

From The Complete Guide to the Gap Year By Kristin M. White

Joshua Claxton: Arabic Year at King's Academy

As a student at Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, Josh Claxton had a passion for US history and foreign policy. He found this interest to often intersect with current affairs in the Middle East. While he was in school, the Arab Spring's people's movements were unfolding, and he felt a desire to understand the politics and cultures of the region, which he feels were severely misrepresented in US media. Upon his admittance to Middlebury College, he received an acceptance packet with a letter that encouraged incoming students to consider a gap year. He was excited by this opportunity and raised it to his parents and favorite faculty mentors. His history teacher knew about King's Academy in Jordan, an international boarding school, and proposed that Josh participate in their Arabic Year program, which offers a year of intensive language study and experiential learning. Josh was immediately convinced and deferred enrollment at Middlebury to attend King's.

Josh arrived in Madaba-Manja, Jordan, to begin the school year in September. King's has over five hundred students in grades 7-12, coming from 35 different countries, and approximately 22 students in Arabic Year. The school is modeled after Western boarding schools, which eases the transition for many of the Arabic Year students. Josh took two Arabic language classes per day, plus a class in Arabic literature, among other courses. He participated in various school sports as well as the chess club and Student Symposium.

The goal of Arabic Year is to allow students to make substantial progress in the study of the Arabic language, soak in the history and culture of the Middle East, and "learn by doing" through off-campus educational excursions in Jordan and the broader region. Josh's favorite parts of the experience were the relationships he formed with his peers from the Arab world. He had close friends from Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and many other countries who introduced him to their unique perspectives. During weekends, he went to friends' homes in Amman, and on campus he spent his free time in the student center discussing everything from social-political topics to romance to pop culture. The school also sponsored trips to excavation sites, museums, and historical landmarks throughout Jordan, as well as to Morocco. However, it was in those memorable moments with friends where Josh learned the most and developed the cultural awareness that he will value forever.

The Arabic year experience not only expanded Josh's world view, it began to answer his questions that first arose when he followed the *New York Times*' reporting of uprisings in Egypt and Syria. "Initially, I knew absolutely nothing. I did not know anything about Palestine! But through casual conversations with friends, I was exposed to so much so quickly." Josh explained, "Prior, I felt like I had no foundational knowledge to make sense of the news, but I always felt there was more beyond the mainstream stories."

Josh said that he learned his geography and basic history shortly upon arrival and soon after could converse and listen in on nuanced discussions. "Most of what I learned came from just hanging out in the student center and making friends. My Iraqi friend would explain the sectarian tension between Saddam Hussein's regime and the Ayatollah's Islamic Republic of Iran that

resulted in war. My Palestinian friends would tell me how their families were displaced when Israel was established.

There were of course more lighthearted moments, where I was exposed to the breadth and flavors of Jordanian cuisine and learned the traditional ‘dabke’ dance. My classes and travels were informative, but it was those informal interactions with people of different backgrounds that made the experience transformative. Ultimately, through discussing life and politics with my peers from around the world, I also saw that we all have much more in common than that which divides us.”

Josh later matriculated to Middlebury College, where he majored in political science. He continued to take Arabic courses every semester in college and spent his junior fall abroad at the University of Jordan in Amman. After graduation, Josh joined Mathematica, a policy research company, where he focuses on impact evaluations in developing countries.