

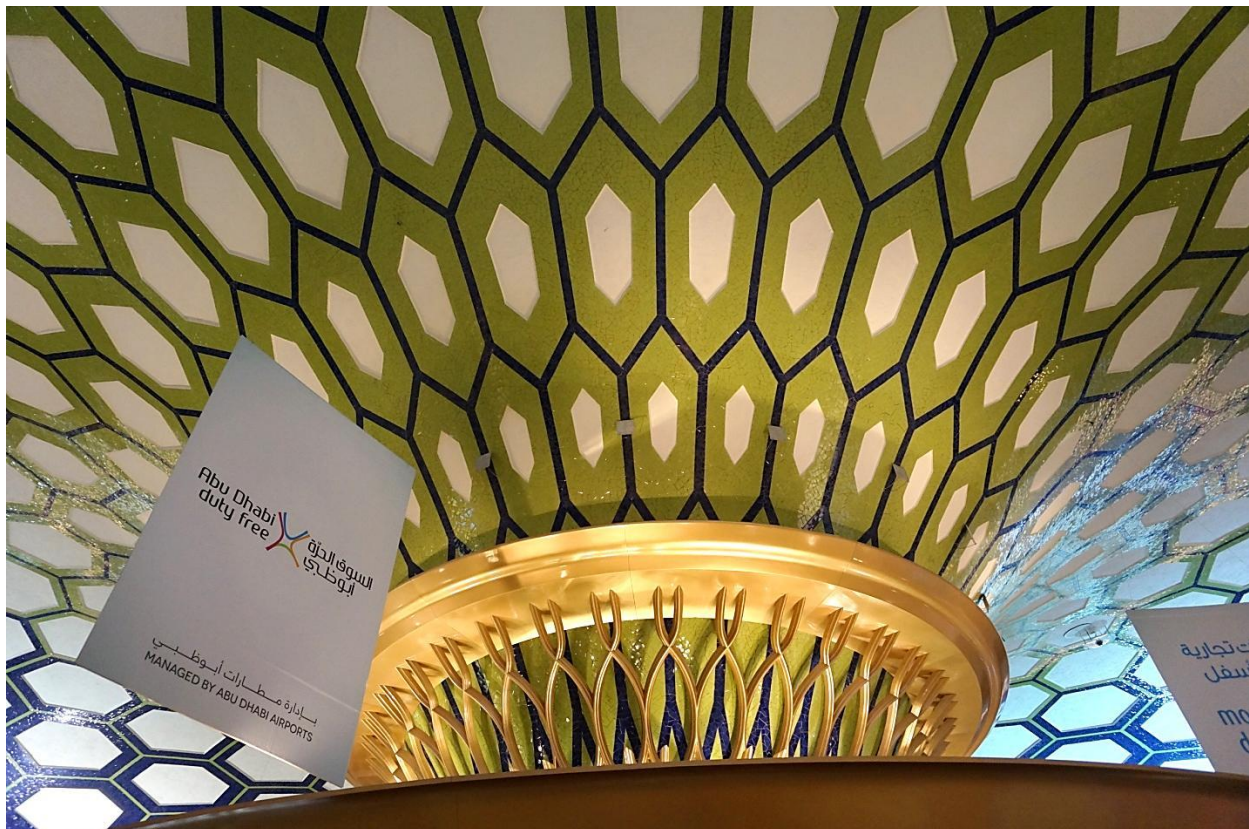


# **A Delightful English Experience**

*(a recount of Cambridge and London for  
the DKLS Linguistic Ambassador Award)*

With every hour that slipped by on the plane, anticipation and excitement built up in me. Not only was I en route to one of my dream destinations in the world, it was my first time flying anywhere west of Malaysia in all my years of life. I'd only ever heard telltale or recounts about how busy Heathrow Airport is at any time of the day, but I was finally going to be able to witness it first-hand. I was also immensely excited that we would be touching down in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, for our transit flight, my first time ever in the Middle-East.

