

Cousin Letters - Summer Edition

Date: September 1st, 2019

Location: Quebec City, Quebec Canada

Dear Family:

This letter is coming out a few days late, but I hope you'll read it anyways :-). I don't get to see you guys as often as I'd like, so I'm pretty excited to be able to write to you and share a little bit of my life.

My last semester of college was spent abroad, at Université Laval in Quebec City in French-speaking Canada. I had always wanted to get some use of my French classes, as well as to explore life outside the US. Iowa State University had an exchange program set up with Laval, so in July 2017 I packed up and headed north for the summer and fall semesters.

I decided to live in the dorms for those six months, and was surprised by how unfamiliar the experience was. Compared to the US, Quebec students are much more likely to study in their hometown and thus not live in the dorms. This meant that the majority of my dorm mates were actually other exchange students! On my floor alone there were students from France, Portugal, Colombia and Senegal.

Another difference was mealtimes. Unlike ISU, Laval doesn't really have any student eating centers. Instead, there are big communal kitchens in the dorms. Imagine 400 students sharing the same 20 stoves! It was hectic. Luckily, everyone ate at different times. The Quebec students (and me) ate around 5pm; the European students around 7pm and the Africans around 10pm! I asked some guys from Senegal why they ate so late, and he said that it was a habit from their home country - eating late let them avoid generating heat during the sweltering days.

I got really lucky with my room assignment, and had an unbelievably gorgeous view of downtown. Every month I stuck my phone against my window and took a photo. Here's two I liked quite a bit:



Unbelievably, I woke up early to snap a photo of the fall sunrise



A month later and the leaves were replaced by snow

While I was studying, I also was searching for my first job post-college. I applied to ~60 companies, got call-backs from 8, interviewed with 3, and ended up taking a job again in Quebec City. It was one of the toughest decisions of my life. I hated being away from my family, but I really liked the company and the location was dreamy - extremely walkable neighborhood, close to all my dance venues, and in one of the safest cities in North America (compared to Quebec City, Des Moines seems dangerous!).

After two months back in Osky, living with my parents and waiting for my work visa, I packed up my entire life into three suitcases and moved back to Quebec City in late February. It was a tough couple of months at first. Living on the couch of a friend, I trudged through the snow every day doing apartment visits. I moved into my apartment after two weeks of searching, and had to furnish it completely from scratch - I even had to buy a stove and fridge!

But the toughest part by far was developing a social life. Here, I had one advantage: I had picked up swing dancing my last two years for college. The swing dancing scene in Quebec is very lively, so I started going to social dances, taking courses and even signed up for a dance troupe. Over time, I've gradually been able to make friends, but it's always a work in progress.



A summer dance held outside a church

A little about my city: Quebec City is one of the oldest cities in North America, and is on the St. Lawrence river. There's a section of the city that's enclosed by walls and is called "Vieux" (old) Quebec. In the center of Old Quebec is the Frontenac hotel, which is the former castle (!) of the governor:



I personally think Dad would make an *excellent* governor.

The city is on the St. Lawrence river and is about twice the population of Des Moines. Across the river is another large town called Lévis (around the size of Cedar Rapids). There's a ferry that commutes between the two cities and is free with a city bus pass. A really popular summer activity is to take the ferry across to Lévis and picnic there.



Selfie in Lévis. You can just make out the Frontenac castle in the background.

To explain the terrain of Quebec a bit: By the river, the town is quite low (sea-level) - not many people live here for fear of flooding. Further on, the city rises to a shelf where the old Quebec and original settlements are located. Then the city drops back down in elevation again. I live right on the seam between the high and low portions of town (they're actually called "high town" and "low town" in French). Here's a picture looking down on my neighborhood:



I live about five blocks left of this photo, and work on the opposite side of the park on the right hand side. Here's a shot closer to work (my work is to the right of the giant church):



My work visa expires in February, so the next big decision point in my life - whether or not to renew - will need to be made before December. Right now, I'm leaning towards moving back towards the States, ideally Minneapolis or Chicago or another bigger Midwest town. I haven't told anyone outside Mom and Dad and a close friend here in Quebec, so please keep that piece of news on the down low.

I'm excited to be able to write to you guys. Thank you Emily Samman for the idea! Thanks to Mom and Dad for their unconditional support, and thanks to all of you for being the best set of cousins a guy could hope for.

