

Alastair White (Asian & Middle Eastern Studies) - Jordan and Israel, September 2012

For two weeks, from the 13th September until the 27th I travelled with 3 friends (one of whom also studies French and Arabic at Pembroke) around Jordan and Israel. Having spent most of our first year concentrating on formal, written Arabic, we were keen to try to speak the colloquial form which is more difficult to practice in Cambridge – especially as we will be starting our ‘Year Abroad’ in under a year’s time. It was also an opportunity to have a look at Jordan as a possible destination for next year.

We arrived in Amman on the 13th September in the evening, and left the next morning straight away to go to Jerusalem for two nights. We stayed in Petra hostel in the Muslim quarter of the city, and visited religious sites such as the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It was a fascinating two days, I had never been to a city where religion seemed to dominate to the extent that it did in Jerusalem – we arrived as the mosques were emptying on Friday and had to leave on Sunday to avoid being stranded by the Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah. We were also able to begin speaking some Arabic, as most of the shop keepers in the old city were Palestinian.

We then crossed the border again, visiting the Citadel and Archaeological Museum in Amman, before going to the Dead Sea and spending two hours negotiating a river/canyon called Wadi Mujib. It was an unbelievable experience, the landscapes in this area of Jordan were particularly stunning. We travelled for this trip by taxi, which proved an extremely effective way of practicing Arabic as every taxi driver we met was fascinated by our studying the language, and were therefore always willing to help us out and point out our mistakes.

We then went to the ancient Nabatean capital Petra, which was without doubt the highlight of the trip. We spent two days exploring the Nabatean tombs and Roman ruins, and were also able to see some of the more isolated parts of the city, such as view over the famous treasury. The extra time we had also allowed us time to speak properly to some of the Bedouin who live in a nearby village and work in Petra.

Our last two stops for the trip were Wadi Rum National Park and Aqaba, both made famous by Lawrence of Arabia. The scenery at Wadi Rum was spectacular – we visited certain famous sites in the park such as a Nabatean trading post which T.E. Lawrence had used to store food and munitions. We also spent a night in a camp in the desert, which really showed us the extreme temperature changes of the desert. In Aqaba we visited the ancient port of Ayla, which formed the main part of the town 2 years ago, and took advantage of the friendliness and hospitality of the shopkeepers to speak some more Arabic.

I cannot thank the college enough for helping us to make this trip possible – before the idea of speaking the language, let alone living in an Arabic speaking country seemed daunting and an impossibility, but now I cannot wait to go. It has helped us to practice an aspect of our Arabic (colloquial) which otherwise would have been untested until this time next year.