



One of the greatest of human experiences is the ability to communicate with other human beings and to develop cultural understanding through the wonderful tool of language. Through travel, communication and the sharing of information, one learns to appreciate global cultural diversity. The Woodside travel scholarship to Tunisia offered me an opportunity to do just that, by sponsoring my participation in the Deakin University Arabic In-Country Program during the summer break of 2006/07.

A saffron sunset greeted our arrival into the Tunis Carthage Airport, where our new host families were anxiously awaiting our arrival. Like most Middle Eastern countries, where hospitality is an integral part of the social fabric, Tunisians are warm and welcoming. My host family was certainly no

exception. They welcomed me into their home with open arms and it did not take long for me to become the eldest of the four children in the family. Living with a host family gave me a unique opportunity to not only witness life in Tunis but also allowed me to participate and experience everyday life as a Tunisian. The daily commute to the language institute with a tram was a pleasant journey and provided me the chance to communicate with locals (albeit in broken Arabic) and learn a great deal about the Tunisian way of life.

The Habib Bourguiba Language Institute, situated on Liberty Street, was close to the city centre and the location of a major tram junction. It was constantly full of life, traffic and colourful characters. The tram junction doubles as a square or a meeting place for friends and family and is surrounded by cafes filled with onlookers enjoying coffee. The short walk to the institute amid the hustle and bustle of Liberty Street was a highlight of the daily journey.

One can not help but notice the French influence on the city's structure and architecture. Walking down the main boulevard of Habib Bourguiba, which leads to the old town and 'souq' (markets), at a quick glance you could certainly imagine yourself in a European city. On closer inspection however, you discover that the city, although quite French in some ways, is most certainly unique in its Arab North-African identity.

The program itself was an intensive course of Modern Standard Arabic and included four hours of daily tuition in MSA, when not a word of any language other than Arabic was to be spoken. After the initial two-week struggle, I suddenly found myself articulating thoughts and feelings in Arabic. I was amazed at the effectiveness of this method of teaching. The institute staff were outstanding in their teaching methods, and were only too happy to provide extra assistance. The program also offered courses in Tunisian dialect, Middle Eastern dance, calligraphy, cooking and historical studies. The range of classes provided students with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of Arab North-African culture.

The various trips offered on the program also provided a greater insight into the cultural depth and history that exists in Tunisia. Broken up geographically, each trip offered a unique adventure and very different scenery. Experiencing the luscious greenery, the Atlas Mountains and the Mediterranean coast, it was easy to understand why the country is known as Green Tunis (*Tunis Al Khadra*). Visiting the historical sites of Dougga, Belorougia and Carthage offered an understanding of the country's historical roots. A definite highlight was the trip to the South and travelling into the vast Saharan desert. Riding a camel through the Saharan sunset, camping under the stars, enjoying a trip to an oasis and meeting locals along the way, enriched the travel experience immensely.

My Tunisian experience has enabled me to appreciate the cultural depth, diversity and complexity of Arab society to a much greater extent. At the same time, I realised that Australia and the Arab world have many areas of shared interest and both regions have much to gain from increasing awareness through cultural, educational and commercial trade. I am grateful for the opportunity that Deakin University provided me to travel to Tunisia and was able to embrace the experience and enjoy every moment. The experience would not have been the same without the support of Mr Hakeem Kasem, who was integral to the success of the program. He addressed all students' concerns promptly and was available at all times. His support allowed students to settle in, with the least amount on impact on our studies and ensured that the experience was a pleasant one.

The trip improved my Arabic language skills to a great extent and introduced me to a new culture and to wonderful people, whose friendship I will cherish for a lifetime.

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