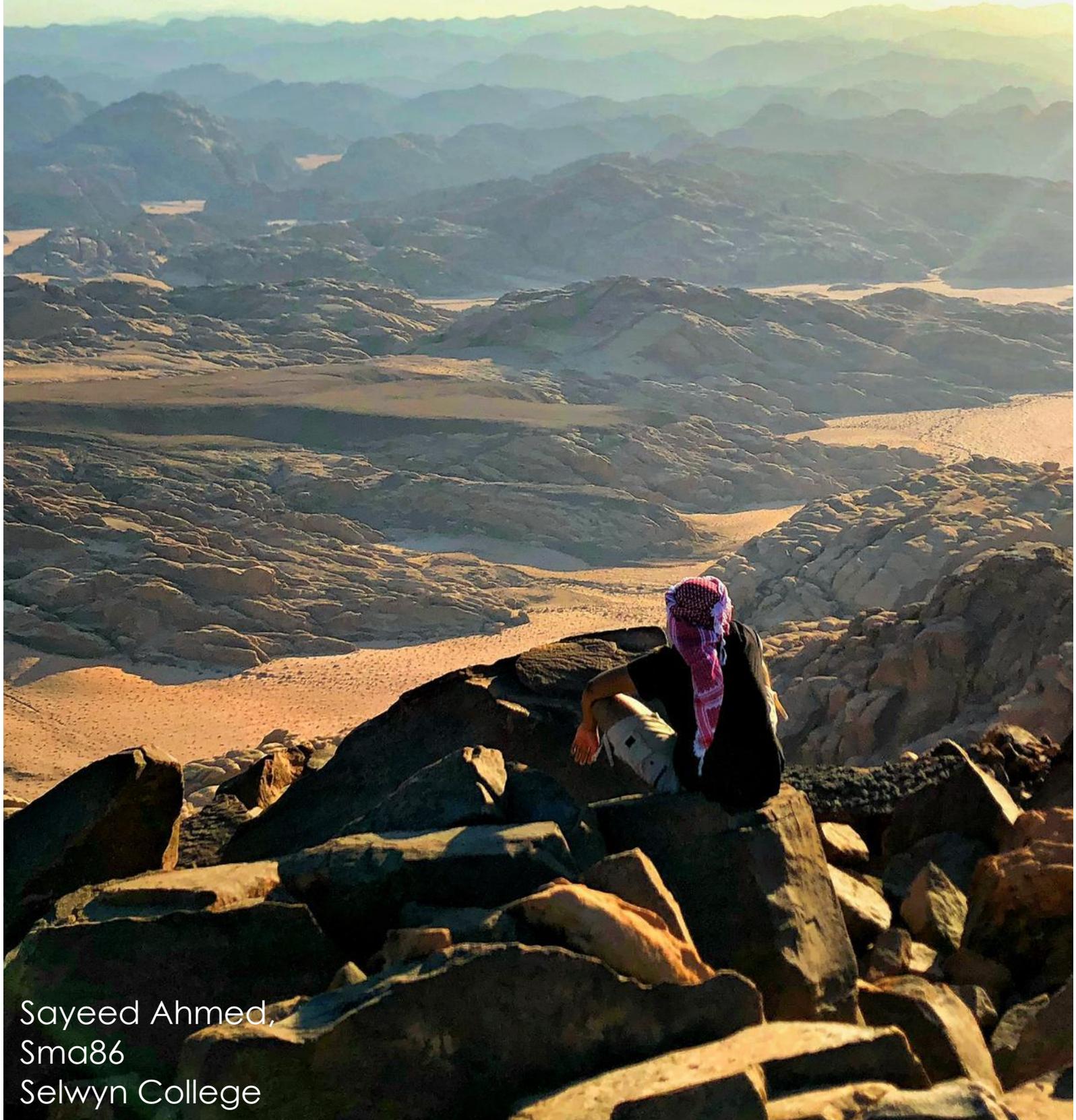


# Jordan (الأردن)

## AJ Pressland Fund: Travel Report



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Image: Jabal-Umm-ad-Dami

## Introduction

مرحبا (Marhaban)! My name is Sayeed and I'm a third year Chemistry student at Selwyn College. Last summer, I had the privilege of travelling to Jordan for five weeks to take an intensive Arabic course, which ended up being one of the most enriching experiences of my life!