The stories are no exaggeration. Indeed, Heathrow is a massive airport with planes taking off at an average interval of 4 minutes. It was a melting pot of nationalities and cultures; never before had I seen so many different kinds of people gathered together in the same place. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi International Airport was home to dozens of transit flights and everyone was as busy as a bee. The airport was chock full of people and the influx never once showed signs of slowing down.



▲ The stunning main concourse of Abu Dhabi International Airport.



▲ The flight control tower at Abu Dhabi International Airport.

First up on our agenda was the lovely town of **Cambridge**, renowned for its richness in history and being one of the most prolific educational cities not only in Europe, but across the globe.

Our first full day in Cambridge was an exciting one, because we had the Cambridge Walking Tour planned! As we made our way to the Tourist Information Centre in the heart of the town, I was spellbound by the streets and buildings of Cambridge. Every single road and every single structure had a story of its own to tell, from the churches to the shops. Cambridge's emphasis on education was very apparent from the get-go; there were several language centres and small learning institutions along the streets.



▲ A few examples of the interesting architecture all around Cambridge.

For the walking tour, we were part of a group of ten, and we were led by a registered walking guide, Catherine, who had lived in Cambridge all her life. She was extremely well-versed about the town, its many sights and attractions, as well as its history, and she'd tell us occasional stories about the buildings we passed by.

As she guided us through the many winding streets of Cambridge, we passed several interesting sites of history, among them being the Eagle Pub, which was a very famous after-hours bar amongst mariners back in the day. Even now, in modern times, the pub is still frequented by Cambridge folk, young and old alike. We also passed Eve and Ravenscroft's on Silver Street East, renowned robemakers who specialised in making graduation gowns for the students who would be graduating from their respective colleges. Their most notable customer would probably be Prince Charles, late husband of Diana, Princess of Wales, who also patronised the shop during his student days!



▲ The signboard outside the Eagle Pub, which leads into a quaint little alleyway.

As we slowly made our way to our star attractions of the day, King's and Queens' College, I discovered that I'd been severely misinformed about the educational institutions in Cambridge. All my sheltered life, I'd thought that Cambridge University was a building in itself, a gigantic compound that housed 31 other colleges and their student accommodations.

Only when I'd arrived in Cambridge itself did I realise that that assumption was a mistake. To quote Catherine, "When people ask you where Cambridge University is, you wouldn't be able to answer. That's because the university is all around you."

In truth, Cambridge University is a body of education, an umbrella institution that consists of 31 other colleges, situated all over the historical town. The very buildings of the colleges themselves usually house the student accommodation, library, professors' rooms and a few classrooms, but that is all. The real studying is done all over the city – each department is located in different areas of Cambridge, and students are required to commute between their designated 'classrooms'. Cycling is an extremely common mode of transportation in Cambridge, especially among students. This is highlighted specifically when the students' lectures change from one subject to the other, and passers-by have to be extremely cautious of a speedy, steady stream of bicycles flooding through the town!

Queens' College is named such – with the apostrophe after the 's', signifying multiple queens – because the college was started by two different Queens of England in their time. The college compound itself is an evolution of Cambridge throughout the years; if one were to stand in the main courtyard and look from west to east, different parts of the building were built in different centuries, from the 1400s all the way till the 1900s. The college has never once stopped expanding! The compound was absolutely beautiful – stunningly preserved buildings, with history in every nook and cranny, framed by neatly trimmed grass that never seemed to be out of shape.

Some of the interesting facts we came across were that teaching assistants were named 'fellows' in Cambridge, and it was not uncommon for colleges to have special rooms for professors to get together and hold intellectual discussions after a long day of teaching. Also, Cambridge was known for its unique educational system – it wouldn't be uncommon for say, Professor Stephen Hawking to invite students into a one-on-one debate. The folk of Cambridge never, ever stop learning, and it's clear just how much education means to them.



▲ The interior courtyards of Queens' College.

