

ONYX AND SAND

MY INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

Before I go...

Posted on [June 5, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

6 am I woke up this morning determined. I pushed past the sleepiness, exhaustion, and anxiety and put on my workout clothes. I was not letting a beautiful 70 degree sunshine-filled day go to waste. I grabbed my new camera and set off into the calm and quiet morning. The streets were not yet bustling with late employees, so honking was at a minimum, I walked lengths upwards the usual trek to a monastery near my parents home.

It's a place I go to in order to receive the maximum amount of unity between nature and spirituality, two things I consider great treasures. The monastery is a convenient walk and my mom, sister, and I usually go whenever I used to live at home. But today, I went on my own to deal with my personal issues.

I am leaving this country for the first time in my life, and to a place that isn't necessarily the first you'd think of for a new traveller. Amman, Jordan is located right under Syria, beside Israel, and not too far from Egypt. And if you have been monitoring a screen the past year, the issue of ISIS persists and there are refugees flooding nearby countries in order to seek asylum. I know I am only going for an intensive Arabic immersion program, however, I know that with an opportunity like this there is mounting pressure on me to do above and beyond what I am actually going for. I want to help the situation as much as I can over there and I believe volunteering on weekends during my stay at a local crisis center would help me to expand my perspective on what I am able to contribute to the world. It may seem like a bit much at one time for someone who got her first passport only three months ago, but that's why I'm here now, praying about my gifts and talents.

What is God using me for when I go to Amman? My dreams are always bigger than my current situation, and so I see myself contributing more than that is required of me. In any event, I will be committing myself to blogging often and keeping you up to date about what happens.

This place gives me peace, I'm at home when I'm near God's beauty.

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Stepping Off of the Plane

Posted on [June 10, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

It was not as overwhelming as I thought it would be. Leaving the American soil for the first time was more exhilarating than nerve-wracking, I anxiously stared out of the window as the Air France plane took off to Paris.

A seven hour trip to a place I've never seen. Granted, it was only a four hour layover in the Charles de Gaulle airport, I stepped off of the fancy airplane in which I was able to watch two comedies and eat two filling meals into an even fancier airport that housed Gucci, Dior, Rolex, and Louis Vuitton. It wasn't much of a culture shock, I didn't feel out of place, the only time I felt inadequate was when I attempted to ask for directions with the few words I was taught by friends. At the next gate I officially met my homestay roommate, Kat, an incoming sophomore at the University of Georgia with only one year of Arabic under her belt, but basically the same amount of learning as me, considering we're about two chapters apart (I have four semesters including Oral Expression in the Egyptian dialect). To this day this girl is inspiring me to work doubly hard and study every free second. She's pretty awesome!

We arrived in Amman at 9:30 pm, exchanged our US dollars for Dinar (and by the way, is not very cheap, 1 JD=1.41 USD!), while the cool wind of 67 degrees fahrenheit hitting my face, which was surprisingly refreshing. I expected dry heat and sand everywhere, but trees sprouted where concrete didn't cover. We met with Ahmed, our program advisor and he gave us our CIEE bags with a local cell phone, internet dongle, class schedules, and tips and tricks of getting through the city. He also gave us the sage advice that there is nothing to fear in Jordan except a Jordanian behind the driving wheel. Considering that no one uses a seatbelt and traffic lanes are just for decorative purposes, driving in Jordan is like an adventure/rollercoaster with it's steep hills, I don't advise people with heart problems to attempt driving here, let alone sit in the backseat of a taxi!

Ahmed also explained that Ramadan was announced a couple of hours ago and would begin the next day, so we couldn't be seen eating, drinking, chewing gum, basically anything that can go down your throat or else we'd be arrested. Thanks for the heads up. I decided (with the encouragement of fellow program peer and new friend Yezan) to try fasting in solidarity, I told him I'd try my best to fast for a week.

Ahmed took us to our home and told us he'd see us in the morning on campus!

Sidenote: We'd been in Amman less than an hour and were already directed to get to campus on our own. Since walking in Jordan is considered an unnecessary and inefficient

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form of transportation, taxis were our only saving grace, and that meant practicing our Arabic from the jump with the drivers!

Kat and I were dropped off at a quiet home on a hill near the downtown area, and were immediately greeted by Ahmad, our host father and Kifah our host mother. We were served pita bread with olive oil and za'atar, Middle Eastern herbs that you dip the bread into, as well as sour cream. Kifah warmly welcomed us into their home, explained that everyone was sleeping (she and Ahmad have three children; Sara 17, Lara 14, and Mousa 7) and would meet the kids in the morning. We chose our rooms and prepared for the next day of intensive orientation...

