



# Beyond international tourism: Meaningful pedagogy in short-term study abroad in Jordan

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## Abstract

This paper explores the design, execution, and pedagogical impact of a short-term study abroad program in Jordan, focusing on the intersections of history, urbanity, and performance. Through site visits to Petra, Jerash, and Amman, students critically engaged with how antiquity informs contemporary urban development and cultural narratives. Using a mixed-methods approach—including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and student surveys—we analyze the program’s evolution between its 2022 and 2024 iterations. We highlight three key pedagogical themes: creating a cohesive research-driven curriculum, moving beyond a “customer service” model of study abroad, and balancing classroom and fieldwork experiences. By centering local expertise, fostering intercultural engagement, and incorporating Arabic language study, the program challenges traditional study abroad paradigms. This paper contributes to broader discussions on short-term study abroad as a site of critical inquiry, demonstrating how carefully curated programs can cultivate meaningful, transformative learning experiences beyond tourism.

## Keywords

Cultural engagement; experiential learning; faculty-led, short-term study abroad programs (FLSTSA); pedagogy; urban spaces

## 1. Introduction

This article analyzes a short-term study abroad (STSA) program in Jordan, taught by Dr. Samer Al-Saber and titled “Jordanian Futurities Between Ancient Antiquities and Performances of Urban Life” as a pedagogical case. The course was organized around a central inquiry into how the architectural and

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cultural histories of Petra, Jerash, and Amman, especially their ancient theatres, continue to shape contemporary urban life and tourism, and what this reveals about broader historical dynamics in the Levant. We focus on ancient theatres not only as preserved remnants of Roman infrastructure, but as active sites within the modern city. Their scale, centrality, and continued use position them as key nodes of movement, gathering, and economic activity. At the same time, they stage ongoing encounters between past and present, making visible how historical forms are continually reinterpreted within contemporary urban contexts.

“I’m thinking of the Roman Empire...” a student remarked during the program, laughing at both the historical reference and its resonance with a recent cultural trend. This moment reflects the layered temporalities that shaped the course: students engaged Roman imperial histories as frameworks that remain embedded in the built environment and circulate in contemporary cultural discourse. Under Roman rule, cities in present-day Jordan were shaped by infrastructure and architectural forms, such as theatres, colonnaded streets, and water systems, that facilitated integration into imperial networks (Hadidi, 1992). These structures continue to inform the organization and experience of the modern city, contributing to a layered urban landscape in which multiple historical moments remain materially and symbolically present (Corboz, 1991; Lefebvre, 1991).

Within this context, short-term study abroad programming provides a setting in which students encounter and interpret these layered histories. This article examines how the program was designed to guide that engagement. We identify three pedagogical priorities that shaped its structure during the two times we led this particular STSA: maintaining coherence across sites and activities, resisting a “customer service” model of student experience, and integrating classroom-based learning with embodied, site-specific encounters. By coherence, we mean the deliberate alignment of site visits, coursework, and reflection to build a cumulative trajectory of learning rather than a series of disconnected experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). Moving beyond a “customer service” approach shifts students from passive consumers of cultural experiences to participants in reciprocal, critically engaged learning processes (Bolen, 2001; Zemach-Bersin, 2007). Finally, integrating classroom and experiential components reflects established approaches in experiential and place-based education, which emphasize the relationship between critical reflection and situated learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Kolb, 1984). All layers of program curation contribute to student engagement with the historical layers of the built environment of Amman, Jordan, and its surrounding areas.

## 2. Literature review

Short-term study abroad (STSA) programs are distinct from long-term study abroad, particularly in terms of program curation and modes of student engagement. In their systematic review of 156 studies published between 2000 and 2019, Iskhakova and Bradly (2021) demonstrate that STSA research spans multiple disciplines, including education, business, psychology, and language studies, reflecting the broad applicability of this pedagogical format. Data from the Institute of International Education (2019) further indicate that 54.6% of students who studied abroad in the 2017–2018 academic year participated in programs lasting fewer than eight weeks. Rather than serving as definitive proof of dominance, this figure reflects a notable shift toward shorter program formats.

Scholars emphasize that STSA is not simply a condensed version of long-term immersion but a distinct form of learning shaped by specific structural and pedagogical conditions (Engle & Engle, 2003). These include program length and organization, group structure, level of faculty involvement, degree of cultural immersion, and the integration of pre-departure preparation, reflection, and post-program engagement. Because of the compressed timeline of STSA, these elements must be intentionally designed rather than emerging organically over time.

