

Laidlaw Scholars Program

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Experience Abroad Reflection

What Lesbos taught me about cultural humility

Before I ever left

Before I went to Lesbos, the phrase “experience abroad” sounded exciting and a little abstract. I knew where I would be working and why I wanted to be there. What I could not know was how it would feel to travel to Europe for the first time on my own, arrive without anyone from home beside me, and build a life somewhere I had never been. I expected to learn from the work at European Lawyers in Lesbos. I did. But the part of the summer I want to explore here is what happened to me outside the tasks I completed: the small decisions, the friendships, the unfamiliarity and the growing sense that I could manage it.

Even getting to Greece required more independence than I anticipated. As an Indian passport holder, I needed a Schengen visa. With the Toronto office shut, I had to travel to the embassy in Ottawa. That meant arranging another trip before the actual trip, organising my documents and sitting with the uncertainty of a process whose timing I did not control. I was used to planning around deadlines for university or work, but this felt different because the possibility of travelling at all depended on somebody else's decision. I kept checking that I had what I needed and thinking through what I would do if a step took longer than expected.

I do not want to overstate that inconvenience. I had a funded placement, a university programme behind me and a route home. The process did, however, puncture the easy phrase “just go abroad.” Travel begins differently depending on the passport you carry, the money and time you can spend on an application, and where you have to go to submit it. I had thought my summer would start when I landed in Greece. In some ways it started on the trip to Ottawa, when I realised that deciding to go and being allowed to go were separate things.

Landing somewhere new

Landing in Europe for the first time felt almost unreal. I was aware of how far I had travelled, but I was also dealing with ordinary practical questions. Where do I go next? Have I understood the sign correctly? How do I get from this point to where I need to be? I had to keep moving through those questions instead of waiting for the moment when I would suddenly feel like an experienced traveller.

Lesbos was unfamiliar in ways a map could not prepare me for. There was the light, the heat and the sea, but also the effort of finding a routine: getting groceries, learning the route to work, remembering where people liked to meet for dinner and working out how much time I needed to get anywhere. None of these is a dramatic achievement. Taken together, they changed my relationship with the place. During the first days I was actively navigating it. Later, I could recognise where I was going and anticipate parts of a normal day. I had made a small life there.

I liked noticing the point at which a new place stopped feeling like a series of tests. At first, even a simple errand carried the possibility that I would not understand something or would have to

ask for help. Gradually I became less concerned with appearing as though I knew everything. If I needed something, I could ask. If a plan changed, I could work out another one. I had travelled alone, but being independent did not mean refusing assistance. It meant taking responsibility for the next step and knowing when to turn to someone else.

There was also a particular pleasure in having arrived somewhere completely new and realising that it could become part of my own story. Before this summer, Europe was a place I knew through photographs, other people's trips and my studies. Now I had my own memories of walking around an island after work, choosing food with friends and looking out at the sea early in the morning. None of that made me an expert on Greece. It meant I had stopped experiencing it only from a distance.

What language feels like in everyday life

Many people I encountered in Greece spoke English, and that helped me a great deal. But being able to make myself understood did not mean I always felt equally at ease. Greek was the language around me, and I sometimes noticed a difference in the warmth or speed of an interaction when someone else could speak it. In grocery stores, for example, I sometimes felt that people were more ready to help a customer speaking Greek than me approaching in English. I cannot know whether that reflected language, familiarity, a busy moment or my own self-consciousness. It was how the interaction felt to me, and it made me think more carefully about what it is like to be the one asking another person to switch languages.

This was a useful experience because I can normally rely on language as one of my strengths. I move among English, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, and before arriving I expected those abilities to help me feel capable in a multilingual setting. On an ordinary errand in Lesvos, none of those languages gave me the ease a local speaker had. I had to accept that I might say something awkwardly, misunderstand a response or take longer than the person behind me in a queue. A small greeting in Greek, patience and a willingness to try again helped, but the deeper change was that I became less embarrassed by not knowing.

I also saw how much context matters. The same person who was brief during a transaction might be generous in a less hurried moment. I did not want to turn a handful of encounters into a claim about Greek people. What I took from them was a better awareness of my own habits. When someone communicates with me in a language that is less comfortable for them, do I allow enough time? Am I listening for what they are trying to say or reacting to the effort it takes them to say it? I had understood those questions intellectually before. Depending on other people's patience made them personal.

At work I met applicants from different parts of the Middle East and Africa, alongside colleagues from many countries. Their experiences of language were not the same as mine in a shop, and I do not equate them. Living abroad did make me less likely to assume that a conversation

conducted in English was effortless just because it happened. Someone has usually done work to meet someone else there.

The people who changed the place

I expected to learn about a new country. I did not expect how much I would learn from the people with whom I shared those six weeks. My colleagues had connections to Greece, Luxembourg, London, Belgium, Brazil and elsewhere. Some lawyers came to Lesvos briefly from practices in other European cities, while others lived with the rhythm of the work for much longer. Lunch could start with an ordinary office question and turn into a conversation about where somebody grew up, why they entered law or what they planned to do next. The group changed as people arrived and left, and I found myself making connections more quickly than I usually would.

