A Special Summer

Growing up in an Indian immigrant family, I consider my mother tongue an important part of my identity. I speak Hindi with my family, and English just about everywhere else. My bilingual background inspired me to discover other languages, a passion that led me halfway across the world to the small nation of Jordan, which I now call my second home.

I became interested in learning Arabic when I discovered its influence on Hindi as well as on Spanish and French, both of which I’ve studied since middle school. In addition, as an active volunteer and tutor for refugees in my community, I had grown frustrated at the language barrier between me and my students, many of whom knew very little English. I started listening to music in Arabic, researching the culture, and self-studying the language. Then I learned about the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y).

One of the Best Decisions of My Life
NSLI-Y is a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State that sends American high school students abroad on full scholarship to study critical languages—i.e., those less commonly taught that have been deemed of diplomatic interest by the U.S. Currently, they include Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Bahasa Indonesia, Korean, Persian (Tajiki), Russian, and Turkish. A selective program, NSLI-Y accepts around 15 percent of applicants. The first round of the application consists of essays, short-answer questions, and a teacher recommendation. In the second round, interviews and application reviews determine acceptance.

Applying to NSLI-Y in my sophomore year was one of the best decisions of my life, but my initial selection to the program provoked mixed feelings. I was ready to spend a life-changing summer abroad, but nervous about living in a foreign region whose language and culture was so different from my own. To prepare, I took a course that taught the alphabet and reviewed basic vocabulary and phrases. I spent months working with my Lebanese friend to learn key phrases in Shaami, the dialect spoken in the Levant (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine). All the while, I daydreamed about what the summer would hold.

Meeting My New “Family”
Following a long flight, I landed, bleary-eyed, at the Queen Alia International Airport in Amman, Jordan. I was greeted by the sound of traditional music and voices speaking a language I would soon get used to. I saw busy streets, small box-like houses forming a jagged horizon line against a clear sky, and billboard advertisements in Arabic.

After two days of orientation, my true learning in Jordan began when I met my host family. My host dad, the only family member who knew English, was quick to make conversation. I passed around a little plastic ball with my host brothers (six and two years old), and ate a Popsicle with my host cousin. My eight-year-old host sister helped me unpack my suitcase and gave me a lesson on how to fold clothes properly, chatting in Arabic as I nodded along cluelessly.

That first night, as my host siblings and mother gave me goodnight hugs, my host dad told me I was their new daughter and that I should never feel shy or sad. I knew then that this would be the beginning of a beautiful relationship with a family I would soon call my own.

Rough Start
Living abroad did not come without challenges, however. Homesickness and the language barrier, coupled with Jordanians’ nearly nocturnal lifestyle during the summer, made the first week tiring. To add to this, the food, although incredibly delicious, was served in extremely large portions. Because it is considered rude to turn down food, I found myself feeling sick. When I confessed my struggles to my host mother, she wiped my tears and pulled me into a hug, telling me that she was my “mama” for the summer. This experience made us much closer.

The language barrier was particularly overwhelming at first. Arabic is considered one of the hardest languages to learn. For me, the dialect was challenging. The Arabic language has three main categories: Classical Arabic (the language of religion), Modern Standard Arabic or MSA (the language of formal text), and the colloquial dialects spoken in different regions. These categories are almost
like three distinct languages, and while we mainly studied MSA in school, the Shaami (Levantine) dialect was spoken at home. Initially, I confused the two. But, wanting to sound like a native, I made a conscious effort to speak only in Shaami and write only in MSA.

I like to say I had six Arabic teachers in Jordan: two at school, and four others—my active, mischievous, and adorable host siblings—who inundated me with native speech and forced me to respond. Time spent with my host family made my Arabic go from nearly zero to highly conversational in just weeks.

Cultural Immersion through Everyday Life
Sharing a home with an Arab Muslim family allowed me to witness Jordanian culture firsthand. I came away feeling that the people of Jordan, and the Middle East as a whole, are often misrepresented by our media. Abroad, I never felt judged for being American. I was greeted regularly with the phrase “Ahlan wa sahlan” (“Hello and welcome”), and treated as part of the family by my host cousins and aunts. I was struck by the openheartedness of those around me, from the bus driver who bought us juice every morning to the security guard at our Arabic school who always talked with us after class.

My most meaningful experiences of cultural exchange came from conversations with my host parents, as we discussed issues including the Syrian civil war and Arab-Israeli conflicts. I am Indian; they are Palestinian, yet we connected over shared humanity and a common desire for peace. They conveyed to me their respect for other religions and cultures. I, in turn, gathered insights from our discussions.

Jordan is home to the Dead Sea, Petra, and the famous mosaics of Madaba, all of which I saw during my stay. But for me, no excursion compared to everyday life in Amman. I cherished time with members of my host family, whether playing indoor soccer games with my “brothers” or chatting with “cousins” and my host mom. I can still smell the spices as she cooked in the kitchen while I cradled her two-month-old baby in my arms.

Attending school was another highlight. Our competitive games and sweet teachers tempered the quizzes, tests, and lengthy homework. Many days, at the beginning of class, our teachers would bring us cookies and black coffee, and we would spend a solid 20 minutes chatting about anything from the best place to buy Arab pastries to the various prayers in Islam.

Thinking back to my summer in Jordan, I’m flooded with feelings of nostalgia. I still remember the sights, sounds, and smells of my days abroad. Mostly, I cannot forget the amazing people—my family, teachers, and peers—who made my summer so special.

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The Jordanian food was delicious and abundant.