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5 Countries in 49 Days IWU Biology Major Recounts Trip of a Lifetime: Coping with 6 Languages, 6 Currencies . . . 2 Marriage Proposals!

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--It was a 16,000-mile trek by airplane, bus, taxi, train, rental car, sailboat . . . horse and camel.

His itinerary featured stops in dozens of towns and cities, where he explored everything from the great pyramids of Egypt and the politically turbulent Gaza Strip to the antiquities of Rome and the picturesque Greek isle of Santorini.

Over the 49-day adventure, he coped with four alphabets and a half-dozen currencies and languages.

Despite the trip's length, he traveled light. His luggage was a single 24-pound backpack--crammed with camera gear (he shot 21 rolls of film) and just two changes of clothes for seven weeks, making laundry an important part of the journey.

This intrepid traveler, Tom Hladish, is a junior majoring in biology at Illinois Wesleyan University from Evanston, Ill. He was accompanied on the June 21-Aug. 7, 2000, journey by Bill Galush, a chum from their days at Evanston Township High School and a junior majoring in chemistry at Minnesota's Carleton College.

Four-Year Old Dream

The idea of backpacking through Europe was a four-year-old dream for Hladish. Partial inspiration for the trip's "southern" geographic focus was a love of Italian food and the appeal of the region's climate and culture. Additional inspiration came from Archibald Bryant, a high-school history teacher, who suggested the itinerary, begin in historic Egypt.

"Mr. Bryant was incredibly supportive, saying, 'Do it. You'll have an awesome time,'" Hladish recalled.

The itinerary mapped out by Hladish and his companion took them to Egypt, Israel, Greece, Italy, and Spain.

To prepare for the trip, Hladish and Galush read books about their proposed itinerary stops and they talked to some people who had traveled to the region. However, these individuals typically had made their journeys in groups, not in a twosome.

Trip goals for Hladish were independence and studying various cultures.

"It was important to me," he explained, "for just the two of us to do the trip. I didn't want things to be very structured. I wanted to go to some random city and figure things out--to deal with the language and eat and sleep and then get to the next place.

"Uncertainty was a very important part of it--a challenge," he added.

The trip's price tag for Hladish was about \$5,000. A trio of sources helped him finance the excursion: money he saved from summer jobs, parental assistance, and his trusty credit card, which he is in the process of paying off.

Eyeing Different Cultures

Hladish got an eyeful of different cultures and how they function, especially when it comes to shopping in the Arab and Middle Eastern worlds, where a premium is placed on the sophisticated art of bargaining.

A case in point: Hladish was in Jerusalem, where he spied a simple drinking glass adorned with colorful pastel swirls. The starting price was \$40-\$50, which was far too pricey for his budget. To entice Hladish into making a purchase, the merchant schmoozed with him about also being a student and the two American travelers were served tea. Only when Hladish appeared to start to walk away, empty-handed, did they settle on the price, \$10, which was too high, Hladish confessed.

Hladish also discovered that some "merchants" could be aggressive in their salesmanship. One warm day he found himself in the Egyptian desert near the pyramids, where a man peddling bottles of Coca-Cola confronted him.

"The guy," Hladish recalled, "held out an ice-cold bottle of Coke, popped the cap, but I wouldn't take it. He wanted \$3 for it. He then poured it out. By opening it, he was trying to make me feel obligated to buy it since he couldn't sell an open bottle to someone else. It was an extreme form of used-car salesmanship."

Hladish also was introduced to the sometimes hair-raising rules-of-the-road in Cairo during a 15-minute taxi ride to the pyramids.

"Drivers don't use car headlights and don't observe stoplights or the lane markings," Hladish explained, adding "they honk incessantly, especially if they're trying to get by you.

Hladish also offered this tip when it comes to taxi etiquette in Egypt: "Make sure you agree on the price before you get in and drive off."

Marriage on the Mind

Hladish and his friend met a bevy of interesting characters on their extended excursion--characters with marriage on their minds. One acquaintance they had known just briefly invited them on the spur-of-the-moment to his daughter's wedding.

In Luxor, Egypt, Hladish was confronted with a marriage proposal pitched by a hotel proprietor.

"I asked him an employee's name," Hladish explained, "and he asked if I wanted to marry her. I'm not sure they were even related."

