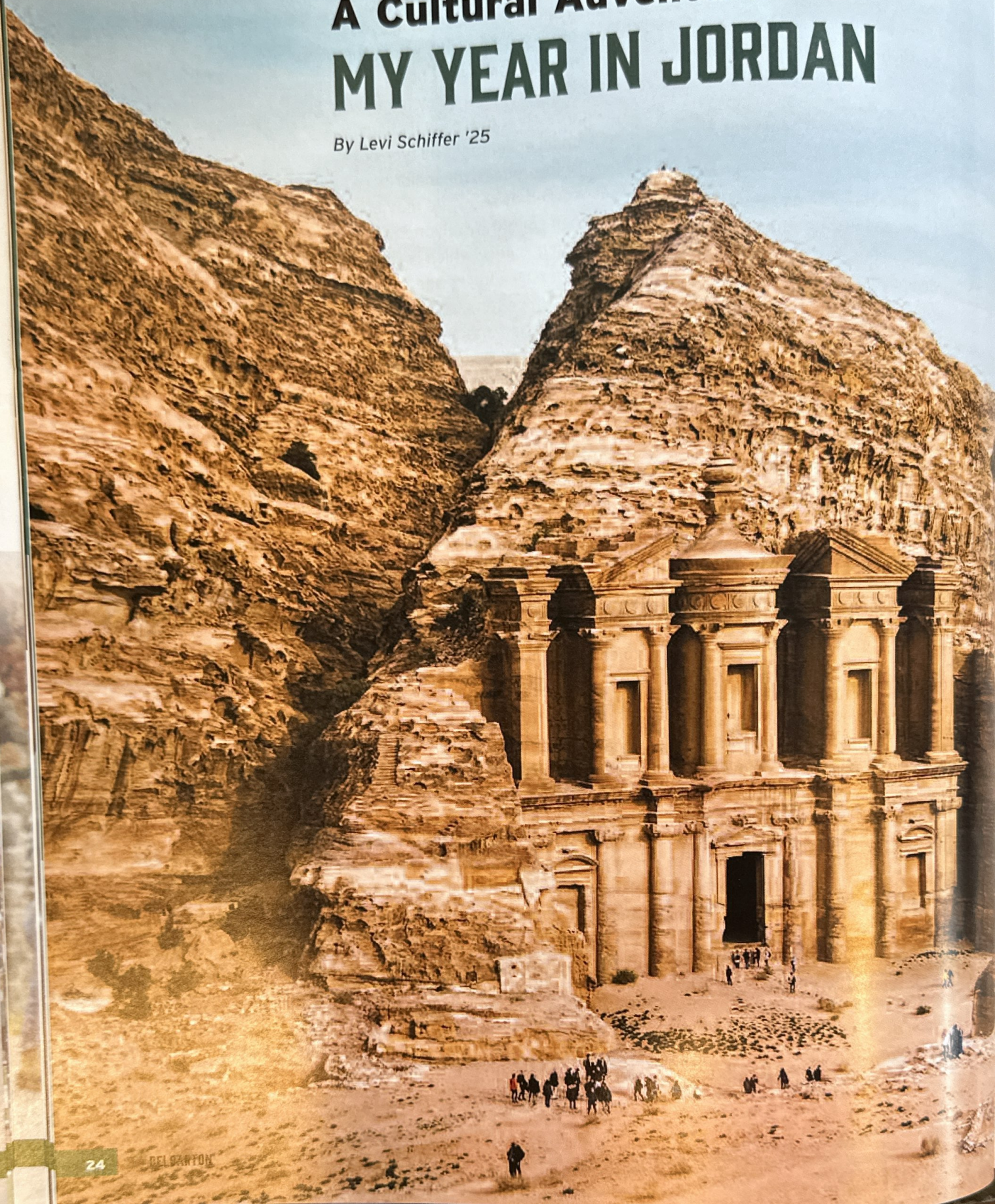


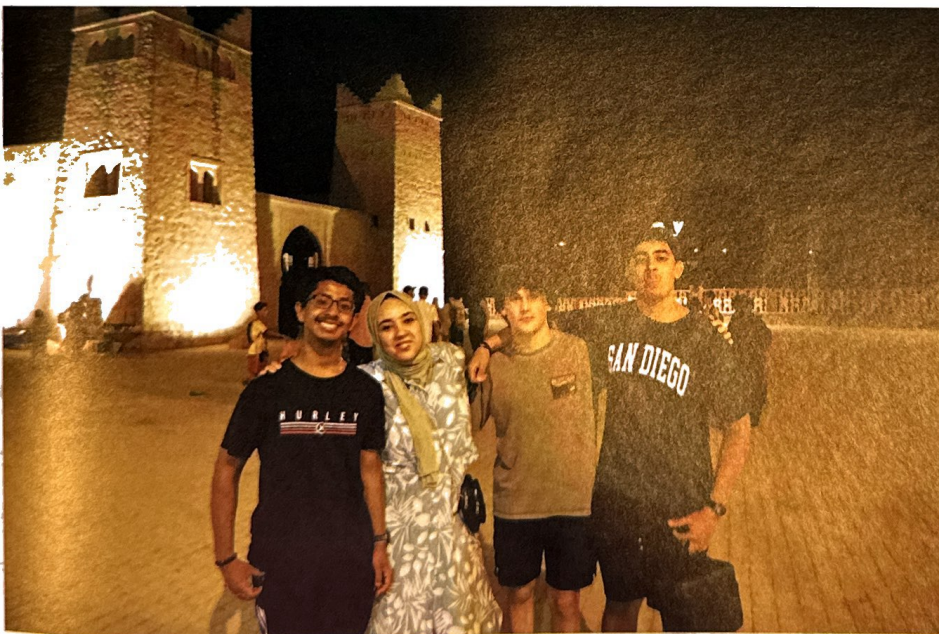
A Cultural Adventure: MY YEAR IN JORDAN

By Levi Schiffer '25



Growing up as a Jewish kid in northern New Jersey, I was constantly surrounded by cultural homogeneity. Sundays at Hebrew School reinforced the remnants of Jewish culture I inherited from my ancestors as I engaged in traditional holiday celebrations and practiced transliteration from Hebrew to English. It was not until my experience at Delbarton that my worldview began to expand. Delbarton's Arabic program enabled me to immerse myself in two new Abrahamic religions, completing my unique endeavor to understand the intricacies of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the linguistic aspects accompanying them. Mr. Zack Tabor's engaging lessons and insistence on providing our class with a much-needed cultural and historical context on the Middle East introduced me to Arab culture, yet I felt I needed further immersion to uncover its true richness.

I applied for a summer immersion program through the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) to further my Arabic studies, and I was granted a six-week scholarship to study in Marrakech, Morocco, over the summer. The small beds, humble accommodations, and scorching one-hundred-and-twenty-degree heat proved exceedingly challenging at first; maybe even insurmountable. Yet, as the summer continued, I was inspired by the constant radiant smiles I saw on the faces of my host family and other locals in Marrakech. Despite facing profound challenges like a lack of access to potable drinking water, everyone I met expressed a sense of happiness and joy I had never experienced before. Their overwhelming sense of community and hospitality allowed for collective solutions. Restaurant and business owners would leave coolers of water



