchange as well as some family. It was probably the smartest decision I made, it felt amazing to be able to travel around and not have to worry about school or work and just enjoy my time abroad.

My last international experience was my last work term in New York City. I was able to really plan out my time in New York in comparison to my time in Leeds and DC. I had a week to myself in Manhattan before flying home. Because of this time, I was able to see a few things I was wanting to do throughout the term and visit a few of my favourite places in the city before leaving.

2.0 - What I learned

Other than learning how to pack my life away into a suitcase and a duffle bag for 4 months and how to unpack and repack within 24 hours, there were three main things that my time abroad taught me. These may seem obvious but while you're travelling by yourself they become really important. They are: make the most of the time you have; don't be afraid to be alone; and the people you meet along the way definitely make the experience. In addition to these three main things, I learned a valuable survival skill while in New York. Time Square is huge tourist trap, I tried to avoid it at all costs, but when my friend Marlene came to visit I had to take her because it was her first time in NYC. Long story short, we got dragged into taking a picture with the people in costumes, do NOT take pictures with them, they will chase you through Time Square if you don't give them money after you take the picture (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Myself and Marlene prior to running away from these guys in Time Square

2.1 - Make the Most of the Time You Have

You're in a city for a limited time especially when you are doing an international co-op or exchange term. This doesn't mean that you won't be able to return to the location in the future, however you're already there so you might as well do as much as you can to make the most of it. Try to spend some time doing the classic tourist things where you are (Figure 2), but also try to experience it as a local. This may take some time to figure out, but finding the places where locals go usually makes your time in that location even better.



Figure 2: The classic photo on the Parkinson Steps at the University of Leeds

2.1.1 - Never Say No

This idea ties in closely to that discussed in Section 2.1. The best way to experience a new city is to get out and do things in the city, don't go to a new city just to stay in your room. Also, don't let the weather be the reason to say no. I took a trip to Edinburgh while in the UK, my friends and I went hiking up King Arthur's Seat. During the time we were hiking it was pouring rain and we got absolutely drenched. Even though we couldn't see anything from the top, we still had an amazing time going on the hike. The figure below shows me trying to stay dry while taking a photo of the lack of a view along the path.



Figure 3: Picture of me on King Arthurs Seat trying to stay dry and failing

2.2 - Don't be afraid to be alone

You learn a lot about yourself when you go on an international experience by yourself. It's expected that you may be alone for the initial step when you move there and are finding your bearings. Travelling and living by yourself gives you the complete freedom to do what you want, instead of being restricted by others. Personally, I feel that spending time exploring a city by yourself is just as important as meeting locals and having them show you interesting places. When you are exploring a place by yourself, you are able to take as much time as you like in locations that you find interesting and are able to find what truly interests you about the city. You

are not restricted by other's schedules or desires and you are able to focus on what truly interests you. In spending time alone, you are able to truly explore your interests and see what really fascinates you.

During my time in New York, I spent a fair amount of my spare time exploring the city by myself. Some people may be uncomfortable being alone for an extended period of time, however I found a sense of peace when being alone in a city (even in a city like New York with a population of 7 million). Whenever I had a few hours free on a weekend I would take my camera and get off the subway in a different part of the city and just walk around to see what was interesting about that neighbourhood. Doing this also lets you find hidden gems that some locals may not even know about.

2.3 - The People You Meet Make the Experience

This is probably the most important thing to note when you're going on an international experience. The people you choose to spend your time with are definitely the most important part of the experience. My first day in Leeds I knew no one, but I was in the food hall on campus and I heard a familiar North American accent. I went up to these two girls and found out that they were from Ottawa and Baltimore. We became amazing friends and spent a lot of time together exploring the UK and trying new things. The bad part of getting really close to people when you're travelling is that you have to leave and may not see them again for a while. But as everyone moves back to their respective "home" countries you just have to remember that you now have reasons to travel more and go visit them and explore their countries and cities. To give an example, I met Rebekka in Leeds, we ended up going to a few concerts together, had several drinks at the campus pub and ended up running into each other in Eddie B and 'studying' until we got kicked out when it closed. Since meeting Rebekka in Leeds, I've been able to meet up with her in Washington DC while she was visiting and then I was able to attend her wedding in Denmark this past August (Figure 4). When she was in DC, I was able to show her some of the places I liked going to which she had not been to before and travelling to Denmark for her wedding gave me an excuse to explore Copenhagen and Vejle (a city where I stayed, but can still barely pronounce).



Figure 4: Myself and Rebekka at her wedding in Denmark

3.0 - The Built Environment

During my time at the University of Leeds, I was able to study the urban development of the city from the time that it was a trading post on the River Aire to the modern city it is today. The way a city develops has a strong impact on the types of activities that occur in the city and how ordinary tasks occur. Throughout the next section of this report, I will discuss how a city has developed which influences the types of interactions that occur in the city and how city life functions as a whole.

3.1 - Master Planned City

Washington DC is an example of a master-planned city. As seen in the figure below the original plan of the city (completed by L'Enfant in 1791^[1]) does not vary from the present day urban layout of the entire district.



