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My experience as an Openlab Summer Student at CERN – Part 2

This is second of the two posts where I write about my experience at CERN. Click here to read part 1, where I narrate a few incidents from my first month of internship.

The Second Month at CERN

The redhead and I weren't really good at attending parties. But, thanks to our party-girl roomie, we never missed anything important. She would come back to our room and spit out everything interesting that had happened. She was our eyes and ears of the place.

She introduced us to two sweethearts (a dude, and a physicist) and soon we became a group of five close friends (only one dude and four girls, lucky him).

We were given a tour of several important sites at CERN. The CERN Control Center was one of them.

It was around this time that I really started relishing the food there. I no longer felt the need to add extra salt or pepper. The desserts were exquisite and so were the salads and everything else in between. I discovered these really delicious croissants that they served at R1 (restaurant 1). Eating those was like a trip to heaven and back. Once I bought a sandwich for 4 euros and when I found out that they've only added two slices of cheese between two loaves of bread, I felt totally cheated. But, as I ate it a fountain of deliciousness exploded in my mouth. The French are brilliant with their food.

I began to experiment more and tried Turkish, German, and Chinese food as well. They were all heavenly! This other time I bought a sandwich without reading what its ingredients were (I was too lazy to translate them from French to English). It had a queer taste. After eating it I realised that it had pork in it and I liked it nonetheless (I'm a vegetarian)! I had never eaten so much food in my entire life.

I started to love the food there. This is the Happy Kebab from a Turkish outlet that was close to our hotel.

Somedays I would wonder why I wasn't putting on any weight despite all the food that I was consuming. It didn't take me long to figure out the reason. I used to dance all day, every day. I danced in my room, in my office, on the streets, on the tables, while sitting, while walking, or eating. I just couldn't stop dancing! You know why? One day, while searching for something at my office desk, I dug out a pair of old (but functional) speakers. I felt like I've found gold. A few days later the redhead gifted me a TnB sports edition Bluetooth speaker that would turn into a bomb of bliss when turned on. Would you still blame me for dancing overmuch?

Sometime around this time, my supervisor shared with me the code for a graph that played a major role in helping me develop my dashboard. By this time, I had a decent understanding of D3 but it still wasn't enough to create complicated charts. I could, however, understand and tweak almost any D3 code.

Ooh, one day my party girl roomie told me that some students were planning a 2 day trip to Paris and I knew that I would regret not joining that group. So, I did and that's how I reached the city of love which is as romantic as it is fabled to be. We saw all the major tourist attractions but I want to talk about the one that won my heart.
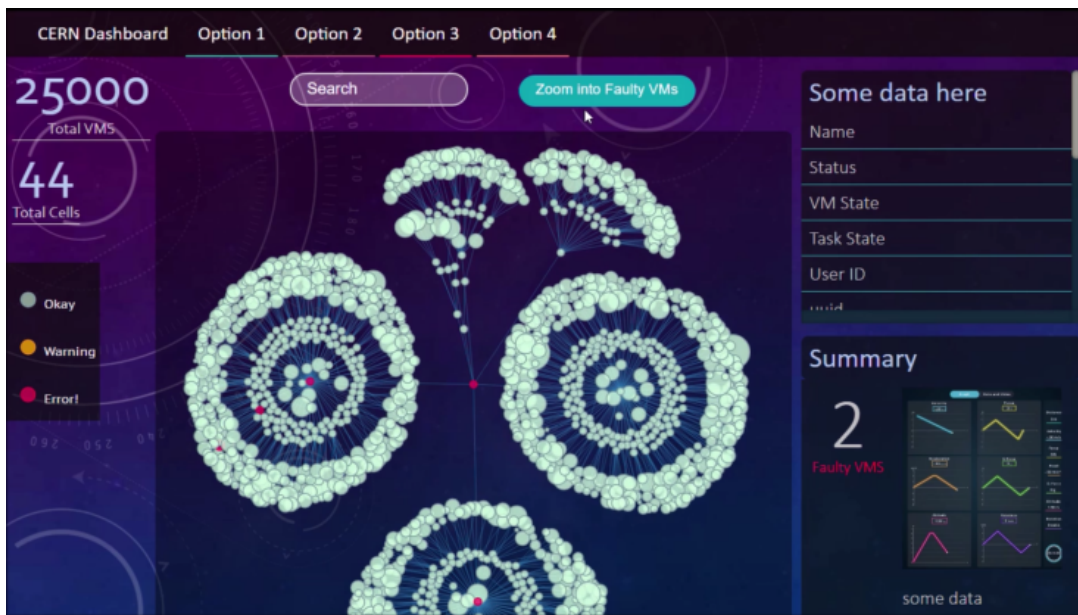
I didn't take photos of the Eiffel Tower. This right here is a photo of what I believe is Napolean's stuff at the Museum de Louvre. It was so grand!

I don't think a naive writer like me can do any justice to the enchanting beauty of the view from the Eiffel Tower. It was something else. As I stood at its peak, I felt completely at peace with myself. I think the architects and builders at Paris must ascend the tower before choosing a spot for their constructional wonder because every edifice, every structure on the city's landscape is in harmony with the rest and they together paint an almost symmetrical scenery that is sure to take your breath away.

I must tell you about all the kind strangers I met during those two months so that you don't go there thinking that the French are cold and reserved. A lady offered me a ride to my hotel when she saw me walking, carrying a somewhat heavy backpack. Another dude at a really posh resto in Paris (at Museum de Louvre) gave me water and offered me some of the delicious cuisines they served there, all for free! I met a jovial Spanish family who was so kind as to invite me to their home at Barcelona and give me some really great advice for my eyes (I have a "condition" in one of my eyes). On my return flight, I sat next to a friendly Swedish couple who were clearly so much in love. They shared some of their sweet memories with me. They were really nice.

