**London**

28-31 January

I was fortunate to have Mom along with me when touching down in the UK for the first time in my life. The time difference hit me pretty hard, but we still crammed a ton into our brief few days. We stayed at a nice flat in Kensington, with quick access to the tube station and the rest of the city.

Over the course of the four days we were here, our adventures included seeing the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, Tower Bridge, the Churchill War Rooms, the National Gallery, the Tate Modern, the Wallace Collection, and the Book of Mormon at the Prince of Wales Theatre. Basically all of your typical tourist experiences. Despite seeing so much, London is definitely a place I will return to throughout my stay. There was plenty still that I would like to see, including the Tower of London and a trip on the Eye. “Tired of London, tired of life” is definitely an accurate phrase after seeing this city.

3-4 March

I made the last minute decision to join my buds Jocelyn and Andy for a night in London. It’s really cool that the city is so close and easy to get into for a weekend trip. We revisited a few of the same places I had seen earlier with my Mom, and also go to see the Harrod’s, British Museum, The Great Fire of London Memorial, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and the Covent Garden Market.

Andy had stayed at Wombats, an awesome hostel in East London earlier in his trip, and the three of us ended up getting a room there for the night. It was not far from the Tower of London and the Thames, and was far better than the first Oxford hostel that we had chosen.

My top recommendations:

Wallace Collection

House of Lords/Westminster Abbey area

Tower Bridge

**Bath**

My home base for the semester!

I’m writing this only a few weeks into my trip, but I’m definitely really happy to call Bath home and am thankful for finding this awesome town. There is a lot of history in this town, specifically surrounding the Roman Baths. Some really unique sites around town would include Bath Abbey, the Royal Crescent, the Roman Baths, and my own personal Bath-room (probably the first time I’ve had one to myself since Ryan was born).

There are some really great restaurants, pubs, and bars around town that I have checked out frequently with my new friends. I spend a lot of time with other exchange students, as well as some of the guys on the university basketball team that I have been playing with. It is definitely good to have these British friends to show me around. The university is quite different from the grounds of UVA, and it’s been really cool to see what learning is like in another culture. I am taking two computer science courses, and two British studies units that give me a better sense for the place that I am staying.

Bath seems like the perfect fit for me; it isn’t an overwhelming city but still gives me easy access to nearby cities for when I want to travel. Navigating some country roads outside the city throws me back a little bit to home, but the horse farms are replaced with cattle and sheep pastures.

My top recommendations:

Roman Baths

Bath Abbey

Bath to Bristol bike path

**Cardiff**

11 February

Cardiff was my first trip outside the country since arriving in England. Bath is not far from Wales, and a large group of the exchange students and I took advantage of the short hour or so train ride to get to the nation’s capital for the day. We may have picked the wrong weekend to visit, as the city was buzzing surrounding the Wales v England rugby match. This did however make for a pretty cool cultural experience, seeing the city get excited for the game and make a lot of noise around town. Would have been nice for Ryan to be along to see it!

We visited Cardiff Castle, which kind of made me forget that I was in the middle of the city. It reminded me a little bit of all the castles Dad would take us to back in Germany when I was really young. This was the first castle I visited in the UK, and I’m sure won’t be the last.

We also had a chance to see the harbor and one of the old coal factories turned into a museum, as well as the National Museum. I was also really interested in the Welsh language, and was able to somewhat (successfully) learn the alphabet and phonetics. I’ll definitely have to come back to keep working on it.

My top recommendations:

Cardiff Castle

Harbor area

National Museum

**Stonehenge**

17 February

I went with some of my exchange friends for the day to check out a couple of old rocks in a field. The museum and audio tour gave a lot of the history behind the site and was really excited to see one of the oldest structures in the history of the world. Probably the best English weather I’ve had too!

**Salisbury**

17 February

Salisbury is the town nearest Stonehenge, and had a really cool small-town feel to it, kind of like Bath. The highlight was definitely the Salisbury Cathedral, the tallest in all of England. Between the Hogwarts-esque courtyard and the walk through the chapel, it had to be one of the most awesome churches I’ve seen. I found it amazing that during WWII enemy forces were even instructed not to bomb the church, as it was their best point of reference from the air.

We also had the chance to visit Old Sarem and its very run-down castle that gave a great view of the surrounding area.

**Oxford**

18-19 February

Oxford was a real easy trip from Bath: only about an hour and a half by train. Of course, the college is the trademark of the town, and got the chance to see a few of the incredibly old buildings and residential colleges. One of these we paid to look through, Christ’s Church, which is notable for being the filming location of the large dining room from Harry Potter. It definitely didn’t look the same without floating candles around the room, but was still a really cool. To be a student at a place with so much history and attracting so much tourism would be quite the feeling.

Andy, one of my friends on exchange from New Zealand, had a list of the best bars/pubs of Oxford to visit in one of his travel books, so I got to have a drink at the Bear Inn, the oldest pub in Oxford (established 1242!); the Eagle and Child, where CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien used to convene; and the Turf Tavern, visited by Bill Clinton back in the day.