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Day 1

Posted on [June 10, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I was advised to wake up around 3:30 am, before the first call to prayer (you'd know when the loudspeakers littered all over the city announce it) for Suhoor, the pre-dawn meal that is taken advantage of by drinking as much water as you can, avoiding salty foods that will dehydrate you throughout the day, and eating sweets such as dates. I was too exhausted from the plane ride and instead woke up at 5 am, saw the inching of a sunrise and reluctantly got ready for my first day in Amman without proper nourishment.

I wasn't too focused on the fact that I messed up my first day of fasting as I was trying to hail a taxi. Taxis are so frequent here that it takes less than ten seconds to spot one. Kat and I both were nervous about getting lost trying to communicate with our limited Arabic vocabulary, but the CIEE bag had the most useful yellow card with directions to campus. I managed to mangle the pronunciation but the driver understood me to my surprise and we were on our way to Princess Samaya University of Technology!

We got lost though.

Yezan, whose host family happened to live near the campus caught up with us and we were all equally lost when we got to campus. Luckily, he knew more Arabic than we did and was able to ask for help and then we were back on schedule, granted a few minutes late! We finally met everyone from the program and I spotted my classmate from Howard, Mufti, and met other really great people who also happened to attend schools near me such as GW, John Hopkins, and Towson. We had brief orientation (I was slightly *very* tired from the lack of food, and may have whimpered when they brought out breakfast for everyone to eat. My will remained intact though!), and were on our way to touring the city.

Amman is completely different from any place in America, but it is so beautiful in its own way. The limestone used to build the houses and buildings were purposefully chosen to keep houses cool or warm depending on the season. We saw caves that predated modern society and learned the history of how Jordan was founded on originally seven hills, but has now expanded to 56. We visited the Roman Amphitheater and the Citadel, and walked along the downtown area.

The shops were a bit of a dud at the time, but only because during Ramadan most shops, especially restaurants, were closed down until Iftar, the meal that breaks the fast. After Iftar the city comes alive with lights everywhere and food is in abundance, the grumpiness of the people wears off once the kousa diwali finally get eaten!

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The Fam and the Food (عائلة و طعام)

Posted on [June 10, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I love my homestay. I first met my host siblings at 6 am the morning after I landed, and I heard a faint knock on my door. A little child's head poked around the opening and introduced himself as Mousa (7). This kid reminds me so much of my own nephews from home; a shared obsession with superheroes, endless amounts of energy, and completely adorable. Not too long after, Sara (17) and Lara (14) came to introduce themselves and were the sweetest girls ever, I'm the youngest in my family and living with teenagers should be an interesting experience for me. They took Kat and I to the Taj mall to watch "Before I Wake" a horror movie that showed in English but with Arabic subtitles, and we had so much fun! Kifah, my host mommy, is one of the nicest people I've met here. She's a homemaker like my own mother, and always has a smile on her face, and her husband Ahmed is such a pleasant guy who helps with my Arabic whenever I have a random outburst of confusion.

The highlight of every evening for both Kat and I at home is Iftar. Because we came right when Ramadan started, we were able to witness Iftar from the start which was really cool. We had water, mango, guava, and peach juices, started with soup شوربة (well, I started with drinking a full cup of water. I've never appreciated it so much until that moment!), and followed with the main course of kousa diwali كوسا ودوالي, stuffed squash and grapes leaves full of rice and meat, the grape leaves straight from Kifah's garden. Maqluba مقلوبة is another main course we've had so far that is literally translated as "upside-down". Its a chicken and rice dish that is cooked and flipped over to reveal the chicken and onions on top of the mountain of flavorful rice. We've had falafel and fatah بالدجاج فتاح بالدجاج, a side dish with crispy pita, yogurt, chicken, with garlic and vinegar, and is probably one of my favorites! Another side is fattoush فتوش, a salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, and crispy seasoned pita bread that was so much better than any Chop't salad that I used to eat religiously. Not sure what type of sorcery that is.

And for dessert, we had qatayef قطايف a sort of sweet cheese stuffed pastry covered in honey. That was probably one of my favorites, considering I don't like donuts and it was like the fresh version of a glazed Krispy Kreme. Mind you, Kifah loves to pile on the food, and so by the end of each meal I felt like a glutton, and having the "-itis" was a complete understatement! Every night there is a new dish, and so I'll attempt to account for them all, but it may be hard.

