

Introduction

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I was given the opportunity as an MSP to attend the Imagine Cup EMEA regional finals and the MSP Summit 2019 at Amsterdam. This is a short report on the event, and the reflections I had from it.

Background

Microsoft invited 20 of us MSPs (Microsoft Student Partners) to attend the MSP Summit and Imagine Cup EMEA finals, along with Microsoft Ignite: The Tour (held right after the Imagine Cup). We had an internal link on Teams to apply (which involved several short paragraphs with a video), which I did just hours before the deadline on February 1st. I got to know that I was selected around 2 ½ weeks later, something which I was pleasantly surprised given my usually rotten luck.

The build-up before the trip was mostly administrative, including getting to know whom my roommate was, and my flight details. Sadly, we got to know that (at least) two MSPs had their visa requests denied, which was sad (and especially surprising).

The trip was from March 17th (Sunday) to 21st (Thursday) (inclusive). The rest of this report is structured by day; March 17th is Day 1 for instance, and so on.

Day 1

It started off with my having to catch an early bus from St Andrews to Edinburgh (especially as it was a Sunday, limited buses would run on that day, plus I like to be early at the airport). The rest went mostly as planned.

At Amsterdam, the immigration was small and hence there was a long queue (not that I'm used to it, but the queue was present for *both* EU-only and other passports, which is normally not the case from my experience). I was asked a few questions¹, and the rest of the process was quick. I reached the predefined meeting point but had to wait some time as they were waiting for other students. After that, we boarded a private bus and reached the hotel (Holiday Inn Amsterdam). I had a short break before dinner, which was at the hotel itself.

We didn't do much for the rest of the day, which was good as the next few days were hectic.