Also had my first hostel experience! My travel companions and I hope they all aren’t like this one…

My top recommendations:

Christ’s Church College

Authentic English pubs

**Amsterdam**

8-11 March

I took advantage of the cheap flights from nearby Bristol airport to head to Amsterdam for a few days. I went with five of my mates (am I British yet?) and stayed at a hostel in the red light district, famous for its prostitution business and lax views on drug use. Despite being slightly disturbed by some of the things I saw around the area we were staying, the city was amazing. There were more canals then streets and more bicycles than people it seemed. We did a free walking tour and got to see a whole lot of the city as well as learn its history. Amsterdam basically used to be a giant swamp, and the canals helped drain the area so a city could be built, which was pretty incredible to me.

We waited in the very long line to get into the Anne Frank house, which was well worth it. We also did “The Heineken Experience,” which included a tour through the old factory in the middle of town, a 45 minute canal tour through the city, and a rooftop view from the A’dam tower which featured a swing over side of the building. I went by myself to the Rijksmuseum and was blown away by the variety of different things I found inside. I tried to take a lot of pictures. The famous “I Amsterdam” sign was also outside the museum, and the surrounding park was really busy on a nice day.

My top recommendations:

Heineken Experience with brewery tour, canal tour, and A’dam Tower

Rijksmuseum

Free Dam Walking Tours

**Cork**

15-18 March

I somehow managed to find a cheap way to spend St Patrick’s Day in Ireland, something I was really hoping to do while over here. It involved a long train up to Liverpool and forgoing a more expensive Dublin for Cork, but it had to be my favorite place I have visited yet. Cork is the second biggest city in Ireland, but it still felt very small, not much bigger than Bath.

We reserved St Patrick’s Day for all of the festivities around town, so the day before we saw some sites. The Blarney Castle was a short trip outside town, and was honestly the most beautiful place I have ever visited. There is obviously the castle, but the rest of the grounds featured gardens, trails around a river, caves, waterfalls, and cattle and horse pastures. I could have walked around the whole day there. I kissed the famous Blarney stone (see pictures), so fortune holds that I will be a lucky man now. In the afternoon we went back through Cork and found a bus to the old Jameson Irish whiskey distillery in Midleton, which was converted into a walking tour. Didn’t know much about the whiskey-making progress at all, but was very enlightened by the tour and got to have some great whiskey as well.

On Friday was St Patrick’s Day, and there was a lot going on around town. The parade happened in the afternoon and lasted about two hours, and we checked out a few of the local pubs that were bustling with music and the horse races on TV. I definitely lost a lot of sleep this weekend, but it was well worth it for all that I crammed into the few days I was here. I definitely hope to return to check out Dublin and the rest of the country at some point while I’m here.

My top recommendations:

Blarney Castle grounds

Jameson Distillery

Live music at one of the many pubs

**Liverpool**

18 March

We went through Liverpool to get to Cork, and on the way back we spent the day there after an early flight in. There isn’t much in terms of tourism in Liverpool, but thanks to a couple of famous musicians in a band from the 60’s, there was a really cool Beatles exhibit to see. Emmett was really jealous he missed out. In the afternoon, we planned to go to a football match at Goodison Park, home of Everton, and were able to experience what the best soccer in the world is like first-hand as well as the atmosphere. It wasn’t nearly as rowdy/dangerous as I had expected actually, and a 4-0 win made the experience even better.

**Copenhagen**

22-24 March

Copenhagen was absolutely incredible. It was one of the places recommended by friends back home to visit, but I don’t think I would have made it there had I not had other friends already planning to go. I am very glad I did though.

We rented bikes which was a major key to cut down on time and not get tired from walking around all day. This allowed us to see basically everything we wanted to see in a single day. This included Christiansborg Palace and its tower, Amaliensborg (The Royal Palace), Borsen Stock Exchange, Nyhavn, The Marble Church, Christiania, the Little Mermaid Statue, the Kastellet Star Castle, and the City Hall. We even found some trampolines in a park along the way that were a big hit (see pics/videos). It was a very quiet city, which I really enjoyed and made it feel like a very livable city. We seemed to compare to a quieter version of Amsterdam.

My top recommendations:

Nyhavn

Changing of the guard at Amaliensborg

Rent bikes

**Stockholm**

24-26 March

Stockholm was also a place that I never really had on my list of places to visit, but since it was planned in the same weekend as Copenhagen and was rather cheap, I decided to tag along with my travelling friends. It did not disappoint. When I was first walking around it almost had the atmosphere of an American city which sort of threw me off, but this faded after exploring most of the city.

We saw Storkyrkan Cathedral, the changing of the guard at the Royal Palace, the Vasa Museum, Riddarholmskyrkan Church (that’s a mouthful), Kungstradgarden, the royal armory, and a lot of statues of guys named Karl. About 15 Karls have ruled Sweden over the last couple hundred years. We even saw a bit of snow on the ground and most of the river was completely iced over in late March. I also got to have some of the world famous Swedish meatballs for lunch.

The morning before we left, a few of us went out to Hellasgarden, a large outdoor complex not far from the city. We did the authentic Swedish spa experience: sauna and then a dip in the icy lake. I had my reservations going in, but it was awesome to experience and glad I did it. It was very relaxing. By the time we left, it was even about 60 degrees Fahrenheit which was completely out of nowhere, and was far warmer than when we landed back in London.