I've never said delicious (زاکي) so many times in my life.

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Melanin and Fros

Posted on [June 10, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I expected and prepared for this, I thought.

If you know me, I love wearing makeup and my skin is not terrible, but can be affected by stress or a change in weather, so I brought some things with me that have helped tremendously at home. So far, a few breakouts but nothing too scary, my skin just needs to adjust to the dry winds.

I also struggled with my hair. I have very thick curly hair at the moment that I recently cut, and have had success in the states using my Cantu products, however, here they aren't as effective. My curls were not as defined and they had a more fluffy texture. I was worried this may happen and brought a wig with me just in case, and my classmate/fellow Howard peer Mufti volunteered her services to braid my hair, even. However, I decided to try out some leave in cream I saw in the Safeway here that had keratin in it (by the way, the Safeways here have food plus a perfume section, rugs, school supplies, bedding, etc. Get on their level, America). Lo and behold, my curls popped back! I'm still going to wear my wig, eventually.

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After Iftar

Posted on [June 10, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

It was as if the dead woke up.

The biggest reason I avoid working in the food service industry is because I would hate to get in between man and his food. The grumpiness and irritation from not eating and the effects of having to deal with it is stressful. I'd end up fighting someone if I were a server (kidding).

But that is what I basically witnessed here in Amman. During Ramadan, there is a 14 hour fast that prohibits eating, drinking, smoking, chewing gum, or putting a mint in your mouth. If it causes salivation and/or passes your throat, it is unlawful. No one should be seen doing any of the aforementioned, and will result in jail time if you are seen in public doing such, expats and locals alike. As a result, during Ramadan work hours are cut and most shops are closed until evening time. People work from 10-3 instead of your usual 9-5, and trying to get home around 5 is the most dangerous time if you happen to be driving, let alone walking. Most people are irritated and slightly reckless when their stomachs are growling, regardless if they've been fasting since childhood, and the way they drive on an empty stomach is slightly terrifying. You're flying down hills and rushing into L.A style traffic, while holding on to your things and yourself, because what are seat belts?

I do respect the reason for the fast. It is an effort to show solidarity with the poor and underprivileged. Those who are with experience what it is like without. Indulging in fine things such as smoking and eating whenever is considered a luxury, and I believe Ramadan is supposed to bridge the gap between all classes.

After the 4th prayer call, around 7:45 pm, Iftar begins and everything opens back up. Lights are spilled across the city and laughing can be heard in each household. The aromas of so many different foods permeate you and hookah is in abundance. Everyone has awoken from their afternoon naps and children play in the streets as dates and water are passed out to whoever holds out their hand.

I decided to go back to the Roman Amphitheater with some friends I made in CIEE, and witnessed so much awesomeness.

It gets loud and beautiful here.

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Gallivanting in Giza

Posted on [July 15, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I was bitten by the travel bug hard.

We landed in Egypt on a sweltering evening, making Amman seem like a breath of fresh air with it's dry heat. Cairo was so humid, even at night. But it was an experience like none other.

When I imagined myself coming to Amman, it never crossed my mind to take advantage of the little extra scholarship money I received and go to other places I wanted to check off my bucket list. When it was explained that for one week there would be a holiday known as Eid, a holiday that signals the end of the month-long holy practice of Ramadan, many of my peers suggested a trip to Cairo. Because it was so close to Jordan, I jumped at the opportunity to go since it was a place I've always wanted to visit. I found an apartment through Airbnb with others from the program, and before I knew it, found myself on the infamous Egyptair airline to the capital of Egypt.

Our first day consisted of going to downtown to Tahrir Square and visiting the Egyptian Museum. There were so many well-preserved ancient artifacts that some were just laying around without name tags. We've run into mobs of young boys who wanted pictures from us, taxi drivers that do nothing but try and swindle us, but the glorious parts were the architecture. Seeing Islamic and Coptic Cairo was amazing and the history was rich with war and peace. Locals walking past us down the street would stop everything they were doing just to take us on a tour of the "real Egypt", of course they usually wanted to find a way to get money of us (and they were very good at it!).

Obviously we had to see the pyramids in Giza, and were able to go on a five hour tour of the pyramids and other historical places, courtesy of a stranger we ran into on the street who initially was just giving us directions the day before. I appreciate the helpfulness of the locals, albeit they were very aggressive compared to the approach of those in Jordan. We sailed the Nile, got to walk around the city and eat Egyptian pancakes (like a pupusa, or pizza with the toppings hiding inside of the bread), and galloped across the desert on Arabian horses.

