



A TALE OF A WIKODYSSEY PEDRO BEKINSCHTEIN

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My time at Wiko was expectedly unexpected. As usual for me, I did not know what I was getting into. I had not heard of Wiko before, although I’m not surprised because it seems to be mostly for academics in social sciences and also it is based on a system of recommendation. However, this was not the case for me; I parachuted myself into the application process, jumping from an airplane of ignorance. It was perfect timing, or so I thought. Eventually one finds out that there is no such thing as perfect timing for anything.

Anyway, it had been almost two years since I returned to Argentina from a three-year postdoc stay in Cambridge, United Kingdom. My postdoc had been an amazing academic experience with a twist of cultural shock. An emotional and intellectual rollercoaster, I would say. I spent two long years missing these emotions from time to time, until Wiko happened. I must say, although I wished very much to be selected, I did not expect it at all since I didn’t know anyone on the committee nor any former Fellow. So, it totally caught me by surprise. Because of this, I was unable to attend the intensive German course before

the start of the academic year. Also, since I was staying for three months, I didn't think I was going to need it. I was wrong. It would have made things much easier in social terms. Most of the Fellows already knew each other quite well by the time my partner and I arrived at Wiko, and this was mostly because they had shared time and activities during the language courses. I regret my decision not to attend, but, again, I had no idea what I was getting into as I did not know anyone who had done anything similar.

One seems to forget how hard it is to meet new people. Coming from a place where people are very sociable, some parts of Europe can be challenging. I had experienced that when I first arrived in the UK for my postdoc. Everyone was very polite, but I had to figure out both administrative things and social rules by myself. How do you socialize in a group that seems already formed in which, at least in the beginning, people don't seem to give a damn about you or what you have to say? I was not coming from Harvard, Stanford or Yale and I was not bearing any important Professorship or Commander of the British Empire title. I only had the "Cambridge" card, a postdoc in a good lab that was known by one of the Fellows and the "brain" card that, in the end, made my way into the Wiko environment and into the mind of some of the Fellows and staff. My time at Wiko was challenging in at least three ways. The first challenge was my project, or projects, because there were two. I was determined to write a book and a paper in three months. This was both ambitious and impossible. However, in the quest for the impossible, interesting things happen. I could say I'm a junkie for the unexpected, or at least that's what I keep discovering.

From the beginning of my stay until the end of it, I had a continuous feeling that I was always missing something. I was right: there were lots of things going on, like events, social gatherings and workshops I was not attending. That made me upset at first, but I learned to live with it later on. I must say that for half of my stay I was a bit torn between the Wiko life and my partner, who is not an academic and had a harder time fitting in. If Wiko was overwhelming for me, I can't really imagine how it was for him.

Looking back at my time at Wiko with some perspective, I realised that three months was not nearly enough time to develop fruitful interactions with the other Fellows. This was even more difficult for an introverted oyster like me who has to make a real cognitive effort to begin a social interaction. However, I feel that at Wiko, all the Fellows were awkward in their own way. Luckily, even though social interaction is not my thing, living in Latin America provides you with a repertoire of "I don't give a crap" behaviours that comes to be very useful in these types of situations. I might have oversold my project

during the formal introduction, but that was my only way to bring some attention to myself. Remember, I had no connection to any of the Fellows, plus there was only one more neuroscientist who, later on, I came to like a lot.

As I mentioned before, I had two projects, which I couldn't finish while I was in Berlin, but I have now. I had a lot of time to focus at Wiko, especially because I rarely saw anyone during the day – except for lunch. I'm not sure if this was because my office was a bit isolated from the rest and my apartment was in the *Neubau* where no one actually lived. Well, except for Simone Reber, but she was spending most of the nights at her place, so I never had the chance to see her in her pyjamas nor did she see me wearing mine. This is to say that during most of the day and especially during the night I felt I was completely alone. I spent several nights having dinner with my partner in the kitchen close to the ping-pong table and saw no human nor heard human-made sounds, sometimes known as conversations. This felt really strange for I thought that one of the goals for my stay was the interaction with others. But the others were living somewhere else and it was only towards the end of my stay that I started getting invited to secret parties for heavy drinkers.

There were some moments that I particularly enjoyed. Most of the Thursday dinners were great and it was the time I had the best interactions with the rest of the Fellows. The wine made it easier, but I also felt everyone was more relaxed and more eager to talk. I believe that the dinners, much more than seminars and workshops, made me think a lot and gave me new ideas. It was there that I became fond of the biologists and other creatures found at the Wiko. Some of these dinners were inspiring, challenging to my thoughts and projects; and this is something I rarely encounter these days.

I had a few one-to-one meetings with other Fellows that were pretty amazing. I enjoyed talking to Onur Güntürkün and feel privileged to have been able to discuss my projects with him. I also had the chance to discuss some concepts of memory with Fellows from the social sciences. This was particularly interesting in terms of broadening my horizons.

One other thing that was difficult was that although the problems academics face can be similar around the world, there are particular issues that only apply to developing countries. I know the Wiko is trying to get more Fellows from Latin America, for example, and I am very thankful for that. It would have been great to have a couple of more Fellows with similar regional problems to be able to share experiences and think of possible solutions.

Regarding my academic projects, I'm proud to say that my book on the brain has been published, in June. The name of the book is *100 % Cerebro (100 % Brain)* and I have already left a copy at the Wiko. I wrote about 2/3 of the book while staying at Wiko and those who can read Spanish will likely notice that my time in Berlin had great influence on what I wrote. My second project was to write a manuscript on memory forgetting that is now finished and waiting for corrections from my collaborator before beginning the process of submission to scientific journals. I hope it will be published in an important journal sometime this year.

Overall I felt part of something I had never felt part of before, some kind of intellectual elite that values ideas a lot. If I had to describe my time at Wiko in five words, they would be “challenging”, “amazing”, “alien”, “difficult” and “fun”. It was definitely an experience of a lifetime; it changed my ideas of what I want to do and gave me new friends and tools to think in a broader perspective. If I could accomplish this in only three months, I absolutely hope I get invited for a whole academic year, because I can't see the limits to my imagination yet.