

Latin America Cubing Tour 2017 + extras

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Introduction

This is a "blog" of our Latin America Cubing Tour, including the London and Paris trips. In total, this was a 6 week trip, visiting 9 countries, and participating in 10 competitions.

Pictures taken were shared in Google Photos for all to see.

This document is meant to be read at the same time as looking at the pictures. The chronology, the anecdotes follow the pictures in the various Google shares.

As a summary, the shares are listed below:

1. Latin America Tour 2017 - Santiago, Chile:
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/wgmXauwoSq33HN4x2>
2. Latin America Tour 2017 - Montevideo, Uruguay:
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/ZocJfuZ3WbLRGa0w1>
3. Latin America Tour 2017 - Cochabamba, Bolivia:
<https://goo.gl/photos/rGNTPUHq4rAnWrcx9>
4. Latin America Tour 2017 - Arequipa, Peru:
<https://goo.gl/photos/qYXTPf7np6VAJSwY7>
5. Latin America Tour 2017 - Lima, Peru: <https://goo.gl/photos/Ydxao46DBY6F9S757>
6. Latin America Tour 2017 - Chia, Colombia:
<https://goo.gl/photos/q9QvoJBdwf5hMnWy9>
7. Latin America Tour 2017 - Merida, Venezuela:
<https://goo.gl/photos/kbikk3wYqptGCJT6>
8. Latin America Tour 2017 - Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic:
<https://goo.gl/photos/j5Et9gcNEqvvQJNV5>
9. Post Latin America Tour 2017 - London Open 2017; London, England:
<https://goo.gl/photos/8VvjUu5ozsWXqWEo8>
10. Post Latin America Tour 2017 - World Championships; Paris, France:
<https://goo.gl/photos/h8fGLKhVyz1UY3UB7>

Disclaimers

This was originally written as a text file, with no accents. The document therefore does not have accents (I was too lazy to go through the document and add them).

Note that this document was written from my own perspective, and from my own memory of the events. Some places, names, might have been omitted, not spelled properly, or plain wrong.

Thank you

Thank you for Natan and his "affiliates" for making this Tour happen. Thank you for the generosity and the warmth of the South American people, especially those who took care of us during our trip (there are too many to name here).

Without you, this Tour would not have happened. You made a LOT of cubers very happy in many countries.

Version

Version 2018-01-22.01, modified 2021-06-14.

Author

Claude Cantin
January 2018

Santiago, Chile; June 7-11

Latin America Tour 2017 - Santiago, Chile:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/wgmXauwoSq33HN4x2>

520 m above sea level; founded in 1541. Population 7.3 M. Located in Chile's central valley, part of the Andes mountain range. Those mountains can be seen from many points within the city.

Santiago is a modern city, with good infrastructure. We can drink the tap water.

Temperature was cool. That was winter for the locals. Throughout our time in Santiago, we needed our jacket in the mornings and evenings. The locals kept them all day, even indoors (no central heating that we could tell of).

June 7, 8

June 7 -> 8. Overnight flight from Toronto to Santiago; 10 hour flight, aboard a 787 Dreamliner. Landed at 8:00 AM. Pablo and Suzanne brought us to the apartment they made available for us. We would share it with Feliks, Jay and James; Feliks was already there; the others would join us later. Raul and Leo joined us shortly after our arrival; they were our "tour guides" to their city that day; along with Jose, they were great companions. They took us through Plaza de Armas where lies the Central Post Office, built in 1881; to Cerro Santa Lucia for a view of the city and some mountains in the distance (even though it rained before we came in, fog was a factor and we could not see very far). After Cerro Santa Lucia, we walked past the Mapocho River, where Jose joined us.

Lunch was at some fast food place that served some type of stuffed hot dog buns. With fries. Different, but good. Really good.

We proceeded to the teleferico at Parque Metropolitano; that is the largest urban park in Latin America. We ended up taking the same "car" Pope John Paul II took on April 1, 1987. Atop Cerro San Cristobal (San Critobal Hill), within Parque Metropolitano, is a 14 meter high statue of the Immaculate Conception (built 1904-08), sitting on a 8.3 meter high pedestal incorporating a chapel. Immediately below the status is a large amphitheater.

Great views of the city and mountains from that location.

From there, we took the Cableway Metropolitan (re-opened in Dec 2016 after being closed for 5 years) to go to the next hill. We made our way downtown through the Parque de la Esculturas (walked by the river again), to visit the local cube store, Soletta, owned by Pablo and Suzanne, our hosts. After a short "cube meet" and some demos, we made our way back to the apartment, using the subway.

The Santiago subway, opened in 1975, is the largest in South America, second largest in Latin America (after Mexico City). With its 6 lines and 118 stations, and 2.5M daily passengers, it ranks 7th worldwide in terms of "frequency" (not sure what that means! volume?).

Back at the apartment, we met up with Natan and his family (Maru, Jael, Rachel, Leithian -- had an apartment a few floors up for ours). James was also in at that point?. Natan took us for a walk within the downtown area to a money exchange

place. He knew which one to go as we passed a few before stopping at that one.

Throughout the Latin American Cubing Tour portion of the trip, we visited 7 countries in 4 weeks. Every single country uses their own money (obviously!). In most countries, it is called a Peso... but the value can change dramatically from one country to another (we also had to keep track of that). This meant a lot of money exchanges.

At times, like in Chile, our host would take us to a money exchange location, and we would exchange money there. Other times, we would simply use the bank machine to take money out. Or we would exchange money directly with our local host. The one time, in Bolivia, Natan went to some lady sitting on a busy downtown street corner, and exchange money with her. Another time, in Paris, during the post-LA Tour, I went to a table of British citizens and offered a straight exchange between Euros and British Pounds (I was getting rid of my Pounds). Since the Pound is worth more than the Euro, I easily found a taker.

To keep track of the value of money in the different countries, I had a file on my tablet, listing each country, its currency name, its value to CDN and its value to the USD. That way, I could easily compare the various currency values.

That first night in Chile, for supper, we met up with the Hanqui family: Henry, Carol, Juan Pablo and Gianfranco. We all went to dinner at that huge Argentinian restaurant (very meaty; plates with beef, pork, chicken, sausages to be shared amongst many guests). Very good, but also fairly "heavy".

June 9: Jay arrives; setup venue.

Jay arrived, at 9:00 AM, after a four-flight trip from Australia. He was tired, but had arranged to meet with some locals so he could get three of his large cubes magnetized. Apparently, some chilian guy was good at that, and Jay had contacted him prior to coming to Santiago. We were to meet him at some coffee shop about 10 minute walk from our apartment. They texted each other, we went to one by Torre Entel, but could not meet them. We came back, more texts, then back to Torre Entel and finally met with them. Following was an impromptu cube meet at a Burger King restaurant!

Plan was that Jay would get his cubes back at the competition (and he did).

Following that, a few locals showed us around, then we went to a Domino... no, not a pizza place, but one that serves stuffed hot dog buns. Fairly large place. Was showing a futbol game, where most patrons followed diligently. Food was simple, but good. Very enjoyable meal.

Walked around some more, then proceeded to the venue (at most 10 minute walk from the apartment), and set up the three sets of cubing stations (18 stations total?).

Had pizza supper at our apartment (food provide by Jose!).

June 10: day 1 of the competition

June 10. Day 1 of the competition. Roughly 220 competitors. Felipe was the official WCA delegate. Quiet person, he was responsible for one set of cubing stations. Jose and Marta (Jose's wife) the other. Natan the third. Susanne and

Pablo kept us fed (we certainly did NOT starve!). Pablo and Natan handled a number of media interviews, sometimes involving one of the top cubers like Feliks, Gianfranco, Juan Pablo, Jay, or Antoine.

Of note: the "celebrities" had to be kept into a small room, apart from the other competitors. Any time they would come out, there would be people lining up for pictures, autographs, etc. They needed their "corner" so they can warm up, practice, and hang out together.

That first competition night, we had supper at a Chinese restaurant, with Natan's family, Gianfranco and Juan Pablo, Jose and Marta.

June 11: day 2 of competition

I went for a walk before going to the competition. Walked to the Plaza de Armas, the Post Office Building, the Cathedral, the Palacio de la Real Audiencia de Santiago, Palacio de La Moneda, Torre Entel and went back to Cerro Santa Lucia. Then went to one of the oldest Churches in Chile (built between 1554 to 1618).

The Plaza de Armas is the main square in Santiago de Chile. It is the center of the initial layout of the city in the mid 1500s. The Plaza includes other historical buildings, like the Metropolitan Cathedral, built between 1748 and 1800. It also included the Central Post Office Building, built between 1881 and 1908, and the Palacio de la Real Audiencia de Santiago.

The Palacio de la Real Audiencia de Santiago, build between 1804 and 1807, it was, until 1846, the seat of the government. Since 1982, it houses the National History Museum of Chile.

On the other side of square is the Palacio de La Moneda (Palace of the Currency). Built between 1784 and 1805, it was originally used for the production of coins (hence, La Moneda). Since 1845, it is the seat of the President of the Republic of Chile, and houses the offices of three cabinet ministers. Essentially, the seat of the government.

The Torre Entel is a 124 meter television and communication tower downtown Santiago.

During the competition, I went for another short walk to the grocery store (got a few supplies for the apartment), and walked by a market, where people would put a blanket on the ground, then their goods to sell on top of it.

For the hour set aside for pictures and autographs, the "celebrities" went in a room. People lined up outside of the room and a small group of people at a time were allowed in. It took more than the allotted hour as demand was very high.

Fact at that competition:

- Antoine beat OH average, NR: 10.64, 0.05 off the World Record.
- Juan Pablo broke the World record for solving a megaminx under 30 seconds -- 29.93 (he also broke the average World Record: 35.15).

That evening, we were introduced to a "scoring party", where we revise all participants' scores for the competition. Tried to go and eat at that same Argentinian restaurant we went a few days prior... but end up going to some shopping plaza (it was a Sunday, and many restaurants are closed on Sundays in

Chile -- they also do not have "Sunday shopping" like we do here.

Other fact. Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and many other South American countries have tuition-free Universities. But many Universities have very strict entry-level guidelines, so it is not a "free for all"...

From Santiago, Natan went back to Arequipa. He would join us back later, in Bolivia.

More on weather. Temperature was cool. We needed our jackets. They provided us with portable heaters for the apartment: they have no central heating, and this is the coolest time of the year for them. It did not freeze when we were there, but it did go well into the single digits.

Montevideo, Uruguay, June 12-15

Latin America Tour 2017 - Montevideo, Uruguay:
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/ZocJfuZ3WbLRGa0w1>

Left Santiago mid afternoon on June 12th; Landed in Montevideo at 6:30 PM.

Most of our inter-city travel was by plane. The one exception was our 30-hour-road-trip (more on that later). The airline travels were arranged by locals, co-ordinated by Natan. Before the trip, we provided our passport information, and the locals bought the tickets for us. As they were e-tickets, easy to send to the proper person. Natan was also handling the sponsorship money, so he re-reimbursed the local organisers directly, and gave us the rest of the money as USD, when we got there. It helped in covering most of Antoine's expenses while in South America (not including the flights in and out of South America).

Montevideo. Capital of Uruguay. Not far from Buenos Aires, Argentina (essentially across a bay). Metro population: 2 M. Established in 1724. Main port in Uruguay. Rated Highest quality of life in Latin America.

Good infrastructure. We could also drink tap water there.

Temperatures were similar to Chile. Cool, but not really cold (depends who you talk to!). Needed jackets in the mornings and evening, but locals needed them during most of the day.

June 12: arrival in Montevideo

We traveled from Santiago with James, Feliks, Oliver, and Jay. In Montevideo, Antoine and I stayed with Diego Moraes and his family -- his parents (Pablo and ?) and his younger sister, Sol. James, Feliks and Oliver stayed with Christian at his apartment.

Diego's family live into an apartment. about 10 blocks from the ocean. It is a modest 3 bedroom unit. They had converted the den into a temporary spare bedroom for Antoine and I. It was all we needed. Small, but very comfortable, and very welcoming people.

His father is president of the local Rotary Club, and works as a Customs Broker Agent. His mother works in the health care industry (nurse?). His younger sister is in high school. Diego is the same age as Antoine, and goes to university. He helps out with the local competitions.

We were met at the airport by Diego, Christian and at least another cuber. Walked off the airport property to the cars, where we were driven to Diego's place. Although it was 7:00 or 7:30 PM, it was pitch dark outside. Dropped off our things at Diego's place, then went to a shopping center food court for a "cube meet".

Went back to Diego's for supper -- they eat supper VERY late in Uruguay... at like 11:00 PM or even later!

June 13. Museo Del Futbol, Ciudad Vieja.

Diego took us to a place where his father used to take him fishing. Good view of the city from that location; quite the skyline! Nice beaches along the waterfront; full of high rise apartment. buildings, but NO ONE at the beach. That is because it is winter for them, and too cold. Even Antoine and I had to wear our jackets. Still, the sand was inviting.

Diego took us to el Museo Del Futbol, at the Estadio Centenario, site of the first compeonato mundial de football, in 1930 (Uruguay won) and met up with the others, including Christian father's, Ignatio (a real futbol fan; he ended up getting us an Uruguay futbol shirts/jerseys). From there, as a group of two or three cars, we made our way to downtown. Walked along a main street, stopped by a "hemp store" (smoking marijuana is legal in Uruguay; residents may buy it at the pharmacy, in limited quantities). Continued along Av. 18 de Julio onto the Plaza Independencia, where there is a very large monument in honour of General Artigas. Stopped by Teatro Solis; went into the lobby but could not see the actual theatre due to a performance.

Next was the Ciudad Vieja (old city). All along, Ignacio (Christian's father) was our group's personal guide. He recently retired and has always lived in Montevideo, so has lots of stories... only in Spanish, since he does not speak English. At the Plaza Constitucion, he took us into the Basilica Catedral Metropolitana de Montevideo (opened in 1804, it is the seat of the Montevideo Roman Catholic archdiocese). Continued to the Plaza Zabala, where a statue of Bruno Mauricio de Zabala on horseback is a center piece (he is the founder of the city).

Ciudad Vieja was once protected by walls. They have since been demolished, except for a short section, which we saw when we entered the area.

Lunch was at La Chacra del Puerto, where you can see them cook the various types of meat. They made sure we tried a variety of typical local foods. It was good, but we were full. Good thing, because we had a nice walk ahead of us.

Following lunch, we continued to various sites within Ciudad Vieja, then walked by the very large port along Rambla Franklin D. Roosevelt, which turns into Rambla Sud America. Walked past the old train station (further down, the newer, much smaller one), and the tallest building in town. Made our way to the Palacio Legislativo (built 1904-25), the seat of the country's government (massive but gorgeous building). They tried to get us to tour the building, but it was closed to visitors at that time.

So we went on to the Mercado Agrícola de Montevideo (an indoor farmers market), walking by the Facultad de Química del Universidad de la República (faculty of medicine). Within the food court of the farmers market... another "cube meet".

Diego then drove us to his place, where we had a "snack". By that time it was roughly 6:30 or 7:00.

After the snack, we changed and went to play an indoor soccer game. Pablo, Diego's dad, was surprised I was going to play. We ended up playing foreigners against Uruguay. Christian ended up playing with us (foreigners). We also had someone from Argentina and a Brazilian on our team. Final score was 13-12 for the local people. Good fun, after a long day of walking.

Went back to Diego's place for a nice dinner with Diego, his parents, and his sister. We had pork, rice, salad, small fried potatoes and local wine. Finished dinner close to midnight.

June 14: mid-week competition

Day of competition. A mid-week competition. Diego did not have the use of the car, so Christian came and picked us up to bring us to the venue (Hotel Escuela Kolping). Fairly small room. Also smaller competition (53 competed in the 3x3x3). No formal registration. Your name was called when it was your turn to solve. Organised by Christian. His dad took care of the "cube store" and the hanging of the various banners. Christian organised and Ricardo Piotti was the delegate.

The size of the room made for a fairly loud atmosphere. At many occasions, the organizers kept people to quiet down. "shhhhhhh" was heard quite often, almost to the point of annoyance...

At the prescribed time, the competition stopped, and people lined up to get an autograph and/or a picture with the "celebrities". It was very orderly, and was done in about 45 minutes.

For lunch, went to a local shopping center, a 10-15 minute walk from the venue. Then, at the end of day, after the competition, all organisers, as well as a number of people stayed around... until a birthday cake was brought in. Christian's mother and his aunt baked and decorated a cake for Antoine's birthday!! That was quite the nice surprise.

Following the birthday celebrations, we all went back to the shopping center food court, where we ate supper, and... had a cube meet! Must have been midnight when we got back to Diego's parents' place.

June 15: Piriapolis, Punta del Este

Diego had an afternoon class, so could not spend all day with us. Plan was to take the bus to the "Montevideo sign", and meet up with the others there. Then drive to Punta del Este with a stop at Piriapolis. Finally, come back at Diego's in time for supper with his parents -- his father promised us a BBQ!

So we took the bus and made our way to the "Montevideo sign". It is located by one of the local beaches, with a great view of both the beach and the City skyline. Very picturesque. Each capital letter of the sign is roughly 2 meters high, so the sign is 12-15 meters long.

Made it to the sign well before noon. Then got a text telling us the others were just getting ready to come! We walked around the area until they arrived, then got a group picture in front of the sign, before heading off to Piriapolis (Diego went back home, so he could go to his classes). We were two cars: Christian's and Ignacio's (actually Christian's brother in law's). Both were very small cars, and the one Ignacio was driving was in need of a muffler... and probably a tune-up because it seems to lack power, even for a small car. We still made it just fine.

Ate lunch (at what, 3:00 PM?) in Piriapolis, in a restaurant overlooking the sandy beach. My meal was essentially a breaded veal cutlet the size of my large plate, sitting on a bed of fries, and a small salad. I do not recall if I was able to eat it all! But it was good. Enjoyable.

Played a bit of soccer on the beach, then headed up the Cerro San Antonio, a lookout overlooking Piriapolis, at the site of the Templo San Antonio. Great view of Piriapolis and its beach.

By the time we left the lookout, we could see the sun was very low on the horizon. We still pushed towards Punta del Este, a beach/casino resort/tourist town.

That coastal area is full of beaches. Nice sandy beaches. There is so much sand that, on the road we took between Piriapolis and Punta del Este, sand dunes were on either sides of the road. Some of the dunes were even encroaching onto the road.