My top recommendations:

Swedish spa experience

Vasa Museum

Storkyrkan

**Barcelona**

6-9 April

Started off two weeks of spring break in Barcelona. Having taken so much Spanish throughout school and being excited to put it to use, I was a bit disappointed when just about everyone I spoke to in Barcelona wanted to speak English first, and also how popular the unique Catalan language was.

The city was very unique. It was all very spread out; I have noticed that most European cities like to “build out” rather than “build up” as American cities tend to do, so when we made it up to some of the better viewpoints outside the city we could see real far in every direction. Some of the highlights included Las Ramblas, Sagrada Familia and Parc Guell and all the other unique Gaudi sites around town, Montjuic, and the beaches at Barceloneta. We also caught an awesome sunset view from a high hill called Bunkers, one of the best parts of our trip. The three days we were there seems to be a very good length as we got to see all of the different sides to the city between the mountains and the architecture and the beach, and also got to do the right amount of just exploring and finding cool less busy spots along the way.

My top recommendations:

Sagrada Familia (inside and outside)

Parc Guell

Bunkers for sunset

**Valencia**

9-12 April

We caught the bus down the coast to Valencia, which had some pretty impressive views of the water and mountains together. My good friend George from back in VA had studied here last semester, so he had some good recommendations. The first full day we had we rented biked and went down to the beach. Valencia has a river through most of the city, except that the river isn’t there anymore. So nowadays it is just a long trail and park area below the main level of the roads which we took to get down towards the water. We picked a pretty nice day to be at the beach, and the water was pretty cold as it was still April.

Our second full day we walked around the city, seeing things like the Central Market, the Town Hall, the now-retired bullring, and several different castle towers that lined the outer rim of the city. It was nice as it was not a very touristy town, and was very authentic and livable it seemed. I was able to put my Spanish to better use here as well as a result.

My top recommendations:

Biking through the river

Malvarrosa beach

The bullring

**Madrid**

12-15 April

Madrid had to be my favorite place we visited on our Spain/Italy spring break excursion, and probably only second to Ireland in terms of places I have been throughout the semester. It definitely had the feel of a very big city, but between the many parks and what seemed to be fewer residents around the time of Easter, it had a somewhat quiet feel to it. There were parts of the city where it felt hard to imagine we were still in the biggest city in the country.

Some of the highlights had to be the many parks throughout the city: Plaza de Espana, Templo de Debod, and Parque del Retiro. Plaza Mayor and Puerta del Sol were pretty busy with people when we visited which was very cool, and we were able to unintentionally catch some of the Holy Week processions at night. The Royal Palace was massive and had so many incredible rooms inside, I felt pretty lost. Despite having a massive line out the door, Museo Nacional del Prado had so many cool pieces inside, and had to be one of my favorite museums I have been to.

The mountain town of Toledo was also really accessible by train, so we took a day trip to see that as well.

My top recommendations:

Museo Nacional del Prado

Plaza Mayor

Parque del Retiro

**Toledo**

14 April

Toledo was an easy 30 minute train from Madrid, and we were able to see most of the town in just one afternoon. The entire old portion of the city is built right at the bend in a river, and stretches high up over the valley. The streets were very up and down as a result.

The highlight had to be the Toledo Cathedral. It had some really incredible intricate architecture all over the inside. I also made it to see several smaller cathedrals, a monastery, and the old royal palace that had been turned into a museum. Just walking around the town and seeing all the different streets and buildings was pretty awesome too. The one downside was how incredibly run down by tourists it was. We got off the train and it seemed we were sucked into a flock of people doing the same things we were for the rest of the day.

We capped off the afternoon by walking up the other side of the valley to get a pretty great view down the river and off to the countryside. The city was well worth the trip to visit.

My top recommendations:

Toledo Cathedral

Alcazar de Toledo

Mirador del Valle up on the other side of the river

**Rome**

15-18 April

We thought that being in Rome and the Vatican over Easter might cause us some trouble and a lot of extra money, but flights into the city the Saturday before Easter were far cheaper than anything during or after, so we got to join in on one of the biggest Easter celebrations in the world! On Sunday morning, we got out early, but really not early enough we thought, to go catch a glimpse of mass at St. Peter’s in Vatican City where we might see the Pope himself. Arriving only an hour before the start, we somehow managed to claim a spot standing in about the second row from the restricting gate. There were seats up closer than us that had to have been reserved months in advance, but for the planning we put into it, we had to get the best option possible. A massive crowd ended up filling in behind us throughout the morning. We also later realized that we were standing in Italy, looking into Vatican City across the border. We even got to see the Pope drive by in his sleek white car before giving his address, waving to crowd as his outfit swayed in the wind. Pretty surreal. We ended up standing there for about four hours throughout the day, it was awesome!

