

IAESTE Experience Report

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Tabea Gallusser from University of Basel

Why this traineeship and the most interesting encounters

In summer 2015 I spend some time in Bergen for an amazing IAESTE internship. I got a wonderful Persian neighbour called Ella. She and I had many interesting discussions about different cultures and prejudices. This is when I got curious to someday visiting Iran. In the last year of my master program, I found the offer to work at University of Teheran. Shortly after getting there I fell in love with the Iranian people, their colourful cities, art all over their new and old buildings and their diverse landscapes. Iranians are very friendly, caring and they are all curious about why you come to their country, where you are from and what you think about Iran. There is a huge difference between the attitude of the government, what our European media tells us about Iran and how most Iranians live their life. Therefore, I cannot choose one encounter but all Iranian people I met. The ones who showed me around Teheran and introduced me to the Persian kitchen (Picture 1). With some I got further insight by talking about how and why many young Iranians like to leave this country. A girl from the park, took me to a yoga class, an amazing Sama dancing workshop, rock climbing and even to a camping trip. A friend's friend was my passionate guide in Shiraz. A widely travelled dervish got me thinking about the world and the very end. A young couple told me how to get the best saffron. Many friends' families invited us to their homes. The most sentence I heard from strangers was "welcome to Iran", right after the question if I could be in a picture with them for Instagram.



Picture 1 First saffron-pistachio ice cream and the delicious Sharbat-e Khakshir Nabat.

Most valuable experience at University of Teheran

The second I came to the biology lab of my Professor I felt welcome. Around noon we got together in the lunchroom to share our meal, no one would leave the table before everyone finished his plate (Picture 2). I got the task to do some research on the distribution and the associated biota of mangrove forests in the Persian Gulf. I learned a lot by reading papers, but I was looking forward to do some practical work, visit the cooperating research group at another University or even go sampling in the field. Due to some misunderstanding between me and the Prof, I stayed down in the lab fighting with the internet connection until the end of my internship. What I learned is the importance to clearly communicate feelings and wishes with co-workers and supervisors, as they do not know what you think. I still enjoyed the time in the lab. I was fed with wonderful traditional snacks and black tea by my co-workers. Others taught me Farsi and how to behave in public or showed me what to see in Iran.



Picture 2 My lab family at the lunch table

Cultural differences and the most difficult thing to get used to

The thing what challenged me most was the Hijab. The dress code you had to follow in the Islamic republic of Iran (Picture 3). With the help of IAESTE mentor and the instagram #iranianstreetstyle I sorted out a way to dress. Following the rules of covering most of my hair and neck with a scarf, which gives you one more item as normal to match with the outfit. Therefore, big respect to all girls in Iran managing to look so fashionable. Arms and legs should be covered loosely, what I managed by bringing my mother's clothes. The hole outfit should cover the buttocks twice. At least on the feet you can show as much skin as you like. As a foreigner small violation of Hijab are tolerated. Nevertheless, on my last day, as I was walking back from the bazaar, a girl ran behind me and as she caught up, she was out of breath. Truly worried, she talked in Farsi but after my well-practiced "nah Farsi, nah Farsi!", she switched to English. She told me, my manteaux would not cover my buttocks, everyone could see my jeans! I was amused by her caring about my safety. I got my manteaux into the right position and went on. After the problem with clothes, greeting other people was my second challenge, I never knew whether to shake hands or do the "right-hand-on-your-heart" gesture or even hug people. Theoretically men are not allowed to touch women. Religious and old men would not offer the hand, but handshake in general was the most common and with close friends we even hugged (not on the streets of course).



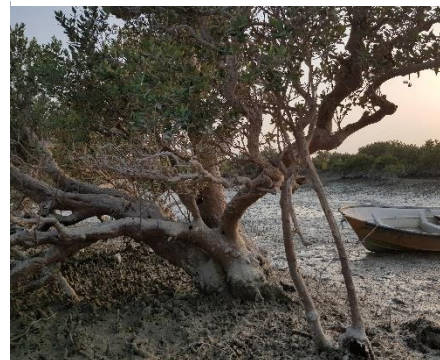
Picture 3 Me properly dressed in front of the beautiful entrance of Niavaran Palace.

IAESTE the advantages of doing an internship

Before my departure I contacted the local IAESTE office, who already helped me preparing my stay and handle the complicated procedure of getting my visa. The international food day was great. Almost all trainees were there presenting local dishes. We got to know not only different tasted but also all the other members and international trainees. I decided to prepare a traditional swiss "Birchermüesli" as the dormitory had no oven, nor found I cheese. All local IAESTE members were so helpful, especially my mentor Behnam. Being in a country with laws you are not familiar with and with letters you cannot read; you depend on kind and patient locals. We would often gather at a café. We needed them to read the menu in order to explore more delicious Iranian dishes, to solve problems, to get the visa extended and to practise some Farsi, the Iranian language. One special weekend was organized by one polish intern. It was a trip to Kashan and an overnight stay in the desert (Picture 4). With a German trainee and thanks to some good addresses to stay, we travelled all the way to the Persian Gulf to see my object of studies, the impressive mangrove forest on Queshm (Picture 5). Together with my colleagues from work I visited their families in the north where we went to see the "Jungle" and swim fully dressed in the Caspian Sea. Another colleague invited me to Esfahan. I think I got closer to peoples' life as an IAESTE trainee compared to a simple tourist. I am thankful for all the experiences I made during my internship, all the precious experiences I made and the people I met that widened my horizon once more.



Picture 5 Maranjab Desert near Kashan our camp site for one night.



Picture 4 Harra mangroves on Queshm island.