From taking French, German and Bengali at GCSE, I have always been interested in communicating in non-English speaking cultures. As one of the oldest languages that is still widely spoken, Arabic emerged as something I had a particular fascination in learning, especially because I was already familiar with the Arabic script from my Muslim background. This interest blossomed into intention after learning about the recent shift towards sustainability in the Middle East; I quickly realised the potential that Arabic has for me to enter the energy sector, an area of long-held interest for me. With this motivation in mind, I took some virtual Arabic courses in the summer after my first year, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Thanks to the AJ Pressland Fund, I was then able to engross myself in the language by studying abroad. There were many reasons for why Jordan was my country of choice. Firstly, the Jordanian dialect ("Ammiya"/العامية) is the closest vernacular to Modern Standard Arabia (MSA, "Fusha"/فصحى). Secondly, despite neighbouring several war-torn countries, Jordan is renowned for its safety and security. Lastly and most significantly, I was drawn to the richness and variety of Jordan's attractions, which include the Nabatean kingdom of Petra, regions of the biblical Holy Land, the famous Dead Sea, Bedouin camps in the desert of Wadi Rum, both Ayyubid and Hellenistic architecture, and more.

In just five weeks, I was able to see plenty of extraordinary sights, meet new friends, be absorbed into an unfamiliar culture, and get my Arabic up to a standard where I felt comfortable to get around the country and converse only in Arabic. Given also that this was my first time travelling alone, this project is one of my proudest achievements. Words cannot express how grateful I am to have been given such an extraordinary opportunity. Everyone should have the chance to undertake a similar experience, so please feel free to get in touch if you'd like to ask any questions about my journey!



Amman



Wadi Rum

## The Course

I studied at Al Baher Language Centre in the capital city, Amman. Since I had done some prior study, the centre was very helpful in designing a course specific to my needs and objectives. Although Fusha was my main focus, some teaching hours were devoted to Ammiya, which provided enough of a grounding for me to go out into the country and interact with locals.

Initially, I was meant to have 22.5 hours of group lessons a week but, due to the pandemic, there were not enough students for these classes to run. Instead, I was given 15 hours a week of accelerated 1:1 tuition which, in addition to extra self-study material, was equivalent to the group class. While 1:1 classes made it more difficult for me to meet other people, they were incredibly beneficial from an educational perspective, seeing as I could set the pace of the lessons and tailor them to suit my preferences. In fact, despite the fewer number of teaching hours, I'm confident that I learnt much more in these 1:1 classes than I would've otherwise.

After an initial assessment, I was placed at the intermediate level and introduced to my teacher, Hiba, who was very friendly and encouraging. Each day simply began with a half-hour conversation about what I had done yesterday and my plans for tomorrow, which usually divulged into other topics and anecdotes. This proved to be the most effective exercise in improving my Arabic because Hiba would teach me useful structures and vocabulary each time I got stuck in communication. As the weeks went by, my Arabic became noticeably more effortless and I was rapidly attempting to discuss more complex ideas.

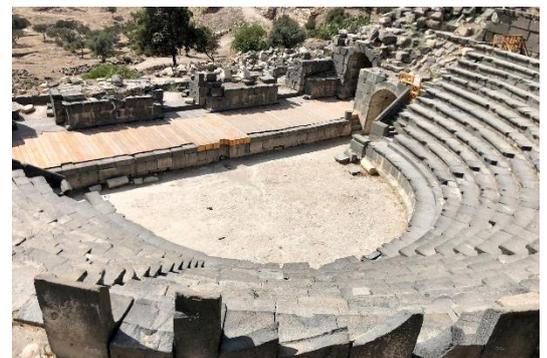
After the conversation, I would work on either grammar, reading, writing, or listening. The lessons reframed into Arabic the Arabic grammar that I had already learned using English terminology, which is useful preparation for advanced Arabic study in the future. The texts that I studied included fascinating excerpts about the Iraq war, Jordanian traditions, and Ashraf Marwan (an Egyptian spy). Another fun activity involved listening to audio clips of news reports from different Arab countries, which gave me insight into the wide variety of Arabic dialects and accents. By the end of the course, I felt that I had received as much of a cultural and historical education as I had a linguistic one.



*Amman Citadel*



*Jerash*



*Umm Qais*

## Life in Amman

The dusty streets of Amman presented a very different image to London and Cambridge: busy markets ("souks"/سوق) were saturated with colours and aromas, shouting salesmen could always be heard, hungry street cats were perched on every corner, and limestone buildings crowded closely. It was always sunny, though not uncomfortably hot. Traffic was wild and unpredictable - cars never indicated, instead they honked at every opportunity. It was both unnerving and exciting to be thrust into such an unfamiliar and chaotic environment, by myself, unable to communicate with others.

My first week was rather lonely since I didn't know anyone and wasn't even able to have a proper conversation. Luckily, the Jordanian people are unbelievably friendly and welcoming, so it was easy to meet people through random encounters in cafés, restaurants and mosques. People were generally very patient with my broken Arabic. In fact, many were delighted that I was learning their language and offered tips or corrected my speech, which helped me to improve quicker. As good as lessons were, it turns out that the best Arabic classroom is the back of a taxi! (Or, more specifically, the front of a taxi, where men customarily sit.)

