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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

I can't believe I got to see Africa!

Summary: You may recall seeing the classic "Road to..." films, starring Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour. This summer 12 UMM students took one of those roads "...to Morocco." They will not be quite the same for their experience.

(August 17, 2006)-Those who check the "40+" bracket on insurance forms may recall seeing the classic "Road to..." films, starring Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour. This summer 12 University of Minnesota, Morris students took one of those roads "...to Morocco." They will not be quite the same for their experience.

"I walked into Morocco knowing little about what I was getting myself into, knowing little about the country. I left with a greater understanding of another way of life by experiencing an immersion you cannot experience by reading about a country in book or watching a movie," said Kate Borman, Crystal.

Rebecca Oman, Duluth: "Going to Morocco taught me that I can go anywhere and do anything I want as long as I have the will to do it, and UMM will help me get there."

The trip was made possible by Study Abroad through the UMM Center for International Programs. UMM faculty member Sarah Buchanan, French, along with Buchanan's husband, Eric, children and her parents, who paid for the trip at their own expense, accompanied the students. Buchanan had made a preliminary trip to the area, traveling with a group from St. Thomas, to determine the logistics.

Why travel to Morocco? Buchanan, who taught the Study Abroad course, titled Morocco, History, Story, Myths, sees Morocco, located in the northwest corner of Africa, as a country of intersections.

"It's a tolerant place," said Buchanan. "Arabs, Jews, Christians, The Imazighn (commonly known as the Berbers), Spaniards, the French, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans – all have a long history of living together there. The king is Muslim, which is the official religion of Morocco. But the Muslims in Morocco are extremely accepting of other religions. It's a study of the way in which the world has been intercultural. We can learn a lot from them."

The students, whose academic majors ranged from French to biology to art history to English, read three novels and several articles about Moroccan culture while they were there. "The country's national identity is a story: we studied folk tales and history, of course. But we also examined how the processes of creating the symbols in a carpet, of throwing ceramic pots, of weaving a carpet on a loom, and of singing and dancing are other ways of telling stories that are steeped in myth and symbolism," added Buchanan.

"I learned many things on this trip, and most of it was not even on the class objective," said Oman. "Of course I learned about the myths, stories, and history of Morocco but I also learned more valuable things like working together as a group, accepting other cultures and ways of life, and most importantly, honing my French skills in a French-speaking country and not just in the classroom."

They visited all of the imperial cities (cities in which past dynasties had lived). They rode camels and sat in Rick's Café, which, although not a historical part of the real Casablanca, was made famous in the movie of the same name. Seeing how the film "Casablanca" invented an imaginary piano bar, which subsequently became a real one, was an intentional part of the course. "I wanted the students to see how fiction can create reality, just as much as reality creates fiction," stated Buchanan. They traveled in the religious, intellectual and artistic capital, Fez, where they visited a higher education institution, ALIF (The Arabic Language Institute of Fez), and saw the old medina, a UNESCO World Heritage site. They attended lectures and heard native music. Primarily, however, they learned what one cannot learn in a classroom.

"An undergraduate education teaches us about ourselves, our own country and the world, but can only do so imperfectly in a classroom," said Buchanan. "It is vital for students to travel to places where their world views are challenged, so that we can really solidify who we are and what we believe. I hope this trip helped all of the participants to think about who we are as Americans and human beings, how we relate to other people and to other countries."

Caitlin G Siefkes, a UMM junior from Coon Rapids, agreed. "I had this romanticized idea of 'Eastern culture,' based upon old racist paintings and movies I had seen. I knew that things like that weren't accurate, but I had absolutely nothing else to base my ideas on, so I guess that was the only kind of image I had in my head. I think this trip is the perfect example of how important travel is it helps erase stereotypes and prejudices."

"I have always thought of myself as someone who thinks globally and worries about other people," said Nathan Hilfiker, a UMM alumnus ('06) from Northfield, "but these trips through UMM have made me realize there is much more out there than you could ever imagine. It really opens your eyes."

"I learned that the people of Morocco are very generous and open minded, that a lot of the American people's beliefs about what being a Muslim means is wrong, not all Muslims are extremists [who] hate Americans," said Melinda Voigt. "I have to admit that, although I have traveled to places like Germany and Switzerland, I have never been further away from what I am used to than when I was in Africa. But I have also never had as many memorable and wonderful experiences. I can't believe I got to see Africa!"

One memory especially stands out for everyone: The days spent during a flood in the Sahara Desert. Yes, flood. Yes, Sahara Desert. The group had crossed the Sahara and was tenting on the sand. Late in the evening, the ominous clouds made it clear that a storm was about to break, so the group gathered their belongings and followed their guide, Abdou Fettah Khelifi, to a nearby inn where they ate dinner and enjoyed some Gnawa music. It poured first rain, then hail. The group stayed in the inn until water began streaming down the walls of the mud and straw structure and they were told by the guides to evacuate the building. They escaped the inn and spent the night packed in Land Rovers, but safe from the elements. Their guides had communicated by cell phones and learned that another inn had collapsed nearby, resulting in a few deaths, and that the inn the group had evacuated was downstream from a swiftly approaching flash flood. Later, the group learned that, in the Sahara Desert, the storm was comparative to Hurricane Katrina. The King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, had been summoned to the area to assess the storm damage. The group credits their guides for keeping them safe and handling the situation expertly.

"Although staying in the desert was a frightening event, it taught me a lot of things," said Oman. The Moroccan people who were staying out there with us that night, including our leader/guide Abdou Fettah (who after the desert experience became known as Papa Fettah) showed a great example of selflessness and kindness. While we were sitting in Land Rovers, they stayed out in the cold and rain because there wasn't enough room in the vehicles. When I woke up at sunrise, I saw a few men sleeping on the sand dunes with only a sopping wet blanket covering them."

To learn more about Study Abroad opportunities at UMM, visit <http://www.morris.umn.edu/cerp/abroad/>.

Photo: Becky Oman, Jennifer Buchanan, Jacob Croonenberghs try their hand at camel-riding.

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