

How can I sum up ten of the most intriguing, confusing, exhilarating weeks of my life? International travel experiences are notoriously difficult to describe; ask a friend how their three months studying in Berlin or trekking in the Himalayas were and it is likely that you'll get a one word answer along the lines of "Great!" or "Amazing!" or "...fine." Living abroad is such a complex experience that one is likely to come out of it searching for a simple, catch-all description, whether they return bruised, elated, or indifferent. But because of their independent nature, a Dickey intern must deal with an added level of complexity—the personal initiative and passion that goes into a meaningful, productive term abroad.

My primary goal for my Dickey internship was to gain field experience in my two areas of specialization at Dartmouth—the Arabic language and Geographic Information Systems (GIS)—while getting my feet wet in the world of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I realize now that this was a rather idealistic set of goals, considering my country of choice and my timeframe. Yet my time spent in Morocco with the High Atlas Foundation ([www.hihatlasfoundation.org](http://www.hihatlasfoundation.org)) has become an excellent starting point for me to consider my future options and goals.

When I first contacted the High Atlas Foundation (the HAF), they seemed a little unsure about taking on an intern, since it would be their first time doing so. After discussing my interests and skills with the president of the HAF and their Marrakech-based project manager, however, they became very enthusiastic about integrating my knowledge of GIS into their operations. They, along with most of Morocco, it seems, didn't know quite what GIS was, but they were excited to use it. I agreed to join them as a field assistant and GIS consultant for their projects around Marrakech, an ancient city in southern Morocco I can only describe in loving terms as absolutely, positively insane. The agreement as I understood it was that I would spend half the time in the field, working to GIS-ify their current projects, and half the time in Marrakech, building the maps and working on other projects. I was ecstatic about getting to split my time between hot, crowded Marrakech and the picturesque snow-capped High Atlas mountains which loom over it to the south. My belief at the time, which has been largely confirmed by my experience, was that social and agricultural developments in the rural areas of Morocco positively affect the whole country. Improving the lives of Morocco's most disadvantaged populations decreases rural migration to cities already bursting at the seams with shantytowns, and allows traditional ways of life to continue.

As mentioned, my first goal was to continue my Arabic studies. This is not as straightforward as it sounds, because although Morocco is an "Arabic state," neither it nor any other country in the world actually speaks the Standard Arabic that I have been studying at Dartmouth for three years. That Arabic is the international language of the Qur'an, preserved through religious and academic discourse and only heard on a day-to-day basis in mosques and on TV and radio shows. I had to decide—should I go far out of my way to program sporadic Standard Arabic lessons, or should I concentrate on the vastly-different Moroccan dialect spoken everyday all around me, of which I could only pick out an occasional word? Since I would be working with Moroccans, for Moroccans, it made sense to focus on the latter. Much to the amusement of everyone around me, I kept my Standard Arabic up to par by going through stacks of illustrated children's books and regularly translating newspaper headlines. But how to learn a spoken language, never written down and proclaimed by most Moroccans to have no grammatical rules?

My first step was to move into an apartment with two Moroccan men my age, both trying to make it in Marrakech. Mohamed and Kamal became my invaluable cultural translators and my brothers. We met almost by chance, and within a few days were cooking Moroccan meals together in our new roof-top apartment in the newer Daoudiate district of Marrakech. When we weren't cooking, we would go out for delicious dirt-cheap meals all over the old and new parts of the city. Waiters and cooks were my second group of language teachers, and shop keepers were my third. Meeting an American interested in learning the Moroccan dialect was almost always a shock to people, and therefore it was easy to strike up conversations from which I could learn a few new words, usually with the aid of French or improvised sign language.

My second major linguistic challenge came during my transition to field work. As it turns out, no one in the areas where the HAF works speaks even the colloquial, Moroccan dialect of Arabic! In the mountains where our projects were, everyone speaks Tashilhait, one of Morocco's four dialects of Berber, the language of the indigenous, non-Arab people. Like me, many of them speak broken Arabic, but it was nearly impossible to figure out when they were using Arabic words I hadn't yet learned and when they were substituting Tashilhait for words *they* hadn't learned. I soon grudgingly began a rather futile study of Tashilhait, and by the end of my time in the mountains I was able to talk a bit about food, family, pets, water pipeline systems, and dangerous erosion.

My GIS work was similarly scattered. The only things you need to perform good GIS work are good software, good maps, and good data. The HAF was enthusiastic about GIS, so they happily purchased the necessary software, yet due to the Moroccan mail system, it took a month and a half to come. I was promised from the beginning good base maps of the study area, which I could digitize and then use with our data. Yet the only available maps were at the scale of 1:100,000; impossibly large when working with such small villages. Thus began an incredibly frustrating two month long period spent ricocheting between what felt like every single government agency in Marrakech and Rabat, searching for the perfect map that everyone swore existed but no one could lay their hands on. In the final week of my internship, our search at last yielded a map of better quality, but with more than half the towns mislabeled. As for data, most of it was collected in heavy rain with a hand-held GPS device, and, due to the non-existence of an essential cable, painstakingly entered into a computer (when there was power) entry by entry. With very little GIS work actually being done in the country, next-to-nothing exists in the way of useful data for rural areas. The Water and Forest Agency swears they had floppy disks (?) full of GIS data, but they got accidentally thrown out during an office move.