I want to go back and experience other parts of Egypt. I wished the men weren't so aggressive, however (I've been told that I would be a wife and make babies for passersby and stalked by four different men in a mall within ten minutes).



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Cairo in itself is still breathing with magic from ancient ancestors, I didn't even get to go to Alexandria or Aswan. Next time, I will go in the fall or winter to avoid the heat, and possibly go scuba diving in Sharm el-Sheikh and hot air ballooning in Luxor!

Where Have I Been?!

Posted on [July 20, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

Since I've arrived I have done nothing but explore. Sorry, not sorry 😊

Jordan has so many beautiful places, and my amazing program has taken us to some of them. I went to Petra, or Raqmu, Jordan's most popular tourist attraction. Petra is a historical and archaeological city in southern Jordan and is notable for the rock-cut architecture and its water conduit system. I also went to Wadi Rum, a beautiful red desert.

Petra

The city began to prosper as the capital of the Nabataean Empire from the 1st century BC, which grew rich through trade in frankincense, myrrh, and spices.

Petra was later annexed to the Roman Empire and continued to thrive until a large earthquake in 363 AD destroyed much of the city in the 4th century AD. By the middle of the 7th century Petra appeared to have been largely deserted and it was then lost to all except local Bedouin from the area.

It was "rediscovered" by a Swiss explorer and then exposed to all the world, becoming one of the greatest tourist attractions in the world.

When going to Petra, it is more impressive in person than in pictures. I traveled through rosy red rocks to a glimpse of an ancient city that was pulsating with magic. It was deafening, I could close my eyes and imagine vividly the people worshipping their gods or burying their dead in the excavated caves. I could hear the music echoing throughout the rocks when the king arrives and see the spices being exchanged at the side of roads. The city still breathed.

But who had a hard time breathing out of the trek, were me and others in the program. Petra was a city, and our tour guide encouraged us to explore this city, highlighting the main viewpoint which was about a ten mile hike up mini mountains in 95 degree weather. The hike was intense because the path to the viewpoint was dangerous, with inches away from 500-2,000 feet drops at some points, and if you're not careful, can slip on a rock and fall to your glorious death. We were given four hours to reach the viewpoint and take pictures of the highest point of Petra, but forgot it takes about 2 hours to get back down to the bus before it left us. With that in mind, it was a difficult hike because time wasn't on our side.

I played all of the hype songs I could think of, and me and a few friends even took dance breaks to keep us motivated. It was not just perseverance that got me up there, but the encouragement from Kanye West, Tame Impala, Chance the Rapper, and more who wanted to see me win. The experience was once in a lifetime, mostly because I never want to make that trek again, but also I have been able to cross off something on my bucket list that I never had on there in the first place.

Wadi Rum

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If there was ever a time I didn't thank the Lord for His grace and mercy, Wadi Rum will always be a vivid reminder of when I nearly broke down in tears with such a prayer. My favorite Jordanian experience so far has hands down been the opportunity to witness the beauty of The Valley of the Moon.

After Petra, nearly the entire program was passed out on the bus from the trek, but we were spending the night in Wadi Rum, so two hours later we find ourselves in this vast red desert with the sun setting behind jagged rocks in the most majestic manner. We made our stop at a bedouin camp, where we posted in tents and made it in time for a local bedouin dinner. The crowd gathered around a steaming pit in the ground as a local explained to us the process of cooking their meat under the earth as an old tradition. The results were glorious, as every piece of meat I ate burst with smoky flavor and all the food we devoured satiated our appetites after our long and active day. After dinner, the bedouin locals started playing live music and we were all soon on our feet doing traditional dances and having the time of our lives. Later, we took to exploring our surroundings, and in the process I looked up and began to tear up. I was never afforded the opportunity to see so many stars in real life, and when I did I could not stop thanking God for His beauty that permeates me.

After my silent session, I joined others in an exploration of an abandoned and unfinished museum dedicated to Wadi Rum in the pitch darkness. After climbing over a huge 500 foot rock and sliding down sand hills barefoot (I was wearing crappy sandals and did not think it through), we played hide and seek games in the creepy building and multiple games of freeze tag, because Wadi Rum brings out our inner child. We were then approached by a truck in the distance with a single headlight, thinking it was a motorcycle initially (and then thinking it was a drug trafficker, because we were warned about that stuff before we left and that they use the desert to transport drugs and kidnap stupid Americans playing hide and seek at midnight in abandoned museums). It turned out to be our advisor in a 4x4 giving out rides in the back of the truck, where we had the time of our lives speeding up and down sand dunes and whipping across the red desert. It was exhilarating.