We stayed at an awesome Airbnb just outside the city, and after making the walk into town the next day we saw the hugely popular sites like the Colosseum, Palatine and the Roman Forum, Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, and the Pantheon, among so many other places we just came across throughout our time there. The day we left, we spent the entire day back at the Vatican seeing the Museum and the inside of the Basilica. After being closed the Sunday and Monday before, the lines for these places were absolutely ridiculous, and we ended up standing around for about five hours of the day with all the other people probably doing the same itinerary as we were. Despite picking a really busy time of year to visit, seeing the city was awesome, and I can understand why it is one of the must-see places of the world.

My top recommendations:

St. Peter’s Basilica (inside is free admission)

Palatine

Vatican Museum

**Florence**

18-20 April

Florence was one of my parents’ top recommendations in Italy, and it was a much quieter town that had a lot of awesome things to see around town. There is such a big art influence in this city from people like Michelangelo, and the Galleria dell’Academia had a lot of his work there, including his famous sculpture of David. Another big staple of the city was El Duomo, featuring a cathedral with an impressive dome, a tower, and a baptistery. Lots of stairs to climb. It was very uniquely colorful. Piazzale Michelangelo also gave and awesome view of the area and was a popular spot to watch the sunset.

The Arno River runs through the city, which provided some really impressive views of the town and the distant mountains. I had some of the best food of my life here too, between a very popular sandwich shop and all the gelato I ate. Even though we were nearing the end of two-week Spain/Italy trip and feeling pretty exhausted, I was very impressed by this city and would definitely recommend it as an authentic Italian city despite how swamped it can be with tourists.

My top recommendations:

El Duomo Cathedral, Tower, and Dome

Galleria dell’Academia

Walking along the Arno River

**Venice**

20-22 April

By the time I made it to Venice and the end of my more than two week excursion, I was pretty exhausted. My experience in Venice thus ended up being rather relaxed, mostly just exploring the city and canals. The hostel we were staying at was not on the main set of islands that could be connected by bridges, so we took the taxi ferry all day from place to place, it was easier than I expected. It was a very efficient system for a city with no other fast form of transportation.

I got to see St Mark’s Square and the Cathedral, and the popular Bridge Rialto. I also spent a couple hours on the island of Murano, famous for its glass-blowing trade, and the number of incredible pieces of art there was unreal. I even got to sit in on a live demonstration in one of the furnaces, and saw two guys make a small vase and a couple flowers that would go on a chandelier. Every shop around the island had a huge variety of different glass vases, plates, chandeliers, and animals, it was pretty remarkable. It was a very quiet place too.

Other than that, a lot of the time we just spent wandering around the dizzying streets and buildings built up against the canals. This has to be one of the most unique cities in the world, and definitely was worth the visit.

My top recommendations:

A live exhibition at Murano

St Mark’s Square and Cathedral

Rialto Bridge

**Dartmoor National Park**

30 April – 1 May

Dartmoor is the main attraction of Devon, the area southwest of Somerset and Bath. I took a two hour train ride down to Exeter, just northeast of the park, to rent a bike, and within an hour of riding I was within the beauty of Dartmoor. I must have picked a bad two days to make my trip down there, as there were only a few hours out of each day when I would be on the road and not getting pelted with rain. Then again, it would be hard to find a good time to make the trip in England, let’s be real.

Dartmoor has a ton of really cool towns throughout the park, and I passed through the single-road towns of Moretonhampstead, Princetown, Postbridge, and Cornwood along the way. I stayed mostly on the road, weaving up and down rolling hills, crossing rivers, and stopping often along the way to take in the beauty. I stayed at a cozy hostel in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by sheep pastures. There were tons of sheep and cattle around the park, some wild and some not, so it was not a surprise to come feet away from them along my ride and also see them cross the street and hold up traffic. I was hoping to see some of the famous wild Dartmoor ponies, but the only horses I saw were fenced in on farms.

On the morning of my second day, Google Maps took me on a serious detour off-road that I was a bit hesitant about, but it led to an awesome row of fields untouched by anything but the trail I was riding on. I saw just about nobody else while I was out there as well, and took some time to hang at Fox Tor, one of the many tors throughout the park that make it unique. By the time I made it to Ivybridge station at the end of my excursion, the 45 miles of riding and admittedly walking my bike up some seriously steep hills started to wear on the legs. I slept well the next night back in Bath.

The park was absolutely beautiful and a very easy trip from Bath. It fulfilled just about every picture in my mind of what English countryside looks like, and the dismal weather further confirmed the image.

**Llanberis**

4-5 May

Coming back from Easter break travelling through mainland Europe, I felt a bit guilty for not seeing all of the beauty that the UK holds, and planned a bit of an excursion through Snowdonia National Park, one of the most beautiful places in all of Wales. My train from Bath to Bangor took a little more than five hours, and after bussing to the nearby Caernarfon to rent a bike I took off for the national park to the south. None of the bike rides that I took from place to place were more than two or three hours, and I was able to stop off a good bit to snap pictures and take some scenic hiking trails.

Llanberis had to be the highlight of my time in Wales. It is a backpacker’s town, with many trails and routes up to the peak of Snowdon, the highest point in Wales. Between the lakes in the valley and the sloping slate sides of the mountains, it had to be one of the most picturesque places I have ever been. The entire time I was in Wales I had absolutely amazing weather as well. My hostel was out in the middle of sheep pastures with great views of the valley. I got to see Dolbadarn Castle, the twin lakes in the town Llyn Peris and Llyn Padarn, and I enjoyed cycling along a little waterfront trail. The town was not very busy, and seemed like a popular spot for people driving through the park and stopping off for some hikes. It had an awesome feel to it. I would definitely consider going back to Llanberis and exploring all that this part of the national park has to offer.

