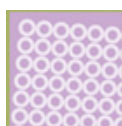




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THE PANTRY

It was a very cloudy, damp day and it was about to get very rainy. Our guides for the day, The Abraham Path Initiative's Theo Van de Laar and Experience Jordan's Ayman Abdel Kareem, Ahlam Serhan and Jawad Abu Rumman eyed the group of youngsters standing before them. In particular, they eyed their lightweight sweatshirts and pink cowgirl boots.

"Did any of you bring more layers? Or maybe hiking shoes?" Blank stares and some giggles followed. Only Adam Hellack (Year Seven), the youngest and definitely the chattiest of the group, seemed prepared for the inclement weather. On this wet, early winter day, I had the pleasure of accompanying a small group of students from the ICS on a trip to 'Ajloun. Each of these students wrote a winning piece for the school's "What's Your Story?" writing contest (see page 93 for the winning stories and poems). The entries had to convey a personal and important moment. The formats ranged from poetry to short story to essay and the experiences covered a vast terrain of memories, feelings and reflections written by a group of preteens between Years Seven and 11 hailing from the United States, India, Kenya, Britain, Libya, Malaysia and Jordan. Stories, explains James Goodman, ICS's Community Service Coordinator, are at the heart of the trip's purpose. He envisioned a trip that would allow for an exchange of stories between our young writers and the local residents of the villages Orjan and Rasoun, hoping that the exchange would itself provide inspiration for future stories.

As we approached 'Ajloun and then the village of Orjan, our first destination, everyone wakes up. "It's so green!" someone cries out. Our surroundings had markedly changed since we departed from West Amman. The intense green of the surroundings, shrouded in low-hanging mists and dissipating drizzle, were unlike anything many of the students and several of the adults, myself included, had yet to experience in Jordan.

### Orjan

During our tour across the two villages, which included a pretty significant walk once the weather cleared, we visited the Orjan Soap House, founded under patronage from the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and the European Union. During this tour, Rima took us through the soap-making process, allowing the kids to sniff around, literally, and explore the different phases and various locally grown ingredients involved, including olive oil, rosemary, lavender, sage, geranium and mint. She also described the different types of products that the five local female employees produce. While initially trained to make six different types of soap, she explained proudly, today the Soap House offers 23 different products, all using local ingredients and all developed by the staff themselves. "Can you make a strawberry soap?!" Exclaims Adam to surrounding giggles and interest. High school and middle schoolers don't quite understand why you'd want ingredients that soften, smooth and tighten your skin.

Rima also explains to the group how she had previously been a homemaker, taking care of her children. When she graduated, she explains, local culture did not accept the idea of women leaving the house and working, perhaps interacting with strangers. When RSCN announced it was interested in developing a local project that women could benefit from, she decided to go for it, along with 40 other women. Of the seven accepted applicants, she was chosen to be manager! When asked how her life changed, she chuckles. "For one thing, I learned other languages!" What's more, she continues, the work "allowed me to learn how to interact with other types of people from different cultures, which in turn changed me as a person." And, of course, she finishes, "It's income." "She's inspiring," says Nada Hamed (Year Nine), reflecting on Rima's speech. "All the doors that were closed are now opening."

### Rasoun

We next travel to Rasoun and meet with the local Mukhtar (head of the neighbourhood) in his diwan (official council chamber). The Mukhtar narrates (in Arabic, with translation provided for all the non-Arabic speaking students and staff by the very hard-working Jawad) the history of Rasoun. He points out its geographical advantages (water and fertile land) and also talks about the long history of social cooperation and connection. Yet, his story is also one of change. He discusses the ways that population growth has affected local customs and daily life. In the 1950s, Rasoun's population reached about 50 people. Today, it stands around 7,500. Formerly self-sustaining household production where families grew their own food, has given way to farther flung employment and markets have replaced gardens and small scale animal husbandry. Perhaps most interesting for the students, as well as for the adults presents, is the Mukhtar himself. The students ask him many questions, basic yet also fundamental, about his role in the local society. Later on the bus, the group tells me that the idea of conflict being solved at a local level, without intervention from

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tells me that the idea of conflict being solved at a local level, without intervention from police or military, is both shocking and impressive. “There’s probably a problem... once in a blue moon!” marvels Nada.

### **The Biscuit House**

The visit to the Mukthar’s Diwan was followed by a trip to the Biscuit House, which includes a workshop, café and Bed and Breakfast. Formerly an RSCN project, this initiative now is completely owned by local women. We get to hear about the local products being made and meet some of the youngest and most raucous members of the staff (the several young children who were getting out of school at the time and going to greet their mothers while possibly sneaking snacks). Our host at the Biscuit House echoes Rima’s thoughts, explaining that their work – going on six years now – allowed them to meet new people from different places and that, fundamentally, it provided much-needed income.

### **Exchanging stories**

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