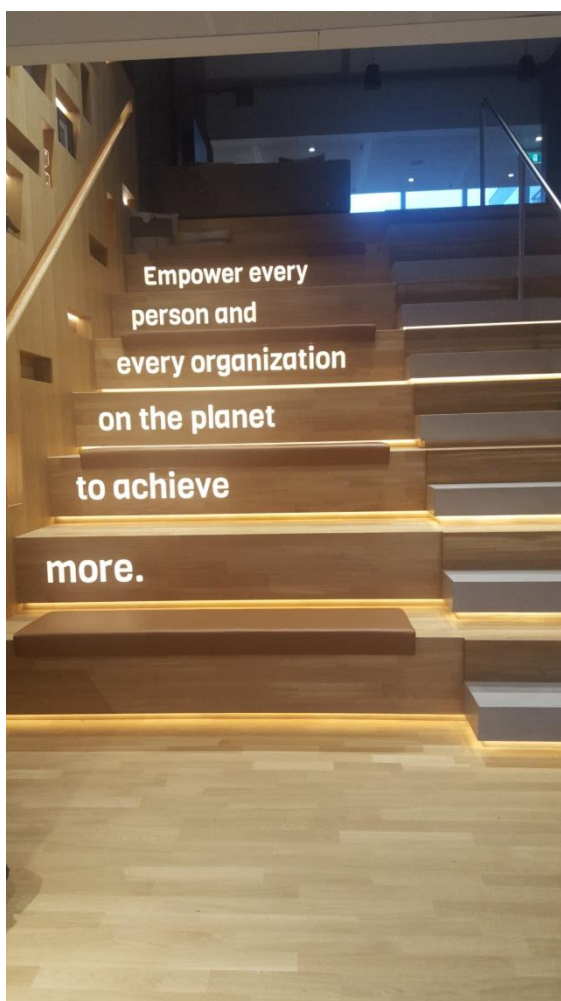
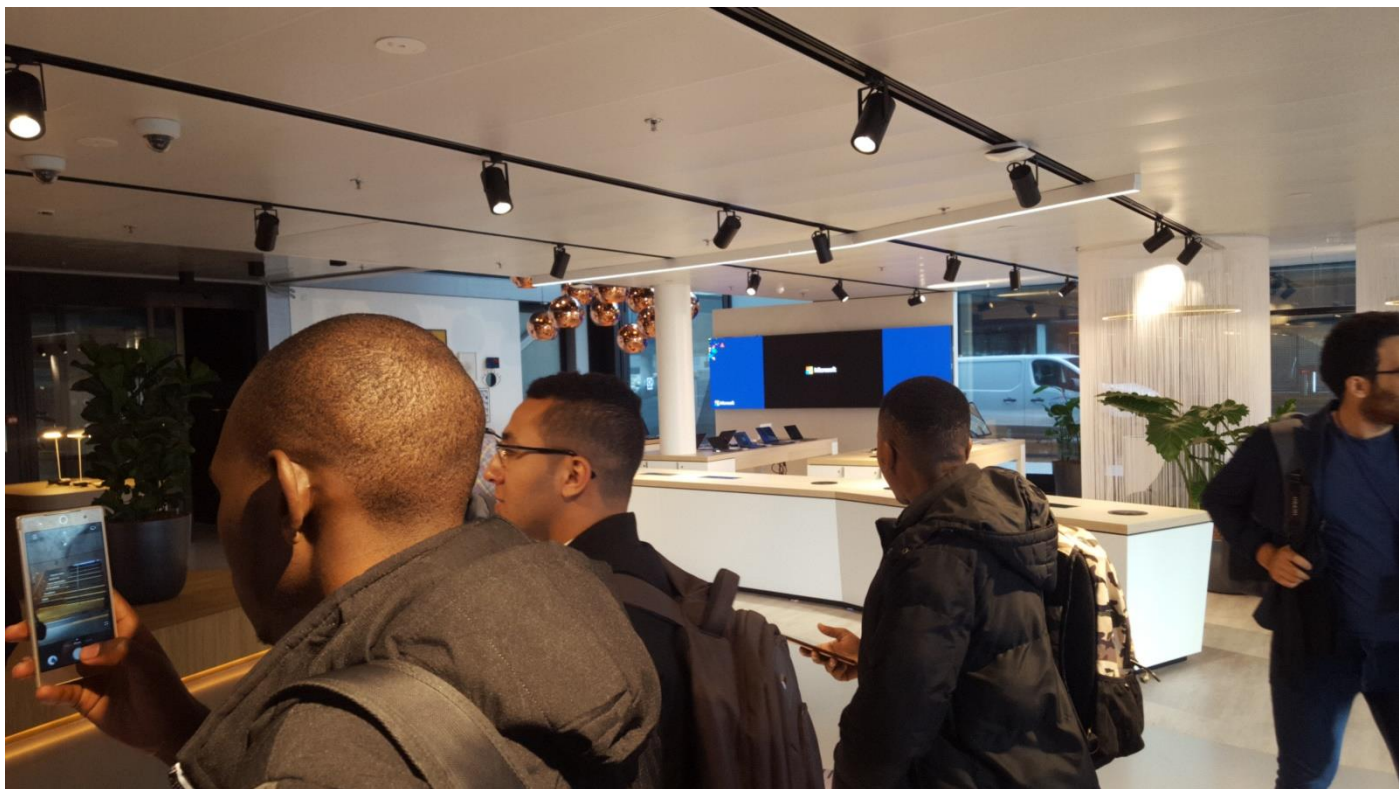
Day 2

We had to wake up *dead* early (I woke up at 5:45 am) for breakfast, as the bus would then leave at 7:45 am for the Microsoft office at Amsterdam. The trip was nice and chatty with the other MSPs, and we literally passed through the airport, leading to some wonder whether we were to depart already!