**Pont Pen-y-Benglog**

5-6 May

After leaving Llanberis, I had quite an uphill trek to get to my next destination of Pont Pen-y-Benglog. After about an hour and a half of riding/pushing my bike up the hill, I made to Pen-y-Pass, and from there it was a more appealing downhill the rest of the way.

I made it to my hostel in Pont Pen-y-Benglog early afternoon, and after dropping my things I started my hike up the nearby mountain Tryfan. Tryfan is distinguished by its particularly rugged peak, and after an easier trail for most of the way up, the final 45 minutes or so was more of a climb. It was good fun. There were some pretty incredible views of the valley and the small town of Pont Pen-y-Benglog, featuring some nice lakes. There was one large lake, Llyn Ogwen down in the main valley, but I also loved seeing some of the smaller lakes higher in elevation like Llyn Bochlwyd (aka Lake Australia), and Llyn Idwal. It was cool because hiking up I didn’t see them, but once I got high enough it was a nice serene space up in the mountains with the flat lake.

At the peak of Tryfan, there are two rocks next to each other known as Adam and Eve, separated by about four feet and a massive drop down the side of the mountain. Anyone who jumps from one rock to another is said to “inherit the gift of Tryfan,” whatever that means. Against my mother’s pleas and the wicked gusts of wind roaring over the crest of the mountain, I decided to save it for next time. A couple of guys performed the jump while I was up there, good for them.

By the time the day was done, I was exhausted and managed falling asleep at around 9:00. I would be up early the next day for my ride to Rhyd-Ddu and hike to peak of Snowdon.

**Snowdon**

6 May

Snowdon Mountain, despite being only 1000 meters high, is the highest point in all of Wales and the tallest in the United Kingdom outside the Scottish Highlands. After leaving Pont Pen-y-Benglog at about 7 am, I cycled about two and half hours to get to the path to the summit starting in the town of Rhyd-Ddu (pronounced “hreed-thee,” bet you wouldn’t have guessed that one). There are many different trails to the top of Snowdon, with most starting in the nearby town of Pen-y-Pass, though I opted for one of the notably quieter routes on the opposite side of the mountain. My ride from my hostel that morning to Rhyd-Ddu was perfect. After about an hour of relatively flat road, I made to the bottom of Pen-y-Pass, and had a perfect view through the valley that would take me next through the town of Beddgelert. This stretch was about 45 minutes of gradual downhill, a cyclist’s dream. Throw some stops at nearby lakes and rivers in and it was an awesome descent.

When I finally made it to start of the Rhyd-Ddu trail, there were plenty of other people making the hike, though after seeing how many others merged in from other trails closer to the top, I definitely consider my trail to be one of the quieter ones. It took me about three hours to make it the summit, occasionally stopping for pictures and sandwiches. The trail started by taking me up relatively wide and easy paths, but turned into a mountainside narrow walk about halfway up, with only a narrow fence separating us from a pretty steep grade. It turned from clear skies to walking through a cloud at about this point as well, and the rest of the way up it would be hard to manage to see too far in front of me. The last thirty minutes had to be the toughest, as the path really narrowed with drops on both sides, and wind whipping from both sides forced me to stay pretty low for most of the way. At the summit, there were a couple hundred people, most huddling together trying to get a few minutes safe from the wind. It was so foggy and offered no view of anything in front of me, and after looking at pictures online of the views on a clear day it made me a little upset. It was still probably the best hike/climb I have done, and to say that I have been to the highest point in a country is pretty cool.

**Caernarfon**

6-7 May

Caernarfon (pronounced “Kernarvin”) was the town where I started and ended my biking adventures through Snowdonia National Park. After a few days in the park, I spent one night in town, getting to visit its large waterfront area and the famous Caernarfon Castle. I really enjoyed the town, it is the “biggest” in the area but was very small and compact. I had a great few days of weather as well.

The castle is the main attraction of the town, built in the thirteenth century and is the site of the investiture of the Prince of Wales. It was incredibly well preserved, with many different halls and towers to explore. It had to be the best physical castle I have visited given how long ago it was built and the condition it is in today. I only had one night in Caernarfon, but I absolutely fell in love with the coziness of the town and its proximity to the beauty of Snowdonia. Looking back on my time here in northern Wales, I would definitely consider doing everything all again with the same itinerary, I enjoyed it so much.

**Holyhead**

7 May

Holyhead, about an hour by train from where I had been around Snowdonia, was where my ferry left from to take me to Dublin. I got there a bit early, so I got to wander around the town and the harbor on a beautiful day. The ferry was very nice; it had a large space for cars on the lower decks and the passenger area was quite luxurious. I spent a good bit of time up on the deck, wind whipping everywhere as we cruised across the Irish Sea. The trip took about two and a half hours total.