Several people regarded me as a "guest" in Jordan and kindly invited me to their homes or offered help. For example, a friend I met, Hamza, sacrificed his Saturday to take me to the Dead Sea and insisted on paying for everything in the spirit of Jordanian hospitality. (I ended up hiding money in his car to ease my conscience.) Another time, I was chatting with a shopkeeper, who I'd bought a Pepsi from, and I asked if he could recommend a restaurant that serves good maqluba (a Palestinian dish that I heard great things about). To my astonishment, he got his workers to fetch some ingredients, then immediately cooked maqluba for me from the kitchen of his burger restaurant next door!

The studio flat provided by the language centre was situated in the Abdoun residential district. It was walking distance away from my classes and conveniently located near restaurants and shops. The accommodation itself was nothing extraordinary, but it was clean and comfortable enough. I usually spent my evenings visiting museums, parks, restaurants, souks or mosques.



*Streets of Amman*



*King Abdullah I Mosque & Church of the Redeemer, Amman*



*As-Salt, a hill-town close to Amman*



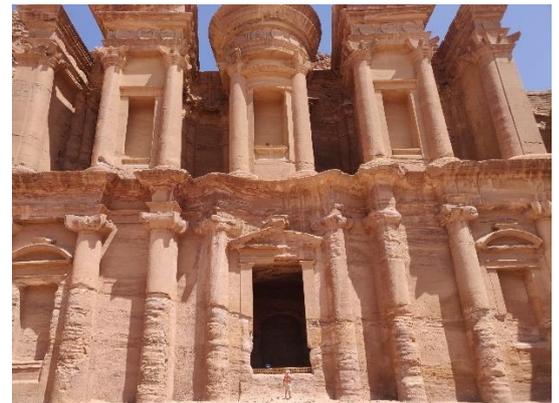
*Sharing a tray of homemade maqluba!*

## Exploring Jordan

As I was staying in Amman, I used my weekends as opportunities to explore the rest of the country. To cut costs, I usually travelled by public bus, which took time getting used to because of the crowding and smoking that is commonly found onboard. In Jordan, buses do not run according to a timetable; they instead depart whenever full and will sometimes not run at all if there are insufficient passengers. At first, I found this unreliability to be frustrating but once I learned to slow down and relax, I soon began to appreciate this more laid-back system of travel. On my trips across Jordan, I enjoyed meeting a variety of new people, both Jordanians and also other European tourists.

It goes without saying that it was phenomenal to witness the rock-cut city of Petra, one of the New 7 Wonders of the World. Fortunately for us, the pandemic slashed its daily number of visitors from several thousands to only a few hundred, which made the experience all the more enchanting. Another spectacle to behold was the Wadi Rum desert, particularly its breath-taking sunset and subsequent night sky. Familiar only with the forests, mountains and coasts of the UK, it was delightful for me to explore the novel environment that Petra and Wadi Rum presents. Rocky, crimson, and dry; the scene sometimes felt completely alien and understandably so, given that many high-profile, Hollywood sci-fi films are shot in these locales.

Native Bedouin tribes inhabiting these regions still live traditional lifestyles to this day. My time at Wadi Rum and Petra were greatly elevated by the plentiful interactions with the local Bedouins. Oftentimes singing or reciting poetry, they are the some of the most carefree, fun-loving, and free-spirited people that I've met. Despite only receiving limited educations, most Bedouins learned to speak multiple languages quite well, purely from practice with tourists - definitely an inspiration for anyone trying to learn a second language! Any time that I got the chance to drink tea with a Bedouin in his tent, I would use the opportunity to listen to their stories and ask questions about their culture. It was fascinating to see the caves (yes, caves!) that people lived in and to learn about their society's tribal, familial, judicial and agricultural systems.



*Petra*



*Wadi Rum*

There were, of course, many other gems in Jordan that I got to see: the relaxed port-town of Aqaba by the Red Sea; the curiously salty Dead Sea alongside the nearby Wadi Mujib canyon and Ma'in Hot Spring; the Jordan Valley, where Jesus was baptised; Mount Nebo, where Moses was shown the Promised Land, and the adjacent town of Madaba; Ajloun Castle, built during Saladin's reign; well-preserved Greco-Romanian ruins in Jerash and Umm Qais, the latter of which has a north-facing view towards the Sea of Galilee, Golan Heights and Syria; and finally Jabal-Umm-ad-Dami, the tallest mountain in Jordan with a spectacular view of Saudi Arabia in the south.