We then headed back to camp where delicious bedouin tea was served and I brought out my mini speaker so we could all relax after a long and active day full of exploring. Shisha was brought out and s'mores were in abundance, it was an amazing bonding moment for us all.

The next morning I was wakened by loud groans from non-humans. As I stepped outside to look, I saw at least forty camels in position ready for the next part of exploring Wadi Rum. I so happened to have been lucky enough to be paired with the tallest camel in the pack, but also the most hard-headed, as he made sure that every tuft of grass we passed was inspected and devoured by him, and so he was aptly named Hashish (an Arabic word for grass, er, a certain *kind*). He also had a family tied to him, a female camel and a baby camel that freely wandered away from the pack and occasionally suckled from it's mother while in transit. The camels took us about an hour and half away from camp to another checkpoint where more 4x4s awaited us. We listened to Arab music as we sped across the valley and saw petroglyphs of ancient bedouins on rocks, with breathtaking heights that hold so much history of another time. We scooped up red sand to use as blush and lipstick the same way that women have done it centuries before, and found out how it was used for many movies such as *Lawrence of Arabia*,

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Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, Prometheus, and Theeb. We even saw the area where *The Martian* was filmed and did handstands in honor of Matt Damon.

Both Petra and Wadi Rum have drastically expanded my outlook on historical sites, where I could name many places in Western countries where there were historical sites, but Egypt aside, Jordan holds a few of the most ancient sites and no one really think of such a country for those facts. It is so well-preserved and the people have done an amazing job educating us on the rich culture that is Jordan.

Arabic is Hard and My Daily Routine

Posted on [July 20, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

As you may know, I am here in Jordan on a mission: to unlock the tools I need in order to effectively communicate and understand the Arabic language. I pride myself on being an auditory listener, but man, this language trips me up!

I love learning languages, Arabic especially, and this intensive immersion program has given me a new appreciation for it. When I arrived to Jordan, I was able to only tell locals that I knew a little Arabic and they would proceed to talk to me in English. I also needed to test into a high level course in order to receive credit for my senior year (cuz ya girl is trying to graduate *on time*), and I didn't know enough to get into the class but I pushed myself anyways and was able to get into the class I needed.

I am studying at Princess Sumaya University in Amman, a great school with amazing professors who want to see me win. I have been taking Colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), one is the colloquial Jordanian dialect, and the other is the standard Arabic that helps with learning vocabulary and the understanding of sentence structures. My colloquial class is mostly speaking, and it helps when I need to get around the area, because if I speak in MSA it is the equivalent of speaking the Shakespearean language to a modern American. Some words differ and most sound alike, so it's easy enough for me to grasp both concepts.

And since I am in a course level above what I haven't fully learned already, I have to work twice as hard as everyone in my class to be just as good, which can be disheartening at times, but then I remember that I am creating awesome habits and I will be able to impress my Arabic professor when I return home. I'm motivated to keep up with my studies because it's hard to claim fluency in Arabic. It takes years to achieve proficiency and every little bit I learn counts toward that goal. Even when I get discouraged I have friends who will study with me and we all struggle together! Everyone here is so incredibly intelligent, and I love being surrounded by like-minded individuals who have goals for themselves. We see ourselves making a difference in this world, and it starts with these little engaging classes with passionate professors who encourage you everyday.

The most rewarding feelings I have had here include hearing myself communicate effectively with Jordanians, having them understand me and maintaining a full conversation here. I'm encouraged by the little things, day by day.

The Day-to-Day

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Jordan is expensive. Let's just start there.

I was under the assumption that everywhere except Western countries were relatively cheap to the US Dollar but boy, was I wrong. Everything is imported to Jordan so the tax prices are insane. During our orientation, our advisor informed us that our main mode of transportation will be taxis and that they are very cheap. What she failed to also mention was that most of the drivers we will encounter are crooked and will try to charge more than is required. During the first month, which so happens to also be Ramadan, the pattern was slowly being noticed. It takes me less than 3 JDs (about 5 dollars) each way to and from school, but after classes there is heavy traffic for the rush to get home and rest before Iftar. As a result, it is rare to find a taxi driver who will start the meter and only charge you accordingly, most will try to make you pay 6 or 8 JDs because of the "heavy traffic". I wized up by the fourth week and finally stopped getting swindled by giving them exactly how much the usual fare is and stopped being scared because it's an illegal practice and they rip out their taxi information in the car and know they'll get in trouble. Unfortunately, this has happened to me many times because I am a foreigner and they think I am naive, however, one thing you should know about me is that I am always poor and my need to conserve my coins are greater than my naive nature.

