

conference **REPORT**

by Michael W Lucas

BSDCam 2017 **Trip Report**

Over the decades, FreeBSD development and coordination has shifted from being purely online to involving more and more in-person coordination and cooperation. The FreeBSD Foundation sponsors a devsummit right before BSDCan, EuroBSDCon, and AsiaBSDCon, so that developers traveling to the con can leverage their airfare and hammer out some problems. Yes, the Internet is great for coordination, but nothing beats a group of developers spending 10 minutes together to sketch on a whiteboard and figuring out exactly how to make something bulletproof.

In addition to the coordination efforts, though, conference devsummits are hierarchical. There's a rigid schedule, with topics decided in advance. Someone leads the session. Sessions can be highly informative, passionate arguments, or anything in between.

BSDCam is... a little different. It's an invaluable part of the FreeBSD ecosystem. However, it's something that I wouldn't normally attend.

But right now is not normal.

I'm writing a new edition of *Absolute FreeBSD*. To my astonishment, people have come to rely on this book when planning their deployments and operations. While I find this satisfying, it also increases the pressure on me to get things correct. When I wrote my first FreeBSD book back in 2000, a dozen mailing lists provided authoritative information on FreeBSD development. One person could read every one of those lists. Today, that's not possible—and the mailing lists are only one narrow aspect of the FreeBSD social system.

Don't get me wrong—it's pretty easy to find out what people are doing and how the system works. But it's not that easy to find out what people will be doing and how the system will work. If this book is going to be future-proof, I needed to leave my cozy nest and venture into the wilds of Cambridge, England. Sadly, the BSDCam chair agreed with my logic, so I boarded an aluminum deathtrap—sorry, a “commercial airliner”—and found myself hurtled from Detroit to Heathrow.

And one Wednesday morning, I made it to the William Gates Building of Cambridge University, consciousness nailed to my body by a thankfully infinite stream of proper British tea.

BSDCam attendance is invitation only, and the facili-

ties can only handle 50 folks or so. You need to be actively working on FreeBSD to wrangle an invite. Developers attend from all over the world. Yet, there's no agenda. Robert Watson is the chair, but he doesn't decide on the conference topics. He goes around the room and asks everyone to introduce themselves, say what they're working on, and declare what they want to discuss during the conference. The topics of interest are tallied. The most popular topics get assigned time slots and one of the two big rooms. Folks interested in less popular topics are invited to claim one of the small breakout rooms.

Then the real fun begins.

I started by eavesdropping in the virtualization workshop. For two hours, people discussed FreeBSD's virtualization needs, strengths, and weaknesses. What needs help? What should this interface look like? What compatibility is important, and what isn't? By the end of the session, the couple dozen people had developed a reasonable consensus, and, most importantly, some folks had added items to their to-do lists.

Repeat for a dozen more topics. I got a good grip on what's really happening with security mitigation techniques, FreeBSD's cloud support, TCP/IP improvements, advances in teaching FreeBSD, and more. A BSDCan devsummit presentation on packaging the base system is informative, but eavesdropping on two dozen highly educated engineers arguing about how to nail down the final tidbits needed to make that a real thing is far more educational.

To my surprise, I was able to provide useful feedback for some sessions. I speak at a lot of events outside of the FreeBSD world, and was able to share much of what I hear at Linux conferences. A tool that works well for an experienced developer doesn't necessarily work well for everyone.

Every year, I leave BSDCan tired.

I left BSDCam entirely exhausted. These intense, focused discussions stretched my brain.

But, I have a really good idea where key parts of FreeBSD development are actually headed. This should help future-proof the new *Absolute FreeBSD*, as much as any computer book can be future-proof.

Plus, BSDCam throws the most glorious conference dinner I've ever seen.

I want to thank Robert Watson for his kind invitation, and the FreeBSD Foundation for helping defray the cost of this trip. ●

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