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Backward Study Abroad

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Cornfields fill the whole of Akshi Mohla’s window in Wilson Hall, broken only by the clear blue horizon. A far departure from the bustling upper-middle class New Delhi neighborhood where she grew up, she is left wondering if she made the right choice, if her years abroad would be worth it. Visions of the “American Pie” college experience were quickly fading, leaving her longing for the security of her family and home worlds away.

She is studying abroad, and she is not alone. This year, 3,510 students from myriad countries packed up their lives, bid their friends and families adieu and began their adventures at Iowa State. An average of 7,669 miles from home, Akshi and two fellow students have found solace in embracing the changes American culture has imprinted upon them and the subsequent lessons they’ve learned.

Jassim Al-Marzouqi betrayed his friendliness with a smile as he walked down the ramp of the Maintenance Shop. “Are you Ethan?” he asks in near impeccable English. “That’s right, nice to meet you, man.” I was expecting something of a language barrier or an awkward exchange I’d have to push through, but this was far from that. Jassim, a junior in political science and economics, came from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, a city with nearly four million people, which is roughly 80 times the size of Ames. He arrived at Iowa State in 2010 after undergoing a grueling set of tests in the UAE his final year of high school to determine which universities he was eligible for, both in the UAE and internationally. He took UAE placement tests, as well as the American SAT and ACT, and eventually chose Iowa State as the place to chase his educational dreams. But as he now knows, the chase comes at a high price. The sacrifice of comfort is worth it for Jassim, though, and not just for the degree. He values his growing independence more than what he is learning in the classroom.

Akshi, 21, a senior in aerospace engineering, and Presha Kardili, 20, a junior in business, came to Iowa State from India in 2010 and 2009, respectively. Growing up in a metropolis with a population upward of 17 million, Akshi’s parents never allowed her to go out alone. Because they feared for her safety, she had never “gone to a stationary shop to buy even a pencil” by herself. But she has met new tasks with determination to learn and grow from each new experience.

Like his Indian counterparts, Jassim appreciates the independence he gains from being away from home, even though at first it didn’t seem worth the trade-off of homesickness. Though fortunate enough to make it home during the summer and winter breaks, the majority of Jassim’s year in Ames is a far cry from his childhood days spent on the beaches of Dubai.

“The history of my tribe is that we used to be the pearl divers, so we are known for being on the ocean,” Jassim says. “So I would be there every day. Not in Iowa, though.”
His adjustment to life in the United States was not an easy one, but through student clubs, organizations and intramural sports, he made many friends, most of whom are U.S. citizens. Friends, Jassim says, are what helped him cope best with the thousands of miles separating him from home. And similar to Jassim, Presha and Akshi found that making friends was the best way to get over the culture shock they experienced. And experience it they did.

For Presha and Akshi, partying back home meant music and dancing, much like it does here. But what they encountered their first night at the club left them disgusted.

"Honestly, I wouldn’t describe what was happening at 20/20 as dancing," says Akshi. "I was shocked at the way some people danced."

At some point during the night, a guy asked Akshi to dance with him. "I was thinking he just wanted to dance next to me, maintaining a distance, but obviously he had something else in mind," says Akshi. "I was horrified and pushed him away. At least this guy had the decency to ask me, as later on in the night there were a plethora of guys who would just start to 'dance on you' without even seeking permission."

Looking past all of the grinding guys from that night, the girls have been able to get used to the difference in partying at college. "Now if I go partying, I don’t really get perturbed by the crowd’s behavior. I have become more alert and my friends and I often decide on a signal, in case one of us is being bothered by someone," says Akshi.

The girls have learned a lot since their first nightlife experience, and they attribute their smooth adjustment to getting involved in activities on campus, both with international friends and American students.

Both girls have been involved in student organizations since their freshman year, and both currently serve as international student ambassadors. Consequently, both say that while it wasn’t always easy, they were able to adapt to life at Iowa State.

"The people," was Presha’s response when asked what her favorite thing about Ames was. "I will always think of Ames as the place where I spent the four most memorable years of my life and met the most amazing people who have now become my family in the United States," says Presha. "I can be anything I want to be and do whatever I want to do in a secure college environment—it can’t get any better than this."