

Christine Murphy (Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) - Damascus, Syria, summer 2010

During my stay in Damascus, I was studying at a private language school – the Levantine Language School - with the hope of meeting fewer international students, and was staying at the accommodation owned by the school. Although it was only for a month, we studied 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, specializing in the Syrian dialect rather than the written form of Arabic. This was, to my mind, necessary – despite my first year of study, I doubt I would have been comfortable conversing with Damascenes without the Ammiyyah tuition.

Damascus is, obviously, a popular destination for foreign students, and it was thus impossible not to be confronted by people wishing to converse in English or French rather than Arabic – the Damascenes themselves also spoke more in English than Arabic; either as students practising their language skills, or as vendors trying to win your custom. However, after the first week, and the unifying presence of the World Cup, I was able to imply my preference for practising my Arabic, which although resulting sometimes in miscomprehension, certainly led to interesting conversations with students and shop owners as the month progressed.

There was, of course, a huge difference between Syria and anywhere I had previously visited – leading to interesting though vague conversations with taxi drivers, although it was certainly not something I resented. The lessons also provided a safe way to understand politics and the country's situation from an insider's point of view – subjects which we were forbidden to discuss with strangers by the school's owner. Danny (our teacher) was a student at the University of Damascus, and provided a victim of any questions we had about what we had seen, or even about our preconceptions of the Middle East as a whole.

Of course, Damascus is a beautiful city, with a very impressive history which I, especially, investigated zealously, despite the frequent deletion of my photos by guards standing nearby. Although we did typically remain in the generally Christian "Old Quarter," (anywhere else being too far to walk in the summer heat), the city outside of the walls proved very modern, almost European in its facilities (the Costa Coffee and Benetton were testimony to it), although seemingly simple tasks like renewing our visas took longer than expected, and a lot of questionable steps to follow.

All in all, my monthly trip to Damascus gave me my first experience of the Middle East, not only preparing me for my year abroad, but also confirming my wish to continue with Arabic. The lessons greatly helped with my confidence in speaking, and the teaching at the school, although often disorganised, was very helpful and the small groups in the private school let us focus more on our weaknesses.