**Dublin**

7-10 May

After catching the ferry over from my awesome few days in Wales, I set aside a couple days at the beginning of my Irish excursion to see the capitol city. Dublin is not very large in terms of area, and I was able to see most of the things that I wanted to see in one day. This included Trinity College and the Book of Kells, a circa eighth century collection of the gospels. The long room of the library in the exhibition was quite spectacular as well, with all kinds of historic texts lining two levels of shelves. With the university located right in the middle of the bustling city streets, I was amazed at how nice the quiet seclusion of some parts of campus was. I moved on to see Merrion’s Square, St Stephen’s Green, the shops of the famous Grafton Street, Dublin Castle, Christ Church Cathedral, and one of my favorites, St Patrick’s Cathedral. The inside was pretty spectacular, and St Patrick’s Park outside the cathedral was filled on a rare sunny Irish day. I also made it to the Temple Bar area right outside my hostel, filled with live music pubs and shopping, as well as O’Connell Street, another popular strip of shops and restaurants.

On my second full day in Dublin, I explored some more smaller parks south of the city before catching a bus to Glendalough for the day, a monastic site about an hour and half from the city.

On my last day before catching my bus out west, I visited the massive Phoenix Park on the west end of town. It featured the Dublin Zoo, the US Ambassador’s Residence, Aras an Uachtarain (the Irish President’s residence), the Wellington Monument, St Mary’s Hospital and loads of fields fit for football, rugby, and hurling. I loved how diverse the park was and how many different things were going on throughout it. The Guinness Storehouse was also a short walk from the park, which I also stopped at. The Guinness Brewery at St James Gate has been turned into quite the large tourist attraction, with a historic look into the brand’s taste, advertising, and global spread.

16-17 May

I returned to Dublin at the end of my ten days in Dublin, only for a night before flying back to Bristol. I spent the evening back at Phoenix Park, wandering around another large portion that I wasn’t able to see the first time, including the Magazine Fort and the Papal Cross. The day of my flight, I walked out of the city to the north to Glasnevin Cemetery and the National Botanic Gardens, at the recommendation of my past host in Waterford, Tom. Glasnevin was full of some incredible headstones and sanctuaries, some dating back to the fifteenth century.

Dublin was a lot of fun, but I felt that in terms of the city life of some other places I’ve been, it wasn’t one of my favorites. Also, I think that all of the tourism and diversity of being a big city kind of took away from a bit of its Irish authenticity, especially after seeing some more of the country. I far preferred the smaller towns I visited during my time here.

**Glendalough**

9 May

Glendalough is the famous Monastic Site of St Kevin, who would use the area as a retreat during his ministry in the sixth century. It was only about an hour and a half by bus from downtown Dublin. It had some beautiful fields, as well as a cemetery featuring St Kevin’s Church and the tall Round Tower, typical of Irish sites from the medieval period. There were also two beautiful large lakes, with Glendalough Upper Lake being the site of the cave where St Kevin used to live. It is built into the side of the mountain right up against the lake, so it is only reachable by boat, and the story goes that Kevin used to stand out in the water long enough with his arms spread for birds to come and rest on his arms. There were lots of people out walking along the trails leading around these lakes and mountains. It was an absolutely beautiful site on another absolutely beautiful day, and offered a nice few hours outside the city.

**Galway**

10-12 May

I absolutely loved Galway and the west of Ireland, it was beautiful and full of the authentic Irish culture I came looking for on my trip here. Galway is the third largest city in Ireland, though it had quite a small feel to it and my tour guide noted that only about 75,000 people live there. Travelling alone for this two week period of time, I didn’t really have many friends to go out to eat, hear music, etc, but my hostel was really interested in getting some community going between the guests. So one night there was a group dinner and live music afterwards, and the other night there was a pub crawl, again with lots of live music. Galway is pretty popular for its music scene, attracting a lot of artists to come busk around town and play in pubs. Everyone knows Ed Sheeran’s “Galway Girl” (although I quite prefer the Irish trad-tune original rendition), but what most people don’t know is that Ed actually used to come to Galway as a teenage to play before his career took off. Pretty cool stuff.

Most of the happenings in Galway are on Shop Street, a long walking stretch of pubs and musicians performing all over the place. It leads down to the Latin Quarter, made popular by the large Latin population living in Galway. Some of the best music I heard was at Taaffes Bar. Really only my close family knows this, but when I was little I used to love to sing songs by the Irish Tenors. I would get all dressed up in a bow tie and perform for whoever would listen to me. I really don’t remember much of these concerts as I was only four years old or so, but when the band in Taaffe’s played “Will ye go Lassie go”—probably the only and most distinct song by the Tenors I remember singing as a kid—it gave me chills. My favorite part about Galway and all of the other places I visited was diving into the culture through the music. Nothing quite like sitting in a pub listening to traditional music late into the night. Some other awesome music was at The King’s Head Pub (which also featured some tap dancing) and Murphy’s Bar.

I got to spend a good bit of time in Eyre Square around the corner from my hostel, which was again filled on some uncharacteristically sunny days. The waterfront area along the harbor was also quite popular with the nice weather.

