

# King's Student Perspectives Geography

Ira, 1<sup>st</sup> year  
June 2012

*I'm an international student from Bangalore, India, studying Geography at King's.*

*I chose to apply to Cambridge because there are not many universities which specialise in Geography, both within my home country and in the United States, which is where most of my friends were applying.*

*I had a friend who had studied History at King's and loved her time here. I visited her in the UK, which is how*

*I first came to know about King's. Since I did A Levels at school, the application process was fairly simple, and the academic transition was relatively smooth.*



Ira

*I wanted a grounding in the discipline as a whole before I began to specialise.*

## What attracted you to Cambridge Geography?

*My A Level subjects were History, Geography, Sociology and Economics. The Geography course at Cambridge seemed to combine them all with a focus on contemporary global issues, which is what I've*

*always been interested in. Some of the other universities I applied to (like LSE) offered pure human geography, but I wanted a grounding in the discipline as a whole before I began to specialise.*

## As an international student, what were your main concerns when you applied?

*When applying, I wasn't too worried about my chances of getting in compared with non-international students because the University looks at everyone together and just admits those who are best academically. I was more concerned about picking a college where I'd fit in. King's is truly international, not just in the nationalities of its students but also in its outlook. Many of my friends are home students - but they're often incredibly well travelled, well read and open to getting to know all kinds of people from everywhere. I'd say, if you're an international student and are considering applying to King's, don't think twice about fitting in.*

*If you're an international student applying to King's, don't think twice about fitting in.*

## How did you get on in Freshers' Week?

*Freshers' week is viewed by many to be a week of non-stop fun, but I have to admit that my first day at Cambridge, although exciting, was also intimidating. My advice is to just remember that everyone is in the same position. For the first few days, you're going to be introduced to what seems like hundreds of new people. And you'll soon be utterly confused about their name/year/subject and so on. Don't worry - this phase doesn't last long. My tip for Freshers' Week would be to relax and be yourself. It's important to be outgoing, but there's no need to make sure that all 120 freshers know who you are - you have three years to get to know people, and nobody finds their friendship groups on the very first day.*

*You have three years to get to know people, and no one finds their friendship groups on the very first day.*

## Are the course and teaching what you thought they would be?

*Not really. Before I came, I didn't really know what the teaching would be like. I had heard about the tutorial system, but did not realise how much personal attention each student got in the one hour classes with supervisors.*

*It was also quite a surprise when I found out that I only had about five hours of lectures each week in Michaelmas term (the first term). On average, this was one hour of lecture time each weekday, so I figured I'd have the rest of the day free to do what I wanted. I remember getting my first supervision topic (about the relationship between volcanoes and climate) and being completely thrown in at the deep end. Each supervision requires hours of reading and writing, so don't be fooled by the small number of*

*Each supervision requires hours of reading and writing, so don't be fooled by the small number of lectures.*

*lectures. You*

*will adjust quickly to the workload, though, and there is time for other things - I was pretty comfortable with the workload three or four weeks in.*

*At the moment, the first year Geography course (or Tripos, as we call it here) has one human paper made up of seven topics, one physical paper made up of eight topics, and a smaller methods paper. Human and physical geography are tested in written exams at the end of the year, and methods is tested in a series of smaller practicals throughout the year (including a field-trip to the Norfolk Coast, if you're interested in that kind of thing!)*



Ira (left), Maddy and Kat, Norfolk field-trip.

## What are supervisions like?

*For Geography, supervisions are generally a one hour meeting of a supervisor, who is a specialist in a certain part of the subject (say, geopolitics), and two or three students who have written an essay on geopolitics and submitted it a day or two before the supervision. There are usually four physical and four human supervisions in each eight-week term, although increasingly, you're asked to do book reviews and essay plans as well as essays. It is a real privilege to have your work read*

*It is a real privilege to have your work read and criticised by experts in the field.*

*and criticised by experts in the field. Supervisions are general discussions about the topic, that may include a discussion of the essay you've written (and why your supervisor did or didn't think it was a good essay), but also go far beyond, discussing different parts of the topic and linking it to other parts of the discipline as a whole, as well as wider reading you may have done.*

*Just remember that supervisions are your chance to ask any questions and clear any doubts with a person who's pretty likely to know the answer, so use them well!*

