

Olson - A shared journey...

We drove up to the old Ibri mud village with our three boys in the back of the van. My husband and 13 year old son had traveled along with my TCNJ colleagues and me first to the capital city of Oman, Muscat and then inland to Ibri. We had all been inspired to come to Oman with Kris Holloway, the President of CIS-Abroad to learn about the Noor Majan Arabic Language Institute. The Directors of Noor Majan, Sultan and Samira, are also proud parents of 4 children. Seated in the back of the van with their two eldest boys, Zach was wearing a red soccer shirt from Prague while the Omani boys were dressed in traditional Omani clothing. Following our afternoon excursion to historic Ibri, our Omani hosts were going directly to the Mosque for their prayers.



Several months earlier, when I told my husband and son that I was organizing a trip to Oman and Jordan to explore options for a TCNJ Study Center in the Middle East, my husband asked without hesitation if they could come along. He was actively following and writing about events in the Middle east and had long wished to travel to this region. Normally delighted to have my family meet up with me before or after a work trip, this time I was not sure. I had never traveled to either of these countries, I do not speak Arabic, and I was going with a Dean and Senior faculty member. I felt anxious about my capacity to take care of everyone's needs and achieve the goals of this trip. I was also uncertain about navigating the cultural differences we would encounter. Could I learn enough Arabic language and Omani culture in a few short months to show adequate respect for our hosts? My son, who normally loves to travel, was also nervous and stated he did not want to go. He told his Dad later that he was afraid that "we would be kidnapped." I was stunned when I heard this. How could our son carry such fear? Where did this fear come from? How would we overcome our reservations about this trip?

As we unloaded the van in front of the historic mud-village, Sultan began to explain the history of the village. His sons respectfully interrupted their father to ask if they could run through the village up to the top of the hill -- since we were all moving quite slowly -- and urged Zach to join them. Zach looked to us and then to the boys and decided to join them for the fun. They were gone for some time as the adults visited the mud houses trying to imagine what daily life would have been like. When we heard the boys returning with joy in their voice, a shift had taken place in their short time away. Zach was now much more relaxed then he had been the prior three days we had been in the capital Muscat. As we re-boarded the bus, the boys began talking about sports - soccer, ping-pong, and basketball - and they decided together that they needed to help Zach pick out an Omani soccer shirt to take home with him.

My own anxieties about being in Oman were eased early on in the pre-departure preparations as Kris offered her guidance in how to prepare and took care of all logistical arrangements. I was freed up to focus on culturally preparing myself for this trip. Exposure to Arabic was top on my list as I know from my training in languages and my experiences preparing for other trips, that even basic language learning opens up my heart and mind to more learning. Packing for this trip was another critical piece as I balanced between the anticipated heat and cultural norms for women in that region -- head scarves, long-sleeved shirts, long-skirts.

Up until the day of the trip. Zach still did not want to go, but his Dad persisted. Upon our arrival in Muscat, Zach was pleasantly surprised by the modern hotel with a rooftop swimming pool and delighted by the buffet which included multiple grilled meats and fresh fruit. This space eased us into this capital city which harmoniously blended modernity and traditional life.

We had a few days of site-seeing together before the official work began and decided a visit to the Grand Mosque was in order. With some trepidation, I arrived at the entrance to discover that my wardrobe was not quite suitable -- my scarf did not adequately cover my wrists -- and without such coverage I could not enter. We managed to navigate this challenge. Then the enormous mosque -- with gardens, courtyards, ablution stations, large ornate prayer halls -- were open to us to visit. While all was extraordinarily beautiful and peaceful, what I appreciated most was the generous spirit of the Iman in the visitor center tucked away near the exit of the Mosque. He had spent time in the US and spoke amazing English. As he learned of what brought us to Oman, he was all the more eager to serve us tea and figs and explain how the Ibadi branch of Islam practiced in Oman varied from other branches of Islam. What began as an experience of exclusion ended with an experience of warmth and inclusion. My heart, mind and soul was more fully opened for what was to be a unique personal intercultural encounter. Following this visit, I was all the more eager to meet up with our hosts at Noor Majan and begin our task of creating global engagement opportunities for future TCNJ faculty and students.

For Zach, however, it was not until we traveled inland to Ibri and he met and ran with boys his own age that he was able to suspend his fear and allow something to shift inside him. Along with his jersey -- which Sultan and Samira made a special stop to allow their sons to help him pick out -- he carried home memories of friendship. Upon return to suburban New Jersey, Zach proudly wore his Omani soccer shirt with the team's name written in Arabic. When someone at his school made a snide comment, Zach was quick to set him straight and told him about the friends he had made in Oman. Also when recently asked by his grandmother where he would like to travel back to in the world, Zach responded without reservation -- Oman.

Something also shifted in me through our various experiences in Oman and later in Jordan. Challenged initially by the restrictive coverings at the Mosque, I accepted what was requested. Then, I strove to observe without judgment throughout the remainder of my trip how various women in Oman and later in Jordan, navigated this custom. While I do not intend to embrace such restrictions in my own life, my quest remains to understand the choices of others. Like Zach, I too feel inspired without reserve to go back to Oman as there is still so much to learn.

