What to put in my suitcase? For the first time before travelling somewhere, I was not sure which clothes were appropriate and what else to bring. This was due to the fact that I was about to travel to a region I had never been before: the Middle East. This past summer, I attended an Arabic language school in Amman, Jordan. It was the AMBergh Education Building Bridges Scholarship that made this unique opportunity possible for me. But before sharing my Jordanian experiences and impressions, I will tell a little bit more about myself.

My name is Lena, and I am studying Scandinavian Studies and Political Science at Humboldt University in Berlin. About three years ago, I got interested in the Arabic culture(s) out of pure curiosity and decided to learn Arabic. I have no relatives or any other connection to the Middle East except for a love for humus and falafel. But my interest in the Arabic language and the region of the Middle East rapidly increased with the events of the Arab Spring starting in 2011. The current dynamic changes in this region are really fascinating to me. I think that the inner-Arab processes shaping the political future of the region, maybe and hopefully connected with an increase in democratic ruling and women’s rights, will be both lengthy and a path with many obstacles. In my opinion, it will hence be all the more important to gain a profound understanding of the region and its political culture in order to be better able to deal with the ongoing events currently and prospectively affecting our own countries as well.

In order to understand what is going on and grasp (political) events out of an “Arab perspective”, I thought that learning Arabic comes as a key to this approach. Being fascinated by Arabic from the start, I have continued to immerse myself in this language. And this summer, I had the feeling that it is about time for me to travel to an Arab country and test my language skills there. Therefore, going to Jordan and attending an Arabic Language School was a great chance for me to do this.

Through online research, I came across AMBergh’s webpage. I chose to go with AMBergh for several reasons. As I said above, it was my first time travelling to the region. I did not really know what to expect and it felt safer going to Amman with an organization that helps you organize your journey and provides you with all the necessary information. Their staff reliably helped me out with any questions or concerns before and during my trip. Also, AMBergh offered a variety of destinations for language studies. Initially, I had signed up to attend a school in Beirut. But with the ongoing conflict in Syria and its uncertain development in the future, I decided to rather to a seemingly safer environment like Amman. It was no problem at all for me to change cities.

Regarding Jordan, I did not know much about the environment I would be in before going there. Therefore, discovering the country was all the more adventurous. Sleeping in the desert with Bedouins under a star-studded sky, floating around in the Dead Sea and snorkeling in the Red Sea, being amazed by Petra’s magnificence, riding camels and hiking in green valleys surrounded by desert lands are all moments I will never forget.
But aside from all the great journeys and fun trips within the country, some of the best and most memorable incidents have happened during every-day life in Amman. One example would be simply riding a taxi, telling the driver about my destination in Arabic and actually getting there in the end. Another example would be getting invited to a Jordanian family’s home and experiencing their generous hospitality. Also, it was so interesting and intriguing to be in Jordan during Ramadan and to experience how so much life and energy came to Amman and its people after sunset when breaking the fast. To me, such moments of daily life are just as valuable as all the adventures mentioned above.

Going to the language school in Amman was a great experience. Our institution was quite small and soon felt like a second home. Lasting for four hours, the courses were intense, but our teachers were all from Jordan and tried to make the classes fun by introducing games and telling us more about their country’s culture. The class rooms were all in a modern glass building right by the University of Jordan. In the building, there was also a coffee shop and many restaurants close by. The school’s location was central in Amman and could easily be reached by taxi or bus. During my time there, I lived in a shared apartment with two other girls which was within walking distance to the school. Of course, the studying took place at school, but it was quite fun and useful to pick up the “street Arabic” in Amman and learn from its native people along the way.

During the whole time I got to spend in Jordan, I consciously made an effort to get to know Jordanians and experience the culture of the country by meeting its people. What really shook me positively was the openness and warmheartedness of the Jordanian people I was lucky enough to spend time with. A lot of people were curious to know why I chose to go to their country and to study Arabic. Also, many wanted to know what German people thought of Jordan and the Middle East in general. And all the people I encountered were especially open after they realized that I was just as genuinely interested in their country and language as well.

But of course, not all my experiences were positive. To pretty much everyone there, it was obvious that I was neither Jordanian nor Arab. Due to this fact, I ended up in some situations where various attempts were made to rip me off and financially try to take advantage. This sometimes happened in taxis and coffee shops. Also, I made some bad experiences with men. Despite always trying to dress appropriately, e.g. by wearing ankle-long skirts or dresses and lose tops covering my upper body, I received a lot of male attention in and outside of Amman. Usually, this would be cars constantly honking when driving by, guys whistling or verbally harassing me when I was walking by. A few times, I was also physically molested by men touching me inappropriately. With some time, I learned to prevent these situations from happening or to handle them the best way I could. For example, I learned that simply ignoring such advances is not an effective protection. And also, I realized that I did not want to let these few incidents ruin my whole experience in Jordan. To put it into perspective: I encountered a broad spectrum of men in Jordan, and most of them went out of their way to help with anything I asked for and became great friends to me.

It was after leaving Jordan that I realized what a great and unique journey this has been. I was so fortunate to get to spend six weeks in Amman and immerse myself in studying Arabic with the AMBergh Education Building Bridges Scholarship. This summer, I have learned so much
more than just grammatical structures and new vocabulary. I have gained an increased understanding of the Arab culture and the way of life in a country like Jordan. It was such a valuable opportunity to get to live in a predominantly Muslim country, especially during Ramadan, and interact with everyone as a Christian foreigner. On the plane ride back to Germany, thinking back, I remembered how unsure I was about what to expect and what to pack regarding the journey to Jordan ahead of me. I smiled at this memory, and felt that now I was returning not only with a suitcase packed with oriental herbs and souvenirs, but also with loads of new friends, invaluable memories and great stories.

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