And, in another Egyptian locale, a young woman asked Hladish for his hand in marriage.

Trip Surprises

The two college students also had some surprises on the trip. "One surprise," Hladish quipped, "was how uniformly bad Greek food was. We seemed to have the same five menu items in each restaurant.

"I imagine," Hladish added, "it would have been better if the Greek places we visited weren't such popular tourist destinations."

Another surprise for Hladish was just how fast the traveling twosome could spend money. He recalled one evening, when "we were in our hotel room talking, and we were dumbfounded. Between the two of us, we had spent \$600 that day--we had souvenirs to show for it, but we had anticipated spending just \$30 a person.

"We had allowed \$4,000 for the trip once we were there [exclusive of air fare]," Hladish continued, "but we had just spent on one day what should have lasted several days. We were surprised just how easy it was to spend money and how little control we had over the situation."

The merchants, he concluded, "were so nice to you. They hug you and give you food. Then you have to ignore them and blow them off, and walk out of their store. Sometimes you have to say 'No!' and be exceptionally rude from our society's viewpoint to get out of the situation."

Gaza Strip

When Hladish and Galush departed Egypt, they headed to the Gaza Strip, a perennially troubled area. As they drove through Gaza, a Palestinian stronghold, Hladish said, it appeared more prosperous and less chaotic than Egypt. "They had tractors in agrarian areas," he explained, "and in Egypt they didn't--they still used manual or animal labor."

They also traveled to other Palestinian-controlled areas and didn't experience any problems. In fact, the only "conflicts" they saw were within religions, for example, bickering between Moslems and arguments between Christians.

Another surprise for the students was just how common the sight of weapons was in Israel, a clear sign of the area's long-term political turmoil.

"In Israel," Hladish said, "everyone our age is a soldier and they carry a weapon at all times--even if they are off-duty and wearing T-shirts and shorts."

Hladish also drew some surprising conclusions about travel and tourism in the region. "Israeli areas are so westernized," he said. "You could find your brand of dental floss--you wouldn't know that you were in a foreign country."

Meeting Fawzy

The trip was largely about learning to understand various cultures by experiencing those cultures first-hand. Much of that was accomplished by meeting interesting people like Fawzy, a retired Cairo resident, who Hladish and Galush encountered while walking down a street taking photos.

Fawzy helped them pick out food for a train trip the two college students were planning to Luxor. They sat and chatted in a bar for about 90 minutes. One topic that came up was Fawzy's son, a hemophiliac.

"He had no understanding of hemophilia," Hladish recalled. "He just knew that his son bled too much. He didn't know that it's a genetic disease, how it should be treated, or even how serious the disease is."

Hladish was able to explain to Fawzy the nature of the disease that affects the clotting ability of blood because of his background as a biology student in college.

Fawzy wanted to be a good father and have his son treated. However, blood transfusions cost about \$50 a piece and Fawzy's retirement benefit was approximately \$60 monthly.

Their wide-ranging conversation also traversed politics. Fawzy spoke candidly, which struck Hladish as interesting since talking openly about politics isn't common among Egyptians, Hladish said. "But Fawzy was a fairly well educated older man with little to gain or lose and he said what he believed," he added.

And, finally, their conversation turned to AIDS and Fawzy's incorrect impression that the deadly disease that attacks the human immune system is transmitted only among homosexuals.

Conclusions

For Hladish, this conversation crystallized one of the trip's key purposes. He was gaining insights into U.S. culture by peering through the prism of other countries.

"I became increasingly aware," Hladish said, "of how ignorant people are here [in the United States]--just like Fawzy didn't know about AIDS. People here take things for granted simply because of the environment they grow up in. They take it for granted that all people are Christians and that everyone has an abundance of possessions. It can really be amazing."

Hladish was struck, for example, by contradictory lifestyles in the United States and Egypt. In Egypt, he said, most people don't have creature comforts like air conditioning or the basics like running water unlike in the United States.

"Israelis," he said, "typically work hard and are prosperous. They are educated--but they have a constant threat. They have things they have to protect. In the United States, we're not worried about the stability of the country."

Hladish's conclusions are reminiscent of Mark Twain's observation in his 1869 work, *Innocents Abroad*: "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness

. . . Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the Earth all one's lifetime."

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls more than 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$26 million library and a \$6 million student center are under construction.