CAMBRIDGE – BETWEEN TRADITION AND ADVANCEMENT

The Master of Advanced Studies programme in mathematics is the oldest and probably most famous Master’s course in the world. I heard of it in my first year of studies, but only towards the end of my graduate studies in Heidelberg did I spontaneously consider applying for it, in order to get another fully taught year as preparation for future PhD research.

Studying and living in Cambridge is a very special experience, even when coming from a historic town like Heidelberg. Both universities date back to medieval times and turn places that would usually be called provincial into lively hoards of academic pursuit. Yet, whereas in my experience the streets of Heidelberg might hide the influence that the university has on them from a stranger’s eyes, this is impossible for Cambridge. No visitor can walk through the centre and overlook the impressive facades of the Colleges, or the students in gowns rushing past, for whom the buildings have become daily scenery unworthy of a second glance. Together with its odd rituals and shibboleths and the presence of legendary names like Darwin and Newton, Cambridge is in fact a bit like Hogwarts.

But along with all the traditions, there is this other side of Cambridge, the modern 21st century university embedded in a global community. Like myself, the majority of students in my programme comes from outside Cambridge and we share classes in the Centre for Mathematical Studies. Completed in 2013, the Centre is best described as a cross between teletubbyland and a space station. Academics from outside visit the university and I had the opportunity to attend some of the talks they gave. In College, I can have conversations with international fellows from a great variety of subjects.

Classes in Cambridge are intense with eight-week terms and six days of fast-paced lectures per week. Add society meetings and additional events offered by the department or the college, and the timetable can get full very quickly. Nevertheless, on Sundays one can still take time for a walk along Grantchester Meadows. Of course, I can understand why people may refer to Cambridge University as “the Bubble”. It only represents a specific but important aspect of British culture, and being aware of this fact, I am trying not to miss out entirely on the other aspects during the time between terms.

After my first months in the UK, I can already predict that at the end of the year I will have learnt a lot about mathematics and about the country. Thanks to the BCCG Foundation and British Airways for facilitating this endeavour of mine.