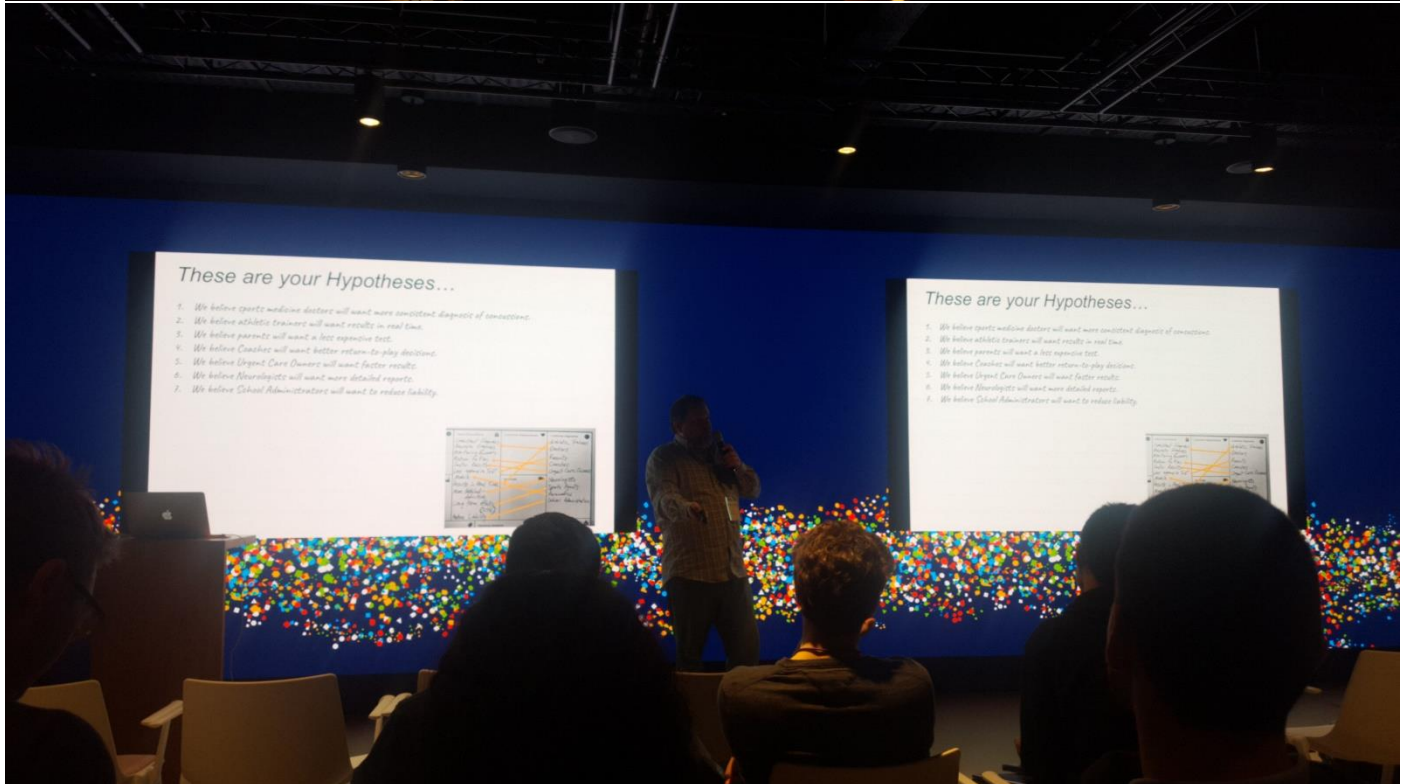
¹ One told me that all he was asked was whether he lived in the UK, and then simply let him though. That wasn't my experience though.



Once at the office, I immediately noticed a coffee machine connected to an iPad; one would select the drink on the iPad! The ground floor also had many Surface devices for demo, and while they were interesting, I didn't have much time to play with them (especially the Surface Studios).



Soon after, we had the entrepreneurial session, while mostly relevant for Imagine Cup participants given that they had their competition the next day, was still quite useful for us MSPs as it gave us a good indication of what we need to consider before going for the Imagine Cup (which is quite entrepreneurial in nature).



After that, we had lunch (at the office itself near the presentation venue) and then the MSP Summit². This was also just as interesting, as it gave me a good idea of the impact I could make with Azure tools, and the presentations given by three MSPs were an eye-opener to the projects they were involved in and how being an MSP helped them in their journey.

² Imagine Cup participants had their one-to-one mentoring session on their project during that time.