At the Castle of Beni Mellal in Morocco are, from left, Levi's roommate, their host mother, Levi and their host brother.



Levi Schiffer '25 and three King's Academy Arabic Year (AY) students in Petra in southwest Jordan.

outside their storefronts for anyone to drink from and street vendors typically offered free fruits and vegetables to those in need. These small acts of generosity within the Moroccan community turned these daunting hurdles into small humps that they crossed as a shared community. From cooking and cleaning to weekly trips to the market for produce, entire families and groups of friends were involved in every aspect of daily life. The laughs, grins, and giggles never stopped; it seemed like I was brought into my own personal utopia, an escape from the anxiety and pressure that awaited me back home.

The rest of the summer was packed with adventure and thrills; weekend trips to the mountains of Ouarzazate

and the beaches of Essouira wove in and out of long school days filled with language instruction and thought-provoking debate. I saw significant improvement in formal Arabic, the local Darija dialect, and, surprisingly enough, French. While I attempted to converse in my target language exclusively, the occasional 'Ça va' or 'Merci' was inevitable. We enjoyed wandering the markets of the old Medina, eating endless amounts of Tagine, and exploring Marrakech's somewhat lively social scene. This Moroccan excursion only fed my craving for further experiences; it provided me with the personal growth I needed to continue my journey, branching out and immersing myself in other cultures as well. It was then I came across King's Academy.