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Besides that, I have a lovely routine of getting up at 6 am to get ready for my 8 am Colloquial class, and then from 10-1 pm I have my MSA class. My professors do their best to keep the class interesting, but 5 hour instructions a day really wears on us. After class, I usually stay after to study with a friend for four more hours or go to a cafe for the free wifi. After Ramadan my roommate and I stopped getting big meals for dinner so we grab something from a cafe or go out to eat with friends. Seriously, the dinars add up.

After I retreat home and chill with my host family and try to go to bed. On weekends, I am usually with friends out to the local lounges where there are plenty of rooftop bars or some nearby event happening. Jordan is filled with expats so it's easy to find familiar things to do with lots of American music. Also, I live in a neighborhood that is close to a lot of places populated by expats so I see familiar faces very often. It's very surprising to find so many types of people here, considering all that is going on around Jordan. Even though it is the "safest" Middle Eastern country, it doesn't negate the fact that it is surrounded by countries with current war issues.

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Point on Earth

Posted on [July 20, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

It was beautiful and it was blazing hot.

I am still amazed at how I didn't manage to blind myself as clumsy as I was in the Dead Sea. We found some taxis willing to take us and a resort to host us, and we were on our way to float in the sea where nothing lived. I avoided shaving my legs for as long as I could just so I could fully enjoy the experience of being in a body of water with the highest salt concentration in the world. I bought a drink and attempted to float on my back like the others, but that was a legendary fail and I flipped over, spilling the expensive (and only cold thing in proximity) refreshment into the sea in my attempt to be cute.

Speaking of legends, I listened to Islamic legends of the sea, where it is claimed to have been the ancient city Sodom, turned upside down by Allah for the wickedness and immoral behavior of the people, and the city is trapped under the clay and saltiness of the sea, a symbol of destruction and punishment.

I felt as if I were being punished for trying to walk on the shores, where salt banks and Dead Sea mud were in abundance, but it felt as if I were walking on hot coals. A few people even cut their feet on the rocks that lay jagged under the surface. I even splashed a little water in my mouth and eyes, which burned slightly and my attempts to drift back to shore without splashing anyone else while temporarily blind were full of struggles, even when I tried to rinse it out, the water from the hose was boiling. We suffered, yes, but after putting on the mud, my skin felt softer than the bottom of a baby's foot after it's first bath.

I intend to come back more prepared and during the winter, and this decision has me slowly realizing that I am a budding masochist.

Falling in Love with the Same Man Again and Going to Holy Lands

Posted on [July 20, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

Deuteronomy 34:1-5

1Now Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, **2**and all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, **3**and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. **4**Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see *it* with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." **5**So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD.

I had the opportunity to see where Jesus Christ was baptized and I fell in love with Him again. The experience of standing in the same river Jordan where His body was submerged by John the Baptist shook my core and brought me so much closer to Him.

We went to the shrine of John the Baptist in Madaba, a church that depicted his beheading by King Herod, surrounded with statues and ancient maps. It never occurred to me that Jordan is home to some of the most anointed places in the world, another great hidden gem about this country.

I also got to go to Mount Nebo, where Moses was shown the Promised land of Israel before he died. It was quite epic.

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The Adventures of Brown Sugar: Tales from a Pretty Slave

Posted on [July 20, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I wish I knew how to give a proper step-by-step, foolproof guide on preventing feelings of insecurity while being black, more importantly, a black woman abroad.

If you know me, I am a very social animal who loves makeup, unicorns, glitter, and a nice Chop't salad. I try to to emit a shield of positivity wherever I go, with the hopes of spreading happy energy to those who seek it, but sometimes that shield can be cracked.

Cat-calling is a universal custom practiced by ~~sub-human~~ many men, and I expected copious amounts, considering I am also a foreigner here in Amman. However, I forget that I am more than a foreigner, but also an African-American female foreigner, meaning I am subjected to a more degrading version of cat-calling here in Jordan.