Then, we had the Open Hack, and that was fun. I had to team up with another MSP (who should not be from the same country or university) and then build an app. The only condition was that it had to leverage at least one Azure or Azure-related tool. I teamed up with Joshua Ndemenge from Kenya and came up with the idea of *Alcoholulator*, a program which leveraged Bing image search and Azure cognitive services to calculate the number of glasses a user could drink in real-time by calculating the ABV (alcohol by value) and the volume of the glass drank.

We worked on it for an hour, before having dinner at the office restaurant, which was decent, along with drinks:



After that, we left the office and had our group photo session near the hotel (while I took random photos around the area):



I should especially note the moment where I managed to get a *personal* photo with all the Microsoft employees who came. This happened because I accidentally strayed into the area when they were taking an employee's-only photo, and quickly went back embarrassed at that error.

With that, we reached the hotel, and then continued working on the project throughout the night. I handled the compute vision part (i.e, back-end), whereas Joshua created the Android front-end (which isn't my field).

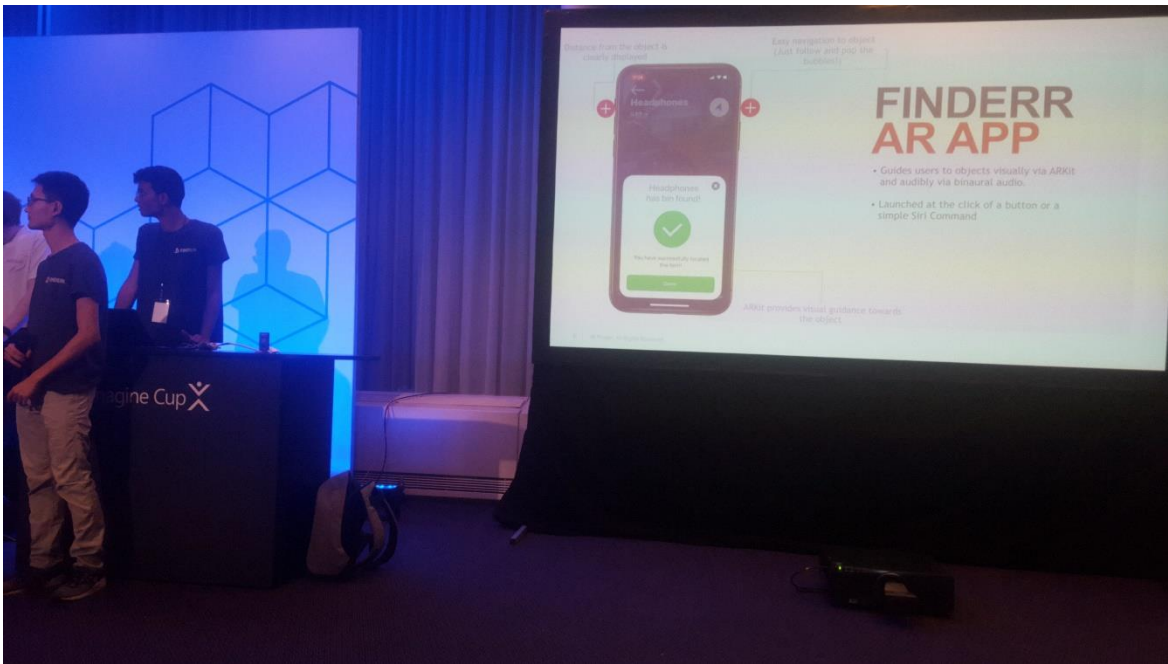
Day 3

We (again!) had to wake up early, but this time could go a bit later, as Day 2 of the summit was at the RAI Amsterdam venue (also the venue for the Imagine Cup and Ignite), which was literally a stone's throw from the hotel. We finished the project (or so did we?) ... and presented it on the stage (I did the talking!):



And then the winners (selected by the other participants) were announced. For such a short hackathon with only 8 teams, the prizes were substantial - \$250 per person for the winner and \$150 per person for the second-placed team. We did not win, but the winners did quite well – the winning team made a chat program which could provide diabetics-related information, and the second-placed team (solo) made an app to be placed in the car which would alert drivers if they were at the risk of sleeping. As the second-placed team was solo, a third team was selected, which measured the 'happiness' of a picture. The other projects were also just as interesting.

