

Blogging all over the world: The best Cambridge travel writers of 2014

Peter Ilchev
Escape Editor

With an academic year that lasts only six months, Cambridge students are given the golden opportunity to explore beyond their familiar surroundings. The University calls it 'vacation' – supposedly a reminder that our flight is only temporary, and that even on holiday we are officially students. Fortunately, this has never been enough to stop us from travelling, but it hardly comes as a surprise that

we carry on writing, though without the pressure of a deadline or indeed any word count to fill. The freedom to write about anything, coupled with the experience of confronting a new language, landscape and culture make for a fascinating account.

From the romantically exotic to the comically chaotic, five of our finest student writers give us a glimpse of their creative exploits in foreign lands over the past year, with each having witnessed a reality far removed from anything they'd encountered at home.

Oliver James
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



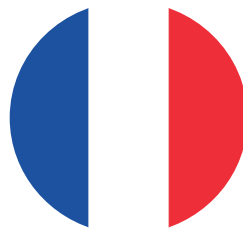
Several weeks ago, during a periodic bout of food poisoning, I found myself heading home from a night out particularly early. Here in Bishkek it's extremely common for taxi drivers, barmen and bathroom attendants alike to ask foreigners about their impressions of the capital. Often phrased as 'Do you love Bishkek?', it's as much a question as 'Do I look fat in this?', and will often set the tone of the rest of the relationship. Given the onset of an excruciatingly painful stomach ache, I was more than willing to hand over the required compliments to ensure I got home via the most direct route – heaven forbid he do laps of the block to debate my opinion of the city's air quality. After two minutes of singing praises I found myself invited to the taxi driver's wedding in two weeks' time.

Yerevan itself is a somewhat perfunctory Soviet-looking city, yet its people more than make up for it. Proud, dark-featured and striking, they are some of the loveliest people I came across on the trip. The student running our guesthouse was so excited to meet English students that she gave us the best room in the place, while the kids fooling about outside Echmiadzin church insisted on dragging us off to play football until it was dark – which meant hitching a mildly terrifying lift with a couple of Racer Boys back to Yerevan, who manfully showed us how fast they could gun the engine on their poor Nissan. Upon being asked: "You are English? Do you like Tottenham Hotspur?" I entered a state of mild shock, unable to believe that my middle-of-the-road London club had made it this far East.



Image: TerraMetrics, NASA, Basarsoft, GeoBasis-DE/BKG; via Google Maps

Ed Roberts
Lyon, France



I like the rain here: it's persistent, but has self-confidence. This makes a nice change from British rain, which seems

insecure and attention-seeking by comparison, sometimes embarrassed and doing half a job, other times making a scene and throwing itself at you, getting in your face as if to prove a point. Here, though, it seemed like the perfect match for dusk in a city like Lyon in November: the atmosphere was heavy but not crushing, it was a grey cityscape, not bleak, just profound, dense, almost protective. I stopped on a bridge across the Rhône and looked out over the swollen river to the buildings on its banks, illuminated, steaming in the downpour and staining the clouds.

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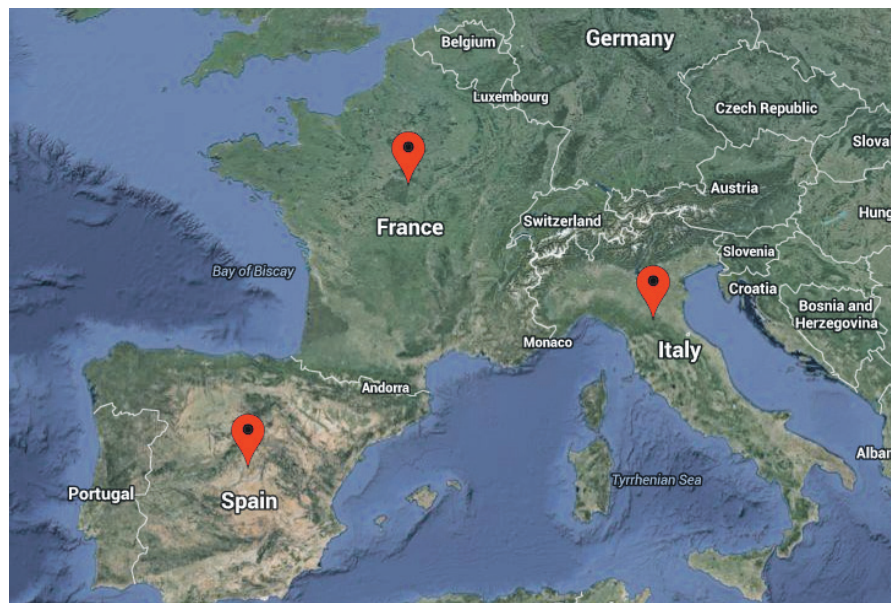


Image: TerraMetrics, NASA, Basarsoft, GeoBasis-DE/BKG; via Google Maps

Alice Singer
Spain



I went to stay with a friend in Spain for a few days. It was scary getting there by myself, equipped with a level of Spanish to rival only Manuel's level of English in Fawlty Towers. I somehow managed to get from the airport in Bilbao to its coach station by repeatedly saying *autobus* and *Torrelavega* to the taxi driver – who needs verbs anyway?. Eventually he understood and drove me to the coach station, insisting on telling me in Spanish before I got out of the taxi how to buy the right ticket (which was both extremely kind and extremely useless). I found my coach, watched Looney Tunes dubbed into Spanish for the duration of the journey, and then all of a sudden my mammoth journey, that had begun 11 hours earlier and featured a miserable sandwich in the Lorraine TGV station and a three-hour wait at Charles de Gaulle airport, was over.

Isobel Edwards
Reggio di Calabria, Italy



On arrival at the school I find no students but plenty of teachers in the staffroom – there's a strike. My two classes are cancelled due to a lack of willing participants – the English teachers invite me out for a coffee instead. Two minutes later, I contemplate my next move. One of the teachers invites me shopping and I gladly accept. I invest in a copy of Dan Brown's 'Il simbolo perduto' to get a grip on my language learning. The shop assistant does not look convinced that I will be able to read it. He underestimates me. As we leave the shops the sound of drums tells us that the protest march is approaching. I recognise some of my students in the throng. They motion for me to join them. I politely decline. The crowd passes as a lefty with a megaphone rouses spectator support – I pretend to listen but understand nothing.

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