At the same time, Iskhakova and Bradly (2021) note that the majority of STSA research remains empirical, with comparatively few studies offering conceptual, methodological, or theoretical contributions. This gap reflects the field's emphasis on evaluating student experience and program outcomes, often at the expense of deeper theoretical engagement. In response, this study approaches STSA not only as a site of student experience but as a pedagogical and methodological framework that warrants critical analysis.

Within this broader field, experiential learning has been a central framework for understanding how students engage with unfamiliar environments. Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process in which concrete experience, reflection, and conceptualization inform one another. Building on this, place-based education emphasizes the importance of situating learning within specific geographic and cultural contexts, arguing that knowledge emerges through embodied engagement with place (Gruenewald, 2003). In STSA contexts, these frameworks underscore the need to design programs that move beyond passive observation and toward active, situated participation.

At the same time, scholars have critiqued study abroad programs for reproducing consumer-oriented models of engagement. Zemach-Bersin (2007)

argues that many programs position students as consumers of cultural experience, where success is measured by satisfaction rather than critical engagement. This “customer service” model can result in superficial interactions with host communities and reinforce unequal power dynamics between students and local partners. In response, scholars such as Bolen (2001) advocate for approaches that emphasize reciprocity, ethical engagement, and collaborative knowledge production. In this study, we use the term “customer service” to describe a mode of program design in which experiences are pre-packaged, friction is minimized, and students are positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants. Moving beyond this model requires embracing uncertainty, fostering collaboration with local partners, and creating space for critical reflection.

To further theorize these dynamics, this study draws on postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and theatre and performance studies. Postcolonial theory provides a framework for analyzing how historical legacies of empire shape contemporary encounters, particularly in regions like the Middle East that are often mediated through Orientalist representations. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this project recognizes that many students arrive with understandings of the Middle East shaped by longstanding Western representations that depict the region as exotic, backward, timeless, or fundamentally different from the West. Examining how these assumptions are reinforced or disrupted through embodied encounters becomes central to understanding the pedagogical impact of study abroad. Cultural studies extend this analysis by foregrounding everyday practices, circulation, and meaning-making within specific social contexts. These approaches allow us to interrogate how students interpret and navigate cultural difference, as well as how knowledge about place is produced and contested.

Theatre and performance studies contribute an additional lens by conceptualizing space as performative. Rather than treating space as static, this framework emphasizes how meaning is produced through embodied practices, movement, and interaction. In this context, urban environments can be understood as sites of performance in which histories are enacted, negotiated, and reinterpreted. This perspective is particularly relevant to our focus on ancient theatres in Petra, Jerash, and Amman. While these structures are often framed as remnants of antiquity, we approach them as active sites within contemporary urban life. Their continued use as tourist destinations, gathering spaces, and cultural landmarks positions them as key nodes within the city's social and economic networks. In this sense, theatres function not only as architectural artifacts but as spaces where past and present intersect, and where cultural meaning is continually produced.

Taken together, these bodies of literature highlight the importance of intentional program design in STSA contexts, particularly in relation to how students engage with place, culture, and history. They also reveal a need for more theoretically grounded analyses of how such programs are structured and experienced. In response, this study examines how these concerns take shape in practice through three pedagogical priorities that guided the design of our program: creating a cohesive learning trajectory across sites and activities, moving beyond a “customer service” model of engagement, and balancing classroom-based instruction with embodied, site-specific learning. These themes, which emerge from both existing scholarship and our own iterative program design, provide the framework for the analysis that follows.

### 3. Program design and logistics

#### 3.1. BOSP Program background

Hosted by the Bing Overseas Studies Program (BOSP) at Stanford University, summer 2024 was the second time Stanford offered a short-term study abroad program to Jordan and the second time we co-led the program. Founded in Year, Stanford is a private university, with more than 7,000 undergraduate students and more than 9,000 graduate students. More than half of the undergraduate population studies abroad during their time at Stanford University.

Professor Al-Saber designed this program after noticing that the Bing Overseas Studies Program (BOSP) did not offer any study abroad programs in the Middle East. Our expertise in Palestine would allow us to run a program there, and we could ask similar questions about antiquity and modernity in Palestine as we do in Jordan. However, the challenges of organizing and facilitating such a program are prohibitive due to university-mandated risk management policies, including travel restrictions, liability concerns, and limitations on institutional support in areas designated as high-risk (Bolen, 2001; Briggs & Calderón, 2012). For that reason, Jordan serves as an alternative to a study abroad program in the West Bank and Jerusalem, where programming is often constrained by these risk classifications. In the following section, we describe the creation of the course as well as the program design and logistics.

