

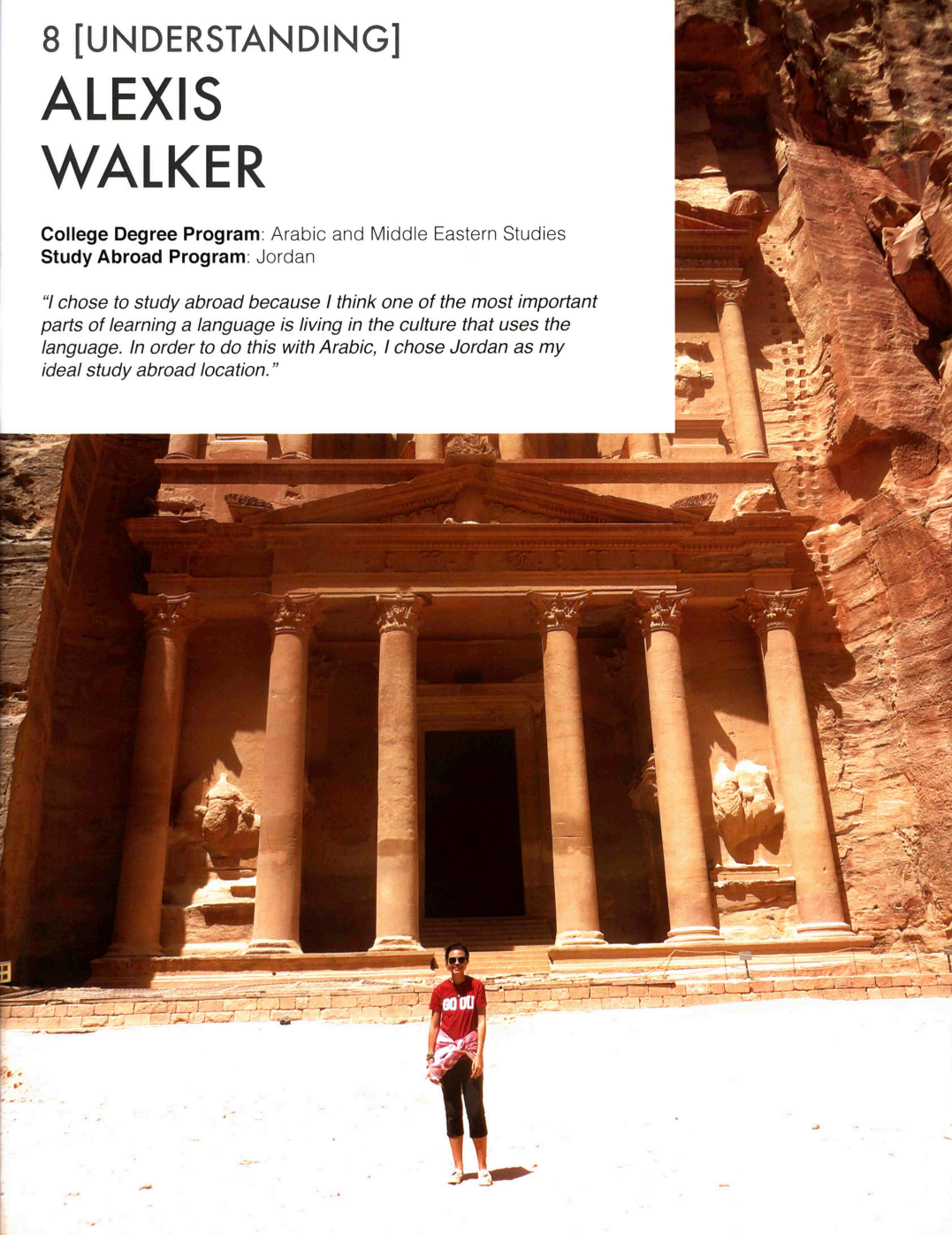
8 [UNDERSTANDING]

ALEXIS WALKER

College Degree Program: Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies

Study Abroad Program: Jordan

"I chose to study abroad because I think one of the most important parts of learning a language is living in the culture that uses the language. In order to do this with Arabic, I chose Jordan as my ideal study abroad location."



I was given the amazing opportunity to study abroad in Amman, Jordan, last summer. It was my first trip out of the country, if you do not count a cruise to the Caribbean I took when I was around 10 (I have found most people do not). I was nervous and feeling a bit out of my element, considering that I am not exactly what anyone would refer to as adventurous. It is not that I do not enjoy adventure per se, but it is more that I am the kind of person who waits for the little walk sign guy to light up before I even think of crossing the street. I have been studying Arabic and Middle Eastern studies for the past three years. Luckily, studying these subjects has ended up providing me with the key I needed to unlock my adventurous side and allow me to immensely enjoy my time in Jordan. This key happened to be one of understanding; understanding the culture and understanding the language when studying abroad.

As one might expect, the culture in Jordan is vastly different than the culture in the United States. Understanding these differences was essential in every interaction that I had in Jordan. When I was in Wadi Rum, a giant red desert in southern Jordan, I committed one of my first cultural faux pas. We were told since the area was more touristy, we were allowed to wear shorts. Now,

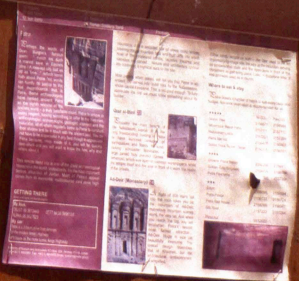
after wearing long pants and skirts in 100-degree heat for a couple of weeks, I was fairly ready to take advantage of this opportunity. After changing into shorts, I noticed that, while appropriate in the United States, the shorts I had brought might not fit in culturally in Jordan. I made my way to one

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THE BEST
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RECOMMENDED
FROM
AUSTRALIA.
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VIVE JORDANIA



of our guides and asked her if my shorts would be alright. She said when they said shorts, they meant knee length and mine were too short. I completely understood where she was coming from so I immediately went back to my tent and changed into a pair of pants. After I came back, the guide thanked me for being conscious of the culture. Understanding that even casual dress expectations were different culturally saved me from offending our hosts in the Bedouin camp.

Language was also an essential element when it came to understanding. Consciously, I knew that I would need to use my Arabic while living in Jordan, but unconsciously I felt like I might have been expecting people to communicate telepathically. Obviously, that did not happen and I was thrown into situations where my understanding of the Arabic language became necessary. One of my favorite memories came from a situation where a misunderstanding became an understanding of the beauty of people. I was sitting in the back of a taxi and my friend was up front with the taxi driver. The driver was trying to say something to both of us. I was at a slightly higher level of Arabic than my friend, but grammatically, I was stuck. I believed the driver was trying to say that Muslims, Christians and Jews were always fighting and would never get along. However, when I asked him if that is what he was saying, he emphatically shook his head no. The next thing we knew, he had called a friend who spoke both Arabic and English. After talking on the phone with the friend, we realized he was saying that no matter if you are a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew you are still the same - people who, despite the fighting, believe in something bigger than themselves. Just having that extra bit of understanding changed a taxi ride into something profound and beautiful.

Being in Jordan is something I will never forget and I hope to go back someday soon. Understanding the culture and the language made me really appreciate the opportunity that I had been given by the University of Oklahoma. The Middle East is an area that is widely misunderstood and stereotyped, but going there with an eye towards understanding allowed me to fully experience its beauty and uniqueness firsthand.