For John Jay Student-Athlete, Study Abroad Is a Life-Changing Experience

While most John Jay students were relaxing and recharging their batteries during the end-of-semester break in January, sophomore Katelyn Davis was one of 15 ambitious undergraduates who spent an intensive three weeks in Morocco as part of a winter-session study abroad adventure.

For Davis, the trip from her upstate New York hometown of Hurley to Rabat, the Moroccan capital, could be measured in more than miles. It also represented a dramatic cultural adjustment, as Davis admitted, “This will be my first time on a plane and out of the country.”

Taught by Professor Chitra Raghavan of the Department of Psychology, the course on “Psychology of Gender” was designed to be academically rigorous, with lectures and discussions, field trips, presentations and language immersion. Participants also engaged in a community service project at a Moroccan school.

“I enjoyed being challenged academically, while having to constantly reflect on my personal growth in weekly journals and expanding my understanding of Morocco through assigned scholarly articles,” Davis said of Professor Raghavan’s leadership of the class.

By most yardsticks, Davis is not your average student. She is a stellar student-athlete who sports a 3.785 GPA as a Criminal Justice major (with double minors in Psych and Music), and serves as captain of the John Jay women’s soccer team. She was selected as a second-team all-star by the CUNY Athletic Conference for the 2013 season. Her experience with living independently in New York City, coupled with her polished teamwork skills, served her well during the whole study-abroad experience.

“Although preparedness is very important to me, I chose not to do any ‘boning up’ before leaving for Morocco,” she recalled. “I wanted to save the culture shock for arrival. I realized that I wouldn’t be traveling alone at any point during the trip, and I knew that I could trust in my decision-making and teamwork skills to make the trip successful.”

Davis and her fellow students were in fact well prepared for their overseas
adventure. She singled out the help of Anderson Rosa and Maureen Coyle of John Jay’s Office of International Studies and Programs, as well as the encouragement of Danielle Rosario, the student-athlete academic advisor in the Department of Athletics. “The overall process of preparing for the study abroad trip was great,” Davis said.

[To learn more about John Jay's study-abroad programs, contact the Office of International Studies and Programs at 212.484.1339, or attend the Study Abroad Fair to be held on February 25 from 12 N to 3 PM on the first floor of the New Building.]

In addition to the formal academic components of the course, Davis said, students were encouraged to break away independently of the group setting and venture around the country. “While visiting Marrakesh, my roommate and I found an excursion agency that allowed us to tent out in the Sahara desert for one night and sleep in Berber tents. It took about eight hours to drive up the Atlas Mountains on a winding road, but as soon as we got to the top, the sun was setting and we saddled up for a two-hour camel ride into the Sahara. We enjoyed a delicious couscous meal and listened to Moroccan drumming while learning to sing along to a few Arabic songs.” Capping the experience was the most spectacular starscape either of the young women had ever witnessed — “the best television you can watch,” their tour guide said of the night sky.

As luck would have it, Davis was in Morocco as history was being made. She noted in a January 10 posting on Facebook: “Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code has been appealed today!!! Can't believe that we are around to witness this. Go Morocco!” The law in question, which would be repealed on January 22, shortly after the John Jay students’ return to America, was a holdover from Morocco’s colonial era. It allowed a rapist to avoid prosecution by marrying his underage victim.
Repeal of the law is seen by human rights activists as part of a broader effort to promote gender equality, outlaw child marriage and protect women from violence. Davis, who hopes to go on to earn a master’s degree and ultimately join the FBI, says she has been bitten by the “travel bug” as a result of her study-abroad experience. “I would take an experience like the Morocco study abroad over an ordinary vacation any day,” she said. Equally important, she wants to encourage fellow students to look into studying abroad. “It really is an experience that will change your life and your perceptions of the world we live in.”

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