

Expectation Setting for Jordan

Written by Zoie Chang, CET Jordan: Intensive Language | Summer 2018

Allow me to give you the rundown on myself. I'm a rising junior majoring in international studies and sociology. I am Taiwanese-American born in California, but raised in Taipei, Taiwan, under the American school system. I guess I tick off all the boxes in terms of "average American study abroad student," with the exception of the one pertaining to race, so that factor is what I'll be addressing here.

This summer, I studied the Arabic language in Amman, Jordan. It has been an incredible experience, and while not necessarily a 'life-changing event,' having the opportunity to live and study in Jordan has allowed me to question my own biases and reevaluate my opinions on interactions between people from different cultures. However, while I'm currently writing this piece to help fight off the feeling of sadness from having to leave, I won't deny that I had my share of somewhat unpleasant experiences here.

My appearance has absolutely influenced how local people here react to me. I'm East Asian, and I look it, and I've been counting the number of times random strangers have called out "ni hao" to me. They've also shouted "Japan? China?" and once a man driving a car pulled up to the sidewalk where I was walking to inquire as to where I'm from. Given that it was at night, as well as the gender roles we have to play in Jordan, that was a bit scary. Oftentimes when I meet people, one of the first questions they will ask me is "Where are you from?" Since I consider myself fairly Americanized, because I study in the US, and for a whole host of other reasons, I usually respond that I'm American—only to be met with "But where are you REALLY from?" It really was a wake-up call; although many Americans are accustomed to seeing identity as multi-faceted, I realized that I couldn't expect everyone I met abroad to be interested in fully understanding my identity. Some people simply wanted a short answer, and tried to fit my story into the shape of their own perspectives.

A lot of locals in Jordan have preconceived notions about different ethnicities; I've heard an African American friend called "brown sugar" (that was weird), and the girls that look especially 'white' tend to be harassed very aggressively, especially if they're walking together in a large group (an example: the second day here, they were crossing a street and all the drivers on the road started honking their horns for a solid minute).

I don't think that there's any way to avoid this, and honestly it's easiest to just grow a thicker skin. This isn't America, and I understand that we can't force our views about racial stereotypes on others (disclaimer: I think that my situation in Jordan was also particularly extreme, owing to the interaction of race with gender roles as well). However, it's important that students of color understand that the culture of PC oftentimes

just doesn't exist in the country they're traveling to, and mostly there's no ill-intent behind the (inadvertently) offensive remarks being made.

In terms of preparation, it's all mental. Expect to be called out with regards to your race. You may be POC and experience no questioning about your identity. If it doesn't happen, that's great, but in my opinion, it's better to expect the worst so you won't be as shocked if it does happen. If you prepare for it, you will be better able to let these things slide. One thing that I think is particularly important to understand, even if it is harsh, is that as an American student studying abroad, in the end, we are the ones who have decided to travel to a foreign country. This kind of opportunity isn't available to everyone, and simply by virtue of being able to study abroad, the dynamic between you, a study abroad student, and the locals of whatever city you are in, may already be slanted. The director of my program reiterated this idea by reminding us 'not to play the victim.' While this sounds incredibly harsh and a bit like victim-blaming, especially with regards to instances of stereotyping, keep in mind that in the end, studying abroad is a privilege that you yourself chose to utilize. You are here to experience new cultures and expand your perspectives, and that may come with some level of initial discomfort.

That said, don't feel like you are prohibited from responding to any provocations, or even just gently correcting someone when they stereotype you. Check with the program leads about cultural norms, and try to integrate your responses in a way that gets your point across, yet does not violate the norms. My best advice is to let go of hostility and negative feelings the best you can, and try to gauge intent rather than word choice. Also, remember to contextualize your reactions in terms of what you already know about the safety level of your location. Sometimes local people might be forward with you because they are curious, and you may feel very awkward, which might lead you to feel unsafe. At these times, take a step back, detach from emotions, and consider whether you feel like you are in a truly unsafe situation, or are simply uncomfortable.

Best,
Zoie