Figure 5: (A) Original Map of DC drafted by L'Enfant^[2]. (B) Map of present day DC^[3]

Originally marsh land, the area has been converted into a government powerhouse for the United States. The city was planned on a grid system of streets with standardized block sizes and diagonal streets named after the original states that connect key locations throughout the district. The city is planned around its primary governmental institutions, namely Capitol Hill and the White House, with the National Mall running from Capitol Hill to the Lincoln Memorial. Unlike a majority of other American cities, Washington DC has a very European atmosphere to it. The buildings are of a similar architectural style, the streets are of uniform width resembling the wide boulevards of Paris, and there are areas of public space at locations central to the city.

3.2 - Planned City

The most appropriate way to describe Manhattan is organized chaos. From an outsider, Manhattan appears to be a chaotic mess with everyone rushing about and no apparent order. However, after a short time you realize that there is a sense of order to all the madness. Manhattan is one of the most walkable cities in the world and as such every store and organization on street level is competing for your attention and trying to attract you as you walk past. This results in stores changing their storefronts almost monthly in order to keep people's attention and in doing so can completely change the appearance of a street or neighbourhood.

In addition to the competition on the street, there's a massive competition in the sky. Space is extremely limited in Manhattan and every square inch of space counts. Because of this, buildings are continuously taken down to make way for larger, specifically taller, buildings trying to reach new heights in order to create space.

3.2.1 - Cities within a City

New York City is an extremely unique class, comprising of the 5 Boroughs, including Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island. It consists of cities within cities. Manhattan creates a unique city environment due to its sheer size and population.

Due to the massive scale of the development that has occurred on the island, Manhattan is an engineering masterpiece. In my eyes, Manhattan consists of three layers of life and social interaction. The first being the subterranean labyrinth of tunnels which connect various parts of the city and the hidden locations below street level. Many old buildings in Manhattan were designed to have an extended storage area below the sidewalk. Due to the fact that space is such a commodity, people use every square-inch of useable space to the full potential. As such, many restaurants have converted these subterranean storage areas into underground bars and restaurants. Due to the unique design, people can walk along the sidewalk completely oblivious to the fact that there is an entirely different world beneath their feet. Two of the most unique places worth seeing are Tao located in Chelsea and La Esquina located in Soho. La Esquina consists of a small corner taco fast food restaurant, however when you go downstairs (and walk through the kitchen) you enter an underground bar and dining area. Unlike La Esquina, Tao has no street level presence except the door. After entering the door and walking down a long hallway, you enter a large open room with a full width staircase with built-in booths leading down to the main bar area and a giant Krishna sculpture at the far end (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Looking down the stairway to the main bar in Tao

3.3 - Organic Growth City

The City of Leeds represents a natural growth city. This type of city occurs where people naturally gravitate to. These cities are less defined than most cities that can be found in North America and other areas which have been settled. Leeds is located on the River Aire and served as a prime trading ground when it was first settled. As the city became larger, streets were located where they were convenient, thus not conforming to the primary north-south east-west grid system so commonly found in cities across North America. Instead, the streets twist and turn around areas where buildings and structures were previously, and are still, obstructing a direct

path from one point to another. One example of this was seen in the route taken from where I was living, north of the University campus, to the train station, located on the north shore of the River Aire. In the entire time I lived in Leeds, I don't believe I took the same route twice to get from my residence to the train station by cab, every journey was a constant worry of "are they going the right way?", "do they know where they're going?" and, most commonly "this is definitely not the route I've taken before." Going for an aimless walk around these types of cities is an amazing way to "get lost" and truly experience the city for what it is. In Leeds, you can find interesting shopping arcades that can be very hard to find otherwise (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Shopping arcade in Leeds decorated for Christmas

Cities, like Leeds, are very interesting because they hold so much history. In some areas, you can see the impact that certain events had on the city as you walk through it. It is important to understand the events which have shaped the city in order to understand the city as it is today. Leeds was a prominent manufacturing powerhouse within the United Kingdom, at the onslaught of the World Wars, all the warehouses and manufacturing plants within Leeds converted their systems to assist in the War effort. Because of this, Leeds became a target for enemy attack and saw mass bombings destroying several sections of the city. When walking through the city centre you can see modern buildings sandwiched between century old buildings and churches (Figure 8). This exemplifies how Leeds has been able to adapt overtime to ensure its success as a city.



Figure 8: Laidlaw Library located between two historic landmark churches

4.0 - Conclusions

The main point I want anyone reading this to take away is to really make the most of your time while you are away. Try to take on as many experiences and meet as many people as you can. It's not always going to be easy and fun, but you'll grow more than you thought you could and you'll learn more about yourself than you possibly could while sitting in the Starbucks in STC. Be prepared that some people won't understand your experiences when you get back, that's alright, they're your experiences, only you need to understand and appreciate them. It's very hard for people, who have not experienced it, to truly understand what you go through while you're living by yourself in a completely different country. My time abroad taught me a lot and I honestly wouldn't change it for anything else. If someone were to ask me if I would have a car or another chance to travel I would definitely take the travel. Material possessions are one thing, but spending money on experience is far more valuable.

References

^[1] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Pierre Charles L'Enfant: French Engineer and Architect." Internet: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-Charles-L'Enfant>, 2-1-2018 [March 5, 2018].

^[2] P.C. L'Enfant. "Plan of the City of Washington." Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3850.ct000509/>, 1792 [January 12, 2018].

^[3] DCpages.com. "Washington DC Street Map." Available at: <http://www.dcpages.com/Tourism/Maps/Washington-DC-Street-Map.shtml>, 2010 [January 12, 2018].