After that, we had lunch at the same place, and then the Imagine Cup regional finals started. It was clearly quite nervy for the participants – 12 teams – but only one qualify for the finals. And the process wasn't easy. 4 teams ran at one go in a phase, and each team would first present a 3-minute presentation, then a 5-minute Q/A with *each* of the four judges per team, and then a 10-minute joint Q/A combined for all four teams. Each of these phases took around 42 minutes, and there was a 10-15 minute between each phase.



Then we had a talk from the Windows Developer section, and then one from Maasa Walker (whose talk was quite useful, talking about her experience as a recruiter, and how to get a job application noticed. She also seemed to love LinkedIn, and her arguments made sense to the extent that I'm now considering signing up for it).

And then the winners. I personally wonder how the judges managed to fish out the winning team – after all, no team was bad, and their ideas were all quite good. For the record, I kept my internal notes on who I think would win, and while the first two were fairly correct, I got the third-placed team way off.

https://universityofstandrews907-my.sharepoint.com/:v/g/personal/dm282_st-andrews_ac_uk/EW5Zkk7Eb3ZOrly3-GvYt3EBx4a2gEAZLxHPPSbOjLwklQ?e=SO7vpk

Personally I was pleased with the outcome, not least because I got my prediction correct, but also because one of them is a 3rd year student at St Andrews whom I never knew before reaching Amsterdam!

After that, we went for the dinner at a restaurant, again very near from the hotel and RAI Amsterdam. It was an "all you can eat" buffet, and well it was excellent. I haven't seen one before with such a [huge variety](#) of spread of different types – from the starters, to the main course (with good seafood!), and to the desserts. They even had live cooking stations for beef and seafood!





Indeed, I ate significantly more than I normally would in the two hours that we had. Probably a good way to drown the sadness³ of those who did not win the Imagine Cup.

After that, I went back to the hotel, and then soon after, went with 9 other MSPs/Imagine Cup participants to a trip around the city center, which we reached using the metro (it's open all day and night here). We strolled around Amsterdam Central, took random photos and even entered the infamous RLD (Red Light District) which I personally could not manage as I was quickly obliterated by the strong smell of weed. But others managed just fine.

We soon returned back to the hotel after that, ready for another tiring day.



³ No alcohol was involved.