The transition from taking GIS classes at Dartmouth to actually giving GIS advice and designing GIS projects was a challenging one as well. To understand how to integrate GIS into the HAF's projects required a thorough academic foray into the niche research on the combination of GIS and Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is the form of community consensus-building and planning on which the HAF's programs are based. For the first time in my life, and more strongly than in any class I've taken, I found myself deeply engrossed in a highly specialized academic niche where I actually could actually see real-life implications of my studies. I also began learning about the managerial procedures used for designing projects and writing proposals, and the result of my work was three GIS project proposals: one which combines maps with multimedia to be used for donor-feedback and fundraising, one participatory mapping project to be used in community meetings, and one social geodatabase to collect, compare, and monitor spatial demographic data over time.

There is much work still to be done on these projects—many more data-points to be recording, hours of interviews to be translated (from Tashilhait), survey data to be collected, and meetings to be held using PAR and GIS. Hopefully I have helped to lay the necessary framework for GIS usage to become an integral part of the HAF's operations, and I have been invited to stay on board to help them with their data collection and analyzing. The academic aspect of my time in Morocco was probably the most surprising inspiration I received the whole time—I'm now considering things like thesis writing and graduate school, concepts that were far-fetched prior to my internship.

The third goal of my internship was to gain experience with an international NGO. After my internship, this is possibly the center of my most complex feelings. First of all, after witnessing numerous PAR meetings where I saw difficult issues discussed for the first time as a community and community consensus being built, I have an overwhelming sense of respect for PAR work. I'm convinced that it is the only way for an NGO to function for the good of the people, especially in regions with complex ethnic make-ups and cultural traditions. Seeing the joy of villagers eating locally grown apples or using clean, reliable drinking water for the first time assured me that the goals of the HAF were being met and that our projects were useful and beneficial. Furthermore, working directly dynamic, inspiring people like HAF project manager Abderrahim was a powerful experience. Yet despite all this, it is incredibly difficult for the HAF to get any work done. This is due to the mindset of the people they aim to help, the unending stubbornness of the local and regional bureaucracy, the extreme harshness of the geography, and the HAF's own problematic structure. It makes for a difficult debate over whether or not it's worth it all to work in such an area.

I'm sure I could tell a dozen stories detailing any of the above topics: Months of preparation derailed by a mean, incompetent official. The impossibility of a conservative, stubborn, rural people ever whole-heartedly accepting the help of an American-directed NGO. The difficulty of navigating wide-spread corruption, shady business practices, unreliable hired help, bureaucratic incompetence, and horrible roads to try to provide highly marginalized populations with much-needed goods. The long, terrifying rides on these mountain roads, 18 people packed into a curtained 1980s Astro-van, an illegal form of transit but the only way to arrive in less than a day's travel. A charitable organization so short on time and resources that it doesn't have the time to organize the resources it has. On that note, I was shocked one day to realize that in terms of time, I was the HAF's most dedicated employee. Everyone else worked another job or even two; the HAF was a side project or part-time job. Even Abderrahim, the most important person on the ground, was balancing his time between the HAF, and his PhD.

Morocco is the most difficult, confusing place in which I've spent time, and, in all my traveling, my first doses of true culture shock were delivered this winter. I can sum them up in one word: waiting. Abderrahim had to wait for authorization and materials for our projects, we waited together for transit to the field, and I waited for Abderrahim, since so much of my work relied on his knowledge and input. Each step could take hours, days, or weeks, and we had to be ready to leave at any moment. Yet we couldn't leave Marrakesh until everything was in place, and we were stuck in the most remote valleys of the highest mountains in northern Africa for days at a time whenever it rained, because all the roads washed out and people died traveling and repairing them. The inefficiency of doing work in Morocco (and any other developing country, I imagine) can be mind-boggling.

Though I spent much of the winter frustrated about the state of the HAF's projects as well as my own, I am proud of the work they do for the improvement of Morocco and the work I did

to improve and enhance their mission. I feel I have earned my critical perspective on NGOs working in developing countries, and have come to empathize with one which does work I care about and respect. Working with them in the future should continue to inform my understanding of NGOs, but I'm not sure if it is a path I will continue down in the future. The personal and academic growth I experienced last term in Morocco was unlike any other period of my life, and I'm deeply grateful to the Dickey Center for making this immersion opportunity possible. All in all, I'd describe this term as "complicated," but a wonderful experience worth every minute.