

View from the seawall in Asilah, Morocco

A photograph of a man with short brown hair, seen from behind, wearing a yellow polo shirt. He is standing on a stone seawall, looking out at a vast, clear blue ocean under a bright blue sky. The water is a deep turquoise color, and there are some white waves breaking in the distance. The stone wall he is standing on is made of large, rounded, light-colored stones.

7 [PERSEVERANCE]
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Arabic

Study Abroad Program: Morocco

Aaaaaaaaaaallah u-akbar. Aaaaaaaaaaallah u-akbar.

The call to prayer echoed across the city streets. Sunlight began to creep in through the open window; a necessity given the lack of air conditioning in the house.

Laaaaaa allah ila aaaaallah.

My eyes shot open, taking in the dimly lit room. The sudden consciousness quickly filled with dread as a singular thought entered my mind: *I have to go to class*. Never before in my some 13 years of schooling had I so dearly not wanted to go to class. This was Monday, week two.

I started studying Arabic in fall 2014 of my freshmen year. It was a utilitarian decision, as I harbor hopes of finding work in the government someday. I always knew study abroad lay in my future; where exactly, I did not know until

last summer. The Arab World reaches from Oman to Morocco, so quite a few options were available. I decided to go with Morocco out of some particular advantages my program at OU offered. My program was 10 weeks of intensive study of Arabic—four hours of class each day and four hours of homework. Easy. Piece of cake. Culture shock? No sweat. I had been abroad to Europe before. How bad could this be?

It was in those 10 weeks that I learned the true meaning of perseverance.

My host family's house sat upon a small hill. From the window, I could see for miles and had a full view of the main square. My school was located in the old city a couple of kilometers down the main drag. Every weekday I walked that route. Given the hilly topography of the city, the walk was, in fact, uphill both ways. The temperatures, even in the mornings, were rather



Medieval Stable in Meknes, Morocco

high and my back was almost always drenched in sweat by the time I got to class. Despite this, I enjoyed that walk.

The classes I took in Meknes were probably some of the hardest I have ever taken or will take. Not a syllable of English was found on our assignments. I am not completely proud of my somewhat liberal use of Google Translate. The worst part was the sensation of moving backwards, that I was somehow falling behind in my study of the language. It is quite the blow to one's confidence to have remedial practice after six semesters of Arabic.

The stress of class was strongly amplified by life with my host family. They were quite possibly the nicest people on Earth. They always made sure I had what I needed, even Americanizing some of their dishes to give me a taste of home. That being said, there was a certain clash between the very social nature of Arab culture and my more anti-social nature. Not being able to be alone for more than a few moments at a time made it very difficult to relax after class. Indeed, I stayed at a low boil almost constantly.

After a few weeks of this, I found myself staring at the ceiling, hearing the call to prayer in the early morning. Somehow my roommate never seemed to be woken by the muezzin's call. *I am not sure I can do this*, my mind thought. *It is too much.*

During the week, I studied. On the weekends, I traveled. I went to cities all over the country — Fez Asilah, Chefchaouen and Marrakech. Sometime near the middle of the program, I went to the city of Ifrane. It was very different from the other cities I visited. Slightly in the mountains, the town was designed as a French resort town in the colonial era. It is often referred to as “Little Switzerland.” Even in the middle of the summer, it is a green town with grassy islands dividing the tree-lined streets. The difference was so stark from the arid environments my friends and I previously visited that we looked at each other as if we had passed through a wormhole upon entering the town.



Medieval Stable in Meknes, Morocco

Despite the charm of the town, it was a terribly boring place to visit. In an hour or two we had eaten at its cafés and walked its numerous parks. Tired after not only the day of traveling but also the previous weeks of intensive study, we found ourselves sitting on the edge of a park looking into a small bank of trees. There was little chatter between us. The air hung heavy and moist between us in the forest climate. I was immersed in my own thoughts. By then, I was having serious doubts of my ability to finish the program and possibly my studies in Arabic.

I sipped the Coke I was drinking—likely my second or third bottle that day. I began to drink a lot of soda as a coping mechanism. I found that Moroccan Coke did not taste very different from American Coke, so it was like carrying a little piece of America with me at all times. Months later, I had a cavity filled upon my visit to the dentist.

It was at that sip that I realized something: I only had a month left. I only had four weeks of classes remaining. Four vocab lists, four tests and four more meetings with my language partner. Upon discovering that, a weight lifted in me. The program, in terms of scope, became manageable. It was finishable.

That thought led to another thought: progress. It occurred to me I had made a great deal of progress. While homework was still hard, I was

getting through the articles faster and faster. I could defend myself better in the daily debates we had on topics I had only heard of the day before. Even my *ghain* was getting ever closer to perfection.

I squeezed my bottle a little at this thought: *I can do this. I can do this.* I smiled into the distance. *It is going to be alright.* Later, as we walked back to the long-distance taxi stand, my friends thought my behavior was a bit strange: one moment a dour person and the next a smiling fool making jokes all the way back to Meknes. I did not tell them about my minor revelation. I just kept smiling and moving forward.

If I could boil down the lesson of my study abroad experience into a line, I would say to remember this when you are facing difficulties: relax, reflect and refocus. Studying abroad can be a very discouraging experience, especially if you are learning a foreign language. That feeling, while very real, is also very much in your head. Even when you feel like you are not, you are progressing and learning. The challenge is very much manageable—a program would not be made that students could not finish. Relax knowing you can finish. Reflect on how far you have come and refocus on the goals you have for the remainder of your trip. With that, you will persevere.

Moulay Idriss, Morocco