Outside Queens' College was the Mathematical Bridge, named as such because each piece of wood is placed at a tangent to the piece before and after it, creating a sturdy bridge comprised entirely of right-angled construction!



▲ Mathematical Bridge extending beautiful over the banks of River Cam.

A short walk down the road is the beautiful King's College. It was undoubtedly a privilege to have been able to step inside the compound of the prestigious institution, much less enter the chapel in the light of day. King's College Chapel is a work of art in its own; no words could possibly do it justice. The ceiling was as high up as the eye could see, pillars stretching out to meet it and splaying in a gorgeous pattern on the roof.

All along the sides of the chapel were stunning stained glass windows, but these were no ordinary display of glass art. Each panel told a different story from the Bible, and the tale in one would correspond to the tale told in the next. According to Catherine, every single panel of glass was removed during World War II for fear of it being damaged during the tumult, wrapped in newspaper and carted

around to several hiding places all throughout the city for the duration of the war. It took a whopping eight years to place each and every single piece back in its place after the battles ended.



▲ The jaw-dropping detail on the stained glass windows in the chapel.

▼ (top) Royal insignias on the wall; (bottom) the interior courtyard of King's College.



We returned to the chapel for the evening service, where a short procession would be held, and where the chapel's world-renowned boys' choir sang every day. In part thanks to the high ceiling and sheer breadth and length of the chapel, the acoustics were absolutely stunning. The notes of the organ resonated in the air, and the echo of the boys' singing reverberated all around us, almost like a cutting-edge surround-sound system. But, make no mistake, no technology could compare to their raw singing voices; it was beyond any words I could string together, and all I can say was that it was a privilege to be able to listen to their wonderful singing.



◀ In King's College Chapel, with its stunning ceilingwork in the background.

One of the highlights of the day besides the colleges was the punt ride we took along River Cam. Punts are small boats designed to carry about ten people, and would be guided along the river using a long, metal stick by special guides called punters. River Cam is the great, man-made river that cuts through the town of Cambridge, and is part of the town's namesake. Along the punt ride, we saw a great many of the colleges of Cambridge University, as well as several of the bridges that go from one bank of the river to the other and generally allowed for faster commuting among students and professors.



▲ Our very first time in a punt!



