



## My experience studying abroad with SIT in Tunisia By Maureen McKamey, Drake University



I studied in Tunisia with SIT in the spring of 2009, and it was an unforgettable semester.

One of the reasons I was drawn to the SIT program, as compared to other study abroad programs, was the concentration on field study. I had friends who studied abroad through other providers, and while I am sure their experiences were interesting, they were basically learning in a university-like environment not dissimilar from their own college or university. The only difference was that they were across the world.

When I studied in Tunisia, we did have some classroom oriented learning, but the learning process went beyond that. The Emerging Identities in North Africa seminar is lecture based, and the language learning courses take place in a classroom setting, but these experiences were supplemented with a number of other methods of learning.

The excursions usually last about a week each and were one of my favorite aspects of the program. Tunisia is a geographically diverse country. The coastal areas are dotted with beaches and resorts, the northern part of the country is hilly and green, and once you get to the Sahara, there are a number of changing desert landscapes, from rocky plateaus to shaded palm oases to giant sand dunes.



The ISP is yet another unique part of the curriculum.

During the ISP period, students can continue living with their host families but also have the option of exploring other living situations. Some students from the spring 2009 program decided to move to a hostel in the Tunis medina while conducting their research. I chose to continue living with my host family for most of the time, but I also traveled and stayed in hotel accommodations in the south. The scheduled classes end during the ISP portion of the program, and students are free to study the topic of their choice.

My ISP was on the effects of the tourism industry on Tunisia's desert region, and I traveled to Tozeur, a southern Tunisian town in an oasis, to conduct a number of interviews there. You have a

lot of freedom, but also have the opportunity to check in with the program's academic director or other staff members for guidance or questions. ISP papers written by former students on the program are posted off of the coursework page on the SIT Tunisia program Web site.

In the Field Study Seminar, we would embark on mini excursions around Tunis in order to study various cultural aspects of the country. In one field study activity, we were split into small groups. My group went to a fish market in a Tunis suburb, another group went to a downtown food market, and a third group explored local bookstores. Upon our return, we talked about the things we had seen, read, or eaten. The field study course helps you improve your skills in interviewing, research, and observation and really helps you prepare for the Independent Study Project (ISP).

The field study portion of the curriculum continues during the excursions, as well. We got to attend a theater festival in El Kef, a town in the north surrounded by hills. We explored Hammamet, a touristy resort town, in order to determine what was real and what was fake (the most touristy places try to give visitors what they want to see, whether such experiences are true to Tunisian culture or not). We also attended a synagogue in Djerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia. All our experiences on the excursions were discussed at the end of the day over dinner.

The homestay experience is unforgettable. I lived in Sidi Bou Said, where the SIT headquarters are located, and all students live with families in the surrounding Tunis suburb area. I lived with my host mom and dad and an older brother and younger sister. I am still in contact with all of them, and they've become a second family to me. The families do everything they can to make sure you have an incredible time in Tunisia. You don't feel like a houseguest; they really bring you into their family. On the weekends, my family would take me on short trips, or to the beach, or downtown. My host brother and I were very close in age and he introduced me to his friends and would invite me out with them when they went out on the weekends. My little sister and I loved getting coffee at Coste, the cafe that sits underneath the SIT offices. With the exception of my sister, none of my family members spoke English, so my French and Arabic both improved a ton!



The SIT Tunisia program is as unique as the country itself. Tunisia has been influenced by a huge number of cultures. The first Tunisians were Berber, and there is still strong Berber influence (especially in the south) in the food and the architecture. The country has been under Punic control, and the ruins at Carthage are just a few train stops away from SIT. There is Arab influence, a giant Turkish style minaret in downtown Tunis left over from the Ottoman period, and French cafes and boutiques everywhere. There's an entire European quarter of Tunis, too. Pasta and bread are staples, not unlike other Mediterranean countries, so get ready to eat a lot of food! It's hard to throw Tunisia into a box, culturally, because it doesn't quite fit anywhere. That's one of the greatest things about the country. Because of Tunisia's strong European influences, a number of European countries have started investing there. A Saudi company owns a large shopping and apartment complex in Tunis. American business advisors are beginning to travel to Tunisia more frequently. There's even a Mexican restaurant downtown! Globalization is almost an understatement there.

The students in my semester had a number of different majors, including international relations, African Studies, journalism, and international business. Though I can't speak for everyone in my group, it seemed that most of us felt that the experience has helped us in our studies and careers. If you are at all interested in the Arab world, North Africa, effects of globalization, or Mediterranean

culture, the SIT Tunisia program could be an excellent fit. I can't recommend it enough. It is a truly incredible experience!

*To learn more about the SIT Tunisia program through the words of recent students, take advantage of the "Contact a Former Student" page on the SIT Web site:*

[http://www.sit.edu/studyabroad/as\\_contact\\_alum.cfm](http://www.sit.edu/studyabroad/as_contact_alum.cfm)