The first co-ed boarding school in the Middle East, King's Academy was established in 2007 just outside of Jordan's capital, Amman, by King Abdullah II to bring a more Westernized form of education to his promising youth. King's Academy hosts Amman's elite as well as students from throughout Jordan and the world, many of whom receive full merit scholarships. I was drawn to this picturesque school in Jordan for its Arabic Year program (AY), a commitment to "allow students to make substantial progress in Arabic language study, soak in the history and culture of the Middle East and 'learn by doing' through off-campus educational excursions in Jordan and the region." It was everything I had been searching for: a language and cultural immersion combined with rigorous academics that would allow me to keep up with my progress at Delbarton.

After a lengthy application and a series of interviews, I found myself alone in a tiny dorm room almost six thousand miles from home on a hot August 2023 afternoon, intimidated by the future that was to come. However, as I began to engage with other students, the transition became effortless. I found that the hospitality and cultural values I encountered in Marrakech were not an anomaly but a norm throughout the entire region. Weekend AY trips were a highlight, the most memorable being an overnight excursion to Petra and Wadi Rum in Southern Jordan. It was in Petra that I had my first experience bargaining with Bedouins in broken Arabic over the price of a camel ride, losing my

shoes in sand dunes, and failing miserably at dancing the traditional Levantine Dabke. While I did find myself in a sort of idyllic bubble, I still noticed the pressing reality of many Jordanians while touring downtown Amman. Yet again, the presence of radiant smiles returned. During a trip to the ancient Roman Citadel just north of King's Academy, I met a local vendor, Ahmad, and his two children. "Asiir asab asukkar tabi'ii (fresh sugarcane juice)," he would sing at the top of his lungs. The five dinars in his daily earnings bucket did not curb his high spirits and motivation, nor did it prevent him from insisting that I take a cup of juice for free (which, of course, I did not accept). As long as Ahmad had his family, sugarcane, and music, the struggles of daily life couldn't overwhelm his happiness.

After spending months in Jordan, I felt it was my duty to give back to the community that so graciously welcomed me. Throughout the course of the second quarter, I volunteered to tutor three Jordanian middle school students in English. Coming from a small town in Jordan and having little exposure to Western customs, their curiosity surrounding my American background was constantly sparked. We spent the first few weeks watching *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, listening to rap, and eating copious amounts of chocolate chip cookies. The last few weeks were spent listening to Fairouz, drinking traditional Jordanian Sahlab, and watching famous Middle Eastern sit-coms. Ghaina, Ghazal, and Joud went from exchanging broken greetings and pleasantries to reading and writing English short stories in

MY YEAR IN JORDAN



Arabic Year (AY) trip to the Roman ruins of Jerash, Jordan. Delbarton student Levi Schiffer '25 is on left in back row.

just three short months. My half-semester of tutoring was just a pebble thrown in the ocean of favors bestowed upon me. Yet, my contribution was a reminder that even the smallest acts of gratitude can have a lasting impact.

In the face of devastation post-October 7th, the Jordanian community maintained their warmth and generosity. Nevertheless, political conversations became harder, more complex, and filled with more emotion. Some students and faculty talked past one another in pain and an understandable resentment began to appear. Many felt helpless as they watched their friends and extended family suffer just a couple hundred kilometers away. The need for bridge-building became apparent. It was clear that there was not enough communication between Americans and Jordanians, especially among the youth. With a pronounced language barrier and significant geographical barrier, this resentment was inevitable. My deep love for both cultures and regions has fueled my determination for more interconnectedness and dialogue so that a path to peace becomes a reality rather than a distant future.

The experiences I've undergone during this unique endeavor have changed the course of my life. Not only have I gained critical skills of independence and self-sufficiency, but the experiences and people I've encountered have altered the way I view the world and choose to act within it. I've committed myself to

Levi teaching English to middle school students from a local public school in Madaba, Jordan.



The first co-ed boarding school in the Middle East, King's Academy was established in 2007 by King Abdullah II outside the Jordanian capital of Amman to bring a more Westernized form of education to his country's promising youth.

entering the world of diplomacy, hoping to foster a better relationship between the United States and the various countries of the Middle East, as well as the many peoples that inhabit them. Hopefully, I will be able to return these acts of generosity, allowing more American students to have the opportunity to see and feel the effects of those radiant smiles as profoundly as I have, promoting a more prosperous and shared future.