I am not alone in my plight. I have four other program-mates who are also Black women, and have shared their stories with me. One friend told me that when walking with another Jordanian woman, they passed a group of men who referred to her as a "pretty slave," as interpreted by the Jordanian woman. I also encounter many expressions of ~~racism~~ ignorance from such men, but in forms of fetishization. I cannot describe all of the daily remarks I'd get from different men in regards to my skin. Most of these remarks align with the desire to touch my skin, feel my curves, or plainly to experience sex with a Black woman. This has become so common that genuine interest from someone with good intentions is approached with much suspicion while waiting for the ignorant punchline. And although it is common to be intrigued by a foreigner, I have rarely received respectable intrigue from my Jordanian brothers.

I am not received as warmly as a beautiful blonde, where she is greeted kindly and the local men would practically lay a red carpet for her when it comes to getting around the city (they would even give free taxi rides, which is nearly unheard of). I, on the other hand, can feel the stares of confusion. Darker-skinned people do exist here in Jordan, but they are usually from Sub-Saharan Africa and can speak Arabic because most are Muslim. When it comes to me, it is very rare to encounter an African-American woman, and I get a mixed encounter between pleasant hellos to aggressive tones of desires to sexually assault me. I am trying different tactics to deal with these sorts of aggressions, from maintaining silence for fear of hearing something else I don't like, to smiling and pretending that I don't hear them, and get emotional in the comfort of my room. Even my own host family falls short on realizing that they pay more attention to the needs of my White roommate. She is able to take up the childrens' time and utilize their skills in Arabic to help her with our homework, but when I ask it isn't of much importance to them. I would notice them playing with her hair or inviting only her to go out with them, as if to show her off to the streets. I then begin

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to feel uncomfortable in my own home and avoid coming home as much as I can, so that I don't have to witness their admiration.

However, I have been handling these situations all wrong. I am not improving my environment by slinking away from the uncomfortable things, I am not supposed to be comfortable here. I have a job to do here, which is to continue to help pave the way for more Black women to feel comfortable enough to travel anywhere with the tools I have acquired in order to deal with such encounters. I have to help educate my peers as well, who have no idea that African-Americans have to deal with daily micro-aggressions and that they should help to spread awareness as well.

The media has represented us Black women poorly, in that we are akin to sexual objects that are mere ornaments in a rap music video, and I feel a personal responsibility to also educate those I meet on African-American culture.

Over time I have built a sense of pride in my blackness, realized my greatness, and have been supercharged to promote consciousness of the Black experience. It also helps that I have a great sense of empathy toward the plight of all people of color, and realize that many of the racist things that are promoted here are due to pre-conceived notions molded by Western media. I hope to create awareness and fairness amongst us during my stay here, because there will be more Black women traveling abroad and they need some sort of reassurance that they have a voice that matters, and they deserved to be valued.

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I Saw Egypt and Israel from Jordan

Posted on [September 18, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

Aqaba has one of the most underrated beaches. It is at the Red Sea, with the clearest water I've seen in my lifetime (then again, I don't get out much). I was there for 36 hours and knew it wasn't enough time. My highlights of spending time in Jordan was being able to see a large body of water for the first time. I am a water sign so it is crucial that I make contact with an ocean, lake, river, pond, etc where I feel the most calm and serene. I arrived with a friend on the last weekend of our time in Jordan and thought it would be a great sendoff back to the States.

From the beachfront, you could see Egypt directly across, as well as Israel on one side, and Saudi Arabia on the other. I wanted to go scuba diving for my first time and it was an amazing experience. I saw a sunken ship and swam with little Dorys (blue tangs) and Marlins (clownfishes). I brushed with coral and had impromptu exercises when carrying the oxygen tank on my back to and from the sea. I polished the day off with amazing ice cream and a good nap and went home.

Thank you Aqaba for giving me an amazing first time experience in scuba diving, reuniting me with the water.

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Harsh Realities

Posted on [September 18, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I haven't had a completely glorious time here and would be doing myself and others a disservice if I didn't share my complete experience in Jordan. It has taken me over a month to actually find the words and put them together in the most eloquent way possible to inform you that I was a victim of sexual assault while abroad. For the sake of my sanity as well as enlightening those I may have alienated following the course of events, I felt the need to express the truth to you all, because although I am fiercely private when social media is concerned, I cannot ignore the impact this has had on my life following. I also was concerned about posting my truth because I did not want to dissuade others from visiting this country. Do not misinterpret the situation: my experience in Amman has been exciting and encouraging and makes me want to travel more than ever, and I can only grow from my harsh realities.