#### 3.2. History, urbanity, and performance in the Middle East

This paper examines a short-term study abroad program in Jordan, taught by Dr. Samer Al-Saber and titled “Jordanian Futurities Between Ancient Antiquities and Performances of Urban Life” as its central case study. The program takes cultural artifacts as foundational elements of the Levant, asking how a contemporary state exists alongside and atop the ancient past. It explores this question through three cities: Petra, Jerash, and Amman. All three cities

have large theatres that suggest a particular pattern of growth over time and play a major role in how these cities function today as tourist attractions and a geography for performances of everyday life. In these three major sites of exploration, students investigate how culture, in its broadest definition, has shaped the trajectory of the Levant historically and in the present day. The overall narrative of this course is an expansive movement from the center of the country to the periphery, starting out in Amman at the Roman Amphitheatre downtown in the first week, then expanding to Gerasa/Jerash in the second week, and finally ending in a long journey to Petra in the last week. Throughout, students investigate specific questions they develop in the seminar's early stages.

As students engage critically and physically with the three major sites that equally straddle the past and present, they participate in smaller site visits, including guided tours, which encourage them to explore their own readings of how space is produced and performed. Each major site visit is anchored by a major theatre where a city can be read in relation to performance, architecture, and urban planning. At the end of the course, students should be able to read theatrical and urban spaces in historical terms, juxtaposing two periods of their choice. The main objective of the course is to demonstrate on the ground how history and culture shape the footprint of human civilization. Their research confronts basic investigative dimensions: periodization, location, agency, and action. All interactions during the course are part of the fieldwork. For example, students are encouraged to converse and informally interview guest scholars, tour guides, Sijal Institute employees, and fellow students as a key part of engaging with the course materials. While some students have experience with Arabic, group conversations occur in English, though individual students can engage with guests in Arabic if they so desire. This linguistic dynamic shaped the learning experience unevenly, as students with Arabic proficiency were able to engage more directly and develop deeper interpersonal connections, while others relied on translation and collective interpretation, highlighting the role of language in structuring access to knowledge and cultural understanding. Some of the challenges of a program like this include organizing and facilitating it in the Middle East, where many universities lack existing institutional partnerships. Additional challenges arise around representation and intercultural interaction as students navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts.

### 3.3. Sijal Institute

Located on the bustling Rainbow Street on one of Amman's seven major hills, the Sijal Institute is a paragon of Arabic language and culture instruction. Sijal is an Arabic word that refers to a debate in which both sides put forth spirited and equally compelling arguments. The name serves as a metaphor for the institute's dedication to intercultural dialogue and exchange. We chose Sijal as our partner because the institute demonstrated several crucial competencies.

The institute's connection to the local art scene and major intellectuals serves as a gateway for study abroad students to engage with Jordanian culture and the Arabic language simultaneously. Second, they are located in the heart of Jabal Amman area, close to downtown but having easy access to transportation via the First Circle.<sup>1</sup> Third, students have access to the surrounding neighborhood of Rainbow Street, which has all basic amenities including a large selection and variety of restaurants. Fourth, across the street from Books@Café serves as a comfortable space for queer students. One of the few publicly queer-owned and operated sites in Amman, we cannot understate the importance of Books@Café as a symbol of safety for queer people for our students.

For the majority of the program, students stay in a dorm-style hotel, the Jabal Amman Heritage House Hotel, a short walk away from Sijal Institute. During site visits to Petra, Wadi Rum, and the Badiya, they stayed in hotel accommodation on or near the site. Seminar classes were taught by local Jordanian professors and other experts. Those who were not local to Jordan were Stanford University affiliates who happened to be in Jordan at the same time as the course. A daily schedule consisting of three meals, a conversational Arabic class in the morning (since the students have largely not been exposed to Arabic until this course), a seminar in the early afternoon, and fieldwork in the late afternoon formed the core of the students' daily activities. Field trips included both day excursions and overnight trips. During any fieldwork sites around Jordan, we were led by Amer Bdour, a local tour guide with a background in archaeology. We worked with Bdour during both short-term study abroad programs and found his expertise as a guide and an archaeologist to be beneficial. Additionally, we traveled with a representative from Sijal Institute at all times, Maen Al Sharif, who ensured that the trips ran smoothly and, after hours, served as an emergency contact for students should they need any assistance, from emergency room visits to finding particular snacks or souvenirs in which they are interested. In this plan of study, students will not only gain a deep understanding of the three major sites of investigation, but also cultural competency in the language and culture of the modern Jordanian state.

