

Traffic!

The first thing I encountered on my journey abroad. I was the last one to arrive at the group flight but after receiving hundred of hugs and kisses from my sisters and weaving through security, my arrival felt perfectly punctual. Everyone was sitting together, friendly and ready to meet and greet. Smiles and excitement all around, with a little bit of exhaustion.

I slept straight through landing (I missed the clapping!) eyelids lifted, eyes wide open, and I'm here!?

Mmmhhmmmmmm Israel air

We arrived at Ben Gurion University 45 minutes and another nap later. We got a quick tour around: 24 hour laundry room and computer lab! We got our rooms and after settling in a bit and unpacking... I packed...the next morning we would be hiking Masada.

Some of us ran up, some of us ran down. Alon, our program coordinator, taught us, quite dramatically, the historically context of Masada and the land surrounding.

After coming in at second place on the run down, I hopped onto the bus and we all headed to Ein Gedi where we would be spending our first Shabbat together in Israel.

We began roaming around with the Ibexes. Gali, our madricha (counselor), led us in a beautiful prayer service for Shabbat and after a great meal we learned everyone's names through a game filled with laughter.

Waking up the next morning was overwhelming. Strong colorful mountains, rising sun, still and glistening Dead Sea, smooth air, and clear clouds gently decorating the sky as rays of the sun hit my face. Was I really here?

Some people went on a hike with Alon, which I heard was incredible, but I stayed back with a few people. We went on a long walk along the shore of the Dead Sea. We found salt sculptures smoothed and formed from the natural movements of the water.

After lunch we all went down to a swimming section of the sea and some brave warm-blooded folks took a dip in the chilled, winter waters.

That evening wax dripped on my arm as I held the havdalah candle, symbolizing the end of Shabbat and the start of a new week.

Here in Israel the week starts on Sunday....so bright and early off we went to our first ulpan class and orientation meetings.

We had a few sporadic breaks throughout the orientation filled day. My new pal Zac and I wanted to find a way to maximize our time between our orientation programs. Since we had already successfully scoped the whole campus, off we went to donate



blood! After sipping the sweetest juice I have ever tasted, we finished up orientation programs and headed to the BIG, Beer Sheva's HUGE outdoor mall, only a 20 minute walk away.

One of my favorite things to do here since I have arrived is my long runs. The desert sky feels so big. The roads feel so long. The sand feels so soft. If I run far enough the buildings gets shorter and shorter and the sunset extends across the open sky.

The sky only felt bigger Thursday on our first camping trip. None of us really knew what Alon meant by "pack well...it will be *cold*." We began our hike in Sde Boker. The weather was perfect for hiking. The view was clear and air was fresh. Zac and I had walkie talkies and Alon brought the perfect food and stories.

The sun set and the weather rapidly changed from perfect for hiking to disastrous for sleeping. We played card games until we couldn't see in front of us anymore because of the darkness. We sat around the large fire and ate a fresh pasta dinner. It was only 7:00 pm but we were all exhausted and ready for bed. By 9:00pm we were all in our sleeping bags wearing all the clothes we brought and ready for some shut eye. By 10:30 pm we were all awake, shivering, and huddled closely around the fire. We had a long cold night ahead of us. There was an incredible amount of singing and game playing. The sun rising was celebratory and filled with energy. Warmth was on its way! Some of us were even wearing short sleeves on our walk back. Crazy the way the weather works like that.

We returned in time for Shabbat and I went to dinner at Chabad and fell asleep at Chabad. Nothing could keep me awake. I slept very well that night.

The week went by so fast but was filled with activities. I visited Tel Aviv, went to a friend's concert, met a professional photographer, went to a class about Tu B'shvat, did laundry, went food shopping, and did a lot of ulpan homework.



On Friday we planted trees in honor of Tu B'shvat, the Jewish new year for trees. Afterwards, continuing the celebration of the outdoors, a few of us did some arts and crafts outside our dorms.

That night Alon set us up with Friday night meals with Israelis. I fell asleep (how does this happen every Friday night!?) and was a half hour late... which means I was perfectly on time. It was really great meeting other students at Ben Gurion and speaking Hebrew over a

wonderful warm meal.

The next day a bunch of us planned a sunny pot-luck picnic by the dorms. It was a day of rest and enjoyment, refueling us for the next event packed week.

This week I went to a kickboxing class offered by the university, the Bedouin shook, and an off campus program introducing students to Judaism, where we made scent boxes for havdalah. I also explored the old city of Beer Sheva with my cousin. We saw a well used by Abraham, the city's art center, a Christian

missionary building, and much more. We then went to a “shekel shook” which is a market where everything sold costs 1 NIS. There was live music and friendly people all around.

Oh and hebrewhebrewhebrewstudystudystudy,

My 3<sup>rd</sup> Shabbat in Israel! I went to services at “Bayit Ha’yehudi,” which is a house right off campus that has Shabbat services and meals for students. It was beautiful, crowded and full of spirit. The next day we all went to lunch at Jack and Ellen’s, a wonderful couple who are in our Ulpan. They took good care of us and fed us very well.

This week it rained! No... it poured! In the desert! ☺

Soggy and happy I look forward to February and what else the Negev will share with me.

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