During the last week of my stay in Jordan, I was assaulted by a tour guide who worked at the hotel that I stayed in while spending the day in Aqaba. I overestimated the amount of trust I had in my surroundings, and fell victim to a predator who did not recognize an American girl who was not promiscuous. I am nice, and apparently naive, which gave him the encouragement to pursue me for two days and beg to have sexual relations with me. I have mentioned before how I have been fetishized by most men here, and this is a prime example in action. Before the assault the night before, he mentioned how he loves when American girls come to visit because he is not allowed to touch the Muslim local girls, and asked me on many occasions if I've had sex with someone outside of my race.

I cannot express enough how frustrating it is to be in such a predicament, as it is enforced by society to wear modest clothing, yet there I was being targeted. I could not believe what was happening at the time and the following morning of the attack I left without speaking to anyone. And my attacker (who was posted at the exit) caught me before I left and asked me to pay for my scuba dive, and wished me a safe trip back to Amman, as if nothing happened the night before.

As if he didn't drug my water and follow me to my room after his first attack and closed the door behind him to attack me again.

I became a recluse the last week of classes. I couldn't bring myself to spend time with my host family before I left, which I'm sure has left a bad impression. I couldn't hang out with most of the program and dance the night away as a send-off back to the States. I couldn't do my best on my final exams because I was having anxiety attacks before and during the tests. I couldn't properly have a conversation with my roommate about why I've been

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distancing myself, and I couldn't mend things with the people I was beginning to call friends. I let it all fall apart during my period of shock and wanted to go home.

I am writing this to encourage others to talk about their frustrations and their fears. This is my catharsis and if others understand my plight, maybe it would be easier to get through this traumatic event together, because I have been battling with this alone for the most part. My depression reappears and my anxiety is at an all time high. I sometimes struggle seeing others from my program talk about how joyous their experience was on Facebook, and anxiety seeps in when I try to relate. I wish my experience was drama-free, but harsh realities set in and I know this will only empower me to continue with my journey. I believe women, especially Black women, need to go abroad to places unfamiliar, perhaps these societies will have more accurate depictions of us besides the objectified, promiscuous versions they may see in rap videos and reality television, and will respect our bodies more.

A Love Letter to Amman

Posted on [September 18, 2016](#) by [onyxandsand](#)

I'd like to thank my Lord and Savior for giving me the opportunity for a fully-funded opportunity to experience the Middle East. It is always comforting when your dreams and passions are validated by a powerful being.

I'd like to thank my friends and family at home for the support, even when most were hesitant to support me due to the fact that my first time being abroad would be in a country surrounded by turmoil. You all believed that I was ready for such an adventure.

I'd also like to give thanks to the program, for nurturing me and my dreams. You groomed me to learn better about other cultures, showed me new things and made me uncomfortable so that I can take these experiences back to the home front.

To my professors, you have pushed me past limits I have set for myself and I am only grateful for what I have learned. Every day you have tirelessly tried to ensure our success and have supported our passions. You invited us into your homes and shared your families with us, helped us to assimilate with the Jordanian population, and encouraged us to never be satisfied with good enough.

Thank you to the family that hosted me. Kefah and Ahmed, you made sure that I was well-fed and saw the best of Amman. You made an effort to help bridge the gap of communication, teaching me words as I taught you. We bonded over our love of za'atar, and Kefah you showed me what a great homemaker you are, while also knowing when to take time for yourself. To Sara, Lara, and Mousa, I loved my time with you all. You guys went out of your way to make me and my roommate more comfortable in the house. You took us to the movies and to eat ice cream, and taught me how to "peacock" for cute guys to get their attention.

To my roommate, I have never had a roommate before, let alone someone younger than me and from a different background. Thank you for helping me discover my voice, helping me to form my opinions, and grow as an individual still working on self-improvement. I only hope that we can continue the way we started and stay in touch.

To the friends I have made, you all are a true blessing to me and I could not have enjoyed myself fully had it not been for spending time with you. I hope we keep in touch and reunite again.

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And to Amman, I have never felt more growth as a person than here. I have been overjoyed, overwhelmed, and over it all sometimes. I hid from discomfort and pain, have been forced to confront it, and appreciated every moment of it. I have discovered myself more here; what makes me excited, and how I handle painful times. I sometimes reflect on the pain I experienced here and get emotional, but I know that when I move on to my next journey, I have developed the tools I needed to deal with similar events. Amman, You have loved me and given me great food to tell everyone at home about. You have shown me a culture that I find similarities with. Thank you for hugging me and pushing me as well, giving me a great experience as a first time traveler. I will return again, and when I do, I will resume my writing here for the next chapter of my adventure.

With all of my love and gratitude,

Ngozi