When we arrive at Punta del Este, it was too dark to take decent pictures. Nonetheless, we ensured we got to get our feet wet in the Atlantic ocean, walked into a casino/hotel, went by the "fingers" sculpture, and went downtown to a store where Christan and Ignatio are the "cube suppliers".

Got back at Diego's place at roughly 11:00 PM, just in time for Pablo's BBQ supper. He had cooked a variety of meats, on his charcoal BBQ. They also served us small, individual birthday treats :-). Great supper with great guests.

Montevideo and Uruguay, from where we went, seem to have good infrastructure. From what we were told, mostly in urban areas. That is different when you get in less populated areas. Still, we were able to drink tap water, and not worry about salads, or other meals or foods rinsed with local water. Prices, however seemed to be more than what we are used to. Food is certainly more expensive than in Canada.

That was the last place in our Latin America tour we could safely drink tap water.

Cochabamba, Bolivia, June 16-19

Latin America Tour 2017 - Cochabamba, Bolivia:
<https://goo.gl/photos/rGNTPUHq4rAnWrcx9>

Cochabamba, Bolivia. Elevation 2,558 meters. Fourth largest city in Bolivia, with a metro population of 2M. In a valley within the Andes mountains (sound familiar?).

Spaniards got there in the mid 1500s.

In that area, weather is like an eternal Spring: highs hovering around 25C all year round. Lows from 1 in June, to 12 in January. Since we were there in June... it was on the colder side at night.

June 16: arrival in Cochabamba; Kriss Cubes

Left Montevideo early on the Friday morning. Our plane left at 7:00 AM so had to be at the airport before 5:00. It meant getting up at 3:30 AM, meet up with the others at Christian's place, then onwards to the airport. But when we got to Christian's place, they were just waking up! Made it to the airport, checked in, went through security, and did not have to wait long to board our first flight of the day.

Took three flight that day: Montevideo to Asumption, Paraguay; stayed in plane then went on to Santa Cruz for a 4 hour lay-over, and finally flew to Cochabamba, Bolivia. Feliks, Oliver, James and us were on the same flight.

We were met at the Cochabamba airport by Cristian, Marcelo, Jhoanna, Cristian's dad, Jeremy and a few more cubers. Cristian's dad would be driving Joselyn's truck for us (Joselyn is Cristian's girlfriend; also works at the store).

We were driven to Kris' apartment (Cristian and Kris are the same people). He lives with his dad in that large 4 bedroom, 2 bathroom, apartment. We all stayed there, including Natan and Jeremy. We were from two to four per room; Antoine and I shared a bed (as we did in Santiago). We had a room of our own.

Were taken downtown, to Kriss Cubes, Cristian's local cube store. Parking was like playing "rush hour", where cars had to be moved around in order to be able to move out. A number of cubers were already waiting there, eager to see the "celebrities". They included Joseph, Ernesto and Eduardo.

The store was situated in a small shopping centre. A small sign off the street directed you to suite 112. Crowded streets. Lots of cars, motorcycles, people. That is where we went with Natan to exchange money: we went to some street corner, talked to an old lady, and exchanged money! Apparently better rates than the banks.

Maybe 12 people could fit in the store. Not much bigger (like most cube stores we saw in South America). The "celebrities" made a video to announce the competition. It was led by Antoine, introducing everyone, in Spanish.

Leaving the store, we went to the venue: the auditorium of Universidad UCATEC. Nice large hall, with plenty of room for the 102 people who competed in the 3x3x3.

Supper that night was outdoors, at some popular eatery. We were introduced to Pique, a typical South American meal. Oddly, the street next to the restaurant had no parking signs everywhere, but it was full of parked cars all along.

Temperatures were getting a bit warmer. Cool, but no need to wear our jackets anymore. Daylight until maybe 6:00 PM. We noticed many unfinished buildings. Apparently, just like in the poorer South American countries like Peru, people start a building, run out of money, then stop building. When they get more money, they continue.

Also, if the building is not finished, no property taxes, so no rush to finish them off... That is also the reason that we often see re-bars coming out of the corners of some buildings. That is to show they are not finished yet!

After supper, headed off to Kris' apartment.

June 17: competition day

Also first day the 9 or 10 of us had to share the two showers. Luckily, things were semi-planned. Some of us took our showers the night before, so we would not have to fight for one in the morning. Also no worries of running out of hot water: the shower head were directly connected to an electrical heater (inside the shower head!), so the water is heated as it flows through. What is hard to get used to is the "ticking" of the electrical arcs as the water goes through... and yes, you are under that arc...

Kris' dad would typically prepare breakfast for us. Bread and spreads, tea, coffee, etc.

Two cars typically took us to the competition: Joselyn's truck, driven by Cristian's dad, and Kris' sports car, where he had to be careful not to bottom up on the speed bumps... or scraping the front when getting in/out of parking garages (people actually got out of the car so he could take in those ramps!).

Marcelo, a taxi driver and a speedcuber, shared in the taking people around as well.

That first day of competition, music was playing all throughout. It was not too loud, almost background. It did not distract the competitors. Was actually nice.

A barrier was erected between the current competitors and the competition area. It was nice as it forced the competitors to stay at the same place, and they could not see any part of the scrambles, even if they tried.

Lunch on both days of the competition was at a North American style shopping center. The food court had all kinds of neat places that served local foods. Certainly was not "fast food" as it took a while for the food to be served. As a result, we ended up taking a bit more than the allotted hour to eat. But food was authentic, and very good.

Supper after the first day was at some small shopping mall. Went to a pizza place and our entire group was fed with... ONE pizza. It was a signature pique pizza 60cm in diameter. Yes, more than half a meter. It was enough to feed about 12 of us.

June 18: day 2 of competition

Weather. Cochabamba was cool. You could wear shorts in the middle of the day... in the sun. Locals would certainly not. Many kept their jackets throughout the competition, a few kept a tuque on. Mornings were certainly much cooler.

At the end of the second competition day, and last day in Cochabamba, Natan had organized a bit of a futbol match. A small tournament. I went to play, but only stayed a few minutes as I pulled something in my thigh. Feliks took my place, even if he was wearing flip flops.

Following the soccer matches, and before the sun went too far down, we went to teleferico to climb the hill to see El Cristo de la Concordia (Christ of Peace). Built between 1987 and 1994, it is 40 meters high; higher than the one in Rio de Janeiro. When built, it was the largest one of its kind in the world. It sits 265 meters above the city, and at 2,840 meters above sea level.

Great views of Cochabamba from the top of the hill.

There is a viewing area inside the arms (1,399 stairs). Visitors are allowed there only on Sundays.

The cable car is used to get to the top of the hill. There is a trail going up (and down), but there are signs warning people that it is not safe to take; that many people get mugged when taking it.

After the cable car and Cristo de la Concordia, the organisers and the "celebrities" were invited for supper at Jhoanna's place, where she lives with her sister and parents (I think!). As with all houses in many countries in South America, properties are delimited by high brick walls. Many have broken glass on top of it, to deter thieves from jumping the walls.

Jhoanna's house was no exception. As you entered the front door, and followed a short hallway, you got into that room, about 15-18 feet wide by 25-30 feet long (at least it felt that way). At the end of the room, half the wall was completely opened to the outside/backyard! Her garden was there, as was the kitchen (another room/house, part the garden).

She had set out a long table in that opened room (adorned with heads of different animals). She served us typical Bolivian foods including pique, prepared by her, her sister, and her mother. We were introduced on how to serve ourselves; there was plenty of food. We were just over 20 guests at her house.

After the needed short walk to the park, we needed to get to the bus station, as we were beginning our 30-hour road trip to Arequipa.

Rodrigo's mother had bought the tickets for us earlier that afternoon. It was an overnight bus trip from Cochabamba to La Paz, the capital city. We got to the bus station, put our luggage on the bus (thank you, Joseph for taking care of that!), and boarded an inter-city bus, with 125 degree recliner seats, and a blanket for each of us! There were also three seats wide (in a 2 - 1 configuration). We needed the blanket as the overnight temperature was around the freezing point.

People taking part of the trip: Rodrigo and his mother; Joseph; Yuri and his father; Natan; Oliver; Feliks; Antoine; myself; Jay; Jeremy; Eduardo and Ernesto and their mother; Manuel; and?

June 19: La Paz and Lake Titicaca

La Paz, Bolivia. Founded 1548. metro population: 2.4M. Elevation: 3,640 meters.

Like many cities from central South America, they were inhabited by the Inca before the Spaniards took over.

La Paz has the longest and highest urban cable car network in the world. That is one of the reasons we stopped at that location: we were to ride it, as the local do.

Got into La Paz early morning (around 6:30). Once at the bus station, Natan took everyone aside and warned us: "we are entering dangerous territory" were his exact words. We were warned to always be vigilant, and stay together as a group. Also not to leave *anything* unattended, as someone might simply pick it up, and walk away with it.

The La Paz bus terminal is a very large yellow coloured building. It was designed by Gustave Eiffel (yes, the same designer as the Eiffel Tower in Paris). That terminal like the one we used in Cochabamba, charges a "terminal fee"; it is not added onto your bus ticket - you must purchase it yourself, off a central booth in the station, and show it to the ticket agent when buying a bus ticket (or is it that you have to show it to the bus driver... cannot recall).

At the bus terminal, a mother and her disabled child came to see us. The "child", a fifteen or so year old, was a cuber, and had a wish to meet Feliks. She got what she wished, and more, and we all had breakfast together. We were wearing our warmest clothes, as it was hovering around the freezing mark. Even inside the bus terminal (no, no heating).

From the large, once gorgeous bus terminal, we took taxis to one of the cable car terminals. Natan stayed with our luggage as most of us went up the hill to El Alto, a larger city on top of the mountain ridge. The cable car as commuter transportation for workers, much the same way a subway or bus system is used in other cities. There are a few "lines" of cable cars, just like large western cities have multiple subway lines. They also have a few more line either at the planning stages, or about to be built.

At the top of the mountain (gorgeous view, by the way), we disembarked, looked at the lineup of people, and walked to the end of it. Must have been a few hundred meters. At least. Police officers were making sure people were behaving and staying in line. So we lined up, just like the commuters did. It moved consistently. Not fast, but consistently. Then made it down to where Natan was waiting for us.

Views were amazing. Good way to see what the city looks like. The snow capped Mount Illimani in the distance were a bonus.

From the bottom, took another set of taxis to another, smaller bus terminal. Natan walked around, and talked to a few people, then told us to board some bus that would take us to Copacabana, virtually at the border with Peru. But first, it would take us to the Strait of Tiquina, where we would cross lake Titicaca on a boat, while the bus would take a barge across.

We left La Paz and drove through poor neighbourhoods (or maybe most of the city is like that?), where we noticed a lot of local people dressed in what I would define traditional dresses.

Arrived to the Straight of Tiquina a few hours later, where we disembarked. We crossed the Straight in a small boat, and the bus did so on a barge.

The Straight is 850 meters across. It is the narrowest area of Lake Titicaca.

Climbed the bus on the other side of the straight, and continued to Copacabana, our destination. Got off the bus, and went to eat lunch in a small restaurant, where we ordered our food. Sat down, and saw the owner leave, to come back a few minutes later with some fish we had ordered to eat! After lunch, hired a taxi to go a few minutes further to Kasani, at the border with Peru. Checked into the Bolivian immigration office, then walked across the border into Peru to register our entry.

Arequipa, Peru, June 19-22

Latin America Tour 2017 - Arequipa, Peru: <https://goo.gl/photos/qYXTpF7np6VAJSwY7>

June 19: Puno, Lake Titicaca, Arequipa arrival

At the Peruvian border, Yuri noticed his backpack missing. We looked for it. Could not find it. To this day, we still do not know what happened to it.

From the border, we took moto-taxis (three-wheeled taxis power by a motorcycle engine) to Yunguyo, at the bus station. Loaded our luggage on the roof of the "bus"... closer to a minivan as it sat maybe 12 people; they are called "combi" in South America. I do not remember if everyone did fit, or if we ended taking two separate "buses". Certainly, Natan and the foreigners were together.

Temperature was still cool. Jackets were needed.

The drive to Puno from Yunguyo was about 2.5 hours. Along a two-lane paved road, with picturesque views of lake Titicaca, and traditional way of life of the Peruvians.

Lake Titicaca: 190 km long and 80 km wide. avg depth of 107 m; max 281 m. 27 inflow rivers; outflow: evaporation and the Desaguadera River. 3,812 m above sea level, making it the highest elevation navigable lake in the world. By volume and surface area, it is the largest lake in South America.

Puno is the main stop to see the "floating islands" constructed by the Uros people. The islands are made out of cut totora, a thick reed that grows in the shallows of Lake Titicaca; the totora needs to be constantly replenished, as they eventually decay and rot. The islands float/lay near Puno, where people can hire boats for touring and visiting them. Most are about 15 by 15m, but some are as large as a football field. They are a major tourist attraction, as many islands have dwellings on them. Tourists visit them, and buy crafts from the locals. It is a major source of revenue for the locals.

We arrived in Puno at sunset. At that time, the boats are all at port, all tourists having come back from the islands. Still, Natan did find an owner who was willing to take us to the islands. Which we did, pitch dark, on a boat with no lights (that we could see), on a lake where many boats did not have lights -- we did cross many of them, on some of the channels between the islands. But the sky was clear and the stars were bright!

We did visit the islands, and saw a few dwellings, used to attract tourists.

Back to Puno, we walked to the bus station, to find a bus that would take us to Arequipa.

We would arrive in Arequipa, past 3:30 AM, on June 20th. That was the end of the road trip that started in Cochabamba, 28 hours earlier, at 11:30 PM on June 18.

Arequipa, Peru. Established in 1540. 2,335 meters above sea level. 2nd largest city in Peru, with metro population 1M. Home of Natan and his family.

As with Cochabamba and Montevideo, property lines are defined by those tall [typically] concrete fences. Often with broken glass on top to prevent people from jumping the fences. Natan's home is no exception. Neither is the rest of the cities we are to visit during our Latin American Cubing tour.

Natan's home is in the same "complex" as his parents' home (also a common occurrence in South America; those "enclaves" tend to stay within the family). It is a two storey home with a full basement. The second storey is accessible from the outside only; it is the master bedroom and a rooftop/outdoor patio area (over the kitchen). Rachel, Jael and Leithian moved in with their parents during our visit. Antoine and I (and Oliver, the first night) shared Leithian's room, whereas Feliks, James, Jay, and Jeremy shared the girls rooms in the basement.

The house is on a hill in the Simon Bolivar neighbourhood. Simon Bolivar seems to be everywhere in that part of South America. Also known as "El Libertador, was a Venezuelan military and political leader that helped create independence (from Spain) for Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Panama. That was in the first part of the 1800s (1808-1830). The district Natan lives in is named after him, as is the school his kids go to.

The view from his house is amazing. Misti (5,822m), a snow-capped symmetrical mountain is in plain view, as are Chachani (6,075m) and Pichu Pichu (5669m; a volcano that last erupted in 1985).

We arrived in Arequipa past 3:30 AM. There were a few fresh baked chocolate cake on the counter, so we took a piece :-). A good sign we would be well fed (thanks, Maru!). As it was too late (or early) for Oliver to go to his hosts' place, he slept on the floor in the room Antoine and I shared. It was likely past 4:00 AM when we went to sleep.

June 20: first day in Arequipa

Day of rest after the road trip. Woke up fairly late in the morning. Taking a shower at Natan's place requires planning, especially when we are eleven people staying there. His water is heated by solar energy. On his rooftop, he has a water reservoir tied to a solar panel. Water is circulated through the panel, and the sun warms it. No sun, no warm water. Eleven people... means by the time you reach the third person, no more warm water. You therefore have to be quick, and be careful on the amount of water you use.

In the morning of our first day in Arequipa, Rachel and Jael were performing in a "talent day" show at their school. I went to see them with Natan and Maru. I should have taken my camera: many kids were dressed in traditional costumes. Their school's yard is also covered with a tarp to give it shade. It serves as a gymnasium for their school of maybe 300 pupils (so fairly modest). It is the same school Natan went to, about five minute walk from him place, across some park.

I did take a picture of Rachel and Jael in their school uniform when they got back to the house at lunch time.

Leithian did not go to school that day. He wanted to spend the day with us (I guess we were bad influence!).

At lunch time, Natan prepared a BBQ for us. Similar to Diego's father, Natan used coal into a shallow container for his BBQ. We brought up a tent atop his roof top, and took out his patio furniture. Weather was low 20's, so perfect for this.

We discussed potential plans for the next day (climb Misty, Arequipa tour, zip lining in Colca Canyon), I suggested that some of us may do the Arequipa tour that day, then zip lining the next day. He looked at the other and says something like: "look who has the energy to do those things... the oldest guy in the group!". I took that as a complement :-) But it turns out when he called, we could not have made it to the time and location where the tour started...

After the leisurely BBQ, we headed downtown to Natan's cube store, where Ernesto works. It was a roughly a 30 minute cab ride -- Natan does not own a car. Cabs are cheap enough, and when he really needs one, he borrows his father's.

At the store, people were already waiting for "the celebrities" to show up. So they had a cube meet.

After a while, a few of us went for a walk to get the shirts Natan had printed for the competition. By the time we came back, it was dark already. Stayed at the store a while longer, then walked to the Plaza de Armas, site of the Basilica Cathedral of Arequipa, and seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Arequipa. Its first incarnation was constructed 1540, but was destroyed by an earthquake. The current version was finished in 1656, and survived at least 4 major earthquakes (including a 8.1 magnitude in 2001) and at least a major fire.

The cathedral sits at one end of the Plaza de Armas. The other three sides of the plaza are lined with two storey building with arches the entire length of the buildings, on both floors. They typically house touristy shops, restaurants, stores.

To return to Natan's place, Natan called his brother (a taxi driver). He wanted to introduce him to Jeremy, who was planning to climb mount Misti the next day.

That night, for supper, we ate fresh cinnamon buns Maru had made for us :-)

June 21: Colca Canyon; zip-linning

We woke up very early, as we had to be at the bus station for 6:00 AM. Jeremy had gone with Coco to climb Mount Misti. Jay stayed at Natan's because he did not feel well (side story: Maru did not know Jay stayed behind, and set the burglar alarm as soon as we left. When Jay got up he triggered the alarm...!). That left Natan, myself, Antoine, Oliver, Feliks and James for the Colca Canyon zip lining hot bath trip.

Colca Canyon was carved by the Colca River. At 3,270 meters deep, it is Peru's third most-visited tourist attraction; it is also one of the deepest canyons in the world. Chivay (altitude: 3,500m; population: 5,000), our destination, is located at the midpoint of the Colca valley.

Got at the bus station by 6:00, and bought tickets. As soon as the combi was full, we left for the three hours trip to Chivay.

In Chivay, we got off the bus, and took a few moto-taxis to get to another location, where we were to hire cabs to get to Colca Ziplining. As we got there, we paid our 2 soles each (roughly 50 cents) and got ready to get in the cab, when Natan noticed the large red bag Maru had given him had left with one of the moto taxis (in the luggage compartment in the back). He saw the moto taxi turn a corner and started to run after it. Of course he could not catch up to it, but asked the cab to try to follow it, and ended up going back to the bus terminal... where the moto taxi was turning around, because the driver had noticed we had left the bag in

it.

Colca Ziplining is only a few kms from Chivay. It took a few minutes by taxi to get there. We met with Keren, Natan's sister, her boyfriend Danny, and Lorenzo, the Italian help... who would cook us pizza for lunch! First we had a hot chocolate, tea, espresso, or coffee. Oliver took a number of espressos, so was way off his quota on caffeine!

Natan gave us a refresher zip lining course, then we headed off to the course... with two radios, but only one guide (Natan). He figured we knew what we were doing, so did not need a person at each end of every zip-line. We did all six rides that Monster offers. Total length of 6500+ feet at 550 feet off the ground, going up to 55 mph. This includes the 60 foot vertical ladder we had to climb (probably the hardest part of the day).

After ziplining was lunch. Lorenzo had prepared pizza for us. Italian style. Home made...

After lunch a second run of the two faster Monster lines was planned. I stayed behind as my stomach was upset. It had been since we reached Chivay. Altitude "sickness". Same thing happened two years earlier when we came there. And it disappeared as soon as we got to sea level. I was not worried. Only a bit uncomfortable (this time, it went away on the way to Arequipa; my "limit" is therefore somewhere between the elevation of Arequipa @ 2,335m and Chivay @ 3,635m). Most everyone has shortness of breath; I had the added "nauseous" feeling...

Once the others came back, we headed to La Calera, next door, for some Hot Springs. They have a number of open-air pools. They have to cool the naturally hot water before it reaches the pools! Cold beer (not me; unsettled stomach), warm bath, sunny. It was relaxing.

Toward the end of the afternoon, we had to go back to Chivay for the bus back. The combi was one of the newer ones we've had. Probably sat 15-18 people. Again, left only when it was full. It was warm, so they turned on the air conditioning, but only for a few minutes... as we left, they turn it off, and never turned it back on, even though it was quite warm inside!

Made it to Natan's place probably close to 9:00 PM, if not 10:00 PM. At dinner, we exchanged stories of zip lining with stories of mountain climbing (Jeremy and Coco had climbed Misty).

Of note: Maru did laundry when we went to Colca Canyon. Much appreciated as this was our half-way point in the tour, and we were in need of clean clothes! So when we got home, our "chore" was to take our own clothes off the clothes line. This is typical in those countries: they dry their clothes on some form of clothes line, whether they are outdoors... or indoors (their houses tend to be opened, so air circulates freely).

Needless to say, after such a full day, we all slept very well.

June 22: competition day

In the cafeteria of TECSUP, a technical college in Arequipa. The 72 people that solved the 3x3x3 filled up the hall quite nicely.

Of note during that competition:

- Feliks beat the world record for 4x4x4 single (19.36)
- Antoine beat the National Record for 3x3x3 single (5.41)
- Antoine beat the National Record for blindfold (25.14)
- a blind man solved the cube (braille cube)

As with the other competitions so far, some time had been set aside for pictures and autographs. That time was well spent. Also, a number of media interviews took place, and Antoine pitched in, in Spanish.

Lima, Peru, June 23-26

Latin America Tour 2017 - Lima, Peru: <https://goo.gl/photos/Ydxao46DBY6F9S757>

June 23: Rimac historic sites

Antoine and I left Arequipa on a 7:00 AM flight (others left later). Jose and his friend Alejandro met us at the Lima airport, and drove us to Jose's place, where he stays with his grand parents, into a complex for ex-army personnel.

Lima. Capital of Peru. Population of 11 million. A city with contrast: the very poor, and the very rich. Founded in 1535. Roughly 1/3 of the population of Peru live in Lima.

Lima is where someone tried to steel my camera, while I was holding it in my hands. Luckily the harness is very strong, so I yelled, turned around, and kicked. The thief simply ran away, while the other 4 people with me wondered what was going on!

Oddly, I stayed calm the entire time. I think my companions were more upset than I was...

We got to Jose's grandparents' place late morning. Had a bit of a rest, then had lunch. Chicken with rice and some veggies (do not know what it was, other than it was good). With wine, and Incola! We found out later that wine was very rare in that household. We must have been very special guests.

The house is part of a complex specifically for ex-army personnel. Jose's father and grandfather were both in the army. Across from his house, is a school. But all we see is a 12 foot wall, and if you walk around, a few entrances, and kids in uniform. Lots of moto-taxis, as this is a modest part of time. Not rich by any standard.

Our hosts have a three bedroom apartment. The room Antoine and I stayed in is the guest bedroom. It had bunk beds and one desk. Barely enough room for a chair. It was about 10 feet by 7, with a window to the "garden". The window had bars into it, and was completely open for the air to come in. The "garden" was the width of the apartment, and about 6-8 feet deep. Enough to park a car if you had one. A few plants grew in. Very dry, as Lima is essentially in a desert area, even though it is by the Pacific Ocean.

His grandparents, in their mid 70s, speak no English. I had to rely on Jose and Antoine for most of the communication. Each morning, they served us hot porridge in a large coffee cup, with some bread. Very quiet people. Very welcoming.

That first lunch was great. After eating, we set for a walk with Jose and his grandfather. He walks every day. His routine. Early morning.

We walked outside their "compound", and within a few minutes, crossed a major highway, then headed off to a park-like pathway/boulevard up to the Convento De Los Descalzos. That convent is at one end of a walking Mall, which has benches and statues all along its length. From there we made our way to the Paseo de Aguas, which reminds me of the reflecting pool at the Washington Mall in D.C. It also has a nice wall with water running the front of it. We then headed to an alleyway (seemed like a pedestrian street, but in a very poor area of town...) which passes

by the Plaza de Toros de Acho, an authentic bull arena.

The Plaza de Toros de Acho is the oldest bullring in the Americas. Opened in 1766, the only older one is La Maestranza in Spain. It accommodates 13,700 spectators, and is next to the Rimac District, the historical and touristy area where Jose and his grandfather were taking us.

That "alley" is where the "camera incident" occurred a few days later.

Ironically, there always seems to be a police officer at the far end of the alley.

We cross a major road, and the bridge over the Rimac River. On the other side of the River is Parque de La Muralla. That is where the Lima competition was to take place a couple of days later -- we could see the large tent take shape. The Parque is called de la Muralla because it houses an archeological site of part of the fortifications that once protected Lima. A large public area has been built around a section of those walls. The park is several acres in size separated in half by railroad tracks (still in use today; we certainly heard the trains during the competition). It includes green spaces, fountains, exotic birds, large areas for concerts and/or events.

The Lima competition was to take place within that park.

We walked in front of the Casa de la Literatura Peruana (looked like an old train station), and the Palacio de Gobierno del Peru (the Palace and official presidential residence; erected in 1535). Someone important came in because all of a sudden everyone had to move off to one side of the road and some official-looking vehicles came by (you do not mess with the Peruvian military). The Palacio de Gobierno del Peru is on one side of the Plaza Mayor de Lima. The Catedral de Lima (also built 1535) and the Palacio Arzobispal (Archbishop's palace; current version opened in 1924) occupy another side of the Plaza. Across from that is the Palacio Municipal de Lima (City Hall, built in the 1930s).

Those Palacios have amazing balconies!

One block away is the Basilica de San Francisco as are the Catacumbas del Convento de San Francisco. A few days later, we would go down the Catacumbas with a few other cubers.

Jose's grandfather had stories about the various buildings. I wish I could understand Spanish! Our walk continued past Plaza Bolivar, next to the Congreso de la Republica, the Casa de la Moneda and other historic buildings. He took us to a touristy pedestrian street (very safe!), walking in front of the Basilica of Nuestra Senora de la Merced, built in 1614. This led to Plaza San Martin, again, flanked by old historic buildings.

He then took us to the Museo de Arte de Lima, and to the Parque de la Exposicion (both built for the 1872 Lima International Exposition). The Museo had an outdoor amphitheater, and some nice areas to sit. I bought a few bottles of water, and a small "cube meet" took place. The Parque de la Exposicion was fairly large. It had a few odd, artsy-looking buildings, a few small ponds, a puppet theatre, a larger theatre, and some green spaces.

By that time, it was late in the afternoon, and everyone was tired, so Jose called a Uber and we went back to their place.

This was a wonderful way to get initiated to that part of Lima. We did a lot of walking, but well worth it.

Temperature was low to mid 20s. It felt closer to Summer. Antoine was wearing a t-shirt and shorts, but Jose and his grandfather still had long pants and a light jacket.

June 24: day 1 of competition

Jose called us a Uber taxi. Got to the large tent. The tent was mostly setup. So we proceeded to setup the stage with the stations and timers. There were three groups: Paulo's, Jose's, and Natan's. Each had 8 stations. Each group had its own judges, scramblers, and runners.

Power was not universally available. The workers were still setting that up. It meant we started without the big displays. It also meant that as the competition went on, workers were installing large banners, and putting the finishing touches to the setup.

Of note: many banner were installed fairly high. The workers did not use tall step ladders to tied them up. Either someone tied them up from the outside, "walking" atop the tent structure, or they tied them up from the inside, by a person literally standing on the shoulders of another worker.

That first day, Antoine beat Feliks in the 3x3x3 (that is NOT something that happens very often). That first round of 3x3x3 saw 219 competitors.

Gianfranco Huanqui beat the 3x3x3 blindfold world record twice during that event: 18.46, and 18.31 seconds.

At the end of the first day, Juan Pablo beat the Guinness World Record by solving 81 Megaminx in 60 minutes. During the Guinness World Record event, literally at the same time, was the competition's multi-blind event. It made for an odd combination!

During the day. further down the plaza/park, some folkloric event was taken place. Different schools from Peru were taking part of it. It involved a contest in which the various schools pupils (teenager age) would dress as some ancient peruvian peoples.

June 25: day 2 of competition

From the Parque de la Muralla, one easily sees the 400+m high San Cristobal Hill, with its large wooden cross illuminated at night. At the bottom of the hill and moving up the hill is some very poor neighbourhoods. That hill is seen from a wide area within the city (and from Jose's grandparents' place as well).

Tourists are encouraged NOT to walk up the hill as it is not a safe neighbourhood. Instead they are asked to either hire a cab, or take a tour bus.

The second day of competition went well. Because it ran late, we ended up finishing the finals using the lights on within the venue.

Both days, lunch was provided to staff, and to "the celebrities".

I do not remember what we did for dinners... I think one night we went to Jose's and ate leftovers. The other... ??

June 26: Rimac; Catacombs; Costa del Verde

We had a free day after the competition. A good time for the locals to show us their city.

A few cubers came and met us at Jose's place: Manuel and Joseph. We walked back to the Parque de la Muralla (that is the day of the "camera incident"), and toured the convent, and the Catacumbas del Convento de San Francisco. It is believed bones of 25,000 people lie in the catacombs. The church and monastery were blessed in 1673.

After the tour, we met up with Fernando and his mother (Monica) at the Plaza Mayor de Lima (they are from Argentina). We then went to eat at a restaurant similar to the one we went in Chile, that had the "meat sampler" good for 3 or 4 people. We spent some time in the touristy area, then took a uber to Parque Kennedy, at the Parque Central de Miraflores.

The locals introduced us to "picarones", a fried dish you eat with lots of syrup. Yes, very sweet. Very good :-)

Miraflores is an affluent area of Lima. If you have money, that is where you live. That is where the nicer homes are. It is also walking distance to Costa Verde and the Pacific Ocean.

We walked to the Pacific Coast from Parque Kennedy. Then down the hill to the ocean... where we got our feet wet in Playa Waikiki. Some of us got more than their feet wet (mostly Antoine, but Joseph also got wet). Oddly enough, the water felt quite warm.

We walked back to the hill, up to the top of the cliff. Most people were tired, but Antoine, Joseph and I decided to walk past Parque del Amor and Parque Antonio Raimondi to the lighthouse by the cliff, about 1km away.

By the time we came back to the others, it was getting dark. It was also time to go to the Huanqui place of business for a BBQ supper hosted by the Huanqui family (Henry, Carol, and their sons). They hosted roughly 25-30 guests.

There, we were introduced to Pisco, some BBQ pork, sausages, tomatoes, etc. Enjoyed by all, others, even more, and some did not feel great the next day!

Chia, Colombia, June 27-29

Latin America Tour 2017 - Chia, Colombia: <https://goo.gl/photos/q9QvoJBdwf5hMnWy9>

June 27: from Peru to Colombia

Our flight from Lima to Bogoto via Cali left at a decent time (10:24 AM) from Lima. Antoine, Jay and I took that flight. The others took a direct flight from Lima to Bogota. We were to all meet at the airport in Bogota for the bus ride to Chia.

Our flight to Cali (Colombia) went as planned. When we went through customs, we gave them our Canadian passports. "Do you have any other passport?" the customs agent asked, in Spanish - she spoke no French or English. We told her that was all we had. She asked again, and we said no. She picked up the phone and called someone else. A few minutes later another agent came by, and asked us to follow him. We went to his desk, and he asked for our passports. As with the first agent, he asked us if we had any other passport. When we told him we did not (good thing Antoine understood Spanish; he was our spokesperson/translator), he told us there was a USD 85 entry fee for Canadians... PER Canadian. Paid is cash, please!

Good thing we had enough cash (Natan had warned us to carry US dollars everywhere we went). Apparently, this is reciprocal: Canada charges an entry tax for Colombians, and Colombia has an entry tax for Canadians. For every country, we had checked if we required a VISA, but we never thought of checking if there were any form of entry (or exit) taxation...

Our Cali to Bogota flight was delayed by almost two hours. It gave us the opportunity to get to know very well the small domestic wing of the Cali airport; surprisingly small (8 gates?) since Cali has a population of 2.4 M (I swear the international portion is larger). We even met a few cubers that were making the trip to Chia.

During our wait, we noticed the temperature in Cali was very hot and humid. Very hot, and very humid. Upon our return, I found out the average temperature for each and every month is 30 +/- 1 degree Celsius with an average of 2 meters of rain per year. It is 1,000 m above sea level.

We landed in Bogota a couple of hours late. Others were on the way back from a media interview downtown. A bus, provided by our hosts Wilson and Elizabet took us to Chia, slightly over an hour from the airport. It gave us a chance to learn a bit more about our hosts. Elizabet owns and runs a private school (the venue for the competition). Her school encourages the kids to solve the Rubik's cube. Wilson owns the local cubing store; he is also somehow connected to the school (he runs the school/manager?). David is a former student of Elizabet's school and takes photography. Felipe helps out; he is Wilson's son. Wilson also has a daughter and a younger son (Antonio). His wife Carmen was also involved.

Bogota. Capital of Colombia. 10.7 M. 2,640m above sea level.

Chia. Located just north of Bogota. 100,000 population. Essentially a suburb of Bogota. In the Chibcha language, Chia means "moon". It is evident through the city, as it has lots of moon-related monuments, and "luna" is a very common name for places, building, parks.

We went directly to a crêpe restaurant in some shopping center. We were treated to a wonderful meal.

We were then taken to our hotel in the old part of the city, where our hosts had reserved four rooms for us. The hotel was about 10 minutes walk to the venue.

For that trip, that was the first time Antoine and I did not share a room. Instead, Natan and I shared, whereas Antoine was with Jeremy.

June 28: day 1 of competition

Breakfast was included with our rooms. It was served fresh, and at the table in the downstairs/lounge area.

The venue was in the school's Coliseo, a fairly large sports venue, which sits eight thousand people. Lots of room for spectators! And lots of room for the 16 stations and 202 3x3x3 competitors.

Feliks beat many world records during that tour. Some many times. But in this competition, he broke the 3x3x3 average (5.97 seconds). To his credit, as soon as he broke it, because so many fans were trying to get to him, he went to the far side of the floor, and asked people to line up. He then started to give autographs, and allow people to take pictures with him.

This calmed down many a fan, and allowed the competition to continue, almost uninterrupted.

This is one of the reasons Feliks is a cubing living legend -- class all around!

This is also the competition where Antoine could have got his World Record back. In the first four solves of one of his heats, he got 10.84, 11.52, 9.38 and 9.73... then a 13.06. All he needed was roughly an 11 second solve or better, and he had the world record back... :-(Maybe another time...

Throughout the competition, Elizabet kept bringing us Colombian snacks. I do not know what they were... other than they were good :-)

The organisers had also printed large banners of the 5 celebrities: Antoine, Feliks, Jeremy, Jay, and Natan. That was a nice touch!

Antoine again, got to participate in a few media interviews... all in Spanish. He certainly got some good practice speaking the language.

At the end of the first day of competition, we were taken to a place that served typical Colombian food. Sandwiches they served were HUGE, and contained multiple types of meat: bacon, beef, pork, egg, then a few veggies like tomato and lettuce. With of course, a bed of fries on the side!

Elizabet's husband, and her daughter joined us at dinner. So did Wilson's wife and three kids.

No, I did not finish my sandwich (but Antoine did).

June 29: day 2 of competition

Chia had a few nice touches. The medals had different imprints of the moon, depending which podium they were for. The posters (already mentioned). The Colombian snacks. The venue was nice and big, but not overwhelming. Real podiums (different heights for bronze, silver, and gold). And Antonio (Wilson's youngest) slowly warmed up to me. We were offered some "vests" with the local flag's colours.

It was too bad we had no downtime in Colombia. Arrived one evening. Two days of competitions, then leave the next day very early.

That was unfortunate. We still have great memories of Chia.

