Experiences in Amman, Jordan

I planned my international experience to Jordan during the tail end of my student exchange to Singapore. Months earlier, I was torn between applying for an SIT program or an exchange program, and by the end of the first choice, I knew I had to find a way to do it all again.

I chose Jordan based off a year of Arabic class and some previous study on Islam from my days as a religious studies major. The SIT program was appealing based on its offerings of an intensive language course and a thematic seminar touching all ranges of important issues in Jordan and the Middle East. At the end of the semester we were given the opportunity to conduct our own independent research project on anything of our choosing- a unique opportunity compared to the CALS exchange.

From the beginning I was both more excited and more nervous for this trip than any I had taken. As soon as I got to the airport I was wishing I spoke more Arabic. The idea of living with a host family was also a cause of anxiety though I was excited for the immersion opportunity that came with it.

As it turned out, any anxiety about a host family was unfounded. The first few hours in my new home were filled with smiles, broken languages, spaghetti, more smiles and the best coffee I have ever had. On top of all this was the cutest baby I have ever seen, so I knew I was in good hands for the rest of the semester. Through the following weeks I quickly felt as though this was my real family; my new home became my favorite place in Amman. I went fastwalking and running with my host-
dad, stayed up late watching the midnight horror movie special with my host-mom and the baby, and played games with and mercilessly picked on my 12-year-old host-sister. I learned a lot of Arabic, learned a lot about Jordan, ate a lot of great food, and most importantly found myself in a second home.

The program itself was unique in that it brought us in contact with many interesting professionals from all sectors who came to present to our class. Their viewpoints were very diverse with some speakers who I would consider controversial. In fact, one guest lecturer resorted to saying in defense of his views on Israel, “I don’t hat Jews, some of my best friends are Jewish”. Needless to say, our opportunities for discussion could often get very lively.

In addition to our guest speaker series, we were taught the ins and outs of conducting research in anticipation of our month long independent research project. This class brought together ethics, methods, and analysis and even pushed us into doing practice runs in the field.

Our research could be on anything that caught our interest, be it from guest speakers or from our time traveling and exploring the city and country. For me, inspiration came from my walking route to and from school. Every day I would walk past herds of goats, gardens, and small farms in the city. The first question that came to me was how are these activities possible in an urban setting with limited resources and this became the basis for my project.

I worked with an advisor from the Jordan Hashemite University who was able to connect me with people in the Ministry of Agriculture. Much of the process involved repeated phone calls and emails and a lot of rejections and being ignored.
It was quite an interesting experience conducting interviews for the first time in a very different culture from my own. One of the more exciting parts of my research came from a tour of small farmers in a part of Amman known for small agriculture. It was interesting to see how the attitudes of the farmers matched many of the challenges faced by extension practitioners. The growers typically would be difficult to work with based on their reluctance to deviate from their old methods and their belief that they are too small to matter towards receiving instruction.

Hearing about the conversations the farmers would have from my translator shed light on their philosophies and ideas about agriculture and why they continued. They were passionate about fresh organic food and about the community that they lived in. Both farmers and the community consider the locally grown food much superior. One farmer memorably told me that when he was younger the food “was organic and tasted better. Not like it is today.” His philosophy involved wanting to provide that quality today. Stealing of crops was cited as a problem but was tolerated with the understanding that some families needed the food. These crops were “for God”.

Summing up my semester, the most important thing I learned was to approach new situations with an open attitude. The most rewarding experiences came about by letting situations unfold naturally by exploring and meeting new people. I made sure to strike up conversations with cab drivers and groups of kids and was even invited into a few homes for tea during a stay in the Badia. Work and travel abroad is valuable towards learning a bit of everything and finding new passions and interests.