The next important event was that of the lightning talks at CERN. All of us were required to give a brief presentation on our projects. I remember that day so well. I had already lost my keys, burnt my jeans, and broken my specs. So, I was quite sure that my quota for all the bad that can happen in a day was already full.

Two out of three of my supervisors were not at CERN, but the one who was there made sure that I rock my presentation and I guess I did because I stood second. I really couldn't have done it without my supervisor's support.

A screenshot of the dashboard that I built.

This makes me what to tell you why I am sure I had the best supervisors. On my first day they introduced me to all of my teammates, they helped me set up my system, they took me to the restaurant there and briefed me on the life at CERN. Even when I was taking my own sweet time with my project and not necessarily showing them tangible, visible results of my work for the first few weeks, they never blew their top or say anything. I needed them to show some faith in me and they did. They made it a point to take out time from their busy schedules and show me some major sites at CERN or give me some advice on how to enjoy my time at Geneva. I shared my office with one of my supervisors and I used to bob my head like crazy to the ghetto rhythms of Check on it and do several crazy things while working, but he never complained. He and the other office mate I had were so adorable! They were the coolest. One of my supervisors even visited India twice after the programme! How awesome is that! And that's not even all (as you will see shortly).

The Datacenter at CERN was one of the places that my supervisor took us to. He gave us a pretty good tour of the place.
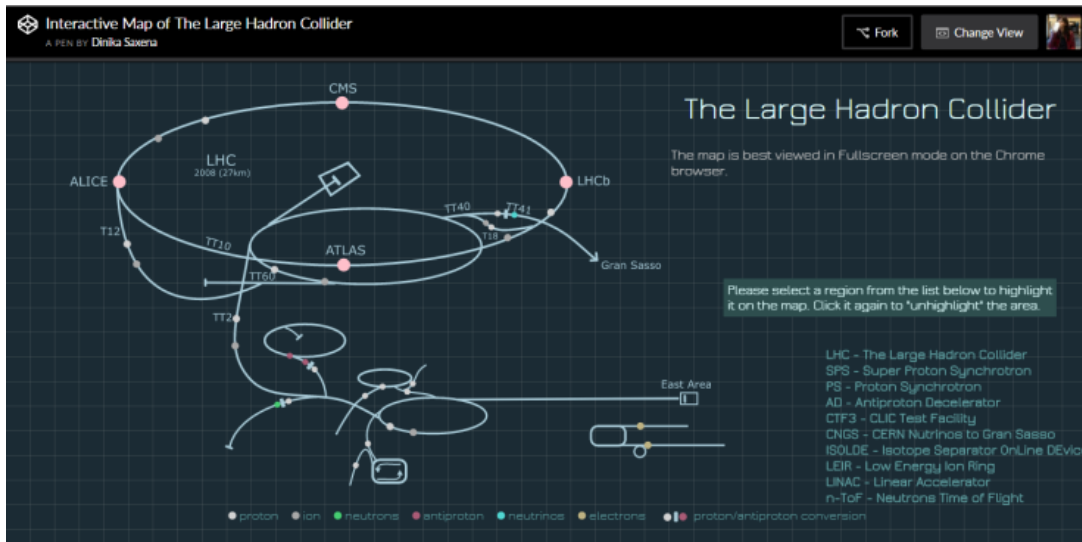
I was also so lucky to have my birthday celebrated at CERN. I may or may not have gone on a date that day. My friends and neighbours made me some chocolate pancakes at midnight. I went to Chamonix with my friends where I saw enormous expanses of snow in every direction that my eye could see. (I also saw some brave hearts trekking on the snow covered mountains there, wearing nothing but shorts and t-shirts. How could someone be so immune to cold?)

The surreal Chammonix

It was now my last week at CERN. I had completed my project and had a pretty good understanding of D3.js. My supervisor was now reviewing drafts of my final report with an unmistakable precision that surprises me to this day. I thought I'd be a mess on my last working day there. I had no idea.

A day before my last day, my colleague (another Openlab student) and I invited our supervisors and our teammates to an Indian dinner and I could not be more thankful to this colleague of mine to suggest this idea to me. It was the best farewell ceremony that we could have. My supervisor gifted us a CERN album (I told you my supervisors were the best) on which everyone in the team had scribbled such cute messages. It was so special! Just the other day when I was flipping through its pages I saw a simplified map of the Large Hadron Collider and I immediately thought, "Woah! Wait a minute! I can code this." And, last week I completed making an interactive map of the LHC on Codepen.

An interactive map of the LHC I made on Codepen

On my last day, I had the nerve to express my residual anger towards the supervisor who had not attended the dinner (I really wanted him to!) and was glad to learn that he had a very genuine excuse (it wasn't sad, so don't worry).

I could have never imagined that my last two days at CERN would be my happiest days there. They were promising and I realised that I was not saying goodbye to anything or anyone that I didn't want to. I am still in touch with my supervisors and my friends and I have brought back more than enough memories from my time there. It has changed me more deeply than I every thought it would. I experienced and opened myself to new things (and food varieties) and became more accepting. I learned a great number of things there but most of all, I learned about myself. I see myself as a more able person now and I have dreams that are far bigger than I ever had.

My book of memories from CERN

As to what I miss the most from my time there, it is the people that I met at CERN. They are extraordinary in every which way.

Published by Dinika

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