## 4. Methodology

In this paper, we employ a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a non-mandatory anonymous end-of-course survey of students from both the 2022 and 2024

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<sup>1</sup> Jabal Amman is one of the seven original mountains, or jabals, on which the city of Amman, Jordan, was built. The First Circle is a well-known traffic roundabout in Amman, Jordan, located in the Jabal Amman area. It is one of the seven circles that historically helped organize traffic in the city.

cohorts as our primary data sources. These methods allow us a robust and multifaceted understanding of the short-term study abroad experience.

Our analytical frameworks are grounded in postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and theatre and performance studies, which enable us to explore the complexities of cultural exchange and identity inherent in study-abroad contexts. These frameworks offer a lens through which we can interrogate issues of representation and intercultural interaction as students navigate new cultural spaces.

Students were informed in advance that a scholarly paper would be produced and that all data would be anonymized to protect participant identities. Often, student evaluations are overrepresented as a metric. Student opinion is valuable, of course, but our evaluation of the degree of success achieved relative to our goals was our guiding force. In accordance with institutional guidelines, this project constituted program evaluation and reflective pedagogical research using anonymized data and therefore did not require IRB review. Our participant observation data collection focused on observing students in various settings—classroom interactions, excursions, and informal social settings—and documenting their responses to new cultural contexts. As participant observers, we balanced active involvement in the program's activities with a critical, reflective stance to better capture the nuances of students' behavior and engagement with the local culture. This method allowed us to observe behaviors that might not be fully articulated in interviews or surveys, such as non-verbal communication, group dynamics, and subtle shifts in how students navigated intercultural encounters.

The data analysis process was shaped by our emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of the students and the locals with whom we were partnered. We began by transcribing field notes from observations alongside interview data and survey responses. This allowed for cross-comparison and supported triangulation across data sources (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2015). We then engaged in iterative coding, identifying recurring themes, behaviors, and patterns. This process helped us trace consistencies between participants' articulated experiences and their embodied practices within the program (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the end-of-course survey, although anonymous and non-mandatory, provided a broader sense of student satisfaction. It also helped corroborate themes emerging from our qualitative analysis. While the survey offered less depth than our observations, due to its reliance on brief, self-reported responses that lacked contextual and relational detail, it allowed us to capture perspectives from all participants and identify trends that might not have surfaced through observation and interviews alone.

## 5. Changes between the first and second iteration

One of the biggest changes between the 2022 and 2024 iterations of this program was how we determined which students we would accept. But the impetus for this began in 2022 as well, when Dr. Omar al-Ghul from Yarmouk University gave a lecture about the Safaitic inscriptions his team researches in the Badiya.<sup>2</sup> The students were enraptured by his research and his deadpan humor and expressed a desire to spend more time learning from Dr. al-Ghul. Following the program, Dr. al-Ghul hosted Professor Al-Saber at Yarmouk University with the primary goal of exploring options for future collaborations that could benefit students from both universities. Dr. al-Ghul works with graduate students on reading Safaitic inscriptions in the Badiya, and both professors decided that the 2024 cohort would venture into the Badiya to read inscriptions alongside Dr. al-Ghul and his graduate students.<sup>3</sup> For that reason, when we read student applications for the 2024 cohort, student ability to recognize Arabic letters became a factor in the admissions process. Having some experience with Arabic as a prerequisite altered the group dynamic by giving priority to heritage speakers and Middle Eastern students in the diaspora. This decision greatly impacted the composition of our student group and was made to enable students to experience firsthand the knowledge production, like Dr. Al Ghul's, that occurs in Jordan. While students are often aware that knowledge production occurs globally, dominant academic and cultural narratives frequently frame it as originating in the Global North and disseminating outward. This admissions decision was intended to challenge that framing by prioritizing students who could more directly engage with local knowledge production in Jordan. Although some students without prior connections to the Middle East were included, the majority had linguistic, cultural, or diasporic ties to the region, marking a deliberate departure from the admissions process used in the program's first iteration.

Some of the changes that came from repeating the program a second time are also predictable. Familiarity with a structured STSA program and with the course syllabus creates a sense of ease while fostering a deeper engagement with the material since their pedagogical rationale has been solidified. Some of the changes we made were based on student feedback from 2022, which largely involved how trips and lectures were structured, and when they were scheduled within the three-week program. Our pedagogical choices became more confident as we planned for the 2024 trip. Below we highlight three pedagogical

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<sup>2</sup> Safaitic refers to an ancient script and language used by nomadic tribes in the Arabian Desert, particularly in areas like northern Arabia, southern Syria, and northeastern Jordan, around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>3</sup> Badiya refers to the desert or rural areas, particularly the open, uninhabited expanses that are home to Bedouin communities. It is often used in contrast to settled or urban areas.

themes that emerged for us: creating a cohesive STSA program, moving beyond a “customer service” style of engagement, and balancing classroom time.

