

The best six days ever



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In September 2009, I was lucky enough to attend the 21st EU Contest for Young Scientists in Paris. The EU Contest for Young Scientists brings together scientists aged 14-21 from around Europe and elsewhere in the world for six days of competition, cultural exchange and social activities. As you can see from the title it was, y'know, not too bad. This article was originally published along with tweets as a series of blog posts on the YSJ website.



I won the chance to go to EUCYS through my national fair, the 2009 Big Bang Fair, as one of three UK representatives. My project dealt with work I did for the Acoustic Cosmic Ray Neutrino Experiment, or ACoRNE. It aimed to detect tiny particles called neutrinos by listening for the sounds they were meant to make when they were very energetic and entered seawater. For my project, carried out at the University

of Sheffield and funded by the Nuffield Bursary Scheme, I studied background noise from whales and dolphins, and also simulated the sounds the neutrinos would make in a big water tank. I worked on it for six weeks in the summer holidays; some people at EUCYS had spent years on their projects!

The night before getting the Eurostar to Paris I only got about three hours sleep – on top of poster-related anxiety, there was the fact the presentation I wanted to have on loop on my stand refused to save on my netbook, and of course general “I don’t deserve this free holiday with lots of smart people” angst. I managed to get to London with everything intact eventually though.

The contest was held at the Palais de la découverte – the UK team (Hannah Stuart, Robert Tann and me, plus Ellie Chambers, our “escort”) arrived too late for the scheduled set-up time (and most of the opening ceremony), but we arrived safely after getting better acquainted on the train and got to see a bit of Paris after dark. We also got bright red bags full of stuff, including bright yellow visibility jackets, though thankfully didn’t have to use them at all.

The next day, the competition began. We were all subject to “jury visits”, where we were asked about our project and judged – there were seventeen jury members altogether from a range of different fields. Coincidentally, the head of the jury was a professor in the physics department of Imperial College London; I study theoretical physics at Imperial! He didn’t judge Hannah, Robert or me for obvious reasons, but he did come round to say “hi” and ask about our projects informally. Unlike the Big Bang Fair, all the EUCYS projects were organised by field – this was

advantageous for me because it gave me a fighting chance of understanding a few of the projects around me! I still have no clue how the jury picked winning projects, considering how high quality all the stands I saw were, and how many I couldn't even begin to understand. In the morning we also had a lecture from a representative of the European Patent Office. I didn't actually get a jury visit on the first day – whether that was a good thing or not is debatable!

In the evening I attended two demonstration sessions at the Palais: electromagnetism, in which we watched lightning being created artificially, and “Galileo’s Merry-go-round”, in which some of us sat on a carousel and felt and saw the effects of forces acting on us as we spun round. If you go to Paris I really recommend you visit the Palais, as I will if/when I return to Paris – it has a huge range of exhibits and the emphasis is on “hands-on” learning, though be warned that all the information on the exhibits is in French.

EUCYS has a good balance between competition and social elements – we got to do a lot of touristy things in addition to being judged and meeting fellow young scientists! One of these things was a cruise down the Seine! The weather was great that evening (though it got cold and wet later in the week) and it was great to see Paris from the water. If you want to watch a video of our cruise you can see it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOSkI8MJLBM>

After our Seine cruise came something I've always wanted to do – we went up the Eiffel Tower for dinner! We had to wait a bit until we could go into the restaurant for dinner, so lots of us had a wander about the first floor of the Tower and took in the sights and sounds of Paris by evening. We even watched what was apparently Europe's largest firework display across the city! Unfortunately one of the UK representatives, who shall remain nameless, managed to get lost on the second floor of the Tower...

The third day brought my first judging sessions, then in the evening a visit to the Musée des arts et métiers and two lectures by two scientists from EIROforum facilities. The European Molecular Biology Laboratory lecture given by Jacopo Lucci was Greek to me, but the one given by Paula Stella Teixeira of the European Southern Observatory on stellar and planetary formation was very interesting.

In addition to jury members coming round, there

were national organisers and researchers (with members of the public and schools coming round during certain sessions) – one person advised me to speak more slowly and pause at the end of sentences. I think more than anything else attending EUCYS helped me with talking to people whose first language wasn't English! On the third day one jury member asked me how my project was original – despite saying that the studies I did hadn't been carried out by the ACoRNE collaboration before and acoustic detection of neutrinos was a fairly new field (i.e. people HAVE studied marine mammals and detector responses before, just not in this context) she seemed unconvinced. It didn't really matter too much since I wasn't there to win, but it did leave me feeling a little annoyed. On a slightly more light-hearted note, I apparently became known as “the girl with the neutrinos” – Neutrino Girl always did strike me as an awesome superhero name...

The student helpers assigned to each country were really great; I wouldn't have seen half the stuff I did (Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, Montmartre, Champs d'Elysses, Arc du Triomphe...) without the student helpers organising jaunts out to various landmarks. It meant we got to see Paris as if we were tourists, in addition to being in the city for a specific purpose.

Most people had at least one dodgy jury session, me being no exception. On the fourth day, this particular jury member let me explain half of my project, then exclaimed his disbelief, then spent five minutes reading my poster, then said “thank you” and left. Hmph. On the other hand, it was always nice when jury members enquired about what university you were heading to, what your future plans were and so forth. Well, after the mean jury member I was just glad the rest let me finish talking!

I had seven jury members come round in total – the norm was five or six, but some people had even more than seven! On the fourth evening there was a round table with Wendelin Werner (Fields Medallist), Jean Dalibard (atomic physicist), Claudie Haigneré (spationaut, aka a French astronaut) and Pascale Cossart (bacteriologist), plus a representative of the EU Commission. Very interesting discussions took place, with many young scientists asking questions. After, we had dinner at the nearby Café de la musique, with music provided by the Original Jackass Band and a few of the more co-ordinated among us taking to the dance floor!



On the fifth day Hannah, Ellie and I went to the Chaillet area of Paris for shopping since we had a few hours between the last jury session and the award ceremony. Robert went with another group that visited Père Lachaise, a big cemetery where lots of famous people (including Oscar Wilde) are buried. During the morning session I had a walk round the previously unexplored life sciences stands and found that some of them were actually understandable! That's not a bad reflection on them, just my puny physicist mind unable to cope with all the scary long words.

On the fifth evening came the award ceremony in the Palais. We were sat with Estonia, who were missing a flag (each table had small flags on them as markers) – using our initiative as young scientists we cobbled one together! The first prize of the evening was the EIROforum CERN prize – the winner gets the chance to spend a week at CERN, visiting the permanent exhibition and various experiments and departments. I was kind of shocked when my country, then my name was read out. Kind of really shocked. To the extent where I was still shaking at the end of the ceremony. Without a speck of false modesty I thought my project was the weakest of the physics projects. In the end a lot of the prizes went to physics projects; I can't really comment on whether more life sciences ones deserved to win since I didn't see or understand all of them, but I think all the prizewinners were very worthy. In particular, the first prize winners and some of the youngest contestants, Liam McCarthy and John D. O'Callaghan, for their project on a convenient test for somatic cells in cow's milk – so simple and yet so brilliant! In addition to prizes, the awards ceremony also included magicians coming round to our tables and an incredible beat boxer!

Before the UK team caught the train back to London we headed back to Montmartre for a few hours for some last-minute shopping. I have to say that even if I hadn't won a prize, just experiencing the contest was a sufficient prize! As well as exploring Paris and taking in lectures and museums, I got to meet young scientists from all over the world (who I still keep in touch with via the wonder that is Facebook). I don't think I'll ever forget the experience!

About the Author

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