Near Amman, I also had the chance to visit Al-Baq'a, a UN-managed refugee camp for Palestinians who fled during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Although the residents live in harshly impoverished conditions, I was amazed at their warmth and hospitality; many offered coffee to me and even sprays of perfume. This trip gave me a lot in terms of perspective and I think it was a valuable part of my cultural education, given the huge population of Palestinians and Syrians in Jordan.

In my first week in Jordan, I got a "shemagh"/شماغ (the Jordanian version of the traditional Middle Eastern headdress) as an impulse buy, which turned out to be a great decision. I'm still impressed by how a simple piece of cloth can be useful for so many functions: a headdress, a scarf, a blanket, a face mask, a prayer mat, a towel, and even a full face covering to keep off the flies when napping in the desert. Many Jordanians demonstrated how to wrap the shemagh around my head and it was satisfying to notice my technique improve as the weeks progressed.

In Amman's Jordan Museum, there was a pertinent exhibition on recent and upcoming scientific developments in Jordan, much of which focussed on renewable energy and clean water. This included a relevant display on Jordanian-born scientist, Omar M. Yaghi, the world's second-most cited chemist and pioneer of reticular chemistry. I also saw a solar-powered mini-grid system in the camp I stayed at in Wadi Rum, which tied in nicely with an internship that I recently did involving batteries used for similar mini-grid applications in Sub-Saharan Africa. These links to my academic and career interests definitely helped reinvigorate my motivation to study Arabic in the first place.



*Dead Sea*



*Wadi Mujib*



*Sharif Hussein Mosque, Aqaba*



*Ajloun Castle*

## The Food

There's no way that I could end this report without a mention of how fantastic the food was in Jordan; it alone is enough to make me want to go back! Whether Eastern or Western, food was cheap yet delicious, which encouraged me to keep trying new dishes.

Typically, I would grab breakfast or lunch from one of three places: a falafel shop with wraps at just 0.40 JD (£0.41) each; an Arab bakery with fresh breads topped with spices, cheese or meat; and a café selling various flavours of "manakish/مناقيش" (a kind of Levantine pizza). If I was home for dinner, I normally ordered in a rice dish, schwarma, mixed grill, or burger.

I ate the Jordanian national dish, mansaf/منسف, several times. This is a rich, fatty piece of meat served with rice and jameed/جميد, a yoghurt so strong that it carries a cheesy smell. On first try, the jameed was very unpleasant but I eventually began to like it quite considerably. When travelling around the country, it was exciting to try foods local to that region, such as fresh Sayadieh/صيادية fish in Aqaba and meat cooked under the sand in Wadi Rum.

Given the huge Palestinian population there, I also got to try many Palestinian dishes, like maqluba/مقلوبة (meaning "upside-down"). This consists of layers of rice, vegetables and chicken, which are cooked in a pot that is overturned before serving. Other foods include musakhan/مسخن, roasted chicken baked with onions and pine nuts, and knafeh/كنافة, a desert of baked syrup and cheese. From an Egyptian restaurant, I really enjoyed koshary/كشري, a dish of rice, lentils, macaroni, fried onions and chickpeas. There's many other foods that I liked too, but I'd need a whole other report to go through all of them!



*Knafeh (left), kullaj (right)*



*Mansaf*



*Musakhan*



*Maqluba*



*Arabic breakfast (bread, egg, hummus, falafel, mutabbal, fool)*

## Closing Thoughts

When I landed in Jordan, I could barely string together a sentence in Arabic and made an embarrassing mistake in saying to my driver from the airport that “your bed is big” instead of “your car is big”. Five weeks later, I knew enough Arabic to hold a conversation and funnily enough, when returning back to the airport, a different driver mistook me for a local, asking if I was heading to Britain because of work or study! Such language acquisition is incredibly valuable in its own right, but paired with the personal growth and cultural understanding that I developed here, I can easily say that this was one of the most incredible episodes of my life.

If the opportunity presents itself, I would definitely return to an Arab country in the future for work or further study. In the meantime, I plan to develop my Arabic further by reading Arabic press and chatting with my Arabic-speaking friends. Unfortunately, the Cambridge University Language Centre only offers Arabic up to an elementary level, but I'm excited to begin an upper-intermediate French course there as part of my third-year degree programme. North Africa has been under my crosshairs for a while, so French and Arabic makes a great pairing!

Regardless of your background or discipline, I'm a firm advocate for the power that foreign languages have in unlocking new opportunities and experiences. With that in mind, I would strongly recommend everyone to pick up as much language practice as they can, whether that be at the Language Centre, abroad or even from a mobile app.

Thank you! / شكرا



Image: Dead Sea