

I participated in the Palestinian Summer Celebration for 1 month in 2013 and I can say with great confidence that this program organized by the Siraj Centre went far beyond my expectations. I will mention some of the highlights of my experience in Palestine.

- Host family

My host family was Mrs. Georgette Rishmawi and her son Ghassan who were most welcoming and hospitable to me. Georgette took great care of me and cooked various kinds of delicious Palestinian foods. She offered me a cup of mint tea with breakfast every day and I really enjoyed drinking the mint tea with her. She had a fruit garden in the backyard and everyday she picked mint leaves from there and sometimes offered me figs which were delicious and something new to me. When I became sick, she cooked a vegetable soup which helped me recover very quickly. I really liked her sense of humor and we laughed and joked about so many things. Through my stay with Georgette, I learned one of the most critical aspects of Palestinian society as well as the Arab world: the religious and ethnic diversity. Before I came here, I spent one year in Kuwait for studying Arabic and my formative experience in the Middle East was very much related to Islam and Muslims. Although I was aware of the long history of Christianity in Bethlehem, I did not fully come to realize the diversity of Christian denominations as well as the presence of various ethnicities such as Armenians until I actually started living together with Palestinian people. By living with them in the same house, it helped me to have a glimpse of how the Palestinian society is composed of in the holy land. Living with a host family is such an amazing experience as I could get the first hand stories of Palestinian people and I definitely recommend everyone to stay with a host family in Palestine.

- Palestinian Arabic lessons

As I mentioned above, before coming to Palestine I studied Arabic language in Kuwait University for one year. But it was the Modern Standard Arabic, *الفصحى*, so the Palestinian Arabic, *اللهجة العامية*, was similar but a nearly new language to me. Personally it was and is still difficult to change my Arabic from *al fusha* to *al a'miya* but as soon as I was able to have a small conversation in the dialect, speaking and using the dialect was all fascinating. I believe that it catches the hearts of locals if you can speak their local dialect. It made my stay in Palestine much more colorful being able to interact with Palestinians in the dialect although most people there spoke English fluently. In terms of that, Arabic lessons with the great teacher, Mr. Michael Rishmawi helped me to be not just an ordinal tourist but one who can have a heartfelt talk with Palestinian people. He explained in detail when Shamus (the Canadian participant) and I had questions and taught us not only just a language but also the culture of Palestine such as famous songs. There were only Shamus and me in the lessons so we could ask so many questions and enjoyed the private lessons which could be almost impossible or too expensive to do back home. Unfortunately, my stay there was only one month but I wish I could take the lessons in a long term to improve my Palestinian dialect. The Palestinian Arabic course really doubled my satisfaction in this program and opened up chances to get to know more of the lives of Palestinians. Even if one does not have prior knowledge of Arabic, I suggest everyone to take lessons as the course is designed for beginners and studying the Arabic letters is not part of the lesson.

- Weekend trips

Traveling the major cities in the occupied West Bank was my favorite part of this program. The weekend trip covered visiting holy places, historical sites, NGOs, delicious restaurants and yummy ice cream shops! It was definitely the most intriguing part because I got to see the situation of people

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living in occupied territories in each city with my own eyes. It was shocking to witness the devastating effects of the Israeli policies towards the Palestinian people and it was even hard to digest all my impressions. The trip that we took in the very last days of this program to Jordan Valley was something I will never ever forget in my life. Most of the Jordan Valley falls into the category of Area C, which is under the control of the Israeli government, and we visited the Palestinian farmers and listened to their stories. I was completely shocked to see how they have been living in very difficult situations. Their houses have already been demolished six times by the Israeli army. Deliberately planned lack of water, presence of Israel army and illegal settlements surrounding the farmers, and other countless human rights violations to Palestinians are detrimental to sustain their lives in their own lands. Although I was aware of this serious situation, actually visiting and listening to their stories made me feel strongly that I cannot ignore this anymore. Without taking the trip to the Jordan Valley as well as other cities, it would have been impossible for me to feel closer than ever before to the Palestine people. I plan to come back to the land of Palestine in the future and stay longer next time. I am very thankful for the very organized trips by the Siraj Centre and the great guides, Mr. Mohammed and Mr. George Saliba Rishmawi, who showed us around in the West Bank and drove long hours for us.

- Volunteering experience

The NGO that I volunteered with was the Arab Education Institute located along the illegal separation wall closer to the Checkpoint 300. The project I was involved in was the Wall Museum project, which aims to put up the posters of Palestinian youth stories on the wall. Mainly I edited English and gave an advice from the perspective of internationals for selecting the best stories for putting up on the wall. It was very interesting to read their stories as they were the real voices of young people in Bethlehem. Their sufferings, frustrations and sorrows were vented on the stories and they were greatly heartfelt messages towards the international communities. The staff members in AEI were all amazing and welcoming to me and told me their situations living in the open jail in the Occupied Territories. It was a very limited and short time to work with AEI but I am glad that I was able to participate in this great organization with the friendliest people. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people in Arab Education Institute especially Mr. Fuad Giacaman, Mr. Elias Abu Akleh and Mr. Toine Van Teeffelen.

- The impression of Palestinian people

Throughout my stay in Palestine what surprised me greatly was the constant hospitality towards internationals and their positive attitudes in their difficult life circumstances. I know that the lack of water is detrimental to each household in Palestine and especially during the summer time a vast majority of Palestinians suffer from it. But every time I visited a Palestinian house, they were always willing to serve a tea or coffee from their precious water to us. Mr. Abu Saqr, whom I will never ever forget, also served us a cup of tea when we visited his farmland in Jordan Valley. While he explained us his difficult life situation in Jordan Valley, he often said the words "Ahlan wa sahan" to us which means welcome in Arabic. Palestinians often explained us their life stories in the Occupied Territories and how tough it is to live under their circumstances. However, most of them finished telling stories with a big laugh and smile on their faces by saying "But we still love Palestine and continue to live in this land". I greatly admire their strengths and persistence holding in their hearts.

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There are three main reasons why I enjoyed being a part of Siraj Centre. The first reason is that the Palestinian Summer Celebration is very organized and well planned with great activities, cooking lessons and so on, but it also gave me a free time. I knew some contacts in Palestine before coming there and I had enough time to meet those people I personally wanted. Secondly, the Siraj Centre has a great connection with people who are specialized and active in the various kinds of NGOs. Through Siraj Centre, I met with Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, who taught me the Palestine-Israel conflict from various lens and often shared his time with us despite being so busy. The third reason is simply that people running this organization are very friendly and the nicest people to be with. They are extremely helpful and reacted very quickly to the needs of the participants.

Finally, I would like to express my special gratitude to the Siraj Centre, my host family, Arab Educational Institute and others who made my stay in Palestine memorable and special. My experience in Beit Sahour is my lifelong assets. Furthermore, without my parents' support it would have been impossible to be here.

The advice for those, who are interested in this program, is to try to join for the 2 months program if you can because I regret that I only participated for one month and wish I would have stayed for two months. Also the weather in August was very hot though dried so be ready for the heat!