Merida, Venezuela, June 30-July 4

Latin America Tour 2017 - Merida, Venezuela:
<https://goo.gl/photos/kbikk3wYqptGCJT6>

June 30: split; long trip to Merida

This was where the group split up: Natan went back home to his family in Arequipa. Jay went back home to Australia. Antoine, myself, and Oliver went to Venezuela. James, Feliks and Jeremy went to Guatemala.

Venezuela. Merida.

Venezuela. A country on the brinks of civil war. Our government was advising us not to go unless we really had to. It was warning us that the Colombian/Venezuelan border was very dangerous, as are the roads close to the borders. It was also telling us that the international airport in Caracas as well as the road from the airport to Caracas is very dangerous.

So what did we do? We used roads at the Colombian/Venezuelan border, and ended up spending one night in Caracas!

Inflation in Venezuela was 1000% last year. Their money is quickly losing the little value it currently has. It is very unstable.

Merida. One of the principal cities of the Venezuelan Andes, it has a population of 350,000 (metro). It has the longest and highest cable car in the world. It is located in the valley of the Chama River in the Andes, at an elevation of 1,600 meters.

Since Merida is physically isolated from much of the rest of the country, has a better economy, and because of its distance to Caracas (800+km), the violence due to the civil unrest is not as high as in other cities in Venezuela. Still, the military is ever present - there is a "checkpoint" at all entrances to the city.

Our host was Oscar. We met him at the competition in Chia. He was to take care of us, from the moment we left Chia, to the moment we would land in the Dominican Republic. We were also staying with him and his family in Merida. We were in good hands.

Our plane was leaving Bogota at 6:05 AM. Plan was to land in Cucuta (Colombia), walk across the border, then drive to Merida. Sounds simple enough. We had a one hour drive to Bogota from Chia, so we planned to leave Chia at 3:00 AM. We went to bed closer to 1:00... that gave us little time to sleep.

Wilson and Elizabet had made arrangements for the Chia bus to bring the three of us to the airport. It picked us up a bit later than planned. But we did decent time to the airport, where we were to meet Oscar. We got dropped off, and waited. After a while, we texted Oscar. He told us he was on his way, and to wait at the Avianca terminal. He still was not showing up, so contacted him again.

Turns out there are two terminals: the main one, and the older, domestic, Avianca one. After asking for directions, still in the dark (there were street lights, but not great lights, and no sidewalks), we headed for that second terminal, on the side of the road with cars coming towards us. We almost gave up, then noticed it.

Oscar was waiting for us.

That was definitely an older terminal than the international one. Smaller, older, not as roomy, not as nice. But functional.

We got in line, checked-in, checked in our luggage, passed security, got to our gate, and boarded the plane (I do not remember sitting down before, so we got there right on time!).

Landed in Cucuta at 7:20 AM, then took a cab to the bus terminal. It was raining a bit. First rain we got in the tour (people said it rained in Lima, but it was a very fine mist, and only for a few minutes). Walked around the terminal (outside; not much of an inside portion). I am glad Oscar was with us, and I did not feel that secure -- not much lighting, the odd character walking by, trying to sell you stuff, area not very "picked up", etc. We asked Oscar what we were waiting for. He said we were waiting "for the others", who took an overnight bus from Bogota to Cucuta.

That is when we learned we were going to travel with another 8 or so people to Merida. The plan was to wait for them, then take a bus to the border (1.5 hours), walk across the border to finally take a minivan from the border to Merida, another few hours.

Rain had stopped. We found a place to sit, and eat something. About 30 minutes later, their bus came in. They were cubers that had participated in the Chia competition. Oscar started to talk to a few locals about buses, then he took our luggage put it in the back of a bus, and told us to board it. As soon as the bus was full, we left.

As we left, some one-legged guy started to go up and down the aisle. Then he got off, and someone else came on. That person started to preach about something. It was about this coffee he was selling. After 10-15 minutes of "preaching" he went up and down the aisle selling his coffee.

Then he got off.

A few minutes later, some lady was picked up. She was selling chocolate. As she walked down the aisle of the bus, she gave some to most people. Then she walked up the aisle and either collected the chocolate, or money.

Vendors like that are common in parts of South America. We had a few more vendors during that one bus trip alone.

An hour and a half later, the bus reached the Puerto Santander, a border town with Venezuela, and we got off. We walked a few hundred meters and went to the Colombian Immigration office. We waited outside with our luggage. Only a person or two would go in at a time. 5-10 or more minutes later, they would come out, and the next person would go in. Antoine and I (and Oliver?) went in with Oscar about 20-30 minutes after our arrival. Oscar talked to them, Antoine took his cube out, did a solve or two, they asked a few questions, and we left.

One of the questions was "are you coming back to Colombia". We had said no, since we were going in Venezuela, a few hundred meters further...

Coming out of the customs office, we did not wait for the others, and proceeded walking towards the border. It was a narrow street with un-interrupted shops all along. Most were one storey, old, not well maintained. Some looked like they were temporary, even tents. Many has tin walls/roofs. Not very inviting. I was glad

Oscar was with us, as he knew how things worked, and how to handle things. I also did not take my camera out, for not attracting any attention (as if my 6 foot 2, 200 pounds stature with brown hair would not!).

We walked a few hundred meters, then Oscar told us this was the place to exchange our money. We walked into a small shop. In front of the counter were a few garbage bags: they were full of money. Literally. Huge garbage bags full of 100 bills of Venezuelan Bolivars (Bs). Oscar walked out of the shop his back pack full of Bs. Antoine and I ended up with a nice stack of them (something like 15,000 Bs) for the small amount of Colombian Pesos we had left. Worth about \$10.

Black market exchange like that offers a much better rate than the official government exchange rate. Venezuela is also in the middle of hyperinflation. A few months after getting back, the stack of Bs we brought back with us has already devalued considerably...

We kept walking towards the border; it was not too far away. The border is for pedestrians only. It is a one-lane bridge over a small river. The road is separated lengthwise by a rope. People going into Venezuela on the right, people come into Colombia on the left. There are guards; I do not remember which nationality, but I would guess Venezuelan. They randomly checked people's passports. We obviously stood out, so we were asked to show our passports. Antoine and Oliver had their cubes ready for demos. We got through, and got to the Venezuelan border office. It had a note telling us their registration systems (i.e. computers) were down. Apparently, a tree fell on one of the lines; it would take a day or two to fix.

It meant we could not register at that border office! We could still enter Venezuela, but without registration, we could not leave by plane from Caracas...! It was OK for the other Colombians traveling with us, but not for us.

Oscar talked with some officials. They suggested going back to Cucuta (yes, an hour and a half away) to the San Antonio border crossing to get registered, then come back here. Antoine, Oliver, and I were at the mercy of Oscar. He decided to bring our luggage to the waiting mini-van/combi that was to take us and the other Colombians/travelers to his place in Merida.

So we did. We left our luggage with the Colombians, and they proceeded, with our stuff, to drive to Merida.

Then we (Antoine, Oliver, myself, Oscar) crossed back into Colombia (illegally, since we had our passport stamped to say we had left Colombia), hired a taxi to bring us to the San Antonio crossing in Cucuta (an hour and a half away).

We got there without any problems. We were dropped off a few hundred meters from the Venezuelan immigration office. Walked to the office, and got our passports stamped, pretending we walked into Venezuela at the San Antonio border. Instead, we walked back to the taxi, and it took us back to our first border town. He dropped us fairly close to the pedestrian bridge to cross into Venezuela.

Cross over the bridge we did. Again, were asked to show our passports. The border guard then started to ask pointed questions to Oscar -- like how come we were here, but our passports were stamped as having crossed at the San Antonio crossing, an hour and a half away. Oscar tried to explain, but the border guard did not seem too impressed.

Oscar then noticed the original guard we had talked to 3 or 4 hours earlier. He recognized us (one advantage of standing out!) and told the border guard our story, and said he had suggested we go to the San Antonio crossing to get our

registered.

We were then let go, with a warning not to do that again.

On the Venezuelan side, Oscar quickly found a driver and a car. Either he knows people, or he has done that a number of times. Or both!

Aside: after coming back from our trip, as I researched the location of where we crossed, I found out many of the border crossings, especially the pedestrian ones, had been closed in 2015. Some started to re-open late in 2016. This one included.

Colombians can easily cross into Venezuela. There is apparently some type of arrangements between the two countries. That might explain why, at the crossings, most people did not get their passports checked. If you are not asked to show your papers, you simply keep walking.

So Oscar hire that car. It was an older Hyundai Elantra or something like that. Oliver, Antoine and I sat in the back. I had my back pack with me, but Antoine's and Oliver's were in the trunk. Both Antoine and Oliver kept a cube out. Border guards liked them.

We headed off to Merida, on that very narrow paved road (no shoulders to speak of), with tall grass and trees on either side of it. Bridges we would cross, for the first 30 minutes or so, would always be single lane bridge, so you had to make sure no cars were coming the other way... which was rare and that road did not have much traffic on it.

That was good, because the driver would be going 120, sometimes up to 140 km/h. Then he would put his seat belt. And we would kind of look for ours...

He did not drive like that very long, because he would reach a "check point". We had to go through a lot of army check points. They would let locals go straight through, but, most of the time, they stopped us. We had to get out, show our passports, and explain our reasons to be in Venezuela. We had to show the contents of our bags. Antoine and Oliver would make sure to demo speedcube solves. Most of the time, that worked. A few times, Oscar had to do more explanations. One time, they took him into an adjoining building. He was there a good five minutes. He told us he talked to their supervisor, then they let us go.

We counted twelve check point. We had to get out of the car for nine of them.

We got to Oscar's place well into the evening. Maybe 7 or 8 PM. That was after picking up Kevin at the airport. Oscar's family own essentially a full block. He lives with his parents, and his sister and her daughter. Next to their house is a gym, then another house (does anyone live there? do not think so... almost like a "guest house"). Around the corner is Oscar's aunt and uncle, and his cousin. Next to that is a garage his father runs. At the corner is a meat market, and a bakery, where is grandmother and aunt sell cakes (they gave us samples!). Attached to that is his grandparents house. A few more businesses around the block.

If you walk the streets around the perimeter, all you see is the high wall (8-10 feet) all around, and the doors for the businesses/houses. You would not guess it is all owned by one family.

It does not look upscale. It looks like any other neighbourhood we drove by. Across his house is an elementary two storey school. Are they rich? They certainly do not show it. Are they poor. Not as much as some. I would say they are middle class.

More on the neighbourhood later.

So we get to Oscar's place. The gym is still opened as the loud music is being played. The doors are wide open; you see inside the gym.

He announces we are at his place. Antoine and I look at each other. He brings us to the door passed the gym, and shows us the house. He offers Antoine and I the one bedroom, with its own toilet! That house had another three or four bedrooms, and a kitchen. That is where all the other cubers that came with us on the bus are staying. Some were there.

Oscar says we had the choice of staying there, or at his parents' house next door.

We head off to his parents house, two doors down. Large living room, with a smooth, hard surface (with a drain!) for a floor, and an opened skylight (translucent roof line, literally opened all around to let the air circulate; apparently not that long ago, it was completely opened. It is built with eaves-trough around the skylight so that when it rains, the water drains down the eaves trough. If it rains too hard, and the eaves overflow, water runs down on the floor into the drain...). Side dining table, and kitchen. Oscar's room has a king size bed, and a desk with a computer and a 48 inch monitor!

We have to mention that literally, from one corner of the living room to the other was a hamac. Double size. It hung from one corner of the other of the living room. Apparently, this is not uncommon.

He offers us his room, which we took. Oliver, Antoine, and I would share the King size bed!

Oscar lives with his parents, his sister Andreitha and her daughter Isabella (3 years old?).

His mother served us dinner. She served us rice, eggs, plantains, and other things. Plantains look like bananas, but taste more like potatoes. They are a fruit. We had them in various dishes throughout, mostly in northern South America. The table would sit at most eight people. Others had eaten already.

His parents do not speak a word of English. I do not think his sister speaks it either. Most of the other cubers did not speak English. There was therefore a lot of Spanish being spoken. Antoine must have been loving it!

His father rarely spoke. He was quiet. His mom was always busy doing something. She made sure we were at ease, and that we had what we needed. Very welcoming, as was his sister. Even Isabella warmed up. I guess it helped when I took her and lifted her up to the ceiling...

The rest of the evening, we got to know each other, and got ready for the competition!

July 1: competition day

This was a one day weekend competition. It was held at Hotel Venetur Merida, in a hall next to the hotel's outdoor swimming pool. It easily accommodated the 6 cubing stations and the 39 3x3x3 competitors.

The hotel seemed to be an up-scale hotel; nice outdoor swimming pool, large

dining room, gorgeous views of the surrounding mountains, and nice side-room/building as the venue for the competition. It had a number of armed guards from the federal police force, making everyone feel safe and relaxed.

Oscar had printed flags of all represented countries. He had made very nice medals for the winners. And a trophy for the winner of the 3x3x3 finals. For us three foreigners/LA Tour Guests, he gave each of us a tuque + mitts gloves that had "Merida" written on them.

Competition went well. Temperature was a perfect mid-20s. Doors were always opened. The stations were setup against a wall of windows, so taking pictures was a bit tricky, especially that flashes are not permitted during competitions.

Oscar's parents brought lunch for us, his family, and the organisers. It was essentially (chicken?) fried rice. We ate it outside, at a site of an area set up for a BBQ of some sort.

During lunch, one of the Colombian cubers got Antoine and Oliver to go and pose for a picture by the pool with three gorgeous girls. I do not know what he told the girls, but that was good fun. I think they enjoyed it as well!

Finals were held outside. Sun was getting low, and lighting was not that great inside the hall. Antoine ended up winning all events but one -- 2x2x2. And I ended up getting a medal... for the oldest solver.

After the competition, we continued their tradition: eat papas fritas at Papa Joe's. The papas fritas reminded us of poutine: it was made out with fries, ground beef, cheese, corn, and some gravy. Each serving was good for two people.

We got at the restaurant well after dark. One whole side of the place is completely opened to outside. The place was full. But Oscar, his father and his uncle talked to the staff, and within a few minutes, we had a corner of the place for all of us. Oscar left to pickup Alexandra; we got to meet his girlfriend.

When driving in Venezuela (and Peru, from what we could tell), road signs, traffic signals are only a suggestion (unless you have an accident). People slow down at red lights, and if it is safe to do so, usually proceed. There are no seat belt laws (like everywhere we went to in South America). More than once (and in other countries as well), we would sit four people on the back seat of a car. Or one would lay across the seat on top of the others. In Merida, we often had people on the back of Oscar's pickup truck. Authorities do not mind -- we have gone through check points (there is one as you enter Merida itself) with people in the back of Oscar's truck.

We also saw someone driving a small motorcycle with an umbrella (for the sun) on top of it. A small child was with him. On another occasion, we saw a car with someone holding some type of bottle that must have contained gas because had a tube leading to the engine.

As Oscar said: "Only in Venezuela!". But I don't know... we saw some odd stuff in China...

Back at Oscar's place. At some point, Andreitha was counting some money from the competition. I pointed out it reminded me of the moving "The Godfather" when the Don was counting the money. It made for a nice picture, with Antoine handling it all...

Weather. Throughout, weather was fairly warm during the day. People wore light clothes. The pool was full on competition day. Not hot, but very warm and dry, so

not heavy.

July 2nd: family gardens; SanCocho

The kitchen was a busy place at Oscar's mother's place. So was his mother. She prepared breakfast not only for her family and for us, but for the other "invited cubers" (another 6+1 cuber? "+1" because one was the mother of one of them). There was Kevin from Caracas, Edouardo, Giovanny (wanted to practice his English), Dennis & <girlfriend> (same name as Oscar's cousin next door to his house), Jose & his mother, Diego, and at least one more, maybe two. She was making sure everyone was well taken care of.

Oscar had talked about going to the cable car. We were looking forward to it.

It was a bit of a leisurely morning. After eating and talking with some of the others, I mentioned the backyard to Oscar. He mentioned his father had a garage back there, and offered to show us.

We got out the back door, and barely made it to the garage, when we noticed all those fruit trees. We started talking about them, then his mother joined. Most trees had fruits in them. It looks like very dry soil, and fairly dry climate. Temperature when we were there was maybe mid-twenties, and dry. The backyard reflected that. I did not know most of the fruits in the trees. Antoine knew some of them. There were lime trees (with lime), mango trees, manga trees, passion fruit trees, and some others trees and fruits we had never heard of. A number of different types of cactus as well.

They made us taste a fresh passion fruit. It was like eating vinegar!! Oscar's mother said she wished she had a camera when I tried it! Then her sister-in-law prepared passion fruit out of it -- that was good.

During that garden "visit", Oscar's grandfather came out. He showed us his shop, the tools he made and what he does in it. He makes metal doors, windows, frames. Some plane and simple, some decorative. He also makes metal bars to put in front of windows, all from the same basic material: sheet metal. He still work in it on a daily basis.

His grandmother also came out. We got to meet the extended family, and what they were doing. All of them working within the "compound" they live in, performing different duties within the various businesses.

Our quick tour of the backyard turned into a couple of hours of show & tell. Very informative, it also showed us how they live.

Oscar, Oliver, Antoine and I headed into town. We picked up Alexandra and drove to the cable car terminal. The 2nd longest (12.5 km) and the highest (from 1,640m to 4,765m, with snow at the highest altitude) in the world. We got see it go into the fog up the mountain. Took a number of pictures, then had lunch at the base.

Then Oscar mentioned it was time to leave. We looked at each other... and asked him about the cable car. "It's closed" he said. "It closed half an hour ago".

It closes at 1:00 PM for the ascent. To give a chance for people to go up, then come down before it closes on the descent phase (4:00 PM?). So we missed it... by 30-45 minutes :-(Obviously, we were disappointed. We had been carrying warmer clothes with us...

We thought we could come back the next morning, to make sure we would experience it. Tomorrow would be Monday. The Teleferico is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. So that was it. We just got teased...

But that was OK. There were other things to see and do.

We went to a local market. Being a Sunday, most shops were closed. Venezuela, like many South American countries, do not have "Sunday shopping" like we do in Canada. They are more like we were 40 years ago: most shops are closed on Sundays. Still, it gave us an idea of what they shops look like.