*Inevitably, you'll find that you like some supervisions and some supervisors more than others, depending on the supervision topic and how the discussion goes. Just remember that supervisions are your chance to ask any questions and clear any doubts with a person who's pretty likely to know the answer, so use them well!*

## What is your timetable like?

*Pretty packed, but that's because I like it to be that way. Your workload and timetable are really what you make of them. In the Michaelmas and Lent terms, I would have five hours of lectures a week on average, as well as one or two hours a week of lab/practical classes (such as statistics or GIS). Add to this a one hour supervision, which requires two or three days of reading and a day of writing (although different people work differently).*

*Aside from the course, I try to fit in sport and extra-curricular activities into my week. I play basketball for King's (roughly one hour a week) and for the university seconds team (roughly four hours of practice a week, plus about half a Sunday every two weeks for a game). In Lent and Easter term, I worked as the interviews editor for one of the university newspapers, which involved interviewing an individual and writing it up for the newspaper once a*



Cambridge University Panthers  
Basketball team





Kayaking on the river Cam: a popular activity in King's

*week. This was flexible, but took up another three or four hours of my schedule.*

*Playing basketball and working on the newspaper has been time-consuming but definitely worth it. I think that it's important for everyone to partake in a sport/activity outside their course for variety. It's also a great way to get to know people from other colleges. On top of my course workload, sport*

*and the newspaper, I still had plenty of time to hang out with friends and go to Cambridge Union debates and other talks. So don't worry - if you structure your days well, you'll be shocked at how much you can fit in.*

*My timetable in exam term was very different. Lectures stopped after four weeks and there are only*

*If you structure your days well, you'll be shocked at how much you can fit in.*

*a few (revision) supervisions, sports and extra-curriculars are mostly put on hold, and Cambridge nightlife is basically dead. Your timetable thus becomes extremely flexible - you'll have more work than ever to do because of the approaching exams, but it'll be up to you to structure how and when you're going to do it.*

*Then, you fit the two months of fun you missed out on in exam term into May Week (which actually happens in June!), when Cambridge colleges transform themselves into amazing venues for garden parties, plays, concerts and all-night June Events and May Balls.*



Front Court being set up for the King's Affair

## *What are the best and worst things about studying Geography at Cambridge?*

*Actually, I'd say that both the best and the worst thing about studying Geography is the sheer breadth of the content of the course. By the end of the year, you'll know a bit about everything from 20th century environmental history and contemporary culture studies to what causes ice ages. The breadth of topics is a great introduction to the discipline as a whole. The number of topics also ensures that you will undoubtedly find something that you are really passionate about which you can specialise in for the following years, and also for your third year dissertation. On the other hand, studying such a range of topics can be quite overwhelming! You'll find that you will have to study selectively for the exams because*

*there's just too much for you to be able to study everything in depth, which is a bit of a shame. Also, I sometimes find it quite frustrating trying to understand why the history of globalization and the study of marine sediments are included in the same academic discipline - and trying to understand what the discipline as a whole really is. But by no means does this mean you shouldn't study Geography at Cambridge. I might find some parts frustrating but the actual content can be absolutely fascinating, and thinking critically about your subject is a must for any course.*

*Studying such a range of topics can be quite overwhelming!*

## *What is the most interesting thing you've studied here and why?*

*My favourite parts have probably been sustainable development and environmental history. These come under the module "Society, Environment and Sustainable Development", which*

*links the history of environmentalism to contemporary debates on sustainable development. The module is taught by some truly great lecturers and supervisors, and there is endless fascinating reading that can be done. I must have read as much about sustainable development this year as I did all the other human modules put together (although this is probably not a good thing!)*

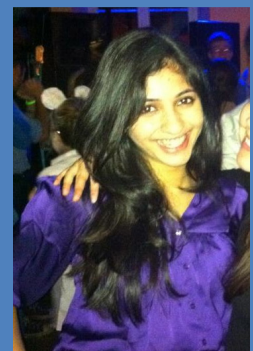
*There is endless fascinating reading that can be done.*

## *What was the hardest thing about starting the course?*

*The hardest thing was definitely structuring my timetable and efficient time management. It can be really hard to know exactly how long to spend on reading, on writing or on a practical for the methods paper. But with practice and time, everyone adjusts. I'm much more confident about structuring my time now than I was at the start.*

