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EXCHANGE STUDENT - SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY - SPRING 2022

When I arrived in Muscat on the 11th of January in 2022, I was first overwhelmed by the hot weather which was a big contrast to the cold German winter. It was a pleasant surprise, as the weather in January is already very warm, but not almost unbearably hot as it will become towards the summer. My arrival in the foreign country was made easy by the help that I received from the first day, for I was picked up by someone from the university, welcomed and shown around the accommodation which is a building for international students provided by the university, and welcomed and made familiar with the details for the coming days by the head of the International Office, who is the contact person for exchange students before, during and after our stay. I study at the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen, Germany, which does not have a partnership agreement with SQU, which made things a little more difficult to organize. My motivation to come to SQU as an exchange student came from the fact that my major programme is basically Economics with a part for languages, which is why I had been starting to learn the Arabic language as part of my bachelor's degree. That is why I wanted to go abroad to an Arabic speaking country for a while, but also wanted to be able to continue my studies of economics during that time. Oman was the perfect choice for me as it is an Arabic speaking country with a deep connection to its culture, SQU is a widely known university with a College of Economics and Political Science that offers a variety of classes in English, and on top of that the fact that the country offers an amazing landscape suitable for a variety of outdoor experiences. The first week at SQU, known as "Add-and-Drop week", turned out to be a bit chaotic as I was not familiar with the organizational structure at SQU and the classes that were offered turned out to be a little different from what I was able to find out in advance. I received a lot of help at CEPS and from volunteering SQU students, so that I could manage to get into my classes and manage to get permission from my university at home to get credits for them. I was a bit disappointed to find that there were no Arabic language classes offered for non-native speakers during the time of my stay, which might have been due to the fact that there were very few exchange students visiting SQU during that term due to the still ongoing pandemic.

The study experience at SQU was overall a positive one, but also needed some adjusting as the system is a bit different than what I was used to. Two of the classes I took were specifically interesting for me as a foreigner, as they taught about politics and economics in Oman and the region. Regardless of the subject, teachers and students were always considerate of my situation and helped me to settle quickly in the new circumstances. The routines of a day at the university were both challenging and a pleasant surprise compared to what I knew from home. One challenge was transportation, as a bus is provided by the university that takes us from our accommodation to the university and back, but it only drives two to three times a day, so that leads to a lot of waiting or walking (about 40 minutes by walking) at the beginning or end of study days. Again, other students were really helpful and would drive me home or pick me up if possible. On the other hand, transportation on the campus was made really easy by the buses that drive around the campus frequently and that are free of charge to use. Boys that don't have a car have it a bit more difficult here as most of these buses are for girls only. This leads to another thing that required some adjustment compared to what I am used to, which is the strict separation of genders on the campus in classrooms, libraries, transportation, accommodation, leisure time... it requires a bit of getting used to and learning about the culture to get a feeling for in what context and for whom it is okay to mix genders and where it is not appropriate. I as a foreigner always received a lot of understanding and tolerance for my different way of living. Another thing that I really appreciated on campus was the free providence of food three times a day as well as the beautiful sites on campus to study or relax like the main library or the botanical garden. Even though studying and university in general required a lot of attention and time, the amazing free time activities that are possible in Oman became a consistent part of my life there. Sometimes organized by the university, the volunteers, the group of international students or just friends that you met along the way, I experienced deserts, wadis, mountains, caves, life above and under water, went fishing, swimming, snorkelling, diving, canoeing, playing beach volleyball, hiking, dune bashing (driving through the dunes with a suitable car) and rock climbing. All these activities were absolutely amazing because of the amazing landscapes Oman has to offer and the people who take you there and the people you meet there. Between all that, I got an insight into different cultures and ways of living, different food and clothing, different stories and views of the world which broadened my horizon and helps me to see my own world of experiences from a different perspective. Altogether, my semester at SQU in Oman has left me with a lot of new knowledge, a whole new set of experiences regarding landscapes and cultures, a lot of new friends and hobbies and amazing memories. Oman and SQU offer an environment in which it is possible to grow in very different regards depending on own preferences and ways of life, and where the atmosphere and people will make it easy to feel at home even when you're far away and many things are different from where you come from.