**Doolin & the Cliffs of Moher**

12-13 May

After Galway, I took a bus down the coast to the small fishing village of Doolin. Doolin itself does not have much to see, though it is a popular destination with travelers for its proximity to the Cliffs of Moher and the Aran Islands. I got to my hostel and dropped my things before starting on the trail from Doolin to the cliffs, which was only about four miles long. The path took me along cattle pastures, budding flowers, and steep drops down to the ocean. It was absolutely beautiful and offered some incredible views of the rugged sides up against the water. There was a large exhibition when I made it to the actual site of the Cliffs of Moher, though I preferred the views from the trail leading up to it. I took a bit of an off-road route down to the base of the cliffs by the water, it was pretty cool. There were also a lot of puffins along the sides of the cliffs; from where I looked down at them I couldn’t them too well, but they would crowd together on many of the lower rocks.

Doolin had a nice selection of pubs offering live music in the evening, which had to be my favorite part of Irish culture. Doolin Pier also had some outstanding views of the sun setting over the Atlantic. It was my perfect picture of a quaint Irish town, and really enjoyed the quietude of it.

**Bunratty Castle and Limerick**

13 May

After leaving Doolin, I had a bus ticket to Waterford but decided to take some time to make a few stops along the way. The first was at Bunratty Castle, just outside the city of Limerick. Not only was there a castle to see, but there was a whole recreated village straight out of the eighteenth century as well, it was very well done. I also learned that you can organize a medieval diner within the grand hall of the castle, reminding me a bit of the franchise Medieval Times in the States. The rest of the park had a bunch of cool cottages that would have been owned by various classes of society, some farm animals, and a number of old shops that would still be used for gifts today.

After seeing the castle, I had a bus change in Limerick not too far away. I only had about 45 minutes, though my dad told me that I had to see the “Wild Geese Fountain” even if I had just a little bit of time. It was a bit out of the way of the bus station, but when I got there it was cool to see my grandfather, Robert Edward Fox’s name on the fountain. He and my grandma had given money to refurbish the fountain a number of years ago and had in turn received a place on the plaque on the fountain. Pretty cool stuff. Other than that, my stop in Limerick was brief, and I would catch my next bus the rest of the way to Waterford.

**Waterford**

13-15 May

After a day of travel from the west coast with some stops along the way, I made it to my first hostel in the small town of Mooncoin, about twenty minutes outside of Waterford. It was called Tom’s Country Cottage and Tom, my host, used to be a tour guide all over the country and had some excellent suggestions for things to see. He says that most people who come to stay have cars and are a little more flexible with where they can go, but he had some good things for me to see when I stopped in Kilkenny and Dublin on the remainder of my trip. Mooncoin was a small one road town with not too much to see, but when I made it into downtown Waterford the following day there was a lot more to do.

Waterford is the oldest city in Ireland, and was first inhabited by the Vikings in the tenth century. Thus, there was a lot of history to the town, and sites like Reginald’s Tower, the Medieval Museum, and Bishop’s Palace told the story of Waterford since it was first settled. Waterford is also quite popular for its crystal making, and the House of Waterford Crystal had some incredible pieces of art for sale. It almost gave Murano in Venice a run for its money. I told myself that someday I might be able to shop at a place like that…

**Kilkenny**

15-16 May

Kilkenny was the perfect-sized town in my opinion, as there was enough to see to keep me busy but was small enough to feel the authentic culture and not run down by people. I started by seeing St Canice’s Cathedral right around the corner from my hostel, which featured quite the impressive interior and a round tower built in the thirteenth century which I climbed 121 steps to the top to see some great views of the town. I checked out Black Abbey, Rothe House, and the Smithwick’s Experience, a brewery tour. Smithwick’s is really only popular in Ireland, but its export brew ‘Kilkenny’ has had some success around the world. They make a unique red ale, somewhere between a lager and a stout (I got to learn all of the process behind this and how it differs on the tour). I also caught some great live music at Cleere’s Pub, which lasted from nine until about one in the morning. It was not very packed, and without a sound system the quieter music from the band gave off a really cool atmosphere in the dark pub.

The day I left, I visited Kilkenny Castle, which is situated right on the River Nore and has some great collections of art throughout the halls and large gallery. It was occupied more recently than any of the other castles I have visited, so it had a much more modern and lavish feel to it. Kilkenny had to be one of my favorite Irish towns, as it was small enough for my liking but still had plenty to see. It had some great food and strips of shopping as well. I would return to Dublin for one more night after this before flying back home to Bristol.

**Gloucester**

29 May

Once a year on the May Bank Holiday, Brockworth, Gloucestershire becomes the busiest that it is all year. The reason for such mass pilgrimage to the small town and the nearby Cotswolds Area of Natural Beauty is the annual Cheese Rolling Festival at Cooper’s Hill. For those of you unfamiliar, Brockworth makes some very good cheese, and for the last 200 years this annual get-together features elite athletes chasing a wheel of Brockworth’s best cheese down the steep Cooper’s Hill. Steep as in twice as high as it long, with various mounds and mudslide on the rainy English day that it was for this year’s festival. My friend Anthony and I attended in hopes of actually participating, though well aware of the masses that would come from around the world for the same reason as us. Based on some of the conversations and accents that I heard, people from Australia, Mexico, Germany and all over were in attendance, some exclusively for the rolling of the cheese.

