

Enhancing Leadership through Cross Cultural Competence: Morocco 2018

MIDN I/C Katie Wesdyk

Six midshipmen spent two weeks in July immersing themselves in the culture of Morocco in order to learn about both the country and themselves.



Midshipmen I/C Annie Laurie Gibson, Hailey Burns, Adam Biethman, Dr. Joe Thomas, Midshipmen I/C Kelsey Kingsland, Katie Wesdyk, and Jamil Muhammad (pictured left to right) explore the city of Fez, Morocco, wearing colorful, traditional headscarves.

Midshipmen I/C Adam Biethman (13th co, Political Science), Hailey Burns (21st co, Operations Research), Annie Laurie Gibson (19th co, Physics), Kelsey Kingsland (4th co, Naval Architecture), Jamil Muhammad (15th co, Computer Science) and Katie Wesdyk (5th co, Mechanical Engineering) traveled to Morocco from 30 Jun-15 Jul as part of the Language Proficiency, Regional Expertise, Cultural Awareness (LREC) program sponsored by the Batten family and International Programs Office (IPO) at the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA). This trip was led by Dr. Joe Thomas of the USNA's Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership. The goal of this LREC was to immerse the midshipmen in a new culture to enhance their leadership effectiveness through cross cultural competence.

The midshipmen had the opportunity to explore a vast range of regions throughout the country. Perhaps some of the most defining characteristics of Moroccans was their friendliness and openness. The Midshipmen were welcomed into their beautiful and historical homes, called riads, with open arms.



The group enjoying warm tea and Moroccan hospitality at one of many riads.

On the way to their first stop in Fez, the group passed through Casablanca and Rabat before arriving at the Riad Yacout. They explored the medina (market) and Merenid Tombs while being introduced to the culture and history of Morocco. A day trip through Volubilis, Moulay Idriss and Meknes led to a tour of ancient Roman ruins and two ports, Bab El Mansour and Bab El Khamis. In Merzouga they passed through the Middle Atlas and viewed the High Atlas on the way to the Sahara desert. Upon their arrival in the desert, the midshipmen were led on a 4x4 vehicle exploration of the desert and Nomad village before a camel back ride into the Erg Chebbi Sand Dunes.



The group heads off to their camp in the Erg Chebbi Sand Dunes, where they spent the night enjoying traditional Berber music, dancing and food before sleeping under the stars of the Sahara.

In Quarzazate, the midshipmen toured the Todra Gorge and a rose water factory, trekked through Ourika Valley, and experienced a traditional cooking class. Their next stop led the group to the coast city of Essaouira, known as the “Windy City.” They ventured through artisan shops, art galleries, and a fishing village along the coast. Their final visit was in Marrakech, the “Red City,” where they toured the Royal Palace, Marrakech palm grove, Bahia Palace, the Saadian Tombs, and Koutombia Mosque. They walked through the bustling Djemma el-Fna square, filled with entertainers, snake charmers, pet monkeys, food stands, henna stands, and souks, giving everyone the opportunity to practice the art of bargaining.

However, this trip was much more than a tour of a foreign country. The objective of the trip was to provide the midshipmen a leadership opportunity through the study of a different culture. To improve their own cultural competence through a deeper understanding of Morocco, a significant focus of the trip was placed on the midshipmen to reflect on their experiences in order to learn about both Morocco and themselves. They were given feedback and regular one-on-one check-ins, journaled regularly, conducted group discussions regarding their observations, and applied what they learned to their LREC billets and looking ahead to future billets. This trip had a significant impact on the development of leadership through cross cultural competence. The midshipmen prepared for this trip by researching the impacts of culture through the GLOBE

Study¹ and DOD Executive Summary², reflected before, during and after the trip, and were active participants in applying what they learned to their own personal development. They were able to gain a greater context for why different values, leadership traits, and personalities can be successful in different situations. They were provided a framework to compare cultures, giving them a lens to analyze both Morocco and the cultures they themselves are a part of and have the ability to influence. Exposure to a different culture can strengthen one's own leadership style by granting the chance to grow in ability to adapt, manage expectations and judgements, deepen an understanding of communication (verbal and non-verbal), and shape one's view of their role in the world.



The group explores Roman ruins in Volubilis to gain historical context for Moroccan culture today.

According to the GLOBE Study, one of the most valued universal qualities of a good leader is charisma. While the United States and Morocco rated other qualities similarly in regards to leadership qualities, charisma was the most significant difference between the two. This was rated perhaps unsurprisingly higher in the United States. Charisma is the ability to unite people towards a common goal through one's ability to connect with people. This is a particularly useful

¹ The Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program has been called the 'Manhattan Project' of cross-cultural research. It measures dimensions of leadership effectiveness in 62 societies arranged into ten culture clusters. GLOBE compiled data from 17,300 managers in 951 organizations worldwide.

² A Framework for Understanding Cross-Cultural Competence in the Department of Defense, May 2012.

tool in times of high stress. Perhaps this difference between Morocco and the U.S. can be accounted for the larger cultural diversity in America and pressure as a global power. This might suggest that recognizing midshipmen's role as leaders of a diverse and highly operational Navy will require their most charismatic attributes. Overall, the group was challenged to see their role in the world from a new perspective and grew together through cultural immersion.