Day 4

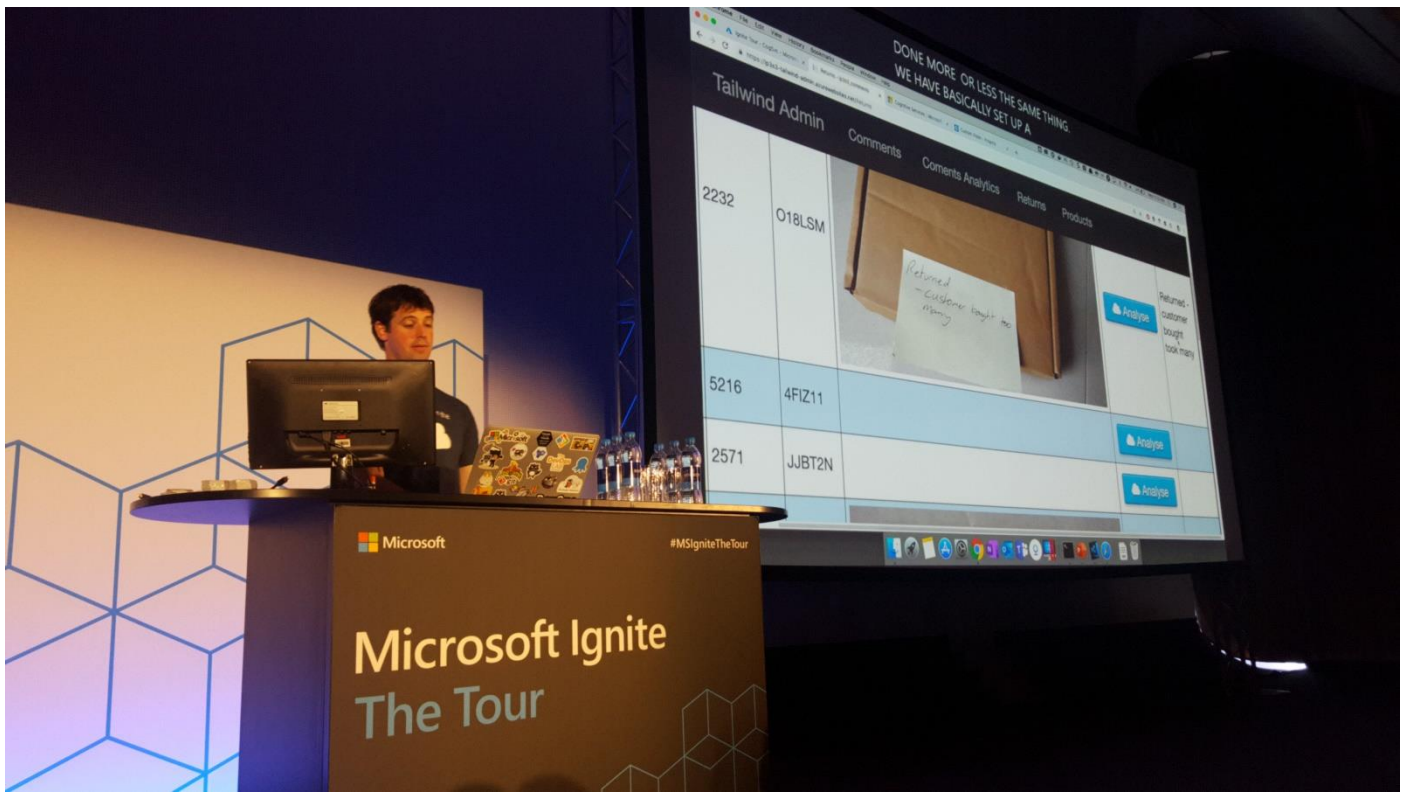
Another early rise followed with us going to RAI Amsterdam again, this time for Ignite: The Tour. I reached the venue in time⁴ for the talks, and the venue was *very* busy, a far cry to the calmness of the previous day.



The venue was so large that they provided screens telling us the location of the talks and where we currently were, which proved to be very helpful.

There were a lot of talks which one could attend – so much that around 9 of them corresponding to different 'learning paths' were scheduled for the same time – but naturally one could attend only one of them.

⁴ I had to wait a few minutes as I forgot to bring any form of official ID. Fortunately, I did not have to go back as I was allowed to proceed after answering verification questions.



Personally, I picked the data-based talks, but I know that others chose the popular Machine Learning talks for instance. The below photograph by Lee Stott shows the crowd for one of the talks:



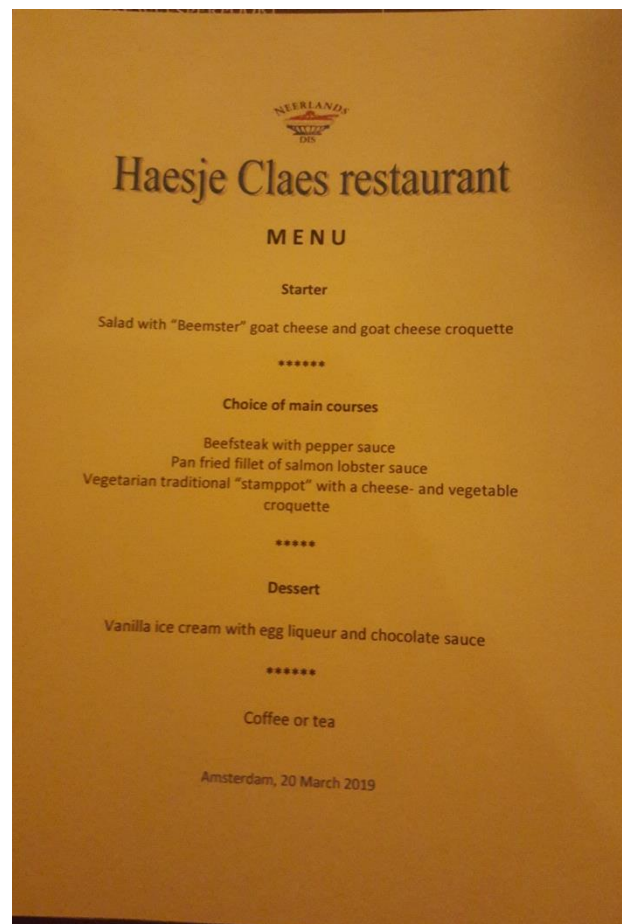
After that, we had lunch, which were packed in easy to carry boxes and was fine. Meanwhile, I watched the Microsoft Mechanics session⁵ (which are so popular that many, including myself, had to stand or sit on the floor as there were simply too many people watching the sessions). After that, I strolled around the company booths, some of which offered useful swag or gave the opportunity to win free stuff, and that meant that I was just a bit too late for the next session (which I was denied entry as it was already full). Disappointed, I went back to the Hub and continued strolling, and gained more swag, which was nice. I went back in time for the session after that.

