

# Two Months in Egypt

## The Only Constant is Change

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Today, while waiting in line for the bathroom at Starbucks, I watched a young woman emerge from the stall in a huff, agitated at the lack of toilet paper. Five days ago, I sat on a busy dirt road eating a falafel sandwich from a sheet of newspaper. People, cars and donkeys heaved by in masses. Traces of exhaust and cumin hung in the air. Truck horns honked at people who would not or could not move out of the way; the only way to go was into more hopeful salesmen and savvy bargainers, more cars and more colossal quadrupeds. Bicyclists whizzed by with cosmic-size trays of pita on their heads. Stray cats scurried into corners. Crafts vendors, dress vendors, lingerie vendors and hijab vendors all shouted welcome simultaneously, in a combination of English and Arabic—for some reason, I was still being welcomed after two months. I watched a fly land on my falafel. I flicked it off and savored my last bite. My last day in the market. Comforting chaos. Egypt.

Once upon a time, little nuisances like a lack of toilet paper or a misguided fly landing on my falafel would have irked me. There was a time when I probably would have refused to eat the fly-fondled falafel. That was before Egypt. After having spent two months there this summer, my biggest surprise was how much I began to overlook little “inconveniences,” and how I grew as a result.



*Photo taken by Tracy Neiman I*

My journey began in the Hunter College cafeteria. I had found out from a friend about the Critical Language Scholarship, “part of a wider U.S. government effort to dramatically expand the number of Americans studying and mastering critical-needs languages,” through which, each year, over 500 American students receive full funding from the U.S. Department of State in partnership with the Council of American Overseas Researchers, to go abroad and study languages such as Azerbaijani, Arabic, Bangla/Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Turkish and Urdu, and, since 2007, Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Russian. The program exists under the umbrella of the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). Having always wanted to learn Arabic, I jumped at the chance to do so, and immediately started working on my application.

At the time my friend told me about the program—with only about two weeks left before the application was due—Egypt seemed like a distant dream. Four months later, however, I opened my email to find a congratulatory message from the Department of State, and the dream started

to become real. Even then, I could not begin to imagine that soon, Cairo, Egypt would literally become my second home.

On June 14<sup>th</sup>, after over 12 hours of traveling, we circled over my soon-to-be residence: a sea of satellites and smog, minarets and markets, ancient pyramids and concrete skyscrapers, dust and jasmine. As soon as we landed, I could feel my transformation beginning.

As a Brooklynite surrounded by diversity, I am used to feeling foreign in my own home, so Cairo began to feel familiar once I was grounded into a daily routine of waking up at dawn, sitting through six hours of Arabic, exploring Egypt in the evenings before crashing at night and waiting for it to begin all over again the following day.



*Photo taken by Tracy Neiman 2*

I didn't just study Arabic and explore Egypt, though. Every day, as I discovered something new about the "City of a Thousand Minarets," I also discovered something new about myself. With every new adventure, I inhaled independence. It was an imposing, all-encompassing independence that I had never before felt, even after I left home for college. This independence was fueled as I gained proficiency at navigating both Cairo's labyrinth streets and its complex cultures.

Further, what would have been trivial back home became fundamental. I spent days learning how to pick out the perfect Egyptian mango and then savoring its sweet juices. I learned to direct taxis in Arabic—and successfully haggle with the drivers. I became a moving target on a daily basis as I crossed the frenetic Cairo streets. I struggled to purchase train tickets to Alexandria with a combination of Arabic and desperate pantomiming. I discussed Barack Obama with market salesmen. I sipped hot tea on hot days, offered to me by Cairean vendors as I browsed through market shops, as per Egyptian tradition. I thrust my head out my window and gawked at the view of the Nile from my hotel room. Cairo. Some warned me that it was a rough city, and hard to adjust to. I, however, was enchanted.

None of this was truly momentous and yet all of it was: each street crossed, each mango selected, each falafel I ordered from a street cart, every time I gazed out the window at the magnificent river that gave life to Egypt. I began to understand Egypt on a personal level, to get its pace, feverish and unhurried at once. Understanding Egypt's complex history, in which the only constant has been change, was another story. But, I know I've come one step closer just by being able to empathize with an all-too-often misunderstood people, to talk with them, eat with them, exchange stories with them, to ask them questions and answer theirs. I do not have all of the answers, but this much I know: *in'shallah*, I will be returning.

*For more information about the Critical Language Scholarship, log on to <https://clscholarship.org>.*