## 6. Pedagogical themes

### 6.1. Creating a cohesive program

Study abroad programming risks becoming disconnected from a pedagogical purpose when touristic experiences are inserted simply to allow students to “see the sites,” even when they do not contribute to the broader course design. While many programs include locations that do not directly align with their research questions, we sought to avoid creating a structure that felt punctuated by pauses for tourism. Instead, our research question guided the selection and sequencing of each site: how do the architectural and cultural histories of Petra, Jerash, and Amman, particularly their ancient theatres, inform contemporary urban development and function as tourist destinations, and how does this relationship reflect broader historical and cultural dynamics in the Levant? In the way that Dr. Al-Saber designed the course, each site incrementally reframes students’ understanding of antiquity by situating ancient structures within contemporary economic, social, and urban contexts. At the same time, modernity remains visible but is continually reinterpreted through its material and spatial entanglement with the past.

In a semi-structured-interview we conducted with Amer Bdour, our tour guide for both the 2022 and 2024 STSA programs with Sijal Institute, we asked him what he sees as the biggest difference among the various collegiate study abroad programs with which he works. He answered: “It’s a personal thing. A lot of groups come here to learn. And most of them that I have worked with, if they come to learn, they will. They want to know more about the beliefs...[and] the cultures and norms here. Other groups...they just want to be here to have fun. They just behave like they’re going into the Caribbean or to any other...resort” (Bdour, 2024). In our conversation, he asserted that study abroad is an educational enterprise and about learning—if you treat it like pure tourism, then it ends up being less successful. Having a guide like Bdour, who is trained as an archaeologist, primes the environment to feel inherently educational, since his expertise is at the forefront of all our trips. Working with a community partner like Sijal Institute is also a major component of keeping the trip focused on the underlying research question for the STSA. Sijal Institute and their managing director Katy Whiting supported the specific needs of the program we sought and helped us improve aspects of the trip with their local staff and expert guidance on the ground.

## 6.2. Moving beyond a “customer service” style of engagement

When we arrived in Jordan, our intention was to move beyond a typical “customer service” approach to STSA, where participants might expect a pre-arranged itinerary to be executed flawlessly and act as passive recipients of the experience. In such a model, students often assume the role of consumers, where satisfaction is measured by how well the program meets their expectations without necessarily engaging with the complexities on the ground. Instead, we approached our STSA program with a more collaborative and dynamic mindset. We arrived with a carefully planned syllabus but also with the understanding that flexibility, adaptability, and active engagement with the Sijal Institute, our partner in Jordan, were essential. We recognized that challenges and unexpected circumstances would inevitably arise, and our goal was to navigate those situations together with our local partner rather than viewing them as “glitches” in a program that we expected to play out “perfectly.” This collaboration is fundamental for creating a pedagogically sound and impactful experience for students, and we knew that our work with the program would end long after it had concluded, as we analyzed and reflected on it with Sijal Institute, the students, and each other.

In discussions with local service providers, we’ve come to understand that not all groups approach STSA with this same philosophy. Some programs treat their local partners as little more than logistical facilitators, with the expectation that they will deliver a pre-packaged experience. By contrast, we selected the Sijal Institute not only for its location in the heart of Amman, but because it is authentically Jordanian-rooted in local culture, values, and practices, rather than adopting a corporate, Westernized structure. From conversations with colleagues in other United States institutions, we know that many universities prefer working with partner organizations that have headquarters in the United States and embody a familiar corporate ethos. These organizations may feel easier to work with because they align with U.S. institutional expectations and frameworks. However, we sought a partnership that would directly immerse our students in the local Jordanian context without diluting the experience. Our goal was to expose students to society, culture, and Arabic in Jordan without imposing external corporate ideals or compromising the authenticity of local traditions and community values. By working with Sijal, we committed to fostering an exchange that was respectful, reciprocal, and grounded in a deep appreciation for the local.

## 6.3. Balancing classroom time

One of the central questions we had to consider when planning this program was: How much time should students spend in the classroom versus the field? This decision was crucial, as it would shape not only the academic

content but also the overall experience of immersion in Jordanian life. After much deliberation, we opted for a fifty/fifty ratio. We understood that by adjusting these percentages, we would inevitably influence how much time the students spent outside of Amman and, more broadly, how deeply they would immerse themselves in the local environment. We saw classroom time as an essential opportunity for students to anchor themselves in the Arabic language—a foundational element for navigating both academic and social spaces during their time in Jordan. Through language study, students could begin to feel more like locals, gradually moving beyond the role of visitors or outsiders.