After that, we had the Networking Reception, the only time for which I wore a shirt. This was also the only time in the trip that alcohol was ever served, and it involved discussing with other people, though I

⁵ They offered a pair of Surface Headphones for a random person for *each* session.

personally felt that to be confusing and a bit of a let-down. Parallel to that was the Imagine Cup section, wherein the 12 Imagine Cup teams and the three MSP teams from the Open Hack who won a prize showcased their projects to the public, with the public also getting the opportunity to vote for their favourite team which would win \$1000. That was quite interesting, as seeing the projects in action truly showcased their capabilities.

After that, we returned to the hotel, and had a short break before going for the private dinner by bus, which was near Amsterdam Central. That was a 3-course meal, whose menu is on the right. That was also quite good, not least as the room was reserved for us unlike the last one, but also, I had several interesting discussions with Pablo in Microsoft, who sat opposite to me. I don't personally care for selfies, but here's one:



During the meal, raffle tickets were drawn out. There were five of them, with each winning \$250, quite good for a raffle with a relatively high chance of winning: there were about 50 people in total, so the probability that I would win a ticket was

$$1 - \left(\frac{49}{50}\right)\left(\frac{48}{49}\right)\left(\frac{47}{48}\right)\left(\frac{46}{47}\right)\left(\frac{45}{46}\right) = \frac{1}{10} \rightarrow 10\%$$

Might not sound like much, but that's amazing for any raffle.

I didn't win one but wasn't too disappointed.

We also got to know who won the People's Choice award. It was the team from the Netherlands (maybe because of Dutch?), but they deserved it.

After that, most of us returned to the hotel, while a few stayed on and continued exploring Amsterdam. I was tired and felt that one day was enough, so opted out from another day touring Amsterdam.

Day 5

I first had my breakfast and then packed my bags: the bus was to leave at 1 pm (as my flight was at 4 pm) and as I would be going for The Tour again, I wanted to be ready. The Tour: Day 2 was like that of the first day, and I strolled around for a bit after two sessions before leaving, though I really wanted to stay on.

I reached Edinburgh safely, but my bag did not. At the time of writing, it is somewhere in Edinburgh (got SMS from KLM regarding that), and I hope to receive it soon.

Conclusion

This was one interesting trip. It was the first time I had ever travelled into a European country (except the UK), and it was worth it. I learned a lot from the MSP Summit, the entrepreneurial session, the Open Hack and Ignite: The Tour, which pushed me out of my comfort zone. I also met a lot of other like-minded MSPs who came from around EMEA and learning about their interests was quite interesting. I even met two boys for the Imagine Cup who never left their country before the event.

I am now strongly considering registering for the Imagine Cup for the next year and would encourage anyone else to also do the same and consider become an MSP – the benefits are worth it.

And I should have bought my travel adaptor; I forgot that the UK power plug isn't the same as the Netherlands', and while my roommate had one, I ended up borrowing one from the hotel as it wasn't ideal otherwise.

References

All photos in this report are of my own, and any which are not have been cited.