

Sharpston Travel Grant Report



Studying Arabic in Morocco

Classics student Ellie-May Vohra was the winner of this year's Sharpston Travel Grant and used the award to fund a month-long stay in Rabat.

Thanks to the support of the Sharpston Travel Prize, I spent a month in summer 2022 in Morocco studying Modern Standard Arabic at the Qalam wa Lawh Center for Arabic Studies in Rabat. It improved my language skills dramatically, while also allowing me to learn lots about the country's history and culture.

I got off to a somewhat shaky start by arriving after sunset. The next morning, after walking to the school with my flatmates and running some errands in town, I went to head home before soon realising that I didn't recognise any of the buildings around me. Luckily, I had a weekend to get my bearings before starting classes. I really enjoyed exploring the Agdal district, getting the tram into the old city in Rabat, and wandering around the winding souk.

The first class was daunting; most of us were total beginners and had barely looked at the Arabic alphabet before arriving. Our teacher, Meryem, was not deterred by this and led us straight into taking notes from the board in script and writing our own transliterations beside them. Although this made the first two days stressful, it meant that we picked up the various forms of the letters according to their position in the words much more quickly as we could remember examples. We had classes in the morning from 8.30 to 12.30 with a break at 11am for "Moroccan whiskey", a sweet mint tea that is served everywhere you go. At first, I wasn't a fan because it was much sweeter than any tea I'm used to drinking, but after having it at the school with breakfast and at break every day now I too am an addict, and I came away with my very own teapot and cups from the souk.

A smaller group, including me, had joined a more intensive course that included a further class from 2pm to 4pm with Zakariya. In these classes we did extra grammar and recapped what we had done in the morning class. Zak always started by going around the class and asking what we did yesterday and what we were going to do after class. At the beginning the answers were quite tame and repetitive with our limited vocabulary – it seemed that all any of us ever ate was chicken tagine for a good while – but by the end we had Zak in tears of laughter at some of our (mis)adventures.



The Madrasa Al-Attarine in Fes, a school for Islamic scholars

A definite highlight was telling him about our weekend trip to his hometown of Fes. A few of us in the class booked trains and a hostel in Fes on the last full weekend, so we asked Zak on the Friday for suggestions as to what to go and see. His immediate response was to give us his number and tell us that, luckily, he was going home that afternoon to visit his brother for the weekend and that we could call him any time because he was sure that we would get lost in the souk. On the Monday in class, having not heard from us over the weekend, Zak eagerly asked us what we had done, to which we had prepared memorable responses on the train home. Henry had a particularly rough trip, having bought some chicken on the first day in the souk and regretting it later that evening. After summoning up the strength to join us again the next day, he decided that trying the signature camel burger at the restaurant we went to was exactly what his stomach needed, with predictable results. The rest of us, however, had a great time exploring Fes. We got quite lost in the souk on the first day but didn't want to give Zak the satisfaction of coming to rescue us, and ended up finding a good vantage point outside of the old city with extraordinary views. The second day we visited the Chouara Tannery and learned how they use natural dyes for their leather, and the Madrasa al-Attarine, one of the many beautiful old schools in Fes built for Islamic scholars.

It was very easy to travel around from Rabat at the weekends, and on my second weekend I took a train to Casablanca. The school was running a trip to Chefchaouen that weekend but, having devoured Tahir Shah's *The Caliph's House* on the plane journey, which follows the author and his family on a move from London to the outskirts of Casablanca, I was eager to visit the souks in the Habous and Derb Ghallef areas myself. I also visited the breathtaking Hassan II



The Chouara Tannery, Fes



The Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca

Mosque, the Mohammed V Square, the Arab League Park and the Sacred Heart Cathedral. I could later see that the French influence was far more palpable in the architecture in Casa, the “economic capital”, than it was in the “cultural capital” of Fes. The third weekend I went on a trip organised by the school to Merzouga, a small town near the border with Algeria in the Sahara Desert, and we camped (well, glamped) for a night in the desert after a camel ride. I also enjoyed looking around Rabat, visiting the Mausoleum of Mohammed V, the Hassan Tower and the Kasbah des Oudaïas on the first weekend.

As the weeks progressed, and our brains were crammed with more and more vocabulary, sounds and grammar, the calligraphy class halfway through the Thursday morning session became a favourite. It took place at the exact point in the week where your brain was telling you that it couldn't learn any more, and we would go and sit out in the garden and Ali would take us through how to write different letters with a bamboo qalam (calligraphy pen). I found it very relaxing and brought a qalam home with me, so that when term-time is getting too stressful I can go and sit on the balcony and try some new words (weather-dependent, of course).

Joining a gym for the month was one of the best decisions I made in Morocco. It was a great way to break up my day and distract me from such intense language learning. I met a girl called Nadia who thought I was Moroccan and started speaking French to me one day. She was asking about what deodorant I was using because she liked the smell, but I managed to tell her, “Désolée, mon français n'est pas très bon”. She asked where I was from, and after I said the United Kingdom she started chatting to me in great English. Nadia was studying English Literature at the Mohammed V University in Rabat; we were often at the gym at the same time, so we started to practise speaking with each other. We tried to go for coffee at as many of the hundreds of cafes as possible, and these were always full to the brim with locals sat drinking black coffee, smoking and people-watching. As well as the cafe culture, Nadia introduced me to the Moroccan hammam, a bathhouse with various sauna and bathing rooms where you use beldi soap and a kessa glove to scrub all the dead skin off your body. It is safe to say that I have never been cleaner.



The bustling souk in Rabat

There was a real focus on food at the school, as it forms a huge part of Moroccan culture. In the last hour of the Friday morning sessions we would receive a recipe in Arabic, go through the new vocabulary and make a traditional dish in an afternoon cooking session. We made chicken tagine, lamb couscous, seffa and briwat during my trip. I had breakfast at the school every day and quickly became addicted to m'semen: a cross between a pancake and a flatbread served with honey. Nadia insisted that I joined her family for a meal on the Saturday before I flew home because she was convinced that, while I might have had some Moroccan food, I couldn't have had the proper experience. It was a great way to end my trip. Her siblings spoke some English, but I had to use a mixture of the French and Arabic that I knew and had learned to speak with her parents, who were incredibly welcoming. The food was delicious and, of course, the meal was finished off with some Moroccan whiskey.

I am very grateful to College for its support for the whole experience, which went above and beyond my expectations. When I arrived, I found out that beginners had to give a five-minute presentation in order to graduate and I laughed at the prospect, yet four weeks later there I was. I am now in a perfect position to begin Arabic as a subsidiary language this coming Michaelmas Term as I not only have a linguistic foundation but also an understanding of the cultural context of the language.