The classroom, in this context, was not just a place of learning in the traditional sense but a gateway into understanding Jordanian culture. Arabic language classes were strategically spread over the course of the students' three-week stay. The twenty hours of classroom instruction were deliberately designed to complement their experiences outside the classroom. This structure allowed students to practice their newly acquired language skills in real-world situations, engage with locals, and then return to class to reflect on and ask questions about what they had encountered. This dynamic approach was vital, as without such structured language learning, students might have defaulted to engaging with their environment in English, the language with which they were most comfortable, thus missing out on a crucial layer of the STSA program.

By placing an emphasis on purposeful engagement with Arabic, we sought to ensure that students connected more deeply with their surroundings and actively participated in the cultural landscape rather than simply observing it from a distance. Our pedagogical approach was grounded in the belief that the STSA program was not intended to be a mere contemporary cultural exchange—i.e., “I’m from the United States, and I am here to engage with Arabs from Jordan.” Instead, the program was designed to encourage students to move beyond this binary understanding of intercultural exchange. We wanted them to delve into intercultural questions that aligned with the curriculum laid out in the syllabus and to confront these questions through their fieldwork experiences. By visiting each field site, students were not just passively absorbing information; they were engaging in academic and scholarly pursuits, using the unique context of Jordan as a living classroom. In doing so, they were invited to participate in a deeper, more nuanced form of learning that challenged preconceived notions about culture, identity, and knowledge exchange.

As we noted in theme one, it was essential that the research question guiding the course remained at the forefront of our planning. However, we also had to remain attentive to the physical experience of the students participating in the program. Jordan’s climate, particularly during the summer months,

presented a distinct set of challenges. The heat could be intense, especially for students unaccustomed to such conditions, and many of our trips took place in areas where resting in the shade was not readily available. This raised a crucial concern: how do we balance the physical demands of the program with the intellectual and cultural demands? Accessibility was something we acknowledged in the initial course description, letting students know that a good deal of hiking was involved in the program but that we would help with access needs where possible. We asked students to be fully engaged with all elements of the program, understanding that this required significant effort on their part, both mentally and physically. In turn, we made it a priority to ensure that students could trust us to find moments of rest when necessary, allowing them to recover and be ready for the next phase of learning.

**PHOTO (1)**

GROUP MEAL PHOTO; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS



This balance between active participation and rest was not merely logistical; it was integral to the learning experience itself. In practice, this meant structuring days with alternating periods of intensive fieldwork and intentional downtime—for example, scheduling site visits in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid peak heat, building in mid-day breaks for rest and reflection, and limiting the number of physically demanding sites visited on consecutive days. We also created space for informal debriefing sessions, allowing students to process their experiences collectively before moving on to the next activity.

These choices were particularly important in sites such as Petra and Jerash, where extended walking and exposure to the elements could quickly lead to fatigue. By deliberately pacing the program in this way, we ensured that physical exhaustion did not eclipse intellectual engagement. Instead, students were able to remain present, reflective, and responsive to the environments they were encountering. In this sense, structuring the program around cycles of engagement and recovery was not simply a matter of logistics, but a pedagogical strategy that enabled students to sustain both critical inquiry and embodied participation throughout the program.

## 7. Critical moments in teaching

### 7.1. Heritage learners in STSA

In both iterations of the program, we had the opportunity to meet with Lana, a local Jordanian-Palestinian woman who graciously opened her home and shared dinner with us and her family. In 2024, the setting was particularly intimate as we gathered in her family home, where Lana engaged the students in thoughtful conversation, answering cultural questions with a mix of honesty and openness. She made it clear that while her experiences were uniquely her own, they were also deeply reflective of the village and community from which she comes. This personal nuance was vital in helping students challenge and reconsider preconceived notions they may have brought into the program, especially regarding the diverse roles of Muslim women in Jordan. One student reflected afterward that the conversation “complicated everything I thought I understood,” noting that Lana’s perspective did not align with the binaries they had previously encountered in academic or media representations.

Lana’s story was instrumental in breaking down binary perspectives, particularly those shaped by Western feminist frameworks, regarding what a Muslim woman in the Middle East “can” or “should” be. Her willingness to share her lived experience disrupted the, often monolithic, portrayal of women in the region, countering a prevalent Orientalist narrative and illustrating the complexity of identity, agency, and societal roles. Another student remarked that “it was the first time I realized how much I had been filling in gaps with assumptions,” pointing to the way Lana’s narrative unsettled prior expectations. During the discussion, several students asked follow-up questions that moved beyond general cultural assumptions and instead focused on specific aspects of Lana’s daily life, signaling a shift from abstract inquiry to grounded, relational engagement. As one student noted in a post-visit reflection, “the conversation felt less like learning about a place and more like being invited into someone’s world.” The conversation not only offered insights into her life but also served as a mirror, reflecting broader cultural dynamics within her community.

