

Middle East | Learning

Article and Photos by Melinda Bak | Day in the Life



In the seat next to me, a young Arab man is vehement as he speaks in hushed tones into the Bluetooth anchored to his ear. I have been listening to "Learn to Speak Arabic" CDs for months and with my increasing literacy, I am able to understand about one in every 1000 words. I recognize intermittent phrases: *Insha'allah* - God willing, *fel al massa* - tonight, and *safiya dafiya* - everything is fine. But the muted utterance of *jihad*, has all my fears now throwing a wild party in my head.

"My children still need me," I plead with God as I rest my head against the airplane seatback and try to remember how to breathe in the midst of my mental mayhem. My destination is Jordan; not the Minnesota city but the foreign country where my eldest daughter is enrolled in college. My pleading with God continues, "God why have you seated me next to *this* man? Is it because I should be yelling, "Terrorist!?" Then, there

was what seemed to be an answer from God, "Talk to him."

That's it? Talk to him? That's what you've got for me, God? As my seat-companion pulls the Bluetooth from his ear, I ask in as casual a voice as I can muster, "So, where are you traveling?"

"Jordan," he answers, "Not the local Minnesota City," he adds with a disarming laugh.

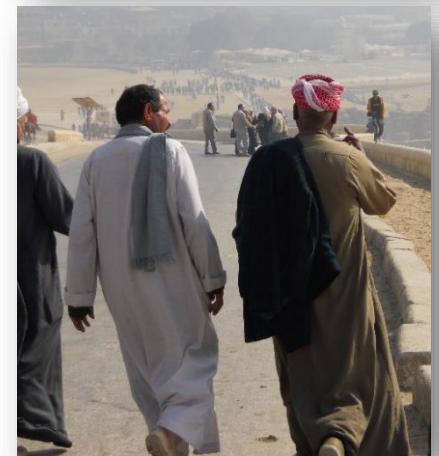
We talk into the night about our families and about how he and his brothers had emigrated. We discover we have a common friend in Minnesota. As the plane taxis into New York, we agree to trek to our international flight together. But, when we are detained by security, my heart begins to pound. The current "profile" includes *white, middle-aged women with ties to the Middle East*. That's me; I am being profiled! My new friend is slack-jawed with disbelief. He's probably thinking, "Wow, she's not who I thought she was." I think the same, "Wow, he's not who I thought he was," as he risks missing his flight to make sure I'm okay.

As our final flight approaches the Middle East, the Pilot issues instructions in Arabic, then translates for the few of us who did not understand the strict directives, "37,000-feet... we are entering restricted air-space... all passengers *must* remain seated." It's probably a good thing that I couldn't Google this until we'd landed. A "restricted area" is where there are hazardous objects like "aerial gunnery or guided missiles."

"Marhaban!" says the pilot, "Welcome to Jordan." I step off the plane into a world imbued with untried smells of cardamom coffee and a cacophony of endless car-horns.

On the sidewalk where I wait for my daughter, striking men wearing the working-man's *jalabiyya* (hooded robe) talk with the same vehemence as my friend from the airplane. Normal? Normal, I think. Men in their finely pressed white *ghutra* (robe) and 'agal-rope *shemagh* (red and white head-covering) walk slowly, purposefully. Not in a hurry? Perhaps not.

Women pass by, a few in an *abaya* (burka) in spite of the heat. While others wear a *jilbab* (a robe worn atop regular clothing when in public), that looks infinitely more comfortable. Younger women in jeans and a modest shirt are there too; some in *hijab* (lady's head-scarf), some not. To cover or not? I haven't yet decided what I'll do.



Loud boys in graphic tees and women in designer-heels wind their way through the crowd; a clash of cultures that proclaims lineage, faith, values, and with whom you can associate.

And there is my daughter! Our embrace crowds out any attempt at words. On my first night in Amman, Jordan, we are honored guests for the traditional meal of munsaf; Arabic rice and lamb in a pungent broth of jameed (made from dry sour milk). It's a communal dish from which we eat with our hands, signifying friendship.



The following day we go to a home where men are banished to other quarters in the house so the women (from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and America) can enjoy one another's company without covering; Muslim *women-of-honor* cover their heads when in public or in the presence of men. We eat long into the night: a meal, followed by tea, then pistachio-honey-laden pastries, then Arabic coffee, then fruit. Really, until you whimper, "no more" there will be more. I make a mental note for the next meal, "Begin pleading *full* ahead of being so."

At the end of the evening, some of the men join us for a final round of pistachio pastries, tea and talk. Against all rules, I am included, like family. Gender lines, politics, culture, faith, fault lines – we cross them all. It's not what I was expecting. Were they surprised as well? We broke bread. Broke tradition. Broke-down walls. And found similarity and friendship.



We return home, piling on blankets against the cold night air. I am learning that Jordan is poor in water, and indoor heat is a luxury. My daughter, who has been attending college here this year, is schooling me in a-gallon-a-day survival. At night it's cold, so I wear everything I've brought in my backpack – two t-shirts, three turtle-necks, two sweaters, long-unders, two-pair of pants and several pairs of socks. And a head-scarf. I make a decision; to cover.

At 4:30 a.m., a forlorn voice from a nearby minaret summons Muslims. I am tossing and turning in a futile endeavor to keep warm, so I am awake and consider the meaning of this soulful call. When my Arabic-speaking daughter awakens, I ask her what they are saying. "God is Great...Come and Worship God. That sort of thing," she says, rolling over and pulling the covers atop her head.

"I think it's rather mournful, yet beautiful," I reply.

"Yes," she says from beneath her blankets while we consider facing the frosty morning air, "though I hardly notice it anymore. It happens five-times a day."

