

Julian Willis (PhD in Biological Sciences) - Morocco Lab Retreat, March 2015

This March my research group chose Morocco as its destination for the biannual lab retreat. A chance to take the time out from our day-to-day experiments and project work, and instead look up at the broader picture. To place our work in its context, something important that we don't do enough; to spend time reading around our area and into new related areas which show some promise and could be worth branching out into; and to think about what new experiments we could do that would be exciting and useful, what we could investigate differently, and what is worth doing.

At first glance it seems needlessly exotic, but this is not so – for two reasons. Firstly, the cost of the trip is equivalent or cheaper than going to a location elsewhere in the UK or Europe due to the cheap living costs of the country. Secondly, and more importantly, the act of physically moving somewhere quite obviously distinct from the lab itself does wonders in separating your thinking. By getting away, we were able to engage on something different, thinking in a manner away from how we do on a daily basis in our normal environment at the LMB (Laboratory of Molecular Biology). It also gave us all something to look forward to very much and get excited about, it has to be said.

Before the lab retreat itself, our research group of 20 was divided into four groups of five to prepare work on a topic to investigate. My research group works on genetic code expansion (an area of synthetic biology), and so my group of five was to look into ways to develop or find new orthogonal pairs of tRNA molecules and aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases to use to encode further unnatural amino acids into the genome. In the weeks before Morocco, we spent several days reading new research papers we had found, meeting up to brainstorm ideas, and giving a preliminary presentation to the rest of the research group for some initial feedback. This gave us the chance to get the most out of the lab retreat itself, by making sure to invest a lot of time into the preparation work.

Once we were in Morocco and found our way to the resort where we would be staying for several days, it couldn't have been any more idyllic. Very quiet, very isolated, no-one else save the place to ourselves, and perfect sunny weather to keep us happy. It was easy to focus on science without distractions; we worked a lot, perhaps too much. Arguably continuing on with presentations until 2am the same day we arrived from Morocco (some of us having been up for 24 hours by that point) was too much, but certainly nobody would be able to say that we didn't work hard enough to make use of our time. Our only breaks from working on science were two hikes for a couple of hours through the surrounding villages and exploring the landscapes of the nearby mountains. On one of these occasions when we had gone up in altitude it actually started snowing – we were covered in snow, walking through sleet, trying not to slip on the settling snow, and thoroughly cold. Whoever said it didn't snow in Africa? Or that Africa was supposed to be hot?

The outcome of the lab retreat was overwhelmingly positive. Listening to each group of five talking about their topic was extremely interesting. The time and initial set-up work we had invested certainly paid off – everything we discussed was relevant and worthwhile of our time. There were plenty of discussions and new ideas that sparked up all over the place; our presentations supposed to last for a few hours dragged into half a day each at least and we ended up pushing back bedtimes because there was a lot to talk about. Most of us returned to the lab with new things to try out or think about and investigate more closely – definitely we had found the point of a lab retreat, and made the most of it.

After the end of the lab retreat, I made the decision to stay on longer in Morocco to do some travelling. I joined a tour heading south from Marrakech across the Atlas Mountains and into the Sahara Desert. This was my first time entering a desert of any kind, and days spent riding camels across the dunes at sunset and sunrise and camping overnight was simply an experience I will never forget. Exceedingly beautiful and exceedingly calm. Having previously only visited the busy cities of Morocco, which I had found wearing and tiring each and every one, I was happy to have taken the time to experience the other side of Morocco in its natural beauty and landscapes. My faith in the country of Morocco was restored.