Best of wishes,

Adam Hammes

(p.s. don't miss the photos on the next few pages!)



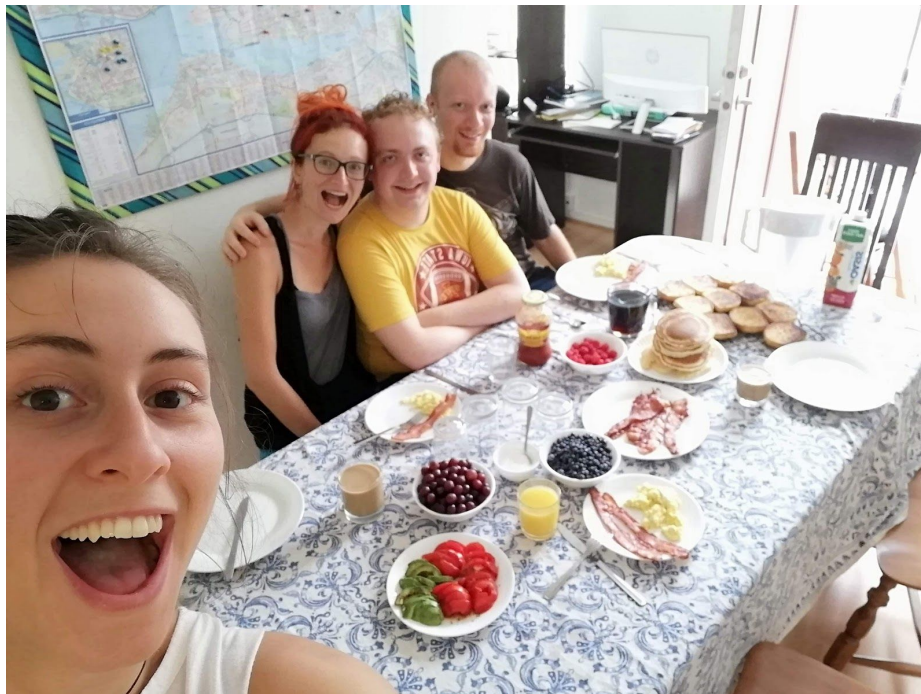
I see this dog every day I walk to work in the summer



Apparently, sunset color varies by region. I'd never seen this shade of pinkish orange before.



A photo taken across the river with my best friends here in Quebec.



Every few months I have friends over for brunch. This time we managed to bring about 5 pounds of berries combine.



To get to my piano lessons, I cross this river which freezes over in the winter.

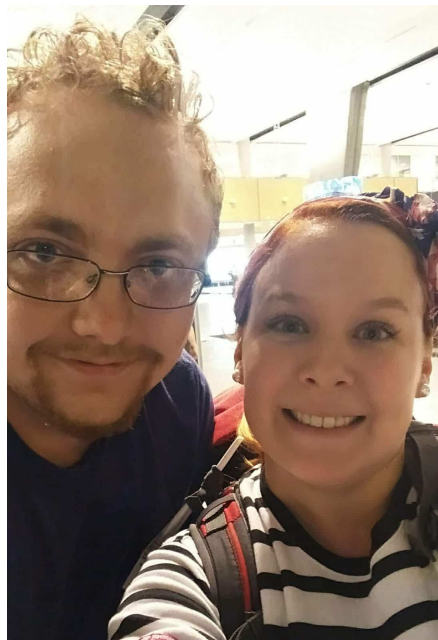


This photo is about 100 feet away from my apartment, but was taken before I moved in. There was a terrible storm the first few days when I moved back, which added a quarter inch of ice around everything.



Story time: Once while coming back from Iowa I got stuck overnight in the Montreal airport. I was absolutely miserable - stressed from change in plans, sleep-deprived, and hungry. Eventually I found a Subway and managed to get fed, and a nice older man at the airport told me the best place to sleep. You can see my "camping" setup above.

I woke up, still a bundle of stress, around 4am and met a Quebecois girl who was flying internationally for the first time - going to LA. She was really nervous, and flooded me with questions. Talking to her, calming her, helped relax me quite a bit. Right before her flight took off we snapped a selfie together (yes, I had a mustache for a couple of months):



A half hour later, and I caught an unbelievable sunrise that *almost* made the whole ordeal worth it:

