

Hello to all my Rotarians at home!

by Taylor Plett

I'm writing this blog from a sunny garden bench in Jesus College, because, despite the fact that it's only 43 degrees out, a sunny day here calls for time outdoors. Jesus is part of Oxford's 39 colleges whose tucked-away gardens I've been visiting one by one. This tapestry of gardens is just one of a thousand details that make Oxford so like a jewelry box. From 16th-century pubs to cobblestone alleyways to spires peeking over ancient walls, the city packs away hidden gems in every nook and cranny, each with a story and history of its own.

As I create my own story during the year I'll spend here, I look forward to sharing it with you in pieces through these blogs. Now, halfway through the first term (called Michaelmas Term), allow me to take you back to the beginning, five weeks ago.



my sunny bench in Jesus College

I arrived in Oxford at the end of September after traveling through Paris and the south of France with my parents and sister. They got to tour the town with me for a day (complete with high tea) before saying goodbye and shipping back to your part of the world. I had little time to miss them, however, as I was quickly whisked into orientation activities for my Master's program, the MSc in Nature, Society and Environmental Governance. Together with my 25 classmates and our course director, Tim (first names only in the School of Geography), I visited a biodynamic farm and learned about sustainability in western England's food system. My classmates come from all parts of the world, but as we sat together for the first time over a truly farm-to-table lunch, I was awed at how much we all share. This is a group of people that care deeply about the environment – no surprises there. But beyond that, my classmates are refreshingly interdisciplinary, they are highly creative (many of them artists), they share a common reverence for Indigenous knowledge, and they champion local and alternative solutions to the crises we

face. It was clear to me that our immediate camaraderie marked a key difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study. Namely, that my classmates and I deeply want to be *here* specifically, in this academic niche at the heart of our passions.



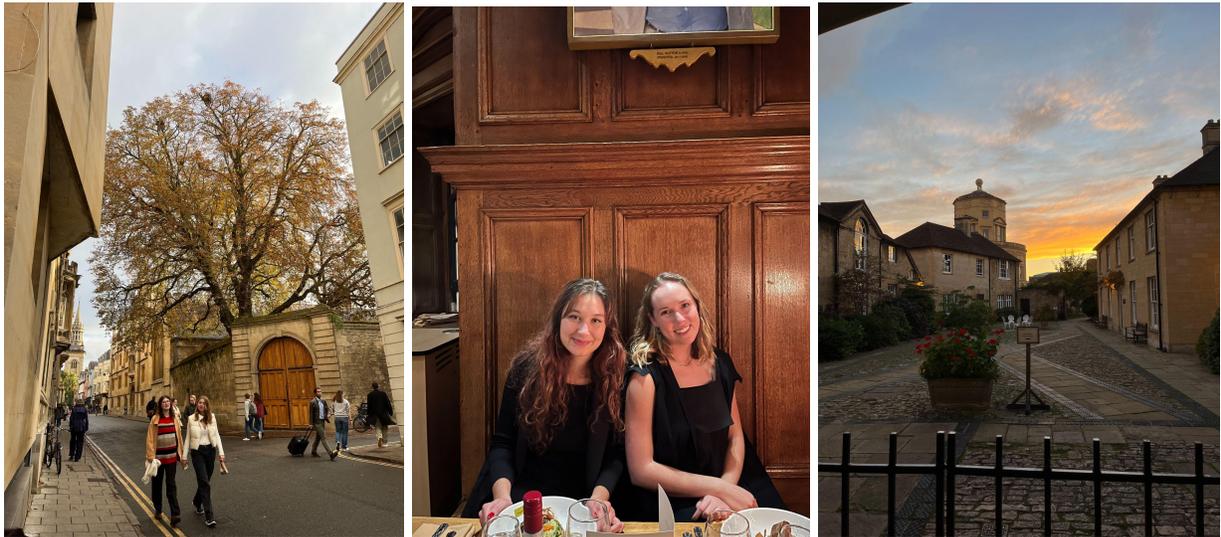
The Bodleian Library (I study here!)

In the weeks since orientation, I've seen how this postgraduate level of passion and expertise can light up classrooms with energy I've never before experienced. As we discuss research methodology, land valuing systems, and the role of the state as a regulator, each one of us has a story to tell and a compelling insight to add. So while my professors are world-class scholars, the majority of my learning happens peer-to-peer. That's not to downplay my classmates' positions as experts in their own right; among them are policy writers, former UN employees, activists, economists, even a science fiction novelist. These brilliant minds – *my friends!* – challenge and sharpen me while taking seriously my own unique perspective. It's exciting to think that as we galavant through Oxford's endless pubs and make potluck brunches together every Sunday, I'm forming not just a sphere of friends but a network of fellow thinkers who will advocate for a better future alongside me in the years to come.



A classmate and me at tea, the Radcliffe Camera (another library!), Sunday brunch potluck

Alright, enough about academics (for now). You're probably wondering whether very serious postgrads ever have any fun. Let me assure you, Oxford is a candyland for fun-seekers. In my residential college alone, there's an opportunity every single night of the week, from themed pub quiz nights (that's British for trivia) in the college bar to free pizza and movies in the media room. Around town, my friends and I go for picnics along the Thames, dance to Latin music at the weekly "reggaeton," and often skip a "real lunch" in favor of whopping British scones with clotted cream, washed down with hot tea between classes. There are also those characteristically "Oxford" events one can attend on repeat, like wine-heavy formal dinners (in full academic regalia!) and rowdy debates at the hallowed Oxford Union (whose most recent guest was Oxford grad Malala Yousafzai). Indeed, each day presents the Oxford student with an endless buffet of lectures, parties, and culinary delights. The real issue is finding time for the library...and for sleep.



Fall foliage, a formal dinner at Hertford College, sunset over my college (Green Templeton)

On that last count, don't worry about me – I'm still recovering from a nasty bout of covid and am taking care to get plenty of rest. As much as I love the hustle and bustle of student life here, I also cherish the quieter moments. I listen and contemplate in a weekly theology forum, hosted in a candlelit church room, smoky with incense. I luxuriate in early morning yoga classes and sit at the cafe next door afterward to complete the *New York Times* crossword over coffee. I'm working on getting a job as a part-time baker at the patisserie down the street. All this to say, in the wild cacophony of student life at Oxford, I'm finding ways to center myself and just be me. I try hard to soak up what little sunlight each day brings (the sun now sets at 4pm). And most of all, I meditate on the immense gratitude I feel that I get to be here at all, in this ancient, special place. I think of my Rotarian family back at home. I'm so incredibly grateful to you for making this chapter of my life possible.

That's all for now – time to head to a tap dance audition for *An American in Paris*. Never a dull moment, huh?

Taylor Plett is the 2022 Rotary Global Grant Scholar. She is from Laguna Niguel and graduated from Duke University in the field of Environmental Policy & Governance. She is pursuing a Master's of Science degree at the University of Oxford in England for 2022-23.

Taylor is sponsored by the Irvine Rotary Club.

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