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## Academy lays groundwork for exchanges in Jordan

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Special to Trident



*Photo courtesy of Cmdr. Tim Disher.*

The Naval Academy is exploring the possibility of setting up semester exchanges with universities in Jordan. I not only took part in the preliminary meetings last summer, but I forged memories that will stay with me for years.

Sitting on the airplane as it flew low over the Dead Sea against the setting sun, I thought of the busy week ahead of me. As the plane landed in Amman, Jordan, on that dusty mid-June night, I had no idea what I was about to experience.

I landed around 9 on Sunday evening in Amman. The Shmeisani district where I stayed seemed very westernized, with signs of Burger King, McDonalds, Starbucks, and Chevrolet decorating the roadsides.

On the trip, I attended the World Conference of Middle Eastern Studies with Director of International Programs Cmdr. Tim Disher and Director of the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies Professor Brannon Wheeler. My official orders stated I was attending a "mission critical" conference, and while the conference was profoundly educational, I found my time away from the hotel and conference just as beneficial culturally.

We visited Yarmouk University in Irbid to discuss the establishment of a semester exchange program. On the way, we stopped in Jerash, an ancient commercial center for traders in the days of Roman Arabia.

We visited the university president's office, and explained the program we were trying to set up. He was supportive of an exchange despite Yarmouk's limited experience with semester-long programs. We then had a great lunch of shwarmas and rice at the university before going to a professor's home for refreshments.

With a 4 o'clock meeting with Prince Ghazi, we headed back to Amman. On the way, we stopped in a small border town to quickly catch a glimpse of Syria and exchange some Jordanian dinars

with Syrian pounds.

The two-hour meeting with the Prince was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip. He wore sandals and a casual button-up shirt, and the relaxed atmosphere allowed the conversation to go from history and culture to politics. We discussed the rich traditions of the various Jordanian tribes, the political climate of the Middle East, and the various tombs located throughout the country. Wheeler, in search of Seth's tomb, received detailed directions to its location, which was presumably a rocky field in the middle of nowhere. A few days later, following the Prince's directions, we found and took pictures of the "tomb," but unfortunately not even those living in the area knew a thing about its significance or exact whereabouts.

On my second full day in Jordan, we visited the University of Jordan's Language Center, and spoke with the dean of the center's exchange programs. The University of Jordan, significantly more experienced in foreign exchanges than Yarmouk, had detailed information and faculty available to answer questions to pave the way for a semester-long program.

Judging by the "American corner," an area specifically tailored to help students from the United States, the university had several well-established language immersion programs for American institutions. During our tour, we ran into faculty from the Universities of Wisconsin, North Carolina, Indiana, and Brigham Young.

I appreciated the genuine Jordanian generosity, which spoke well for the people and their culture. Most exemplary of their hospitality came that night when we visited one of Wheeler's friends at their gorgeous home overlooking the city. Coffee, tea and appetizers were followed by a delicious dinner.

The next morning, Wheeler and I walked to the various Roman ruins in Amman, including a well-preserved amphitheater. We browsed the main shopping district, where I bought a few prayer beads and some Islamic texts.

After a quick lunch, Wheeler presented his paper to the conference panel on Tolerance and the Comparative Study of Religion. That evening we attended a lecture given by His Royal Highness Prince Hassan, the brother of former King Hussein. His remarks addressed the challenges of the current political climate in the Middle East. He denounced Muslim extremism and the repercussions that extremist actions placed on all Muslims.

At one point, Hassan vehemently admonished supporters of Osama bin Laden and other terror organizations, and asked the conference attendees to continue in their efforts to find a peaceful roadmap to the destructive interferences caused by extremism. His words were the most straightforward and poignant we heard while in Jordan.

Early the next morning we left the modern and westernized city of Amman, and ventured into a vastly different Jordan. Barren fields, herds of goats, grazing camels, and nomadic Bedouins met us as we headed south on King's Highway, through Madaba, Kerak, and then Petra.

A stop at Petra revealed everything I had imagined it to be. Majestic facades and huge carved-out kaabas defined the ancient Rose Red City. Due to an afternoon meeting at the naval base in Aqaba, our Petra tour was abbreviated but unforgettable. After our meeting with the naval training commander, we drove to Wadi Rum, the base location for the popular British officer T.E. Lawrence during the Arab revolt of 1917-1918. Indeed, it was one of the most stunning desertscape we saw that week.

That night I relaxed on the resort beach, watched some of the televised World Cup soccer tournament, and talked with various tourists from all over the Middle East. Again, the genuine friendliness took me slightly off-guard. As I dined with a couple from Oman, I realized that most people have the same fundamental desires and dreams, regardless of religious creed or cultural background.

After a morning dive in the crystal clear waters of the Gulf of Aqaba, we set out for Amman, this time taking a route along the Dead Sea, passing the tombs of the biblical icons Aaron, Seth, Noah, and Moses.

That last evening in Jordan, after we drove on what I felt was every road in the country, we had one last chance to dine with an Arab family. We arrived at the doorstep, and the marvelous Palestinian family of five treated us to a smorgasbord of traditional Middle Eastern cuisine. Later that night, the whole extended family arrived. When we got up to leave, the whole family insisted on driving us back. I sat in the front seat with Wheeler, while the cadre of cousins, uncles, and friends jumped in the back. It was an evening I will never forget.

With the progress we made during the university visits, summer and semester-long immersion studies in Jordan seem very promising, and I hope to remain involved in the developing program. As my flight was about to take off, I searched for a way to remember everything that happened during the blur of meetings, visits, and activity. I scribbled several highlights in a notepad; but with time, I know only the most impressionable things will stay with me.

I will always remember the hospitality of those who hosted us for dinners and refreshments. I will forever recall the gorgeous views and desertscape that stretched across the country. I hope to never forget the visits to Petra and other picturesque Roman ruins.

Whichever memories stay with me, I will definitely cherish the experiences of my first trip to Jordan. The people graciously showed me a degree of Middle Eastern hospitality and respect I didn't anticipate, and the country's diverse scenery and heritage gave me a new perspective of Middle Eastern culture.

At first, I wondered why the academy would select Jordan for a semester-long immersion program, but after my six-day trip, I could easily see the historical, cultural, and educational benefits to choosing the University of Jordan. I most certainly await an opportunity to return.