

My Quest for Arabic in Egypt

Yusuf Aziz

I started learning the Arabic Language in August last year. It was a personal and religious ambition to know Classical Arabic, so that I could access first hand the works of the greatest scholars in Islam and more importantly, I could understand the Qur'an first hand.

It was my desire to learn Arabic which also pushed me to read Theology at Cambridge since a major part of the course is that you can study a scriptural language. So my goal was clear and engraved in me. I knew from the very beginning though that this would be a long lifetime journey immersed in Arabic Literature, Dictionaries, tables and graphs and lastly and most gruesomely...Grammar.

I was advised by some of my friends and teachers in the UK to study as much as I can at home, to get a grasp over the language. Then travel abroad over the next few years as much as I can for intensive courses and immersion into Arabic. This sounded incredible, to spend all my time in Arabic?! That would be a dream come true. But I had never travelled abroad alone before, let alone for an extended stay.

Nevertheless I took the risk. Travel is a risk worth taking and for me to know Arabic is a prize worth striving for. Before I knew it I had planned two months of my summer away in Egypt. Flights booked, AirBnB booked and an Arabic Institute found. I was committed and more importantly, I was excited despite my first time butterflies. After having studied Arabic for a year now in the University of Cambridge, and having private lessons, I was now about to go the next step further. On the 29th of July I left Heathrow Airport and landed in the land of Arabic, none other than Cairo, Egypt. And my flight back was nearly two months away on the 25th September.

I settled in quickly and rushed to start revising the Arabic I had already learnt, with my first lesson days away. And this continued, Sunday to Thursday, five hours every morning and then homework across the evenings. Our lessons were focussed on speaking and reading and each day I was learning new vocabulary.

Despite falling sick four times, I still persisted in my studies. The pounding heat, the caution over the food and drinks (especially ice and fruits) and the poor sleep were all taking a toll on me and my studies. But after each time, a few days would pass and I would be back to full perseverance. Egypt still felt wonderful. I liked the weather, the cheap food and nice people, loads of cats and above all endless mosques. In the end, I was still a tourist.

I went and visited places across Egypt, from Old Cairo where I saw the current and historical focal point of Islamic scholarship with its ancient monuments all the way to New Cairo where I saw modern life and architecture. Both completely amazed me and so I took an incredible amount of pictures. Perhaps my favourite places were the mosques in Old Cairo, since I found numerous Arabic language students and endless bookstores with all an ancient feel especially when you brisk past the shelves. It was as if I was literally stepping into the past, rolling back the clock by several centuries.

I met some of my friends as well from Cambridge who also travelled to Egypt and we explored other areas across Cairo and ate loads of Syrian food. Who would've thought that Syrian food would be the best food in Egypt?! And with desserts and coffees being so cheap, who wouldn't be tempted every day?

Strangely even in Egypt I felt sometimes that I was still at home. After a few weeks the enjoyment and beauty of the country, coupled with my dedication to Arabic studies resulted in Egypt feeling like a second home. Even some of the locals started to recognise my face and ask about my studies both back in Cambridge and in Egypt. Each of them seemed so proud and honoured when they heard of my quest to learn Arabic and that I had chosen to travel to Egypt.

One man even invited me to eat lunch with his brother in the mosque. I thought it would be a nice experience so I stayed and ate with them the Egyptian national foods: "Koshary and Ta'miyyah with 'A'eesh". Honestly I don't think anyone on Earth could explain these foods without it sounding like a child's kitchen experiment. But it was surprisingly delicious. Koshary is a mix of rice, pasta, lentils, dried onions, chickpeas and tomato sauce. Ta'miyyah is a vegetable and lentil mash which is eaten with a round floury bread. But while the food was incredible, to no surprise I did fall sick. However that's just part of the experience, it's no fun travelling and exploring without a little risk.

Before I knew it my time was running out. My Arabic did improve as did my confidence in travelling. No more airport butterflies but instead a burning desire to go plan my next trip back to Egypt and other countries. While I actually missed the grey skies, rainy days and zebra crossings of England, I still extremely enjoyed the different life in Egypt. Its bustling roads, endless cats and incredible sunshine.

For anyone questioning whether they should travel to Egypt or elsewhere, you won't ever be certain until you've taken the risk and tried it once. And if you're questioning whether you're able to learn Arabic then the solution is simple. Try to do what you can at home and then take the leap just once and you will appreciate it immensely. You managed to learn English, I mean you've read and understood all this, hence you're clearly capable in the realm of languages. A little hope, a little risk and a whole lot of ambition.















