

My Internship in Tunisia

My name is Michelle and I am a food science student from Zurich, Switzerland. My specialization is in nutrition, health and environment and I graduated in spring 2022 from ETH Zurich. I decided to take a new challenge and go abroad to work over the summer with IAESTE Switzerland in a totally different environment before starting to work in September.

One of the internship descriptions from Tunisia caught my attention. It was from H-CORP and described an internship in the fields of food or agriculture science. As the description of the project I would be working on was kept to a minimum, I decided to jump into the “cold water” and take the challenge. I barely knew anything about Tunisia or its culture. I didn’t know what would await me during my stay – so the adventure started as I applied for the internship.

I was accepted within two weeks. The process was a lot faster than I expected it to be. I was also surprised that I didn’t have an interview before being accepted. This was two months before my internship started and I had enough time to organize myself before coming to Tunisia.

My adventure started on the 30th of May. I was coming two days earlier to Tunisia before my actual work started. I was very excited because, as I already said, I did not know what to expect. As I am Swiss and we are known for “everything is in place, clean and works fine”, I had a slight cultural shock when I arrived. Or in other words: the streets are dirty and smell, there are a lot of stray cats, crossing the streets is an adventure, and using the public transport system is an experience and sometimes dangerous as well.

All intern coming to Tunisia live in the same place. Being in a building with 40 other students is cool, but sometimes also challenging. At top times, we were seven girls in one tiny apartment with one bathroom and one kitchen. I shared my room with two other roommates. The facilities were very old and broke sometimes, but IAESTE Tunisia always managed to fix them. Overall, we had a very fun time together and there was always something going on in case you were bored. The headquarter (“HQ”) was an apartment above ours and basically the center of the building. We met there, sang karaoke, had good talks, and long dance and party nights.



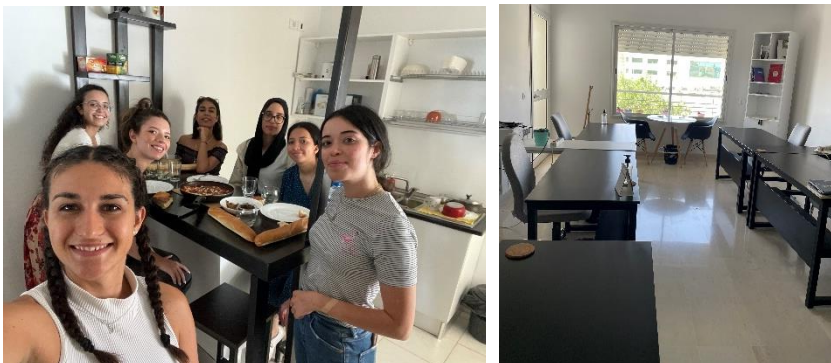
From left to right: “our” building, the kitchen with two of my roommates, and a movie night in the HQ with most of the students.

Work experience

My first day was on the 1st of June. I was a little surprised because I had not received any information about the time I had to be at the office. When I was prepared in the morning and ready to go with a member of IAESTE, he received a call and was informed that everyone is working remotely on that day and that my first day of work was postponed to the day after. This was a funny experience to me as this would never happen in Switzerland and fun fact, I was not the only one that thing happened to. Welcome to Tunisia.

The next day, my official first day had arrived. The location of H-CORP was in Lac2, which counts to the richer part of Tunis. It was a completely new picture for me as I was living in La Goulette, a place close to the coast and a little “shady”. I was surprised and also happy about that all my coworkers were in my age. I felt comfortable from the first second on and I knew we were going to have a great time together.

H-CORP is a consulting firm focused on human-centered social innovations, which means that they are working on projects to improve environmental and human health. I realized quickly that things work here completely different compared to my home country Switzerland. There was no laboratory nor was my project about moss as described. I was given a few tasks over my 8-week internship and a lot of free time, which was not necessarily bad. But I expected something else before I came – let’s say, I learned more of a life lesson than work experience.



From left to right: my team at work and the office.

The country

There is almost nothing in Tunisia being comparable to Switzerland. The religion, the weather, the people, the food, the streets, the taxis... I don’t even know where to start. I had never woken up due to the prayers of the mosque at 3AM. I never had to fight with a taxi driver before because he took a longer way, or even take the taxi to do groceries. I had never went to a thrift shop and bought clothes for 1 Swiss franc before (heaven!). And I never met so many people and made so many friendships in such a short time.

Something I really didn’t like about Tunisia was the food. I was struggling with it since I don’t like too spicy food. And believe me, street food is ALWAYS spicy, fried and fatty. I was lucky that I eat meat because for vegetarians it was hard to find any “good” food unless you cooked at home. The good thing is that the general life is very cheap (unless you want to do

things and make trips). It is little more expensive, meaning the money we received at work was not enough to pay for it. I earned 450 TND per month, which are 150 Swiss francs. I would estimate the costs for a good life around 600 – 800 TND.

However, the trips were the best parts of the summer. We went every Saturday somewhere. For example, we did scuba diving, international cooking, visited beautiful beaches, discovered La medina (=old town), went to bars (yes they exist in Tunisia!), played soccer, went to an adventure parc, did a traditional hamam and and and. The biggest trip in the summer is the so called South Trip, which is a 5-day-trip though the South of Tunisia. Some trips were more relaxing, others full of adventure and joy. We always travelled with a school bus which prepared me for any upcoming road trip (and flat tire...twice on one trip). My personal highlight is probably the South Trip, where we rode quads, camels and horses in the desert, drove like crazy through endless landscapes, took a bath under a waterfall in an oasis, and saw the most beautiful sunsets I had ever seen.



Impressions of the South Trip.



From left to right: soccer night, a street in La medina, and the scuba diving trip.

Even though those 8 weeks were not always easy for me, I am very glad having taken the challenge and participated in the IAESTE Tunisia program 2022. I learned a lot about new cultures and also myself, and gained new friends and life experience that will accompany me on my way.