“The next train is delayed due to the recent heat wave,” announced the operator, quite matter-of-factly. It was eighty degrees at the time. No, not Celsius. What I had thought was a refreshing eighty-Fahrenheit was a scorching blast of sun for these Londoners, to the point that it disrupted the flow of their public transportation. Immediately, it hit me that I was no longer in Memphis, or even New York City. Instead I found myself in Western Europe for the very first time, and their public transportation was now my public transportation. And to say these constant London train delays and the hubbub of a fifty-five minute daily work commute was overshadowed by the CEO program – comprising an eight-week Hilton internship in London and a tour of surrounding European cities it enabled – would be a massive understatement.

The London CEO program could not have been more ideal. The advantages in traveling with seven like-minded undergraduates and the comfort in having an accommodation in central London were unparalleled. This exceptional setup for the summer was only strengthened by the program’s provision of a mentor, who turned out to be a proud alumnus and consultant familiar with the financial and real estate sectors I was to engage in the next two months. Undoubtedly, the core focus of my summer would be my professional growth and my first extended exposure to European culture, but it was Columbia that ensured these aims would come to fruition, that even my absurdly lofty expectations would be significantly surpassed.
Though having interned for Hilton Worldwide twice before and having the fortune to have worked on the Hill in previous summers, this particular internship was easily my best professional experience yet. Being situated at the intersection of finance and real estate opened my eyes to new spheres of the hotel world and, more broadly, exposed me to key business strategies and complex financial computations. In addition to learning to model real estate valuations and submitting return on investment projects to Hilton’s CFO, I was responsible for inputting a CapEx for seventy internationally owned and leased properties during the heat of Hilton’s budget season. The newly gained knowledge of financial modeling and quick transition to real estate projects culminated in a property visit to Israel, as our team looked to renew Hilton Tel Aviv's lease and strategize a renovation of its lobby area and restaurants.

In truth, I was able to make most out of my experience through the time spent outside of the office. My escapade to Tel Aviv included a return to Israel’s Gush Etzion bloc in the West Bank, where I had studied during my gap year before college, for a day of learning from some of the world’s most renowned biblical scholars. Along with my amazing Columbia classmates that joined me on CEO London, I had established an intern network at the Hilton office, with whom I could tour London – myself the lone American among a melting pot of Swiss, Latvian, Russian, French, and British young professionals. We ventured into London’s unique museums, skyscrapers and pubs; stood up close to the actors and actresses at the famed Shakespearean Globe and together journeyed on the public river transit around the
Old City of Westminster. One weekend in London, I even had the distinctive pleasure of being hosted by the Chief Rabbi of the UK in his home for the Sabbath.

But as remarkable as my abroad experience was within the city limits of London, my tour of Europe following my internship was all the more brilliant. From punting on the river in Cambridge to relaxing on the water in Venice; from being wowed by the prodigious collection of art at the Louvre in Paris to then witnessing the magnificence of the Coliseum and Vatican in Rome; from the strenuous climb to the top of the Duomo in Florence to climbing Mount Saléve on the border of Geneva; from scanning works of Maimonides and Jane Austen in Oxford to reading selections of Anne Frank’s journal in Amsterdam; and from sports on the beach in Tel Aviv to a late night football match at Camp Nou in Barcelona – few could imagine that such wide-ranging, geographically diverse adventures would be possible in the span of just a few weeks. Nevertheless, maximizing each moment spent in these legendary Western European cities with the CityMaps2Go app by my side and capitalizing on affordable Easyjet flights and Eurotrail trains, this whirlwind of experience would become a reality.

I entered the summer hoping to use the internship as a springboard into the financial world, and I leave now with an international network of Hilton executives and up-and-coming professionals in both the hotel and financial world. I boarded the flight to London with the hope that I could explore how Hilton hotels is positioned in the real estate sector, and I depart with the confidence to model a ten-year hotel valuation and return on investment proposal. On June 11, I left New York pondering how I would integrate into an international office so different from my
usual American surroundings, and August 20 I return to Memphis with a wealth of experiences in no fewer than seven countries and even more cultures.

Will there be another office in which I will be a part of a team of which not one of its eight team-members was of the same nationality? Will I ever again have the luxury of witnessing a Williams Sisters showdown, only to then observe a trifecta of matches that followed, featuring top ranked Djokovic, hometown hero Murray, and perhaps the greatest of all time Federer at Wimbledon, the crème de la crème of sporting events? Will I again have the luxury of spending two consecutive Sundays soaking in the beauty of two legendary universities in the United Kingdom: Cambridge and Oxford? And finally, will there ever again be an opportunity to complete a work experience abroad with a two-week tour of Western Europe that included immersing in the very best of Amsterdam, Paris, Venice, Florence, Rome, Geneva and Barcelona? Likely not, but I will forever treasure the summer of 2015 that was and embark on a lifetime quest to redouble the professional and personal breakthroughs the CEO London experience realized in me.