We ended up buying some hard liquor with a licorice taste. For something like \$1.50 for a 26 ounce bottle. And poor Oliver, later that night (or early the next day?) he had it on the bed, and it rolled down to the floor and broke...

After the "market", Oscar took us downtown, to Heladeria Coromoto, an ice cream parlour that has the most different number of flavours of ice cream in the world (860), according to Guinness World Record. On any given day, they offer 60 to 75 different flavours.

We then went to the Plaza Bolivar de Merida and the Cathedral de Merida (1803), and walked around.

We returned to Oscar's house, to go to his grandparents, where his grandmother had prepared San Cocho for his family and the entire group.

San Cocho is a combination soup/stew. Their version is cooked in a large pot, over a fire, for three hours. It looks like a thick soup, with meat and vegetables inside: potatoes, plantains, corn (still on the cob), chicken, etc. It is eaten in a bowl, like stew and soup would be eaten.

Oscar's parents, grandparents, uncle's family, the cubers, were all present. It was a good family dinner.

July 3: Merida to Caracas

The next morning, we awoke to some music coming from outside... or next door. It was Monday. Beginning of the work week. Next door is the gym. The music was coming from the gym.

I was the first one to get up (our of the three of us). Oscar had gone in town somewhere. I got up, ate, and went for a short walk around the block (the block that Oscar's family seems to own). The gym was opened. Around the corner the garage was also opened. There was also a meat shop, and next to it, the bakery, and Oscar's grandfather's shop -- he was working in it. I also run into his mother. She pointed to my camera and said something, about not making it too obvious, and to keep it close to myself. Across their house is a two storey elementary school. That is where Oscar went.

A bit later that morning, Oscar's mother took me for a short walk to the church and the plaza across from it. The plaza had a number of plants around it, including large cacti. Although she does not speak a word of English (and I only speak very few words in Spanish) she showed me around. That was appreciated.

Got back to the house. Antoine and Oliver were still sleeping. I guess they were tired! They got up just in time for lunch.

Oscar's father was not around. We asked about him. Oscar simply stated he was at his dialysis treatment...

Our plane to Caracas was leaving at 4:30 PM. That was the USD 27 plane (yes, flights are cheap in Venezuela!) We had to pack up and make it to the airport. Others left at different times, by different means. Alexandra was coming with us, so we had to go and pick her up. That was her first flight out of Venezuela; Oscar was taking her to Puerto Plata after the Santo Domingo competition.

Lots of pictures taken and good byes were exchanged before we left. We packed up our luggage in the back of the truck. Kevin and ? also went in the back. The airport was maybe an hour away. We drove by a number of stands on the side of the road. I noticed a lot of brown sugar to be sold (Oscar's mother had shown us theirs: a block of dark sugar, where you scrape off the sugar as you need it).

The night before, we had given them a maple leaf shaped bottle of maple syrup. They were showing us a different type of sugar.

The Merida airport is very small. Oscar insisted we get our luggage "wrapped" with what it looks like saran wrap, but in a much larger scale. Much safer, he told us.

The airport must have only one waiting room?! Quite crowded. We walked on the tarmac to where the plane was waiting for us. A DC-9. LASER airline has three of them. Not many DC-9s flying anymore. Not much leg room: my knees were against the row in front of me.

But for USD 27, what does one expect?!

We did notice a number of old planes at the end of the runway (past the runway). Old plane they no longer use, and could not bother to dispose of?

Flight was uneventful. Got to Caracas (800km further) an hour later. Picked up our luggage, and headed outside. Oscar hired a taxi to get to our hotel for the night. He was negotiating with a few of them. I think we were one more than they usually take, so they wanted him to take two taxis? We ended up sitting four in the back seat of an SUV. They were also eager to take our luggage and carry it for us and put it in the taxi.

A bit of an odd behaviour. A bit aggressive. I guess they needed the money...

On the way to the hotel, we were following an army soldier carrier truck full of soldiers. At the hotel, Oscar told us to stay inside. Not to go out. After what we had been told, we were not going to go outside, even if it looked lush and gorgeous.

Just not safe.

We were at the Marriott. Oscar called one of his friends. He brought us fast food dinner. We could not see much outside, but we knew it was nice. How nice? We found out the next morning.

July 4: Caracas to Santo Domingo

We got up, looked out the window, and though we were in some paradise island. We were on the 14th floor, so good views. Lush exotic plants, swimming pools, the ocean with sailboats, etc. Then we realized where we really were.

Sad for the people of Venezuela. With the tourism industry virtually dead, they are missing on a lot of revenues.

We went down and toured the hotel. Not many patrons. The dining room had one or two couples. That's it. The lobby was very quiet.

Took a taxi to the airport. Oscar had warned us not to let anyone take our luggage. We were flying LASER airline again. And again, we were boarding a DC-9.

Aside: considering we were in a major capital city, and stayed at a 5-star hotel, \$80 for both Antoine and I for the two taxi rides, the supper and the overnight is not too bad...

Our flight out was also uneventful. Until we got to Santo Domingo: we got off the plane and proceeded to the gate. But there was a line up. That is when we were told we had to pay airport usage fee. USD 25 per person.

Again, good thing we had some US dollars with us...

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, July 4-6

Latin America Tour 2017 - Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic:
<https://goo.gl/photos/j5Et9gcnEqwvQJNv5>

July 4: Beach; Dominican SanCocho

Once landed, and paid the airport usage fees, we all proceeded to the luggage claims area, then to the exit to meet our new host, Nestor.

Oscar and Alexandra were renting a car for the few days they would be in the Dominican Republic. They stayed with us, ensuring we met Nestor. Nestor and Oscar knew each other. They are both WCA delegates, from neighbouring countries, and they had collaborated before.

This is where we each went our own direction. Oscar and Alexandra one way. Us with Nestor. We would see them again a number of times before we left.

So we met Nestor and Gabriela. Gabriela helps out during competitions. She wanted to greet us with Nestor. They drove us directly from the airport to the beach!

Yes, it was warm weather. But not humid. I guess that is one thing the Dominican Republic is known for. It was a Tuesday, so quieter... on a quiet beach to start with. The beach had shade tents, chairs, a menu we could order from. It also had lots of sand. Looked like you could walk for miles in either directions. It was lined with palm tree. A reef was protecting the beach from strong waves. It was wonderful!

Feliks, Jeremy were already there (James was sick, resting; more on that later). They had spent most of the day (had lunch at the beach). Marlene, Nestor's wife, was there as well. We got a cold drink, and Antoine found a bathing suit (one of his shorts?) and went in the water. I only went up to just above my knees.

We could now say we got our feet wet in the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Carabean :-). The Pacific and the Carabean were warm. The Atlantic was much cooler.

We stayed until dinner time. The guys went up to the edge of the reef. Nestor showed them some reef animals. He had also ensured they had shoes, as the reef has lots of sharp edges. Oliver found that out the hard way: he had flip-flops, and lost footing. His bare foot went on the reef, and he got cut.

Shortly after, Jeremy took his freesbee out (he carried a freesbee everywhere he went). Because of his cut, Oliver stayed out of that game.

At the end of the afternoon, we drove back to Santo Domingo. Nestor had arranged two locations for the group to stay: an apartment, on the edge of Ciudad Colonial (aka Zona Colonial) or at his place. Feliks, Jeremy and James were already staying at the apartment, owned by Nestor's family, but only used occasionally. Oliver joined them, and Antoine & I would go and take over the kids' room at Nestor & Marlene's.

Because there was so many of us, Nestor had made arrangement to borrow his mother's car (I think that is who's car it was!). He had used it to pick us up

from the airport. For the way back from the beach, we first all went to the apartment, then only Antoine & I with Nestor and Marlene to the house (in two vehicles).

They live into a modern apartment, on the main floor. They have three bedrooms on half the apartment, and the living quarters on the other half (a door separates the two halves). The living room has patio door to get in. Its window is completely opened to the outside (it has bars to stop people from coming in).

After bringing in our suitcases, we headed out to dinner at one of the cubers' parents place. The cuber's parents have their own house, and a modest backyard. It was the mother's birthday, and the host had decided to invite many cubers, and a few friends, to a SanCocho Dominicano! Yes, how co-incidental, as we had the Venezuelan version of it a few days prior!

It was very similar to the Venezuelan one. A difference was that he had rice on the side (he encouraged you to put it inside your sancocho). He also had mangoes on the side.

Which is better? Both are good. Same idea, but slightly different. And both wonderful.

All organizers of the cubing competition were there. So were Oscar and Alexandra. There was close to 30 people at his place. It was a really nice touch for the parents to invite all of us to such a gathering!

The host happened to be a doctor. We talked about James. I showed him which medication I had taken with me on the trip, in case we would get sick. At the end of the evening, he suggested a few of what I had for James, so I gave some to the others at the apartment to take to James. He insisted James should eat something, not just drink water and juice.

July 5: competition day; drive-through bar

This was our last stop in our Latin American Cubing Tour. But we had two more weeks of travelling, and our supply of clean clothes was getting low. We also were staying in a house where there might be a washing machine. So we asked if we could wash or get our clothes washed. This was good perfect timing as Marlene mentioned this was the day her cleaning lady would come by, so we left our clothes by the washing machine; by the time we came back, they were in the back room drying :-)

James was still sick. He had barely gotten out of bed for the last few days. Something he caught in Guatemala, he thought. He was so sick it did not come to the competition.

The competition was at Galeria 360, a shopping center in the city. It was held close to the main entrance, in an area usually used to showcase products, or do presentations. Stations were on a stage, in the middle and around it. The place was able to accommodate the 50 3x3x3 competitors, and the ten cubing stations on the stage.

The shopping center looks just like any modern shopping centers in North America. Very roomy, clean, inviting. Nestor has a virtual cube store, so brought cubes to sell. He also brought his personal collection of cubes to display. As he ran the competition, Marlene would take care of selling the cubes.

Nestor works for an animation studio. He works with 3D animation. His wife, Marlene, used to be a ballet dancer, but got injured due to an accident, and cannot dance ballet anymore. She does pole dancing (no, not in bars), and a number of other occupations. They have two children (a boy and a girl). They are therefore quite busy!

The competition had a slow start. Some things were not quite ready. It did not affect the outcome.

Lunch was provided to the organisers and to the "celebrities". We had pizza -- I think this is the meal we had the most often during the Latin America Cubing tour. It is such an international meal, often with a local flavour...

A local artist had also made small gift for all "celebrities": their name spelled with a wire, on top of a wood bottom. A holder for a cube was part of the name plate. Each one of us received one.

The finals, like most LA competitions, was a head to head between Feliks and Antoine. You can guess the outcome.

The competition was only the beginning of that "day". It was done, and it was supper time, but we were about to get bit more of a taste of Santo Domingo.

We wrapped up, and put things together. I "sacrificed myself" (not that I minded ;-)) to go with Marlene for a drink. When we got back it was virtually time to put things in the various cars/trucks. Which we did. Then we needed to eat someplace. It was early evening.

We ended up going back to the food court, and ordered something local. Nestor and Marlene were telling us about "drive through bars". At first we thought it was more like a drive through liquor/beer store. They kept saying bars. So, on the way to check James at the apartment, must have been 10 or 11 PM by then, we did go through a drive through bar. You drive to the window, order a drink, they open it, you take it, and continue on driving! Yes, "drink and drive". The locals do it all the time: if they get pulled over in the early hours in the morning, the cops let you go if your are drinking. If you are not, they assume you are on drugs... Talk about logical explanation!

I do not think this will catch in Canada!

We get to the apartment where James, Feliks, Oliver and Jeremy were staying. James was not great. To make things worse, there was no more water coming out of the taps. Santo Domingo, like many cities in South America, does not have a steady supply of water to all its dwellings. That is why most people have a reserve of water. When water is available, they ensure the reserve is kept full, for when the city cannot supply water (this usually happen for short periods of time).

James had to leave the next day, so he had to get better. Nestor and Marlene had a talk with him. She told him to get ready, because he was coming to the house with us in an hour or so...

Meanwhile we tried to figure out if we could do something about the water issue. After a while, we decided to go to a bar in the vicinity. We drove a few blocks away, and found one that was open. Walked in. Small place, not too smoky, and a live band, playing late 70s early 80s music! We stayed for a drink, then left. At the car, we started talking, and it looked like we did not pay the bill! Nestor (or was it Marlene?) walked back and talked to the people at the bar. Apparently we did pay, so all was good...

They also payed some guy on the street to thank him for making sure the cars were kept safe. Then they had a bit of a discussion with him as to how much they should give him (he did not think he got enough).

It certainly was entertaining.

We got back to the apartment. James was still in bad shape. Has barely enough energy to move. We gathered his stuff, and brought him with us to Nestor's place. By that time, it was in the early hours of the morning. Marlene brought him some chicken broth in his room so he would have something to eat. We only had a few hours of sleep before getting up: we needed to get up early in the morning to go back to the venue, then see a bit of the old city before picking up the others at 11:00 AM to go to the airport.

July 6. Zona Colonial; departure

We got up nice and early. Nestor even earlier. James had eaten the chicken broth Marlene had given him. We decided to let him sleep some more: his flight was leaving 6 hours later than ours (Feliks, Antoine, myself). Jeremy would come with us at the airport as his flight was leaving an our or two after ours. Nestor would come back, and bring Oliver and James to the airport for their late afternoon flight.

Antoine and I went with Nestor to the venue to put away some tables, etc. We had said our goodbyes to Marlene, so she could rest, and take care of James.

The plan was to go for a quick tour of the Zona Colonial before picking up the others and head to the airport. Nestor made a short detour to show us the Chinese Market. That is an area of town, close to downtown, and close to under some highways. Must be a few blocks long. Stores side by side. Vendor on the street. The back of trucks full of goods. Huge bags, on the sidewalk, full of goods for sale. Table after table. And of course, your traditional Chinese "arch" over the street.

Too bad we did not have a few more hours. Next time!

We got to Zona Colonial a few minutes later. The parking lot was full, but there was a spot outside of it. Nestor asked if it was OK to park there a few minutes, to allow us a quick walking tour of Zone Colonial. The attendant responded something, and off we were.

Nestor took us to a number of sites within Zona Colonial. Places like Pantheon de la Patria, originally built as a Jesuit Church from 1714-1746. Today, it serves as the final resting place of the Republic's most honoured citizens. Places like Parque Colon (Columbus Park), where a monument in honour of Don Cristobal Colon was erected in 1887 (still standing). As with so many monuments of Chrisopher Columbus, a native scout is portrayed with him. That park also features el Catedral Primade de America, originally built in 1514. The front of the current structure was built from 1540 to 1544. Its real name is "Catedral Metropolitana Santa Maria de la Encarnacion". Additions were done to it multiple times, and has served many purposes, from slaughterhouse to a prison!

We walked around Zona Colonial for about 30 minutes, then headed back to the car, to see someone writing Nestor a parking ticket! He talked to the officer, then to the attendant (a different one than when we arrived). The attendant shrugged his shoulders.

The ticket for was \$1000 (roughly USD 20).

We headed off to the apartment, and picked up Feliks and Jeremy. Oliver was to come with us, but it was decided he would stay (for now).

We started leaving the city to leave to the airport. Then got pulled over by the police. In Venezuela, we were told police officers were not very well paid. They often pulled you over in the hope of finding something wrong with either your registration, your car, your license, or anything else. Instead of giving you a fine, they often took a bribe. That was extra money for them, and you would continue, avoiding the fine.

Apparently, the same happens in the Dominican Republic, and some of the other countries of that area. So the officer asks to see registration, drivers license, etc. Unfortunately, Nestor's driver's license expired a few days prior!

Negotiations started. The young police officer knew Nestor had to take us to the airport. He knew we were short of time, so took advantage of that. Nestor plead with him. He emptied his wallet. I gave him my remaining pesos. Feliks gave him some. Then the cop was happy. He was getting away with \$400 (USD 8), and we were on our way to the airport.

On the way to the airport, we had to go through tolls. Luckily, Nestor had enough change lying around for the toll, and we got to the airport with enough time to check-in and catch our overnight flight to London (via Frankfurt, Germany).

We found out later that James took his plane that afternoon. We saw him 10 days later at the World Championships in Paris. He told us it took him a few days, but recovered fairly quickly.

The surprise in all of this is that Oliver got sick. He got a severe dose of diarrhea, and had to postpone leaving for a day. His flight was through the USA, and, being from New Zealand, he required a transit VISA, which he was not aware of. It took him a day to get it, he got better, and headed off home via the USA and Dubai.

Luckily for both James and Oliver, Nestor and Marlene took well care of them. Of all of us, really.

Throughout our Latin America Cubing Tour, our hosts were great. They, the organisers, and the cubers and their supporters made this trip a trip of a lifetime. It would be hard to repeat that experience.

London, England, July 7-10

Post Latin America Tour 2017 - London Open 2017; London, England:
<https://goo.gl/photos/8VvjUu5ozsWXqWEo8>

London. Population (metro) of 13.8 M. Capital of Great Britain.

July 7: Canary Wharf; London Bridge; St-Paul's Cathedral

Still in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Left in the afternoon. Took at overnight flight to Frankfurt, Germany (more than 9.5 hour flight). After a layover of 2.5 hours, we landed in London's Heathrow airport at 8:40 AM. We went through customs fairly quickly, once we figured out citizens from Commonwealth countries had special privileges. At least we think that is what it was: we were standing in the middle of a long line when some official said something about Australians. We asked "what about Canadians", and we were shown a much, much shorter line :-)

After picking up our luggage, we parted from Feliks. He was trying to figure out if he could go to the B&B he had rented, or if he had to wait elsewhere. Antoine and I found where the subway was, and made our way to Canary Wharf, where our hotel was.

We had previously purchased an "Oyster Card". Those are cards tourists can buy, and allow you unlimited use of the subway, as long as you are within the center of the city, for the equivalent of 3 fares/day. As we were going to go back and forth in the subway for a few days, we figure it was a good deal.

Canary Wharf. Major business district in London. According to Wikipedia, it is one of the United Kingdom's two main financial centres, and contains many of Europe's tallest buildings, including the second tallest building in the UK: One Canada Square (225m high, 50 storeys); it was the tallest from 1990 until 2010. More than 100,000 people work at Canary Wharf. It is home to the world or European headquarters of numerous major banks, including Barclays, Citigroup, Credit Suisse, HSBC, J.P. Morgan, KPMG, MetLife, Moody's, RBC, Thomson Reuters, and many others.

From 1802 to 1939, the area was one of the busiest docks in the world. Most of the docks had closed by 1980. Olympia & York (a Canadian company) started to develop the site in 1988... at the time when the economy started to spiral downwards. Olympia & York filed for bankruptcy in 1994, but a few years later, a new group took over and slowly started the building process again. The building of the Jubilee line of the subway helped increase the appeal of that area, and today, more towers are currently being built at Canary Wharf.

Once we found our hotel, a small and modest hotel within the Canary Wharf complex, we headed to some Fish & Chips place some British friends of Antoine had planned to eat (can you say "cube meet"?). We found the place ahead of everyone else, and ordered. Others did eventually arrive.

Since we only had a day and a half to visit London, Antoine and I resumed our touristy activities right after lunch. We made it to London Emirates Air Line Cable car, which gave us a good view of the area, including the O2, and portions of the Thames. The cable car opened in 2012. A single crossing takes approximately 10 minutes.

We then headed downtown, to see London Bridge.

London Bridge is just like any other bridge. Nothing spectacular. Other than a week before we left for the LA Tour, a number of people, including tourists, were run down by a terrorist driving a truck.

From London Bridge, we found a square that includes a neat market with food stands cooking on hotplates about a meter in diameter! Next to that, at Winchester Square, next to Old Thames Inn pub, rests a replica of some sailboat.

At the edge of the Thames, London Bridge was on our right. On our Left was a railway bridge, with, on the far side of the river, two towers (one on either sides). Although it is an impressive bridge, we realized only once we got home that it was a rail-only bridge!.

Next to where we were was Winchester Palace. It is a 12th-century palace, where the Bishops of Winchester lived. Today, it is the remains of that Palace that we see. A plaque has been erected at the site.

We walked by the Clink Prison Museum and Southwark Bridge, to make our way to Shakespeare's Globe, a reconstruction of a Shakespeare-era theatre dated back to the early 1600s. We got in to the lobby, but were not allowed to go into the theatre... (but we tried!)

From the Globe Theatre, we walked across the Thames using the London Millennium Footbridge, a pedestrian suspension bridge initially opened in 2000, but closed within days of its opening because of an unsuspecting swaying motion. After two years of repairs, it finally re-opened in 2002.

Almost immediately across the bridge is St Paul's Cathedral. We made our way to the Cathedral within minutes of crossing the bridge.

The Cathedral is the seat of the Bishop of London. The current version was built in 1710; its dome is 365 feet (111m) high. Until 1967, it was the tallest building in London!

Past the Cathedral, we made our way to the site of the Priory of the Blackfriars, founded in 1278 (a plaque). The Lane next to it had need Rubik's cube-like murals.

We kept walking looking at centuries old buildings as well as modern ones. At some point, Antoine even argued with some life-like statue (you can guess who won that argument!).

We walked alongside the Thames, towards a subway station. Noticed Big Ben and the London Eye in a distance. At that time, we were almost directly across the river from the OXO Tower, originally built in the late 1800s as a power station to supply electricity to the Royal Mail post office. It was purchased by the company that makes the OXO beef stock cubes, who later rebuilt in the late 1920s in the art deco style. In the 1990s, after years of sitting empty, the building was acquired by a non-profit group, and was refurbished to its current state.

Near the subway station, we ran into one of those classical London red phone booths! Antoine had to "try it out", and of course, Claude had to "document" the whole thing.

That was late afternoon/early evening, and it was time to get to the hotel and find some food. We were only a few subway stops, then a transfer to take us to Canary Wharf.

Our impression of the London "Underground": it is easy to use. It has many lines, but the maps supplied are helpful, especially if you stick to the touristy/downtown areas. Trains are modern and clean. Quiet.

Stations are also very clean, and welcoming. Lots of room. People are orderly. We both felt very comfortable taking the subway to the various places we went to.

The Oyster Card also made it attractive as we did not need to worry about carrying tokens, tickets, or coins. We also knew that if we kept within zones 1 and 2, we could take the trains as much as we wanted and the daily cost would be capped at BP 7.70.

July 8: day 1 of competition

155 people competed in the London Open 2017 competition held at the London Hilton Canary Wharf hotel (the maximum of 180 competitors had been reached early in the registration process). The competition venue was at the far end of the Canary Wharf from our own hotel. It means a leisurely 10 minute walk through the tall building and the various bridges over the bodies of water within the area.

It was also the first competition on the trip where there were some fellow Canadians competing: Alyssa and John Esparaz competed.

The main room was the second floor ballroom. Adjacent to that, the foyer was used as a social and warm up area.

In the middle of the day, I went for a walk within the Canary Wharf Estate. All buildings are modern. The DLR (Dockland Light Railway) line runs right through the middle of the Estate. There is a "waterfront" within one minute of walking, wherever you are on the Estate. There are a number of sculptures and fountains. A very clean and attractive financial district.

That day, Antoine finished first in the OH first round.

That evening, after the competition, we had dinner with the Esparaz family within the Estates (their hotel was a few train stops away).

July 9: day 2 of the competition.

Antoine made it to the finals of every single event. But got only two podiums: second in OH (after Feliks), and first in... blindfold.

That day was also the same day as the last day of the US Nationals. Being a few hours behind, a number of competitors decided to, after supper, rent one of the smaller meeting rooms containing a TV and internet connection, and proceeded to watch the US Nationals finals live. Antoine was one of them. I walked around and managed to get lost in the underground very large round-about located partially under Canary Wharf. I ended up asking a worker how to get "outside". He took me into one of the building, got me into an elevator, and, after a few tries, managed to get to a floor that allowed me to access a door to the outside.

July 10: touristy London – Buckingham Palace

Time to go back to the touristy areas and spend the day visiting.

One of the older restored buildings behind the hotel had very large clocks on its walls, along the street. There were more than a dozen of them, all showing different times. Under each clock was written the name of the city the time represented (ex: Tokyo, Paris, New York, etc.). The Wharf also has its own museum, and a number of plaques and historical facts for all to see.

We headed off to the subway, and aimed to start at the Tower Bridge. As we exited the station, there were signs indicating the direction to take for the Bridge. It was built from 1886 to 1894, and is a combination of bascule and suspension design. It is certainly easy to recognize!

On the other side of the Thames from it lies the Tower of London (official name is Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress of the Tower of London). It was first built more than a thousand years ago (the "White Tower" was built by William the Conqueror in year 1078) and spans 14 acres. Its current configuration dates to the 1400s. Over the years, it has served many purposes: an armory, a treasury, a menagerie, the home of the Royal Mint, a public record office, the home of the Crown Jewels of England... and a prison. Often, a combination of those purposes.

Lines ups to enter the complex were amazing.

We walked to the closest train, and rode it to a stop close to Westminster Abbey... at Westminster Station.

As we got out of the train/subway/underground, you could not miss signs that pointed you to the direction of Westminster Abbey. Some of those were from floor to ceiling, with a huge arrow pointing in the right direction.

Not that this area would be hard to miss. That imposing Palace of Westminster building has Big Ben as part of it, and Westminster Bridge just next to it. Across the river is the London Aquarium, the Florence Nightingale Museum, the London Dungeon, the London Eye (giant ferris wheel) and many other attractions. The Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey are across the street from each other. St James Park in minutes away, as is Buckingham Palace.

We decided to first walk on Westminster Bridge, then follow Parliament St and Whitehall along the numerous National Museums to Trafalgar Square, then headed off to The Mall along St James Park to Buckingham Palace. From there we would make our way to Westminster Cathedral before heading over to Westminster Abbey and Palace before leaving that area, and make our way to the Train station to check out the Harry Potter store...

We got out of the subway station, and walked toward Westminster Bridge, built between 1738 and 1750. It linked Westminster and Lambeth together (meanwhile, London removed some building from the London Bridge, and widened it in 1760-63). A hundred years later, the bridge was rebuilt, then re-opened in 1862; it was completely refurbished from 2005 to 2007.

Big Ben, the iconic clock Tower at the end of the Palace of Westminster is at one end of the bridge. At the other end, one cannot miss the London Eye. It is a 443 foot tall Ferris wheel, which, when it opened in 2000, was the largest one of its kind in the world. It is also the most popular paid tourist attraction in the UK.

Next to it is the London Aquarium, and the Florence Nightingale Museum.

After crossing the Bridge, we came back onto our steps, and proceeded to a small general store across from the Palace of Westminster to grab a few things for lunch. After eating it, we started out walk onto Parliament Street toward Trafalgar Square, in search of 10 Downing St (home of the Prime Minister). Parliament Street morphs into Whitehall, a short street leading to Trafalgar Square.

Whitehall (and Parliament St before it) is lined with major government buildings and memorials. Government buildings include the Imperial War Museum, HM Treasury, Foreign Office, Department of Work and Pensions, Department of Health, Foreign Office, Downing St, Cabinet Office, Wales Office, Scotland Office, Ministry of Defense, Horse Guards, Old War office building and the Old Admiralty Buildings. Some memorials include the Cenotaph (World War I), a statue of Winston Churchill, the Monument to the Women of World War II, the Royal Tank Regiment Memorial, the Gurkha Memorial, a statue of Prince George, Field Marshal Montgomery ("Monty"), and a number of others.

Throughout, our walk along those two streets, we kept looking for Downing Street (I wanted to see 10 Downing, home of the Prime Minister). But we could not find it, even though we looked closely on our way to Trafalgar Square (more on that a bit later).

Trafalgar Square was built around the area formerly known as Charing Cross. It is a Square, or Urban Park, surrounded by the National Gallery, The Canadian High Commission, the South African High Commission, St Martin-in-the Fields church, and the Admiralty Arches leading to St James Park and The Mall to Buckingham Palace.

The square itself had some construction going on. We could still see the fountains, the statue of Charles I and King George IV, and the tall column with a statue of Horatio Nelson, who commanded the British Navy at the Battle of Trafalgar. It looked like either they were getting ready to host a large gathering, or one had just happened.

Across Trafalgar Square is the current St Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican church, built 1722-1726. Its front columns and tall tower attracted our attention, so we walked across the street and entered it. We were treated to some sort of choir/concert rehearsal.

After leaving the Church, we walked past some odd depiction on a big/artistic "thumbs up" structure in front of Trafalgar Square, and noticed a building with lots of Canadian flags around it, along with many Canada 150 banners.

Turns out it was the Canadian High Commission in England! We tried to get in, but, as with all embassies around the world, one cannot simply walk into them unannounced for a tour...

As we looked at the building, we noticed a red London double-decker-bus (they truly are easy to see) stopped just next to one of those iconic red telephone booths. Can you say "picture opportunity"?

We then turned to the Admiralty Arch. The Arch is a four-story building in the form of an arch, and including three arch-ways. It is located between Trafalgar Square and The Mall, providing a grand entrance to The Mall and therefore St James Park. It was completed in 1912 by King Edward VII in memory of his mother Queen Victoria.

On the other side of the Admiralty Arch is a long, wide road. That road, leading to Buckingham Palace, is called The Mall. It is lined by trees and lamp posts bearing large Union Jack flags. On the right of the street (on the way to

Buckingham Palace) we noticed a few old stately buildings: the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Royal Society buildings. Between those two lies a 110 foot high tall structure built in 1833: the Duke of York Column.

Across the Mall from those buildings is the 57-acre St James Park.

Instead of walking along the Mall to Buckingham Palace, we decided to go through St James Park and take a look at some old building and large open areas we could see. We took Horse Guards Road to the Guards Division [War] Memorial, located directly opposite the Horse Guards Parade, a large wide open area for military parades and shows. It is surrounded by the old Admiralty Buildings, the Household Cavalry Museum and... the back of 10 Downing Street!

What surprised us was that this area was not grass. Rather, it was covered with a small gravel; not quite as small as "angel dust", but almost. This was something we were not expecting, but now that we know what the area was used for, it makes more sense.

I should point out, we did not realize we were looking at the back of 10 Downing Street. We found out later in the day, when, after touring other areas, we came back, and I asked one of the guards where 10 Downing Street was. He very politely told me we were looking at the back of it, then give me directions on how to see the entrance to Downing Street from Whitehall (turns out Downing Street divides Whitehall from Parliament St (pictures of that later)).

Continuing along Horse Guards Road, we came by the Imperial War Museums, and Churchill War Rooms. It should be pointed that Horse Guards Road runs parallel to Whitehall and Parliament St, so some of those buildings line up both roadways.

The statue in front of the Churchill War Rooms is that of Robert Clive (1725-1774); it has one large obvious inscription: CLIVE. He was the Commander-in-chief of British India.

Next to that was a memorial of the 2002 terrorist attack in Bali.

From that location, we turned into St James park and admired its greenery, ducks, swans, and other urban-park-like wildlife. We followed alongside the waterway, walking toward Buckingham Palace. Looks like Antoine still has a thing for ducks, as he really seemed to enjoy watching them, and taking pictures of them :-)

Buckingham Palace is an imposing building within the Park. What we think of Buckingham Palace is really its East Front, originally completed in 1850, then remodeled in 1913. It is the London residence and administrative headquarters of the reigning monarch of the United Kingdom (thank you Wikipedia, for that phrase!).

Immediately in front of it is the Victoria Memorial. That memorial, unveiled in 1912, is 104 feet wide and 80 feet tall. At the top of the structure is a gilded bronze "Winged Victory". The monument is the end of The Mall; the roadway goes around it, almost acting like a gate in front of Buckingham Palace.

One cannot get up to the building itself. A large gated fence surrounds the Palace. Sadly for the guards from the "change of the guards", they are right against the Palace, so the public has to watch from a distance.

Side note: as we watched, a guard, as he was doing a maneuver, slipped and fell on his behind. It looked painful -- a number of other people around us gasped when he fell. He got up and continued. A few minutes later, a security personnel went and talked to him briefly, but he kept performing his role.

We are used to the change of the guards in Ottawa, where you can go right up to them. Certainly not so in London. At least at Buckingham Palace.

Surrounding Buckingham Palace are a number impressive gates. We can also see the top of Big Ben in the distance. We must admit there is lots of room in front of the Palace and around the Victoria Memorial.

Leaving that area (temporarily), we took Spur Road to A3214 (yes, it is the name of the roadway), and proceeded to Victoria Street. Along Victoria Street, we stopped at a McDonald restaurant for some ice cream (yes, it was hot that day; we needed to cool off... and have a bit of a "rest").

Next door was Westminster Cathedral. Opened in 1903, it is the largest Catholic Church building in England and Wales, and the seat of the Archbishop of Westminster. As with most of those old Cathedrals, it is an impressive building, in and out.

Walking around Victoria Street reveals a number of interesting residential and commercial buildings. Then there is "Little Ben" (at the intersection of Victoria Street and Vauxhall Bridge Road. Little Ben is a cast iron miniature version of Big Ben. It was erected in 1892, then restored and re-erected in 1981. It is roughly 30 feet tall.

A few minutes from it is the London Victoria Station rail and underground station, connecting London with its airports as well as many other London boroughs. It was built in the mid 1850s.

One of the first things we noticed upon entering the station is that some of its signage is on the floor. It has a number of parallel thick lines running throughout. Each line is a different colour; on the line itself is written what it represents, and an arrow points to the direction of the service. For example, "Toilets", "Passport Office", "Gatwick Express", etc.

The outside contrasts with some of the much more modern buildings in the area.

Leaving the London Victoria Station, we made our way back to Buckingham Palace and its front area, where we would see the various imposing gates. That is when we noticed a number of large concrete fence posts with the names of the various Commonwealth countries on them. We found Canada's fairly quickly.

Behind that gate was a Canada Memorial monument! It commemorates members of the Canadian Forces killed in the two World Wars. Opened in 1994, it is built on an incline, in such a way that water continuously runs on it. The surface the water runs onto is lined with sculpted maple leaves, giving an illusion of floating leaves. It is roughly 30 feet by 30 feet in size.

Walking back via The Mall and St. James Park, we made our way back to the Horse Guards Parade area. That is where I went and talked to a few officers wearing what looked like riot gear, and asked them where Downing Street was (yes, we were still within our quest to find where 10 Downing Street was!). They told me the wall immediately behind us was that of the gardens from 10 Downing Street! They pointed me to a few arches onto The Household Cavalry Museum that would take us directly to Whitehall. Once on that street, they instructed me to turn right to look for the gated Downing Street; that it would be heavily guarded.

I proceeded to those arches, reaching to Antoine and making gestures so he could follow me.

We passed an arch and found ourselves on Whitehall. Walked only a few steps, and

walked by a soldier on a horse, obviously there to depict the cavalry to the tourists.

A few pictures later, we proceeded down Whitehall, and quickly got to a heavily graded gate (with a tiny guard house) to a fairly narrow street: Downing Street! It looked like a heavy gated entrance guarded by a number of federal police officers. The small sign on the building next to it read "Downing Street SW1 - City of Westminster".

We had finally found Downing Street. But unfortunately, we were not able to walk down the street to number 10. We had to look at it from a distance...

Our next stop down Whitehall... ummm... Parliament Street (the road changes name from Whitehall to Parliament Street at Downing Street) was to be the Palace of Westminster, next to Parliament Square.

The Palace of Westminster, home of Big Ben, first opened in 1016. Today, it houses both Houses of Parliament, making the Parliament of the United Kingdom: The House of Commons, and the House of Lords. But for the first few hundred years of its existence, it was home of the King of England. From 1512 onwards, after the initial Palace was destroyed by fire, it was used to house the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In 1834, another fire destroyed most of the Palace, which prompted a complete reconstruction.

After 30 years of construction, the current version opened in 1870. It contains over 1100 rooms. A portion of it was build on reclaimed land (8 acres) from the Thames River. Its river facade is 300 metres (980 feet). Its world-famous tower, commonly known as Big Ben, is actually called the Elizabeth Tower. Big Ben is the name of the bell at the top of the tower!

So we proceeded to the Palace of Winchester, and imposing Gothic style building. Sitting by the Palace, we noticed a sculpture depicting a sword yielding soldier on a horse. The inscription read "Richard I - coeur de Lion: 1189-1199". Not only odd that the inscription was in French, but that is the only sculpture we notice that close to the Palace.

The Palace is easy to see, and we can get fairly close to it. There is a concrete barrier, but it is only a few feet tall, so does not obstruct our view.

Immediately across the street from the Palace is Westminster Abbey. Its official title is "Collegiate Church of St Peter at Westminster". It was originally completed as an abbey around year 1060, a few weeks before King Edward (the Confessor) died. The present-day church/location was started in 1245 by Henry III and finished in 1517 within the reign of Richard II. The building was consecrated in 1269. Since 1560, it is not an abbey, but rather a "Church of England Royal Peculiar". Its two western towers were constructed between 1722 and 1745.

The church is the traditional place of coronation and burial site for English/British monarchs.

We walked around the grounds of the Church. We did not set foot inside (maybe another time).

Next to Westminster Abbey is the Westminster Scholars War Memorial, aka the Crimea and Indian Mutiny Memorial. Erected in 1861, it is dedicated to those educated at Westminster School who died in the Russian and Indian wars from 1854 to 1859.

Our day was almost over. Our time in London was also almost over. Plus, it was

time to get a bite to eat. But first, we wanted to check out St Pancras Train station ahead of our departure the next day. Furthermore, we were told to check out the Harry Potter Shop at Platform 9 3/4 within King Cross Station. Since King Cross and St. Pancras International Stations are literally next to each other, why not kill two birds with the same stone?

Using our Oyster Cards, we used the Underground to get to King Cross and St Pancras, and to the Harry Potter Shop.

The two stations are very large, modern buildings incorporating the old version of the stations within their architecture. It is quite the contrast, but well thought out, meaning the two blend well together.

"The Harry Potter Shop at Platform 9 3/4" (yes, that is its official name) is a small shop within the confines of King Cross Station. The store itself is out of the Harry Potter movies, selling magic wands and other paraphernalia. Packed with people.

Just outside the shop, you see a luggage cart out of the Harry Potter movie; we only see the half out of the bricked wall. It contains a few suit cases and presumably an owl's cage. It is part of the store, and the store owners are using it as a prop for a picture-taking studio for tourists. There is a photographer, which takes pictures (for a fee) of you pushing the cart through the wall (a la Harry Potter movie)...

St. Pancras International outside facade looks like what its original 1868 facade would have looked like. But inside, it is very modern. Its entire complex was actually renovated and expanded from 2001 to 2007, at a cost of BP 800 million. It is the home of the Eurostar, the high speed train we were due to take the next morning for our trip to Paris.

We spend some time walking within the station, and admiring its stature, and its sculptures, one of which depicts two people embracing... it is 30 feet tall and weighs 22 tons! Another is a statue of Sir Jon Betjeman (a poet) gazing at the roof; that one makes you want to stand next to him and do the same thing!

That was London. It was time to get back to the hotel, grab a bite to eat, and get ready for Paris and the World Championships!

Paris, France, July 11-17

Post Latin America Tour 2017 - World Championships; Paris, France:
<https://goo.gl/photos/h8fGLKhVyz1UY3UB7>

Paris. Population (metro; ile de France) of 12.1 M. Capital of France.

July 11: Eurostar train; la Tour Eiffel

London departure. Our Eurostar high speed train was leaving London's St-Pancras International station at 8:31 AM. It meant we had to leave the hotel shortly after 6:00 AM. We walked to the Canary Wharf subway station, and headed off to St-Pancras. Considering it was the beginning of rush hour, it was not so bad. Got into St-Pancras in good time, and joined the LONG lineup of people waiting to take the train.

Fortunately for us, it moved very quickly. Went through the check-in process, including immigration, very quickly. Then, as we waited to board, Antoine decided to practice foot solving (we had enough time prior to boarding, so why not?!). A few people looked oddly at him, but that was it. I was almost expecting a bit more attention... (not that we are attention-seekers).

The ride from London to Paris lasted 2.5 hours (there is a one hour differential). Very smooth. We did not even notice going through the Chunnel! Mind you, we stayed under the sea for all of 10 minutes; at a speed of 300 km/h, one moves fairly fast.

Arrived in Paris just before lunch. In contrast to St-Pancras, la gare Paris Nord is old and... looking old. Not very attractive. Busy, noisy, it looked like some construction was going on. Not obvious which way we should go.

Then we noticed the signage for le metro. Got to the metro station, and figured out, after a while, that buying tickets was the cheaper way to using the metro. So we bought a pack of 20 tickets, and figured out, looking at the various maps on the wall, how to get to our hotel.

And to double check, we asked at the information. One transfer would do it.

I first impression of the metro was similar to that of the train station: old, in need of a make up. Smaller than the London underground. Not as well lit; metro cars also much older than the London underground. That is the impression we got throughout using the metro during our stay in Paris: old stations, old cars. Some really old (on some of them, you had to manually unlock the doors prior to opening them). For many of them, not air conditioned, so very warm.

Also no, or VERY LITTLE, escalators in the stations. All stairs. Signage not as well marked, especially from the street level -- often, you almost had to know where it was, as it was simply a few sets of stairs going down from the street level. Some would say "Metropolitain" in fading-out letters; others would say "Metro"; others... we did not notice the sign, or we saw an "M".

We do not know if it was because the stations were smaller and less lit, or because of the type of people we saw in the Metro, but we did not feel as comfortable in the Metro compared to the Underground. The same goes for the city as well: London seems more "modern", cleaner, friendlier; thinking back, I do not

recall homeless people in London (I am sure there are many; we simply did not cross paths with them).

It may have depended where we stayed, because, as we got to our hotel, we got out of the Porte de la Chapelle Metro station (second last stop of that line). It was apparent we were in a lower class area of the city: run down buildings, obviously poor people, many looking homeless. It was easy to find our bearing: we knew the hotel was just passed a set of highways intercepting each other, so we headed that way. As we crossed under the over-passes, people were sleeping on the street. On the other side of the chain-link fence, there were make-shifts tents and shelters. Garbage all over. People sleeping, or lying down.

We did not linger too much.

Got to our hotel (just passed the overpass). You had to ring so the attendants would unlock the door.

Inside, someone immediately recognized Antoine (surprise!). A few German people were planning to go to the Basilique du Sacre-Coeur. We went to our room, on the 4th floor, looked at the view, then headed downstairs to head off to the Montmartre area of the city.

Then ran into some of the Western Canadian cubers! The like of Theodore Chow, Mark Nie and Orion Donovan. We convinced them to come with us to the butte de Montmartre.

So we head of to the Abesses metro station at Montmartre. Get off the metro, and walk toward the exit. Took the stairs (elevators in repair). They are in a circular style, and not for someone with bad knees: the station is 118 feet underground; there are 200 steps to climb up those stairs. From the street level, there is an additional 300 steps to get to Sacre-Coeur -- there is a reason why they call it "la butte de Montmartre"!

Basilique Sacre-Coeur's construction started in 1875 and lasted until 1914. The top of the dome must be the highest altitude of any building in Paris. The inside is everything you would expect of a hundred year old French Basilica. The views of Paris, even from the ground, are worth it. One can see the Tour Eiffel at a distance.

After admiring the Basilique and the views of the city, we decided it was time to find some place to eat. We started looking for a restaurant, and ran into an area filled with artists and vendors (obviously a tourist area!). Many artists were drawing caricatures of people.

We also ran into a Brazilian(?) cuber that knew Antoine.

Together, we started looking for a place to eat. Most were closed. Not because there were no restaurants, but because, in France (at least that area of the city), restaurants are opened at Lunch time, then close for a few hours in the afternoon before opening again at supper time. Since we were in the middle of the afternoon, they were closed... except for that one Shawarma place :-)

After lunch, we walked down the butte de Montmartre, and parted ways: Antoine and I wanted to get downtown and see the Eiffel tower.

Using Antoine's cell phone and its GPS, we found the closest Metro station. Even though the phone told us we were at the station, we really had to look hard to find it: turns out it was those stairs under some awning. As we went down the stairs, there was a sign that read "Metropolitain". That is it. No station name or

anything else. "Metropolitain". And at the bottom of the stairs, their were trains!

Got out of the station fairly close to the tour Eiffel. We walked to la Seine, the river that runs through Paris. The walkway was lined with trees, with very wide boardwalks. Cruise boats full of people seem to be constantly floating on the river. Old, well maintained building lineup la Seine. Bridges are of similar architecture, and are all massive; some more ornate than others. The Tour Eiffel is easy to recognize.

It is a 1063 ft (324m) tall steel tower, constructed for the 1889 World's Fair. It is the most visited landmark in Paris. For 41 years, it was the tallest structure in the World.

It is located by la Seine, at the Pont D'Iena. We were there at the height of tourist season, and a few days prior to Bastille Day. The grounds under the Tower are fenced off. To get under the tower, one has to go through an entrance highly guarded; you must go through an airport-style security, including bags searched, before getting under the tower.

Luckily, that is done quickly.

They were setting up stages (for concerts), lighting, bleachers, for the 14 of July celebrations. The grass was all dead from people walking on it. In fact, the immediate areas was not that appealing.

But start walking in the Champs de Mars towards the ecole militaire, and it gets much nicer. And good views of the Tower as well.

The Champs de Mars stretches from the Tour Eiffel to the école militaire. It is a large (and long) area covered with grass - a nice park. When we were there, around supper time, lots of people were eating and drinking wine, sitting on the grass. People were walking around trying to sell you bottles of wine!

We walked to the école militaire, 750m away from the Tour Eiffel.

The école militaire was founded in 1750. The main building at the large complex at the Champs de Mars opened in 1760. It is a French institution for military higher education. Many military around the world uses that training facilities.

From the école Militaire, we walked around the neighbourhood. It looked like a Paris neighbourhood (whatever you would imagine it would look like). Then found a metro station and headed to the hotel.

July 12: Arc de Triomphe to Notre-Dame de Paris

Full day of being a tourist in Paris. View from our hotel window is... shall we say... different. On one hand we see the butte de Montmartre with the Basilique Sacre-Coeur on top of it. It is a few kilometers away; still we see it well.

Then there is the immediate view of the three levels of road, immediately next to the hotel. Under the lower level of the expressway, homeless people...

We later found out they were refugees from the middle east. We also noticed, one day, on our way back from the metro, at the main intersection just before the expressway, a number of people with large containers of food and drinks, sharing with them. They were wearing something that indicated they were either volunteers

or worked for some humanitarian organisation (they might even have been city workers, we do not know).

We had purchased a few things for breakfast. Our hotel had both a microwave and a refrigerator, so we "made" our own breakfast. This way, we find we eat reasonable well. You can get going much quicker as well.

Our first stop was at the venue, the Dock Pullman. It was between our hotel, and the next (and last) stop on the metro. We met Lynette (Jay's mom) on our way down, so we walked to the venue with her.

Organizers were still setting up. Still, it looked nice and big. The very large hall was separated into two very large areas: one with maybe 25-30 tables sitting 8-10 people each, and the other with a set of bleachers for roughly 1,000 people, with 50 timing stations in front of it. The back of the bleachers had large staircases that connected with the area full of tables.

Both areas had a large screen, used to project whatever the organisers wanted to show everyone. Usually they would show solves from people in the faster heats (they had the timing stations closest to the bleachers area).

Looked odd at first, but turns out it was a great setup!

In addition to that very large room, another room was setup with vendors, and a more quiet area for people to mingle. That was also the place where the WCA had a booth for people to come and get information, as well as meet some of the top cubers (I worked that booth for part of the Championships). The room had a ceiling "dressed up" like stars. More on that later.

Our plan that day was to take the metro to the Arc de Triomphe, then walk down the avenues des Champs Elisees, ending at Notre-Dame de Paris at roughly 5:00 PM, where Antoine would meet Kian Mansour, so he get his TheCubicle.com/Moyu jacket (he forgot the other one in Santo Domingo; Oliver took it with it to New Zealand, where he shipped it to Canada. Antoine received it something like two months later!).

So we headed to the Front Populaire Metro station, only a few minutes walk from the venue.

That area of town felt much nicer than the area we walked from the Porte de la Chapelle station to the hotel. It actually looked like the area where the venue was located was its own gated community: as we turned into the street to go to the venue, we walked by a gate. As we got to the Front Populaire Metro station, we also walked by a gate. We would find out the next day on the way back from the venue to the hotel, that the gate was actually closed and locked. It would open only after we rang some bell and talked to security... (every day, on the way to the venue, we walked by their office, a small bungalow along the way).

We found the Metro station, located at the end of the street, in the middle of a what might have been a parking lot. A post with a "M" was located by an escalator and a set of stairs going down (I think this was the only station where we saw an escalator!). A small sign that read "M 12 Front Populaire" was located such that you could read it as you go down the stairs. The lettering on the sign was maybe 8 inches high by a few feet long; not much more.

We went down the stairs to the Metro and boarded it. We had one transfer, then got off at the Arc de Triomphe, at the Place Charles de Gaulle.

The Arc de Triomphe is located in the centre of the Place Charles de Gaulle (aka

Place de l'Etoile). One of the most famous monuments in Paris, it was built to commemorate those who fought and died for France in the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. At its base is the tomb of the unknown soldier, set at that location after World War I. The monument sits 164 feet (50m) tall, and 40 feet (14.62m) wide; when it was built, it was the tallest triumphal arch in the world. Commissioned in 1806, it took close to 30 years to be finished.

That location is often the starting point of most military parades, including the annual Bastille Day Military Parade. But, since the tomb of the Unknown Soldier was installed, the parade goes around the Arc instead of through it (out of respect for the Unknown Soldier).

There are twelve roads radiating from the location. One of those is the Avenue des Champs-Elysee we were planning to take down towards the Place de la Concorde, musee de Louvre, etc.

So we get off the Metro station, and immediately saw the monument. We were by the Avenue de la Grande-Armee. The monument is sitting in the middle of a huge round about (called Place Charles de Gaulle). The center of the round about is the Arc de Triomphe. But to get there... do we have to cross the 8 to 10 lanes of traffic to get to the Arc??? Obviously not, as we see people by the Arc, but no one is running through that traffic. There must be some way.

A few of those twelve avenues radiating from that round about are very wide boulevards. The Avenue de la Grande-Armee is one. Across the Arc from it is the Avenue des Champs-Elysee. That is another one. On each of those two boulevards, there is a small island between the two opposite sets of traffic lanes (many of those Avenues are bi-directional). A great place to take pictures! It should also be noted that some of the sidewalks are also very wide. A good thing, because the tourists abound.

We decide to start walking around the round about, looking for signs on how we can get to the center of it. After crossing six streets, we get to the Avenue des Champs-Elysees. Next to the Avenue, there is a set of stairs going down. People go in and come out. As we walk towards it, we notice a small sign that indicates it is the way to the Arc de Triomphe!

We walk down the stairs. It leads to a tunnel, that lead us to the center of the round about. Under the Arc de Triomphe is also the place to buy tickets (if one choses to) to go inside the monument. We decide not to, and walk up to the monument. The view for a few feet away is certainly different. One can really appreciate the various sculptures onto the monument, the inscriptions, etc.

After admiring it, we walked back down the tunnel and decide to get out not in the direction we came from, but at the other end. Which we did... and that made us realize that when we were initially wondering how to get to the Arc, we were standing just next to the entrance to the tunnel to get to the monument (there is two entrances to that tunnel, one by the Avenue des Champ-Elysees, and one by the Avenue de la Grande-Armee, where we were initially!

This was stop one of that day's journey. The next one was to walk down the Avenue des Champs-Elysees.

The Avenue des Champs-Elysees is a very wide street 1.9 kilometers (1.2 miles) long. One end of the Arc de Triomphe, the other Place de la Concorde (more on that later). It is lined with cafes, theaters, and luxury shops. Very high end stores. The Avenue is also used for the annual Bastille Day military parade and the finish of the annual Tour de France bicycle race.

All along the trees or meticulously sculpted. Looking down the Avenue, they all line up perfectly.

We found the first part of the Avenue (from the Arc de Triomphe) is the one with the high end stores, etc. Packed with people, it does have very wide sidewalks, and is very busy. That day was very cloudy. We even had a few light rain showers. Walking down the Avenue, we found a grocery store on one of the side streets, and got some food to eat. A bit further down, we got to a major intersection, a rond point, where there were some really nice flower beds, fountains, etc.

That was the beginning of the jardins des Champs-Élysées. That portion of the Avenue had a number of large buildings, museums, galleries, restaurants, sculptures, monuments. Two of those are the Grand Palais, and the Petit Palais; they are located off a side street from the Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

At first, we walked by the Grand Palais. It is a large historic site, exhibition hall and museum complex, built to be part of the Universal Exposition of 1900 (the Petit Palais, and the Pont Alexandre III next to it were all built at the same time). The stone building in the style of the Beaux-Arts architecture. Its facade has very large stone columns. Huge, it is impressive with its gardens all around.

As part of the Paris 2024 Olympic bid, the Grand Palais would be the site of the Fencing Event.

The Petit Palais, also a large stone building, is across the road from the Grand Palais. On its own, it is large. Next to the Grand Palais... we know why it is called the Petit Palais. It hosts an arts museum.

We walked past both Palais onto the Pont Alexandre III, across the Seine. The bridge is considered as the most ornate, extravagant bridge of Paris -- it is classified as a French Monument historique.

I must admit it is impressive. It does have huge sculptures and monuments all along. Views to the Tour Eiffel and of the Seine are certainly worth it.

Immediately across the bridge is another one of those huge historic buildings/complexes Paris is full of. The complex des Invalides houses the Musée d'histoire contemporaine, the Musée des Plans-reliefs, the Musée de l'Armée, and the dome des Invalides. All of those are related to the military history of France.

That complex was involved on Bastille day (July 14, 1789). French revolutionaries stormed that building to get cannons and muskets to use at Bastille later that day!

The initial complex was built under Louis XIV in 1670, and was completed 6 years later. At that time, the river front of the building measured 196 meters (643 ft) and had fifteen courtyards. Over the years, more would be added. For example, the Dome des Invalides replaced a former church in the centre of the complex. Its construction started in 1840 and finished in 1861 (it was originally designed to be Napoleon's resting place). Finished, the Dome is 107 metres (351 ft) high and is decorated with 12 kg (26 lb) of gold leaf; it cannot be mistaken.

It is the location of Napoleon's final resting place.

We walked towards the building, not really knowing its history (had we known, we would have likely walked around the complex, and likely checked out the Dome). Took a few pictures, admired it, and turned around.

On our way to the Pont Alexandre III, we noticed a very large building with a huge sign on it: Air France. We figured it was some headquarters of the airline... not knowing is it a museum dedicated to the France's aviation history (specifically Air France).

