

Report on a Period of Arabic Language Study and Cultural Immersion in Jordan

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Overview

I spent a week in Jordan, from the 15th to the 23rd of April, studying Arabic and travelling to a handful of places I had until then only read about at Oxford. I wanted to do two things while I was there: get through an intensive course in Modern Standard Arabic and the Jordanian dialect, and see some of the early Islamic and older sites that keep coming up in my history and art papers. I cannot thank Pembroke and the Alan Jones Travel Grant enough for making it possible. The £1,000 covered a large part of my accommodation and living costs while I was there, and without it I would not have been able to go. I managed both of the things I set out to do, and it turned out to be one of the best weeks I have had since starting my degree.

Language study at the Ahlan World Language School

For the first five days, from the 15th to the 20th, I was at the Ahlan World Language School in Amman, doing 25 hours a week split between Modern Standard Arabic and the Jordanian dialect. Mornings were mostly grammar and writing, and the afternoons were given over to conversation, which suited me perfectly. It let me firm up the Modern Standard Arabic I had been working on at Oxford, while finally getting comfortable slipping into the spoken dialect I am actually going to need day to day in Tunis.

The best part was that whatever we covered in class, I could go out and use in everyday life. I have always learned by speaking and by the end of the week I noticed my Arabic was coming much more readily, and I came home a good deal more confident with listening and speaking, and a lot more excited about the year ahead at the Bourguiba Institute. Coming when it did, just before Prelims, it also gave me the motivation I needed to succeed in those exams.

People, hospitality and everyday life in Amman

Outside of lessons, what I will remember most is the people and how kind everyone was. Any effort to speak Arabic, however badly, was very well received. I found Amman a young, partly international sort of city, and the friends I made over the week came from all over the world and from all different backgrounds, really exposing me to groups of people I would never have got the chance to meet.

One evening I went along to a young diplomats' event, which brought together people working in and around diplomacy in the region. I ended up talking to a lot of them, and I have actually come away with several good friends at the British Consulate who I am planning to stay in touch with. It was eye-opening to hear how they use Arabic and their knowledge of the region in their day to day work, and a great motivation for my learning of the language.

The food similarly deserves a mention: I tried to eat as widely as I could, from mansaf, the national dish of lamb cooked in a fermented yoghurt sauce over rice, to falafel and hummus, with kunafa and cardamom coffee along the way. Meals with my Jordanian friends (who took

me in after meeting in a bar on the first night!) tended to be long and shared affairs, and they turned out to be some of the best language practice of the whole week.

Travelling and the sites

Once the course finished on the 20th, I had three days to travel and see some of the sites that tie into my Arabic history and Islamic art papers. I found there was a real difference between studying these places from Oxford and standing in the middle of them.

The Umayyad desert castles (quṣūr). I went out to a few of the early Islamic desert complexes east of Amman, including Qusayr Amra with its surprisingly well preserved bath house and those early frescoes of people, which you very rarely see. Being inside them made all the reading about early Islamic architecture and Umayyad court life feel much less abstract.

Umm Qais. Further north I visited Umm Qais, ancient Gadara, where the Graeco-Roman and later Islamic remains sit up above the point where Jordan, Israel and Syria meet. It gave me a real sense of how many different peoples had lived on the same ground over the centuries.

Ajloun and Karak castles. The two castles came at the medieval history from opposite sides. Ajloun was built under the Ayyubids, while Karak was a major Crusader stronghold before it passed to the Ayyubids and then the Mamluks. Seeing them both really brought the Crusader period, and the Islamic response to it, to life.

Petra. I finished at Petra, which was every bit as extraordinary as everyone says. Walking down through the canyon to the Treasury, and then climbing up to the Monastery, was the perfect way to end the week (although absolutely exhausting!), and a good reminder of how much there still is to discover in the region.

Conclusion

Looking back, the trip was really transformational in my Arabic journey. My language is stronger, I understand the history and art I study a great deal better for having seen it in person, and I have come home ready and keen to make the most of my year abroad.

More than anything, the week made me love Arabic in a way I had not quite expected. Using it out in the world, rather than only on the page, showed me how much it can open up, and I have come back more sure than ever that I want to keep going with it as far as I can.

I am really grateful to Pembroke and to the Alan Jones Travel Grant for making the whole thing happen. It has changed how I think about my degree and about what I might do afterwards, and none of it would have been possible without the College's support. I would be very happy to share any more detail if that would be useful.

With thanks,

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