Moreover, Lana's views and experiences contrasted with those of some of the Muslim women in the diaspora who were part of the STSA program. These differences created a rich, multifaceted dialogue that allowed participants to see the range of lived experiences within the global Muslim community. In one exchange, a student from the diaspora reflected on points of both connection and divergence, prompting a group discussion about how cultural identity is shaped differently across contexts. This moment highlighted that no singular narrative can capture the complexity of identity when viewed through the lens of culture, gender, and religion.

In an interview with our guide, Bdour, we gained further insight into the challenges students face when studying in Jordan. When asked about the biggest obstacles for American students, he mentioned that the greatest challenge often arises for those who anticipate having the easiest time, specifically heritage students. According to Bdour, "the biggest challenge is facing the heritage students, actually, because they think they [already understand the culture due to their] heritage background." These students may arrive in Jordan with a sense of familiarity based on their own cultural connections, yet they quickly realize that truly integrating into Jordanian society requires a deeper, more nuanced understanding of its norms, habits, and customs.

Bdour's observations underscored the importance of approaching the experience with humility and an open mind, as even those with cultural ties to the region may find themselves navigating unexpected differences. His insight reinforced the idea that cultural immersion is not simply about recognition or surface-level familiarity; it's about engaging with the subtleties of daily life, traditions, and unspoken societal rules. The combination of Lana's personal narrative and Bdour's reflections on the challenges of cultural adaptation provided the students with invaluable lessons on the complexities of identity, belonging, and understanding in a global context.

## 7.2. Private in public: Safaitic inscriptions in the Badiya

A major change to our second iteration of the program was journeying to Al Azraq Lodge to spend the night so that students could experience time in the Badiya with Dr. Omar Al-Ghul. Four Master's students with whom he regularly works accompanied him and our group on this leg of the trip as his teaching assistants. Badiya is an Arabic word describing a desert whereas the word Sahra, which is a word many English-speakers may be aware of, also means desert, but the second word implies that the land is empty and nothing is happening there. Conversely, the word Badiya implies that the land is or was rife with people and cultivation. The Safaitic inscriptions found in the Badiya region of Jordan were created by ancient nomadic Arab tribes who lived in the region between roughly the 1st and 4th centuries BCE. Safaitic is a Semitic script,

closely related to other ancient Arabian scripts. The inscriptions were primarily written on rocks and often served as personal graffiti, detailing the lives, experiences, and concerns of the nomads. These short texts cover a wide range of topics, including religious dedications, descriptions of daily life, tribal affiliations, laments over lost loved ones, and prayers for rain or protection.

Our time in the Badiya is when students got to put their existing and newly acquired Arabic knowledge to the test. On our first day of the trip to the Badiya, we spent several hours with Dr. Al-Ghul and his students as they showed us pictures of Safaitic inscriptions that they had already read with a chart that showed a one-to-one between the Safaitic letters and Arabic letters. With this paper in hand, the students got to work reading the inscriptions with the help of Dr. Al-Ghul and his team. At first, the process was slow, but practice allowed the students to gain speed and confidence. By the end of the night, the students were less skeptical and more excited about our 4:30am departure time the next morning to drive into the Badiya. Our early departure time was meant to allow us time in the desert before the sun reached its highest and hottest point.

#### PHOTO (2)

DR. AL-SABER AND ONE OF DR. AL-GHUL'S RESEARCH ASSISTANTS WORKING ON DECODING INSCRIPTIONS; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS



The next day, our journey to the site took longer than anticipated because the inscriptions we were set to read were now blocked by a Bedouin

tribe that had recently moved into the site we had planned to visit. Instead, we drove to the next-closest site Dr. Al-Ghul had studied, adding another 90 minutes to our trip. Once we arrived, students split into groups, each led by a Master's student, took out their notebooks, and began to copy down inscriptions that they would read and interpret later. The excitement on their faces was contagious, and one student told me, "it feels like we are part of the layers of history here now."

**PHOTO (3)**

DR. AL-SABER AND DR. AL-GHUL IN THE BADIYA. INSCRIPTIONS CAN BE SEEN ON THE ROCKS IN THE FRONT RIGHT OF THE IMAGE



The journey to Al Azraq Lodge and the time spent in the Badiya with Dr. Al-Ghul and his team became a transformative experience for the students, offering them the chance to apply their linguistic skills and deepen their understanding of the region's rich history. Engaging directly with Safaitic inscriptions not only connected them to the ancient nomadic tribes who once inhabited the desert but also brought history to life in a way that transcended classroom learning. The challenges encountered along the way, such as navigating blocked sites and the early morning departures, added to the sense of adventure and immersion. By the end of the trip, students felt a profound connection to the landscape and its historical layers, gaining a tangible sense of how human culture, language, and history are interwoven in the Badiya.

