

Tom McGee - Arabic Language Studies in Jordan, September 2014

I have recently returned home from 3 extremely useful and interesting weeks spent in Jordan. I was keen to travel to the Middle East between my first and second years at Cambridge in order to expose myself to the Arabic language and culture. During the first fortnight I studied both Modern Standard Arabic and Jordanian Dialect at MALIC Language School in Amman. I had been told by Cambridge students on their Year Abroad in Amman that MALIC offered a rigorous course and I was not disappointed. The 40 hours of language tuition enabled my written and spoken Arabic to improve considerably, particularly as the course was tailor-made for me. Indeed, there were only 2 other students in my class, allowing the teacher to focus closely on each of us. The teaching material was excellent and has provided a valuable extension to the textbooks used back in Cambridge.

Instead of staying in an apartment or hotel, I chose to live with a local Jordanian family. The parents and 4 children were very welcoming and I was immersed in Arabic. I practised my Jordanian Dialect when we gathered at meal-times and as the fortnight progressed, we discussed some increasingly sophisticated topics; when I first arrived in Amman I stuttered about my favourite hobbies and daily routine, but by the time I left the capital, my host family would share their views and ask for mine on the role of religion in society, Islamic extremism and the death penalty. I would often do my Arabic homework while the younger 2 children did their English homework and we would, occasionally, help each other.

This was my first time in a Middle Eastern country and I wanted to experience as much of Jordan and its society as possible. Over 50% of the Jordanian population are of Palestinian descent, so one night I attended a vibrant Palestinian dance and music show at the Royal Cultural Palace. The Romans' presence in Jordan is also conspicuous, particularly in the Northern town of Jerash, home to impressive and well-preserved ruins and temples. Nowadays Jordan is, of course, a Muslim-majority country, and I felt privileged to visit the magnificent King Abdullah Mosque, one of the few mosques open to non-Muslims.

My third and final week in Jordan saw me leave Amman and travel to the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Petra. The ancient Nabatean settlement is breath-taking and I spent two exhilarating days exploring the desert city and marvelling at Petra's Treasury, carved out of pink sandstone. From Petra, I ventured into the Wadi Rum desert and spent a night with the Bedouins. By the camp-fire they played music on their 'ouds' and regaled us with stories of Lawrence of Arabia, who had lived in the desert during the Arab Revolt. I travelled back to the UK via Istanbul and visited the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque. This was again of relevance to my studies, as the Ottoman Empire had a substantial influence on its Middle Eastern provinces, one of which included Jordan.

The three weeks in Jordan have been hugely beneficial to my Arabic. Whether it has been by means of a ruthless drill on the 10 verb forms at MALIC or a feisty debate comparing and contrasting Messi and Ronaldo with a Palestinian taxi driver, my confidence in expressing myself in Arabic has grown. The bustling city of Amman has captured my imagination and I would happily return there a year from now, to start my Year Abroad.

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