## *Is King's a good College for Geography?*

*I chose King's because I think it's the most international Cambridge college, as well as the most beautiful and definitely one of the most sociable (although I really only found that out once I got here). It's hard to say whether any college is good for Geography, since lectures and lab teaching etc are given by the faculty, and your Director of Studies will organise for you to have supervisions with specialists at other colleges to ensure that you have access to the right knowledge for the different subject areas.*



*King's might not be an obvious choice for Geography because it doesn't have many geographers (normally 2-4 each year so roughly nine in total), but I don't think this is a disadvantage at all. All the geographers know each other really well, and geographers within the same year tend to be close and help each other out all the time. Also, many of my friends in College do similar subjects and are therefore interested in*

*similar contemporary issues (but from different academic perspectives). Geographers can relate to people doing pretty much any subject – Human, Social and Political Sciences, History and Economics students are interested in similar issues as human geography, and Geologists / NatSci's (Natural Scientists) may have things in common for physical geography. Sometimes I feel as if I learn just as much from my conversations with these people as I do from my course: there is endless room for conversation with people from*

*whom you can learn a lot. So don't veto King's just because it doesn't admit many geographers – I'd advise you to look more closely at what you can get out of the academic community here.*

*King's is known for being the venue for interesting talks about global issues on a regular basis.*

*As a bonus, King's is known for being the venue for interesting talks about global issues on a regular basis, and King's library has great climate change section, so there are loads of advantages of studying geography here.*

*A year at King's has taught me that it is special, both academically and socially. People here work hard and enjoy their subjects enough to discuss them for fun - but they also do so much more than academic work. Each term is filled with events (or events) where students across subjects and years get together, such as formals (great dinners served in the nicest dining hall in Cambridge) as well as pub quizzes, karaoke, and garden parties in the summer. Weekends are full of sports - many freshers get involved in rowing because it's sociable and great exercise.*

*A year at King's has taught me that it is special, both academically and socially.*

## *What do you do in the vacations?*

*You'll find that the Cambridge term is shorter than most other unis, giving you a six week break for Christmas, roughly five weeks for Easter, and over three months during the summer.*

*Since Christmas was my first ever break after joining uni, I went straight back to Bangalore and spent time with family and friends who were home from universities all over the world, which meant that I didn't do much work. In retrospect, you don't necessarily need to do any serious work but it's definitely a good idea to continue reading course-related books just so*



*It's definitely a good idea to continue reading course-related books.*

*that you don't lose touch. I came back in January and was thrown in at the deep end all over again because I had taken such a long break from my course.*

*Working during Easter is even more important since this is the break right before exam term. Again, no*

*need to kill yourself, but systematic reading is incredibly helpful! Just pick three or four books that you think are important or that you might be interested in, and read them during the break. While it's nice to relax with a human geography book, physical geography books are more technical, so taking notes is pretty important.*

*As for the summer vacation, this is your complete break from the course (although in second and third year you might have to do some dissertation preparation). It's great to take a breather from reading heavy geography literature, but if you're interested in the subject, you'll probably end up doing a geography-related internship, travelling (King's has travel grants) or just reading, so it's not like you're going to be completely out of touch with your subject.*

## *What are you looking forward to in second year?*

*Within the course, I'm actually really looking forward to the Part1B core paper (which is a fourth of the entire course). This new, compulsory paper deals with contemporary issues across both physical and human geography - climate change, hazards, economic risks and sustainability.*

*Outside of the course, I'm looking forward to living in New Garden Hostel! The Garden hostels are about a four minute walk from the river at King's and are where many second years choose to live. New Garden has really nice ensuite rooms with lots of light, and sociable kitchens with tables. It'll probably be weird living in the Fellows' Garden, over the other side of the road from the main site of College (I lived in Keynes, right in the middle this year), but I think it'll be a nice change. The only disadvantage is how far it is from the geography department (about a fifteen minute walk via King's main site or an eight minute bike ride if you go around) - and biking in the winter is not always fun.*



*I'm looking forward to living in New Garden Hostel!*



**Fellows' Garden**  
A beautiful setting for the Garden Hostels

### **A note to current King's Geography students**

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Geography at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: [undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk)