

I remember the first day that I told my parents that I was going to be studying Arabic at Davidson. Let's just say that my parents were not entirely understanding of why I was giving up Spanish. So when I decided to study abroad in Jordan, my parents were rather concerned, considering that their only conception of Middle Eastern culture was the Western Media's characterization of Middle Easterners as anti-American, religious extremist, etc. I, however, did not share in my parents' concern.

In all honesty I did not know what to expect in Jordan. Was I going to be subjected to verbal forms of prejudice? Was I going to be able to truly access the culture given my racial and cultural background? Was I going to be viewed by everyone that I interacted with as manifestation of American foreign policy? While these questions were running through my head, fundamentally I wanted to experience what it meant to be a minority. And I do not mean to sound ignorant; I am being completely sincere. Growing up as a white male in South Carolina, I am privy to an amount of privilege that many people in the world have never experienced. My study abroad experience in Jordan offered me the opportunity to both immerse myself in a culture utterly different from the one I grew up in and experience the reality of being a minority.

When I arrived in Jordan, I decided that there were a few subjects that I should probably not address: politics, George Bush, religion, etc. And quite frankly I did not know what to expect Amman to be like. But from my experience in Jordan I would advise any white student to first of all understand your innate level of racial privilege in the world, but more importantly do not approach your interactions with Jordanians as a social experiment. Instead, my experience was thoroughly and greatly enriched finding the common humanity in each individual I interacted with.

I can remember that my favorite experiences in Jordan were the moments when I was conversing with my taxi drivers about their views on religion, the horrors of the Syrian civil war, and the social ramifications of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian economy. More than any other experience, my volunteering with a refugee placement and education nonprofit was by far the most profound experience of my life. For weeks I taught English to refugees from Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The thing that I struggled with most during my volunteering was understanding my level of privilege in terms of race, nationality, education, etc. I remember being asked by one of my students, whose family had just received their visas for the US, whether or not her son would be able to transition smoothly into the US educational system, knowing that he would most likely be ostracized because of the language barrier.

Overall I would advise any white student visiting the Middle East to disregard any stereotypes our society has of the region and instead seek to find the profound beauty of the culture, which is the most hospitable culture I have ever experienced, and most importantly the gracious humanity of Jordanians.