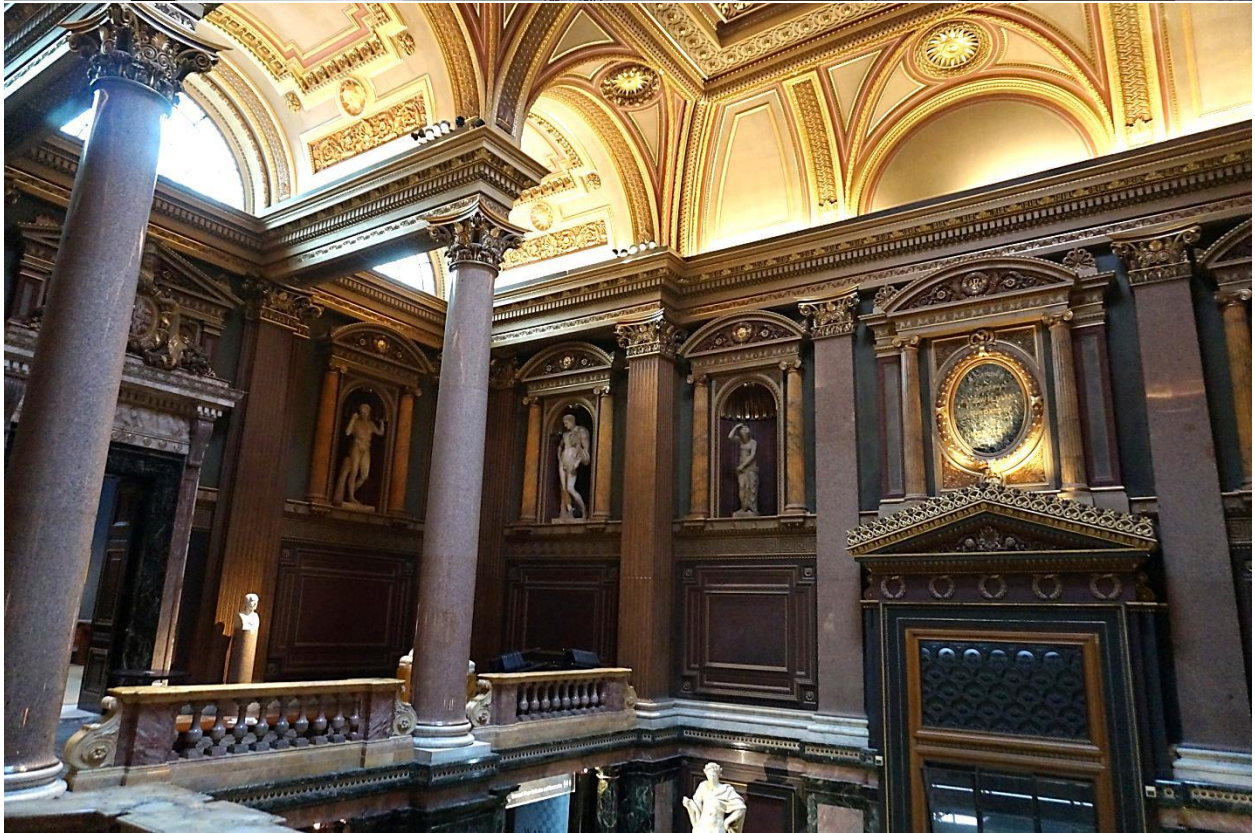
▲ Views from the punt ride – (top) Trinity College's Jedwood Library; (bottom) Bridge of Sighs.



▲ St. John's College, where Prince William of England is currently taking up agriculture!

The Cambridge Hop On, Hop Off Tour that we took the next day had us on one of England's famous double-decker buses! Every time we passed or stopped at a place of interest, the automated audio guide (provided in a myriad of languages for tourists) would give the passengers of the bus a small snippet of its history or interesting facts regarding the site. It was an extremely informative tour and allowed us to see several of Cambridge's famous sights.

One of our stops was the Fitzwilliam Museum, which showcased paintings dating as far back as the Renaissance period, as well as antiques and pieces of art from different countries and eras, ranging from ancient Chinese pottery to weapons and armour from medieval times. The sheer detail and architecture of the museum's interior was enough to floor us – every section had a different colour palette corresponding with its pieces on display. The main chamber, located in the heart of the building, was so intricately done that it stole our breath away.



▲ (top) A display of medieval armour; (bottom) the middle chamber of Fitzwilliam Museum.



▲ (top) A map of the Cambridge colleges; (bottom) Cambridge University Press bookstore at night.

The next chapter of our trip was the capital city of England, **London!**

While Cambridge was a city full of history, London was the future and present interwoven with the past. It was not uncommon to see glass offices with cutting-edge equipment and tech-savvy workers built right next to a traditional English pub or cathedral. The study of paradoxes was exactly what made London leave such a memorable impression on us.



▲ London's not London without its signature red telephone booths!

As a teenager who grew up with only mentions and glimpses of London, it was exhilarating to be able to be in the heart of it all. When we took the underground train service, more widely known as The Tube, my heart leapt in excitement every time we passed one of the locations I'd only ever seen on Monopoly game boards; for example, Trafalgar Square, where the National Art Gallery was located, and Regent Street, which is considered one of London's most populous business districts during the weekdays.

What's a trip to London without visiting its landmarks?



▲ (top) Trafalgar Square and the National Art Gallery; (bottom) us atop the double-decker bus!