They rolled four wheels of cheese down the hill throughout the day: three men’s races and a women’s race. The way it worked was that if you wanted to participate, you would show up at the top of the hill and 25 runners would be permitted for each race. I waited around for the first few races, and managed to lock up one of the final spots in the last race of the day, it was pretty unbelievable. I had watched and studied the various strategies employed by past runners, and figured that if I didn’t let my weight fall too far forward, I could get down the hill quickly enough on my feet and avoid tumbling and potential injury. However, if you want to be the first one to the bottom and claim the cheese, you need to be a little more willing to put your body on the line. I started off a little too slow for my liking, and as a result spent about half of the time on my ass and the rest stumbling and tripping over the side of the hill. I finished in the bottom half of the runners, though far from dead last. If you go to 3:16 of this YouTube video you can see me in the black t-shirt and jeans on the left side: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK1j06Gjp94](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK1j06Gjp94). All three of the men’s races were won by local Brockworth legend Chris Anderson, bringing his career cheese total to 20! He won his first at age 17 and has been coming back for the last 13 years to defend his dairy.

The atmosphere of the event was absolutely awesome. I think it’s hilarious that such a ridiculous event can bring out such a large crowd. People must just love seeing other people tumble and roll at high speeds. If I had to guess I would say that there were close to 2000 or 3000 people in attendance, it was ridiculous. Also, the event has been historically condemned by the local government for past injuries (concussions and sprained ankles are typical), so it is entirely volunteer-run. The guys standing at the top of the hill letting people race were cracking beers all day and only added to the casual atmosphere of the event, I loved it. The part of the day that will stick out to me the most has to be the preparation for each race. Once everyone was lined up to run, the master of ceremonies would yell: “One to be ready! Two to be steady! Three for the Cheese!” (and the cheese would roll…), and then “Four to go!” Probably one of the most unique things I have done, and now I can say I participated in the world-renown spectacle that is the Cheese Rolling at Cooper’s Hill.

**Cambridge**

6-7 June

After packing everything up from Bath, I had a couple days of travel before flying home a few days later. I made it into London for one night, and then took a bus out to Cambridge, a pretty easy two hour ride. It was a pretty awful day weather-wise, which sort of limited all of the exploring that I wanted to do, but I thought that I saw the University pretty well. The many colleges are spread out all over the town, with some of the notable ones being King’s, Trinity, and St John’s College. With exams going on, some of the scenic areas of the colleges were closed off to the public, though I was able to go inside King’s College Chapel, which is quite spectacular. The stained glass art was beautiful and covered most of the walls within the Chapel. Henry II originally had the Chapel built, and over the years it passed through his family, and a lot of the architecture and art inside was given to the royal family.

Cambridge is big for punting, or gondolas, and had it been a better day I wanted to take a punting tour through some of the colleges and the city, it had been a recommendation I received. It was a very similar city to Oxford in my opinion, where the university is really the attraction of the town and had the same feel because of the age of all the buildings.

**Dover**

7-8 June

From Cambridge I went back through London to get down to the southeast coast and Dover. It is a beautiful part of the country, with a lot of history surrounding the two world wars. The town itself was not in the best shape, but the famous white cliffs and Dover Castle were incredible. When I got in I took a walk along the cliffs on a really windy but sunny day. They provided some beautiful views of the surrounding country and even a glimpse of France across the English Channel as it was a pretty clear day.

Dover Castle was also really incredible. During both world wars it served as an important fortress as it was the closest path from Britain to mainland Europe, and had a very influential role in sending rescue missions to the nearby Dunkirk in WWII, rescuing more than 350,000 soldiers when the Nazis were closing in. There were some pretty spectacular tunnels, originally built back in the eighteenth century in response to a potential attack from Napoleon Bonaparte, but got the most use during WWII. Aside from the large war history the castle grounds had, the medieval side of the castle had a ton of different underground passages and hidden entrances. The castle itself was definitely one of the better ones I have visited, as it was pretty well-preserved and had some nice halls and staircases inside.

Dover was a very beautiful place, and I can see why it is a large summer destination. Even though it was June, I still find it hard to believe that the beaches of the British Isles get any use.

**Canterbury**

8 June

Canterbury was an easy 25 minute train ride from Dover. I stopped here for the afternoon before heading back into London and my flight home to Virginia the next day. The town reminded me a lot of Bath actually: there was a large pedestrian walkway through the main part of town surrounded by stores and restaurants and was bustling on the nice day that it was. There were a lot of tourists as well, as the town is probably a popular day trip from London.

The main attraction in town was Canterbury Cathedral. It is the head of the Anglican Communion worldwide, and had some incredible interior art and architecture. Unfortunately, close to the entire cathedral was covered in scaffolding, inside and out, and took a bit away from the beauty of the place. Had it not been covered in so much scaffolding it might have made my list of top five cathedrals I visited. There were some incredible panels of stain glass windows and the main nave and quire were pretty beautiful as well.

Although my stay in Canterbury was short, it was an awesome smaller city to spend my last day in the UK at, and I was a big fan of how similar it was to my home city of Bath.