I am very grateful for receiving a Ruth Owen travel award from the QMUL Expedition Fund. Without it, I would not have been able to fundraise £1500 for International Service and been able to volunteer for three months in the Occupied territories of Palestine. International Service is just one of the six charity organisations that offer the chance for 18-25 year olds to volunteer in a developing country as part of a Department for International Development (DFID) scheme called International Citizen Service (ICS). ICS operates in developing countries from around the world, sending teams of around 12 volunteers to large swathes of Africa, South America and Asia.

Having managed to successfully pass the interview, I was offered a place to volunteer with International Service in Palestine from July to September 2013. From what I understood prior to arrival, Palestine’s troubled reputation, most notably the recent violence during the second Intifada, had understandably led to a tourist drought in the West Bank whilst Gaza could not even be accessed by many NGO workers. I viewed it as an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the daily lives of Palestinians living under Occupation in the West Bank and experience what it is like to work as part of an international development agency. In order to gain a greater understanding of how the conflict has affected people living in Israel and Palestine, living in the middle of the West Bank would be essential. It also allowed me the opportunity to begin researching my dissertation and acquire some much needed Israeli and Palestinian sources on the 1982 Lebanon War.

During my three months in the West Bank, I lived in Ramallah and worked as part of a trio teaching English conversation classes across the West Bank. As part of the “English Delivery Unit” we also delivered employability workshops and poetry writing classes, working with a local charity called Sharek Youth Forum. My other friends worked in a number of different fields, from promoting women’s rights at a local charity called WTLC and campaigning for education at Birzeit University to producing themed podcasts on Palestine. Most of the projects were based in the West Bank’s main city, Ramallah, although three volunteers were also based in Bethlehem and worked with an environmental agency, ARIJ.

Preparing for life in the West Bank was not a straightforward task, with much of the media dedicated to focussing on the region’s troubled past and providing little in the way of practical information about living in Ramallah for three months. One of the unnerving things you can do to prepare yourself is to have a look at the travel advice page by the Foreign Office and the main tourist boards. Warnings about terrorism, kidnapping, protests and arrests quickly leaves your heart racing with uncertainty. The prospect of entering an apparent warzone was both a nervous but highly exciting element of volunteering in the Middle East. Yet after a lengthy bus journey from the airport, having survived the much talked about questioning by security at the airport, Ramallah was not quite what I expected.

Ramallah can be broken down to one solitary road which snakes through the centre of the city. Within a couple of days, I felt used to the setup of Ramallah. With Sharek’s office and my flat situated just on the outskirts of the city, I quickly got used to following the road up the hill to walk into the centre of the city. Like Jordan’s capital city, Amman, Ramallah bears the stereotypical hallmarks of a Middle Eastern city, setup for practical purposes rather than aesthetic beauty. With its concrete grey apartment blocks and endless fruit shops, the city bears few signs of its troubled past. Controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA), the city proudly symbolises the progress being...
made in the West Bank. Political unrest and unemployment might remain high, but the creeping signs of modernity appear to have entered Ramallah from KFC to Calvin Klein.

Our English classes allowed us to explore most of the West Bank and learn more about the notable differences within the provinces. An hour bus journey and we would be teaching in the city of Nablus, known for its soap factory and ancient Hammans (Turkish baths.) With lines of trees on either sides of the roads, Nablus felt more like a Mediterranean town, particularly in the scorching summer heat. In Nablus we taught Advanced English to a group of enthusiastic Engineering students, who came from over the West Bank. The sophistication of their English meant we were able to discuss a range of issues from the environment to Middle Eastern politics.

In contrast to the students at Nablus, we also taught beginners English to a class in the village of Bil’in, just outside of Ramallah. Despite the small size of the village, Bil’in is well known internationally, thanks to the Oscar award winning film, Five Broken Cameras, which documented the village’s fight against the Occupation wall, which was illegally built through the village.

Unsurprisingly the wall was a common subject of discussion and the students were always keen to take us there and update us on what happened at the latest Friday protests. Visiting Bil’in every week was one of the most rewarding parts of volunteering in Palestine as it embodied the warm hearted nature of the Palestinians and the daily struggles they faced under Occupation. Whether it was seeing the left over tear gas grenades or the burnt remnants of car tyres, the signs of unrest in Bil’in brought back the reality of the Occupation; something that could be sometimes be forgotten in the comforts of Ramallah.

We also delivered regular workshops on employment and interview techniques as well as creative classes in poetry in Hebron and Qalqiliya. Hebron was the one place I was particularly interested in exploring prior to going to the West Bank. Often viewed as one of the most troubled and volatile cities in the West Bank, Hebron feels like one of the most traditional cities in the West Bank. Unlike much of Ramallah which has modernised, most of Hebron still maintains true to its roots, with parts of the city still bearing the scars of heavy violence from the Intifada. Hebron was also a unique experience for me as the city is fractured by Jewish settlers living in the middle of the city, cutting off the old market streets and leaving parts completely closed off. The employment workshops in Hebron were highly popular, with university students coming with their CVs and questions about interviews. Whilst many of the students living and studying in Hebron wanted to find work abroad, they all spoke of their desire to return to Hebron and help the local community. This attitude was found in many of the towns and cities we visited but particularly in Hebron.

The poetry workshops in Qalqiliya revealed the imaginative and creative side of the Palestinians. Prior to coming to Palestine I was vaguely aware of a Palestinian poet called Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish’s poems are extremely popular in the West Bank, with many students knowing several of his poems off by heart. With few tourists visiting Qalqiliya, the locals were extremely friendly and interested in hearing our stories. Each time we taught a class we would come away with another collection of life stories, told to us by Palestinian students who attended our classes.