My roommate Megi, a fellow legal assistant from Luxembourg, became central to my days. We lived together, worked together and explored the island together, and somehow still had things to talk about afterwards. With Natalia and Shirin, there were dinners, conversations after long days and jokes that had nothing to do with work. I had arrived without my established circle around me, which made it necessary to be open to new people. The friendships did not happen because I suddenly became a different personality. They grew from accepting invitations, making plans, asking how somebody's day had gone and giving those relationships time.

That was an unexpected kind of independence. I used to imagine travelling alone as being self-sufficient every minute. In Lesvos I learned that going alone can create the space to build a new community. The people I grew close to did not replace home; they gave me another sense of belonging. I could have a difficult day and sit down with people who understood the setting without needing a long explanation. I could also spend an evening talking about absolutely nothing serious and realise how much I needed that.

An island beyond the placement

The work mattered to my time in Lesvos, but I do not want this reflection to make the island sound like an office with scenery around it. I remember Greek food, long dinners and mornings when some of us voluntarily woke up far too early to watch the sunrise. I remember going to an outdoor festival to hear Vicky sing under the trees and seeing a completely different side of someone I knew as my supervisor. I remember beaches, and one day when a dog appeared and seemed to decide it belonged to our group. These were ordinary, happy memories. They are part of what living abroad gave me.

I turned twenty one during the placement and spent my birthday weekend in Eresos with people I had met only weeks earlier. That still surprises me. I had not imagined celebrating there, and I

certainly had not known those friends would become so important to me. Moments like that made me aware of how quickly a place can change meaning. What began as the site of a six week project became somewhere associated with people who knew my routines, remembered my birthday and made room for me in theirs.

Salman's restaurant, SAVANNA HAVIR, became one of the places I most associated with Lesvos. Salman was our colleague and interpreter, and we happened to be there when his restaurant opened. We celebrated him, made a poster and then kept returning for dinner. I became very attached to the hummus. What I remember most is the pleasure of seeing a friend's idea become a place full of food and conversation. It was a restaurant, a workplace and somewhere our group felt at home. Rashu, Salman's dog and an honorary office member, also belongs in my memory of that time.

Why going abroad mattered to me

I could have read about migration, cultural differences and legal systems from Toronto. I could have done valuable work closer to home. Going abroad mattered because reading and doing did not ask the same things of me. In Lesvos I could not close a document and return immediately to everything familiar. I was learning while also figuring out my own daily life. The discomfort of a new language, the joy of forming friendships quickly and the responsibility of entering a team that already had its own way of working were all happening at once.

I needed the experience partly because I had become good at operating in settings where I already knew the expectations. At university and in court reporting, I knew how to prepare, what a successful day looked like and whom to ask. In Greece, preparation still mattered, but it could not remove every unknown. Sometimes the contribution I thought I would make was not the one the team needed. Sometimes my plans outside work changed. Sometimes I was unsure how to enter a conversation or ask a simple question. I learned that I could be unsettled and still be capable.

The place also made me consider how quickly I assign people roles. I arrived with an idea of what a "local," a "volunteer," an "interpreter" or a "refugee" might mean, even when I would have rejected those labels as complete descriptions. Spending time with people after work made the limits of those categories obvious. A colleague could be an interpreter and a restaurant owner; a supervisor could also be a singer; someone I encountered in the camp could spend an afternoon dancing with friends. This insight was less a grand revelation than a change in attention. I became more likely to ask who someone was beyond the part of their life visible to me.

There was something important, too, about knowing my stay had an end date. I could travel home after six weeks. People around me had different obligations and possibilities. I had to hold the gratitude I felt for being there alongside an awareness that my summer was not the whole

story of the island. That perspective made me want to speak about Lesbos with care: as a real place where people build lives, not simply as the setting of a formative experience for me.

The person who came home

The changes I noticed in myself were quieter than I had expected. I did not come home transformed into someone who never gets anxious or always knows what to do. I still like a plan. I still want to do things well. But I am less convinced that an unfamiliar situation means I am unprepared for it. I travelled alone, handled the visa trip, made my way into a new daily routine and formed close friendships without already having a place in that circle. Each of those required me to act before I felt completely certain.

I also became more comfortable being visibly new. At the beginning I felt pressure to show that I belonged and that the trip was worthwhile. Later I could ask someone to explain a route, a word, a custom or a work process without turning the question into a judgment about myself. That did not make me dependent. It made me easier to teach and more open to other people. I hope it has also made me kinder when someone else is finding their footing in a place I know well.

When I think of Lesbos now, I do not picture only the camp or the workday. I think of arriving alone and gradually recognising faces, of grocery errands becoming routine, of laughter over dinner, of Megi, Natalia and Shirin, of Vicky singing, of a sunrise I nearly slept through and of my birthday in Eresos. I think of how a place that initially made me nervous became a place I was sad to leave.

That is why the experience abroad mattered to me. It expanded my world in a very ordinary, lasting way. I learned that I can leave a familiar life for a while, build trust, accept help, make decisions and enjoy where I am even when I cannot predict every part of it. I came to Lesbos for a placement. I came home with a clearer sense of how I want to move through unfamiliar places: with curiosity, care for the people already there and enough confidence to begin before I have all the answers.

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