"Isn't it amazing that you live in a community that is constantly reminding you to come and pray?" I ask. We make haste to ready ourselves and turn on the burner for a cup of tea. It's nearly 9 a.m. (1 a.m. Minnesota time) and the early morning chill has begun to surrender to the Mediterranean sun.

Out on the street, we 'round a corner where some friends light up at my daughter's appearance. We make it our practice to always have local money on hand to share with those in need, but my daughter silences me – *and my charity*.

She greets each person with a kiss. Clearly well acquainted, they banter animatedly in Arabic. Again, I whisper to my daughter that we should do *something*. "No," my daughter is vehement.



She tells her friends that I am a holy woman (because I work for a religious organization back home) and they welcome my prayers. I sit, rest a hand on each and ask God for provision, for healing, for these boys to grow to be men of honor.

Though our language and religion differ, it is as if, in this moment, we draw from the same well of faith. "Ma' Alsalam," I say as we stand to leave, and I begin to question my daughter in some strange role-reversal. "Why? Why couldn't we give them anything? Maybe we could have helped."

"Many people give them dinars, Mom," says my daughter, seeing I need to be tutored. "But in this culture, where honor is everything, they are continually shamed by having to beg. Our gift was honor, something charity removes - what we gave them exceeds what money can buy."

I am learning.
From my daughter.

Across the Wadi by Camel

Article and Photos by Melinda Bak

Backpacking across Jordan, Israel and Egypt, my adult daughter and I wonder about the man to whom we've entrusted ourselves, but as we so often do (sometimes to our own peril), like gnats in the wind, we swat away our fears and get on board.

Today we headed into the desert of Wadi Rum to meet up with our Bedouin guide who sweet-talks his camels like we do our small house pets.

Though he may be as old as 30, our guide possesses the stoicism of a wandering sage. He has agreed to take us the day's journey, along the Siq (Path) of Lawrence of Arabia, across the sea of sand and through a maze of monolithic rockscapes.

A half-hour into our journey, my daughter reaches for her camera. It's gone. Likely tumbled out of her pocket when the camel stood - a moment when one loses track of anything but holding on for dear life.

One is first jolted violently forward as the camel raises its back legs; then leaning forward so as not to be catapulted off the rear side, up come the front legs.

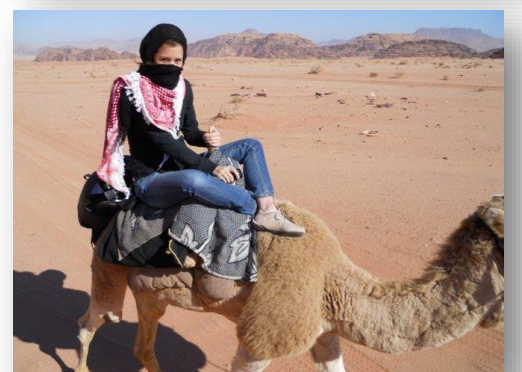
Yep, the camera was likely back where we had begun.

Since my daughter is fluent in Arabic, I encourage her to let our guide know, and see if we might go back for the camera. There's quite a bit of talking. I understand the word, "no" which isn't encouraging.

Our Bedouin guide is willing. But, he has been explaining - the camels are not. "Camels NEVER go backwards."

It's decided, my daughter tells me, they will leave the camels here in the desert with me, while they walk back for the camera. "W/haaat?" I think as I watch my daughter and guide vanish into the horizon, like a desert mirage.

"Okay," I tell myself, "So, my daughter has disappeared into the desert with a Bedouin.



"And I'm here.
Alone.

"In the desert.
In the Middle East.
With two camels. What could possibly go wrong?"

I walk in circles until, following the camels' lead, I settle onto a spot of sand. "Fellas, did you know that in your language "jamaal" (camel) means beautiful?"

Silence.

"So, you don't go backward?" I ask, looking for some assurance. Still nothing. I occupy myself shooting photos. Turns out, they love to pose.

About an hour later, I see two figures wafting my way. "Yalla," I say with truth-defying casualness, as if I never had a care in the world. "Let's go!"

As we sway on the backs of our camels, wind blowing in our ears, blue sky up above, I have the feeling of being on a Midwest Wisconsin river in a canoe, only somehow, I am here, in the Mideast on a camel.

Mid-day, muscles stiffening from their unusual assignment, I notice that my daughter has one leg bent over the camel's shoulders and I shift my weight to do the same. Bending my leg over my camel's neck, he swings his head around to glare at me, making a riotous objection, "*aoharrooah*."

Okay, sorry," I say as I return my leg to its previous, foot-numbing position.

We are entering 'The Valley of the Moon', the place where Prince Faisal Bin Hussein and T.E. Lawrence achieved their World War I, British-Arab alliance; a turning point in the war and a victory for Arab independence.

Lawrence (of Arabia) described this place of towering crags as "vast, echoing and god-like." I think how bold Lawrence was to venture here, dressed as the locals and traveling where few other westerners had ever gone to be one with this hospitable people.

In the Middle East, hospitality is the difference between life and death. When we arrive at the tents of mid-desert Bedouins, they are quick to welcome us in, offer us tea, and our camels, water.

There is wisdom in being a forward-moving people, riding forward-moving animals.

With a glance over my shoulder at the desert that stretches as far as the eye can see, I begin to wonder about all those who have gone before me - who were willing to walk in another's shoes, ride another's camels, observe another's ways, and drink another's tea.

Each an act of trust, believing in a shared tomorrow.

I am overcome with camel-like inclinations. Yes. Yes, to walking forward into new places, new friendships, new possibilities. Yes, Yalla! Let's go!