I am indebted to the Expedition Fund as without a travel award, I would not have had such a productive and memorable summer. Whether it was enjoying iftar every night with a different Palestinian family during Ramadan or helping a student prepare for their job interview, volunteering in Palestine was the most rewarding and enjoyable experiences of my life. The Expedition Fund
allowed me to enjoy the experience of a lifetime and I am planning on returning to the West Bank in the New Year. Since returning in September, I have been extremely busy with my final year as a History student at Queen Mary. My time in Palestine has intensified my interest in the Middle East and I am now one of the co-ordinators of Queen Mary’s Middle East Film club. Rather fittingly, the first film we showed was *5 Broken Cameras*. I also wrote a short travel piece on Palestine which was printed in Queen Mary’s student magazine, *CUB*. Here is a section of the article:

**Palestine’s most misunderstood restaurant**

Quietly tucked away in one of the shabbier parts of Ramallah, there is a family run restaurant called *Heba*. Heba restaurant is squashed on the end of a small line of shops, on the edge of the busy main road. The restaurant is a favourite with the local Palestinians which seemed a complete mystery when you initially compare it to the other cafes and restaurants available in Ramallah. It does not feature in any of the guidebooks nor does it have any swanky features or wifi found elsewhere in Ramallah. Yet it quickly became one of my most trusted haunts during my three month stay in Palestine. Not only is its food surprisingly good, the restaurant also represented what I understood it meant to be Palestinian and to live in Palestine.

Outside on the stretch of cracked tiles are two large tables, big enough for ten people. Large parties of young and old Palestinians frequently spread along both tables, covering the table in plates of hummus, baskets of bread and an assortment of barbequed meat. The smoke from the charcoal barbeque gently wharf over as you approach the service window of the restaurant. As a traditional family business, it is normal for a new member of the family to serve you from inside the kitchen. Once you are beckoned inside you quickly realise how small the restaurant is. A single medium sized room with three tables and chairs makes up the restaurant. The corner of the main dining room doubles up as the kitchen, not quite big enough for the two cousins to rapidly hand make all the meals from scratch. In the midst of this small kitchen enclosure, the two members of staff, normally two of the owner’s nephews battle it out to cook falafel and regularly keep the individual salad trays filled to the brim. Much of the cooking is done whilst one of them is on their mobile phone. Mid culinary cigarette breaks are frequently taken in the kitchen, allowing them to chat to the customers outside, through the window.

Their activity in the kitchen is regularly disrupted as one of the guys usually races out of the kitchen to battle with the temperamental barbeque. Their English is limited to a couple of key phrases and they regularly use the usual favourites like ‘welcome’ and ‘where [sic] from?’ However their trump phrase is the most valuable of restaurant phrases. At the end of the order, they proudly ask a single word question of great importance, ‘spicy?’ Palestinians love their spice so it wise to always reply timidly by asking for a little rather than face the prospect of being overpowered by the spicy flavours.

Once you have managed to successfully describe your order in a mixture of broken Arabic, English and elaborate hand gestures, you are left to sit back and watch the beginning of the show. Whilst you wait for your meal, your eyes tend to focus on the detail of the kitchen. The small details about the restaurant exemplify the resourceful nature of Palestinians. A tangle of extension cords keeps the oven fired up and allows the best of Fayrouz to be continually played on the radio in the background. Fayrouz is occasionally drowned out by a family argument between the staff, usually settled by one of them grumpily going off to take out their pended up frustration on a couple of
innocent cucumbers. Chunks of salad and a few lonely olive stones are lightly sprinkled on the floor. A multitude of off white tissues are stacked neatly into one of the lesser tiled parts of the wall, where a section of bricks have been left out to create an innovative wall cupboard with a single flimsy shelf. Two large cardboard boxes, sagging with plastic forks have been unevenly stacked below the copious amounts of tissues and an assortment of metal nails and pieces of power drills are all unstably balanced on the shelf. There is something magical about the rustic nature of the restaurant and the fact that it does not have the generic Western style found in most of the outlets in Ramallah.

From within the kitchen, what sounds a small earthquake starts to erupt. On closer inspection, the old hummus maker has been fired up and beginning to shake profusely, moving across the unevenly tiled floor of the kitchen towards the sink. One of the lads turns round in the kitchen, managing to avoid colliding with his cousin, grabbing something from under the sink. A large jerry can made of stainless steel is plucked from underneath the sink. It takes him a few seconds to wrestles off the plastic top and begin pouring in the oil. The thick lava like hummus begins to volatilize bubble up to the surface of the machine, creating a dome of creamy hummus and starting to drip down the side of the machine. Food hygiene tends to be a secondary consideration for the staff. They tend to prefer to wipe their hands on their faded blue jeans rather than the standard option of soap and water.

As you sit watching the chaos unfold in the little kitchen, you come to appreciate what makes this small business so likeable and why it epitomises life in Palestine. Palestine is generally portrayed in a misunderstood manner by the media. This was an important reason for choosing the development placement in Palestine. It is viewed as war torn and dangerous, with a population permanently suffering from its long history of conflict. If you look beyond this stereotypical view and not take it on face value, you can properly understand the progression being made in Palestine. Heba restaurant embodies the nature of Palestine. If you only see the strange pink dyed cauliflower going into your falafel and gasp at the kitchen’s hygiene, you will grasp what makes it authentic. There is something wonderfully charming about its appearance, how its character resonates through the disorganised and dishevelled melee of the kitchen in the corner. The family have continually run the restaurant through both the Intifadas, proudly persisting with the traditional style of a small scale, family restaurant. From the outside you would assume you were more likely to get salmonella than a good meal at Heba, but unless you give it a chance and look beyond its flaws you will not understand why it is special. Just like with the occupied territories of Palestine – until you go there you will not see and understand the subtle beauty of Palestine.