### 7.3. TED Talk final assignment

The assignment at the end of the STSA program is for students to deliver a 5-10-minute TED Talk on a subject of their choosing. Professor Al-Saber introduces this assignment on the first day of the program, encouraging students to select a research question that not only ties into the themes explored throughout the course but also reflects their personal interests and curiosities. This assignment is designed to foster a sense of academic ownership, allowing students to delve into a topic that resonates with them. Over the course of the STSA program, students engage in independent research, guided by their chosen inquiry, which they continue to refine as they gain new insights from the program's curriculum and their own investigations. The project culminates on the final day when students present their findings to their peers in the form of a TED Talk-style visual presentation. These presentations become a showcase of both intellectual exploration and creativity, often sparking meaningful discussions among the group.

In previous years, students have explored a wide range of topics, such as “‘Little Manila’ in Jabal Amman,” “Meet the Hashemites,” “Bedouins and the Jordanian Government,” “Women Empowerment in Jordan,” “Roots and Routes: Palestinian Self-Identification in Jordan,” “The History of Churches in Jordan,” “Time, Space, and Storytelling in Kyoto, Japan & Amman, Jordan,” “Where to Walk: Sidewalks and Infrastructure from Past to Present,” “Perceptions of Queer and Trans Communities in Jordan,” “The Journey of Shepherds,” “The Amman Streetscape,” “Birth Control and Family Planning,” “Linking Past and Present: Vendors, Tourism, and Ancient Sites in Jordan,” and “Boycott.”

These topics reflect the wide range of interests students bring to the table and underscore the assignment's flexibility in accommodating diverse academic and personal perspectives. While this assignment can be used outside of STSA programs as well, it is particularly effective in enabling students to exercise agency over their experience, shifting from passive reception of knowledge to active production. For example, one student examining sidewalks and infrastructure traced the relationship between Roman urban planning in Jerash and contemporary pedestrian movement in Amman, using field observations, historical context, and spatial analysis to argue that uneven infrastructure reflects layered priorities of tourism, modernization, and accessibility. In another case, a student exploring Palestinian identity in Jordan combined interviews, site visits, and personal reflection to analyze how displacement and belonging are negotiated across generations, explicitly connecting their findings to broader discussions of diaspora and national identity. The talks are consistently deeply engaging, as they highlight students' ability to synthesize fieldwork, course concepts, and independent research into coherent arguments. Students leave the program with a sense of accomplishment, having developed

both analytical insight and practical skills in public speaking and visual storytelling. This final presentation functions as the capstone of the STSA program, bringing together diverse strands of learning into a coherent, personal, and critically engaged narrative.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the short-term study abroad program in Jordan has proven to be a dynamic and transformative educational experience for students. By engaging with the rich historical and cultural landscapes of Amman, Jerash, Petra, and the Badiya, students have developed a deeper understanding of the intersections between antiquity and modernity in the Middle East. The program's emphasis on immersive learning, critical engagement, and language acquisition allowed students to challenge their preconceptions and expand their perspectives, particularly regarding cultural identities and societal norms in Jordan. The incorporation of diverse pedagogical approaches, including fieldwork, Arabic language instruction, and interactions with local experts, enriched the students' experiences and fostered a greater sense of global citizenship.

Furthermore, the program's iterative design allowed for continuous improvement, as seen in the enhanced cohesion and focus of the second iteration. By centering the program on specific research questions and ensuring that every aspect of the curriculum tied into those themes, the program avoided the pitfalls of "touristic" study abroad, maintaining a clear academic purpose. This structure, combined with the unique experiences offered—such as working with Dr. Al-Ghul on Safaitic inscriptions—provided students with not just historical knowledge but a profound connection to the living culture and history of Jordan. Ultimately, this program serves as a model for how short-term study abroad can be thoughtfully curated to offer students meaningful, lasting insights into both the past and present, preparing them to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world.

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**Marina Johnson** recently graduated with her PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from Stanford University. Prior to Stanford, Johnson received her MFA in Directing and taught at Beloit College. Johnson’s scholarship has appeared in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, *Theatre/Practice*, *TDR*, *Theatre Topics*, *Arab Stages*, *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities*, *Decolonizing Dramaturgies*, and *Women’s Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance, Volume I*.

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