On the Hop On, Hop Off Tour, we managed to see a ton of London's famous tourist attractions, many of which included Tower Bridge, with its stunning twin peaks in the middle, and the Tower of London, an old castle fortress that has been preserved all the way till our modern days since the medieval times. Even its statuettes of lions and angels, as well as its dungeons, have been kept the way they were all those years back in the eras of princes and princesses!



▲ The Tower Bridge stretching across River Thames in the early evening.

Buckingham Palace was another favourite of ours. Its sheer breadth and width was enough to astound us, and what luck we had! We visited the palace while a royal procession was underway, and we managed to see royal kinsman and noblemen leaving the festivities, complete with their neatly-pressed clothing and those famous hats we've only ever seen on television! The black iron gates of the palace were so strong and sturdy, and the gold ornaments lent it an air of majesty befitting the British royal family.



▲ (top) Buckingham Palace; (bottom) the Statue of Queen Victoria.

Pictures do Big Ben absolutely no justice, not even in the slightest. Amidst a clear blue sky devoid of clouds, the golden clock tower of Big Ben shone in the sunlight like a magical sundial. It was majestic in its height, but also in its appearance, the light just catching its gold tips. Nearby was Downing Street, which was the official residence of the Prime Minister of London. Although tourists were not allowed into the area, there were still a lot of people milling about, and it was extremely interesting to watch policemen go about their daily duties. We even saw a patrol team going about on horses, right in the middle of all the automobiles and buses!



◀ Big Ben framed against clear blue afternoon skies.

And of course, what trip to London would be complete without mentioning the engineering marvel that is The London Eye? Towering hundreds of feet into the air, the wheel looked almost intimidating up close. I can't even begin to imagine how heavy the wheel is, complete with all its passengers (not to mention it was a windy day when we went), and to think that the entire structure is balanced only on its centre fulcrum. Now *that* is truly amazing.



▲ A stunning view of The London Eye atop a River Thames cruise boat.

The view from the carriages of The Eye was simply spectacular. We had a clear view of the entirety of River Thames, as well as famous structures like the Houses of Parliament, the Grand Savoy Hotel and Midsummers' House, which was what they called the Customs Department building. It'd been raining just before we entered our carriage, and when it stopped, the passengers ooh-ed and aah-ed at the sight of a double rainbow, the ends of which dove right into River Thames. (I suppose a pot of gold is waiting down there for those who dare to brave the chilly currents!)



▲ (top) The double rainbow as seen from the Eye; (bottom) the Aquarium by the boardwalk.

The original Madame Tussauds' Wax Museum in Westminster has a little bit of something for everyone – from Asian starlets to Hollywood celebrities, and even a special Bollywood featurette and a section dedicated to the superheroes of the Marvel franchise, wax figures of just about anybody who's everybody today sits in Madame Tussauds'. We had tons of fun posing and photographing the many famous figures, which range from pop stars to influential political figures to legends like Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley. Not forgetting, of course, the royal family!



▲ A double family portrait – ours and the royal family of England's!

Truly, this trip to London and Cambridge was an inspirational eye-opener. I feel like I lack words to properly describe this stunning experience, and the only thing I can say for certain is this is one trip overseas that I will never, ever forget. I will retain everything that I have seen, heard and felt throughout my trip to England and will keep the values I've learnt, in the hopes of being able to apply it to myself and be a valuable asset to Malaysia, to be an important commodity to the country. Indeed, I still feel traces of England in me, and I look back on my photos with nostalgia and the 8-hour time difference lingering in my mind.

Thank you to both DKLS Holdings and British Council Malaysia for bringing me to one of my dream destinations in the world, and rest assured, the trip has given me something that no number of books or documentaries can – memories, experience, and atmosphere. *That* is something truly irreplaceable and memorable. I hope this report has been able to convey to you a little bit of how much of an impact this study tour to Cambridge and London has made on me, and I thank you again for your generosity and for the experience this has enabled me to gain.

- Chelsea Teoh Li Ann

*(DKLS Linguistic Ambassador Award 2013: Gold Prize Winner)*