We continued our walk across le Pont Alexandre III back to the Grand and Petit Palais. At the far end of the bridge, we stopped and looked at the Simon Bolivar monument, depicting Bolivar on horse back.

Ironically, we were just in South America, where Simon Bolivar is regarded as a hero -- he lead a revolution that created many independent countries, such as Columbia, Peru, Venezuela, etc.

As I took a picture of Antoine by the monument, a fellow cuber, from South America, notice us! We had met him only a few weeks prior during our Latin American Tour!

As we got to the Petit Palais, we walked by yet another monument, that one dedicated to Winston Churchill. He is depicted in a brisk walk using his cane.

At the Petit Palais, we decided to walk in (it was starting to rain a bit as well, so it was good timing). We checked in our bags, used the facilities, and looked quickly at some of the art work. The interior was what would be expected of such a grandiose building: very ornate, all stone/marble, 20+ ft high ceilings, huge windows, large painting (some on the ceiling). Made our way into its court yard. The interior was filled with all kins of plants. The exterior of the court yard was lines with stone columns, all joined at the top with ornate stone work.. It was like a corridor going around the court yard, the columns on the court yard side, the wall on the museum side.

The outside of the Petit Palais was also full of gardens.

We headed back to the Avenue Champs-Elysee. We quickly came to an area full of bleachers. Both sides of the Avenue. Those were being setup for two occasions: La fête nationale (Bastille Day) a few days later, as the military parade would use that road, and for the finish of the Tour de France on July 23rd.

A short distance later we reached the Place de la Concorde (the other end of the Avenues des Champs-Élysées). At 21.3 acres (8.64 hectares), it is the largest square in Paris. Designed in 1755, it is decorated with a variety of statues and fountains. One of the most prominent piece is an Egyptian obelisk decorated with hieroglyphics depicting the reign of the pharaoh Ramesses II. The 75 foot tall obelisk, which used to be located at the Luxor Temple in Egypt, was given to the French in the 19th century (it arrived in Paris in 1833); it is said to be 3300+ years old and weigh more than 250 metric tons. The original cap is believed to have been stolen in the 6th century BC; the current gold-leafed pyramid cap was added by France in 1998.

The square was used for many public events over the years. One of the more famous ones is the execution of the royalty during the French Revolution (after they erected a guillotine at that site).

The Place de la Concorde was getting setup for the festivities for the fête nationale, so there were lots of tents, bleachers, etc. We did not take the time to walk around and admire the various fountains, statues and sculptures; from our viewpoint, we did not see many of them as the tents/bleachers. were in our way.

But we did see the century old buildings (looking like French Palaces) lining up the square. Looking towards the Arc de Triomphe at the other end of the Avenue des

Champ-Elysees, the view is impressive: in the distance, we see the Arc the Triomphe. The 6-8 lane Avenue is lined with tall, "rectangular-trimmed" trees.

From the Place de la Concorde, we turned 90 degrees to Rue Royale and noticed that building looking rather like a Greek temple. Walking towards it we noticed it had columns all around, just like a Greek Temple. Turns out it was L'eglise de la Madeleine (officially called eglise Saine-Marie-Madeleine).

The church, based on the Roman Pantheon, and a few false starts: one in 1757, and another in 1806. Construction resumed in the early 1830s and the building was consecrated as a church in 1842. It has fifty two (52) 20-meter-high columns around its perimeter.

With its very large pillars around its entire perimeter, it does remind us of a Greek Temple. Its bronze front door must be 20 to 25 feet tall. The interior, like many churches we have seen in France, also has large columns (like most churches, really), and has simple wooden chairs instead of permanent bench-line church pews. That way, the chairs may be removed to make way for a very large hall.

One can easily walk between the external columns and the walls of the church. Those walls are lined with sculptures of various Roman Catholic Saints. There are more than 30 of them.

Leaving the Eglise de la Madeleine, we proceeded to walk towards the Louvre, through the Jardins des Tuilleries.

The Jardins des Tuilleries was created in 1564, was opened to the public in 1667, and made a public garden after the French Revolution (1789). It is a large public garden located between the Place de la Concorde and the Musee de Louvre. It contains multiple fountains, too many sculptures and monuments to name, a variety of plants and trees. It is a place where many Parisians come for a relaxing stroll.

As we approached the Louvre, we realized how large that museum was. The grounds of les jardins des Tuilleries morphs into the grounds of the Louvre. The Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, a stone-based arch build between 1806 and 1808 to commemorate Napoleon's military victories of the previous years, is at the edge of the jardins des Tuilleries and the Louvre's grounds. The structure is 63 feet (19 m) high and 75 feet (23m) wide. It is smaller than its counterpart (Arc de Triomphe).

The Louvre Museum is the world's largest art museum and history monument in Paris. In 2016, it was the world's most visited art museum (7.3M visitors). It is located in the Louvre Palace, originally built in the 12th and 13th century. It has been expanded many times to form the present-day Louvre Palace. The Kings of France would live at that Palace. The last one to do so was Louis XIV: in 1682, he chose the Palace of Versailles as his home.

It was during the French Revolution that the Louvre became a permanent home as a museum. It officially opened in 1793, but after a few years, closed for a few years for renovation, to re-open permanently in 1801. It houses many famous painting and portraits. Likely the most famous one is Mona Lisa, by Leonardo da Vinci.

We did not go into the Louvre. Rather, we walked the grounds, admired the gardens, the sculptures, the "modern pyramids", the architecture of the various buildings.

One can easily see how someone could spend a couple of days in and around The Louvre.

Five O'clock was getting close. We needed to make our way to Notre-Dame de Paris.

The Louvre is right by the Seine, so we walked to the Seine, and used le Pont des Arts, a pedestrian bridge to cross to the opposite side of la Seine.

Le Pont des Arts was built between 1802 and 1804; it was the first metallic bridge in Paris. It was closed to circulation in 1977. In 1979, a 60-meter portion collapsed after a barge rammed into it! The current bridge was build between 1981 and 1984 (still as a pedestrian bridge). In the 2008, tourists began attaching padlocks to the side panels of the bridge. The weight of the padlocks became so large that some panels collapsed under it. In 2014, tourists were encouraged to take "selfies" instead of attaching padlocks. By the end of the 2015 tourist season, all panels had been replaced with glass panels, preventing people from attaching padlocks.

As of 2015, over a million locks were placed, weighing approximately 45 tons (thanks Wikipedia!).

By the time Antoine and I walked on that bridge, the only padlocks we saw were a few, placed on the lamp posts along the side of the bridge.

That bridge connects the Louvre with the Institut de France. The building housing the Institut de France was build as a school. The Institut was established in 1795 and was housed in that building.

At the Institute, we started following La Seine up to the island where Notre-Dame de Paris is. We crossed onto Ile de la Cite using the Pont Saint-Michel, and kept walking towards Notre-Dame de Paris, admiring the centuries-old buildings lining both ends of the Seine.

A short while later, we made it to the famous church.

Notre-Dame de Paris is a medieval Catholic cathedral on the Ile de la Cité. Its construction started in 1163. It changed architects and styles a number of times. By 1345, it looked much as we see it today.

Over the years since, the church was altered, damaged, vandalized, and restored. Various bells, organs, painting, sculptures have been installed. The bells all have names, and play their own notes; the largest one, Emmanuel, dates from 1681, weighs more than 13 metric tons, and has a diameter of 2.6 meters.

Two years after this trip, in April 2019, a devastating fire would cause great damage to the church. It is estimated complete restoration will take upwards of 20 years.

The plan was to meet Kian at roughly 5:00 PM. It was 5:00 PM and we were now on the grounds of the Notre-Dame de Paris. Try to find him in this crowd! We looked around, and noticed a very long line of people waiting to enter the church. We decided to walk along that line. As we got very close to the entrance, there is his, with his parents! We start a conversation, Kian gives Antoine his "gear", and we enter the church with them.

The inside is huge. All stone work, and very ornate. Tourists are generally kept on the perimeters of the church, allowing people to sit and pray on its pews (this one has mostly pews, although parts of the floor has chairs). One of the

displays shows the various stage or constructions, beginning in 1163 onwards. It shows some of the restorations done in the 1700s and 1800s.

After we came out, we walked around the Church, looked at its gardens, then crossed the Seine at the Pont de l'Archevêché. We walked randomly on a few side streets, then looked for a Metro station using Antoine's GPS on his smart phone. Went into a boulangerie, bought a baguette and headed back to the hotel to get ready for the first day of competition at the World Championships.

July 13: Day 1 or Rubik's Cube World Championships

First day of the Rubik's Cube World Championships. First time the World Championships span four days of competitions. We got up nice and early. The first event of the day was feet. One of Antoine's strong events.

We made our way to the main venue, at les Dock Pullman and pick up our registration package. Antoine started to warm up. After the first round, he sat at number 6. At the finals, he finishes 4th, 0.04 seconds behind the 3rd place

Turns out this would be his best ranking (in finals) for the entire Championships. But he did break a few National Records, namely in 3x3x3 blindfold (24.04 sec) and in clock (6.39 single and 7.45 average).

Early that first day, I ran into two Chinese Nationals who seemed to record what was happening. Turns out they were streaming content directly in to China, for Chinese cubers to follow. They showed me how many followers they were having at that moment in time (their tool was keeping track in real time).

I also started to help out as a staff/volunteer. Here is how that came about: while we were in London, we heard that some volunteers for the World Championships were not able to make it (VISA issues?). So Alyssa Esparaz and I offered our services. I was put on two teams: the first with Lauren Clement, and the second with Jeremy Fleishman.

Lauren was in charge of the WCA booth in the Eiffel Pullman hall (adjacent to the venue). The booth offered WCA information to visitors. It was also the focal point for a number of "famous cubers" to make themselves available to their fans (a schedule was prepared). Furthermore, there was a daily quiz people could fill out, for the chance of winning cubes. My job was to man the booth at specific times throughout the Championship, answer questions, help people fill out the quiz, etc.

Jeremy was leading a team responsible for running/scrambling/judging specific rounds of specific events, according to a pre-defined schedule. I did both running and judging. We got to take care of rounds in all five sets of solving stations, giving us a chance to meet the top cubers (the top-seeded cubers tended to be at the 12 stations at the front; those were slightly elevated compared to the other ones.

That was good as it kept me busy, getting off Antoine's back for the most part ;-)

That first day also allowed me to explore the area a bit. As we did not have a lot of Euros, I started to look for a banking machine. I had previously looked at a map, and it had showed me two locations. Unfortunately, I could not find them. At some point, I ran into a Swedish cuber, he looked at his phone and found one nearby. I thanked him, and went searching for it.

Still could not find it.

Finally I decided to check out the Shopping Centre Le Millenaire. I found my bank machine, as well as a few restaurants, and a nice supermarket! We would come back to that Shopping center a number of times over the following few days; in fact, I bought take-out Asian food for supper that night.

July 14: Day 2 of World Championships; parents' supper

We got up even earlier than the previous day, because a film crew from Montreal were coming in at 6:30 or 7:00 to meet Antoine, and shoot some preliminary footage.

The film crew was working for the TV5 television channel, and working on an episode for a new series, "les champions du monde". A few months prior, they had contacted a number of cubers to find out who they should follow. Once they narrowed their search to a few, then asked for recommendations, and talked to those people concerning the candidates to follow during the World Championships -- they ended up choosing Antoine, which meant they would follow most of his movements during the remaining three days of the competition.

The crew of three walked into our room at roughly 7:00 AM. They introduced themselves, and immediately got to work, asking Antoine all kinds of questions, filming his warm ups, asking specific questions about specific cubes, etc.

They also filmed him walking out of the hotel and to the venue. They would follow up most of the remaining days, talk to other top cubers, etc.

The episode featuring Antoine was scheduled to air March 5, 2018, on the TV5 television network.

By the second day, people have their routine already. Many tables in the venue have flags on them. That way it is easy to identify the Canadian, British, Swiss, or the German table.

A number of Canadians were there. The Esparaz family, Bill and his parents, Kian, the western group headed by Theodore Chow's family, etc.

Since I was a volunteer, I was given some coupons for lunch at the "food trucks" (there were two food trucks setup next to the venue; the coupons allowed you to have things like a hotdog & fries, or a hamburger, or crepes). It meant I did not have to worry about my lunches. But I still got some for Antoine, and, at times, for other Canadian cubers... especially when I went to Subway (at the Shopping Centre) to get subs.

As mentioned before, one of my duties as Staff was to man the WCA booth in the Eiffel Pullman hall. That hall also a number of booths for various organisations. Ian Scheffler was there one day, promoting his book, Cracking the Cube. Olivers Stickers was there as well, as was Mefferts Puzzles. Hanneke Rijks, Mats Valk's mother, had her own area, where she sold wooden creations of her own -- they were, of course, inspired by the cube.

That night, for supper, I joined some cubing parents at a supper organised mostly by Rita, Feliks' mother. Some of the group included Floyd and Aimee Esparaz, Rita and Davids and a friend of Rita, Donna and Paul Hays, Henneke and Ron, Lynette, Karen Brooks and her brother, Sandra de Geeter, George Paterakis, Carol and Henry Huanqui and likely a couple I missed. Location was a Le Bon Bock, in the Montmartre area, just down from the Basilique Sacre Coeur we had visited a few days

prior (ironically, when Antoine and I were leaving the Montmartre area to go downtown to see the Tour Eiffel, Rita yelled at us across the Metro platform and we waved!).

I left the hotel with Lynette, Donna and Paul. I took them to the Metro station and we made our way to the restaurant. They had kept one of the back rooms for us, so it was nice as we could stand and mingle for a while before we sat down to eat. Davids entertained us on the piano (good piano player!).

It was a good fun. At the end of the meal, we went up the hill to see if the Bastille Day fireworks were done. They must have been as hordes of people were coming down. After losing a few people from our group we headed back down to the Metro and back to the hotel... eventually.

Since the Front Populaire Metro station was much more comfortable to use, that is the one we got off at. Walked past the venue going towards the hotel. But as we got to the last block from the hotel, the gate to the street leading to the hotel was closed, and locked! We looked around, then noticed a push button and a speaker. I pushed the button, mentioned we wanted out, and the gate opened.

Antoine had beat me to the hotel.

July 15: Day 3; Nations Cup

Most competitors and participants were comfortable with the venue. People had a good idea where people hang out, where the various tables (i.e. Canadians, British, etc) were located. That was also the day we took a picture of the Canadians (the ones we could find) at the competition. Unfortunately, we missed Bill. But we got Harris, Alex, Jonathan (both!), Eric and Kian.

That was also the night of the Rubik's Nations Cup, a side event sponsored by Rubik's. Here is how it worked: various teams of three people had to register ahead of time. Each team had to represent a country. A country could have multiple teams, but no person could be on two teams. For example, Canada had two teams: Antoine, Bill and Kian; Jon, Eric and Harris. Each member of the team had to solve a cube consecutively (three people, three different scrambles) in a head to head fashion against another team. The winning team advances, the losing one is done.

Erno Rubik made an appearance before the competition actually started. Ian Scheffler was the Masters of Ceremony, and called up the teams.

At the end, Canada1 (Antoine, Bill, Kian) clocked the fastest time of the evening. But they finished third, just behind Australia (2nd) and Germany (1st). Competitors and spectators really got into it. There were likely roughly 1,000 people assisting (competitors and spectators). By far the side event the most popular.

July 16: day 4 of the competition

Our last full day in Paris. Antoine did not do as many finals as he usually does, even in the international competitions. This one was different. Not only it was the World Championships, but it seemed like ALL the best cubers were present, and in great form, bringing the level of competition even higher. Still, had Antoine performed as well in the 3x3x3 blindfold in the finals as he did in the

semi finals, he would have won!

In most events, anyone in the top-5 could have won. It was that close. At the end, Max Parks was the "Champion". He won the 3x3x3, and the 3x3x3 OH (breaking the world record in doing so).

Since I was "staff", I got to watch from up close: the first few rows of chairs at the front were reserved for the volunteers that worked during the competition.

Erno Rubik gave the Nations Cup Challenge prizes. Prof. Mefferts give prizes to the WCA events.

It was a good competition. Great finals :-)

After the finals, a group of roughly 25 cubers decided to go eat downtown. I joined them. Led by Keaton Ellis, we headed downtown via the Metro. Got out at a station in a not so desirable part of town, then walked for a while (past a few more stations...) until we got to the place Keaton had in mind.

No room.

So we looked at other places close by, and found one that could accommodate it. After the meal, a large portion of people decided to go buy some "ice cream and drinks", and go to the Champs de Mars, by the Tour Eiffel, to consume it. It was getting late, and Antoine and I had to get up at something like 4:30 the next morning to catch a cab to go to the airport. We found a Metro. Rode a few stations, then the Metro stopped, and we were told to leave. I asked, en francais, to one of the people that was helping "evacuating" the train, directions to go to our destination. He asked if I talked English! (I guess he did not like my Canadian accent :-). He also said to hurry, as the last train was at 11:00PM, so we only had a few minutes.

We manage to catch the Metro in time. Then, a couple of stops before ours, the train stopped, and a message was played letting us know we would be leaving soon. After a few minutes, some police officers walked through, then the train started again. We got off at the end of the line, and got to our hotel.

July 17: back home

Going home day. After six weeks on the road. Happy to go home, sad to leave all that adventure behind. But life must go on.

Taxi ride was nice and fast. The first flight was from Paris to Reykjavik, Iceland. Got great seats: all the leg room we wanted.

Landed in Iceland. 1h5m for the next plane. Although it is a relatively small airport, and only a stopover, one still has to go through customs.

Major lineup. Antoine was hungry, so I stayed in line while he went and hunted for a sandwich of some sort. He came back 10-15 minutes later, just as the line started moving, with a small sandwich -- that is what you get at the Reykjavik airport for USD 8.

But at least the line has started moving. That is because they had just added a number of customs agents to get people through faster. And it did; all we were asked was where we came from, and where we were going. Then "stamp" and we were on our way to our next flight, that one to Toronto (seemed like the same plane, same

seats...).

Again, when through customs, using the self-serve kiosks for any declarations we might have had. The kiosk gives you a paper, which you then give to the customs agent as you leave the customs area.

Last flight was to Ottawa. As we approached we got great views of the city and downtown; landed at 3:10 PM.

Six weeks gone. The end of an adventure. A lifetime of memories...