

Queen Mary Expeditions Fund Award 2014

Destination: Turkey

This summer I had the privilege to be chosen as one of the awardees of a monetary grant through the QM Expeditions Fund. My pursuit was moving to Turkey for a month and working closely with a charity empowering women in order to improve my Turkish, gain an insight into the day-to-day legal issues facing such enterprises, and last, but not least, see what it would be like if I ever decided to move to Turkey and join the workforce there.

I chose to apply and intern in Izmir, Turkey, as not only would it be a cheaper city to live in than Istanbul, but also because I wanted to see a different, less-touristy and more authentic Turkish city. It was a lovely destination to be at and because of my legal background I was placed at a very prominent law office in the city, which handled the charity's legal work. I was one of four interns and I believe the whole experience taught all four of us a tremendous amount. Coming with an education in the common law system, being exposed to the civil law one made a great impression on me. I was given the opportunity to go to the courtroom with one of the lawyers and follow a proceeding there. Moreover, I saw the workings of a deeply bureaucratic system, whose dependence on paper for the smallest changes in a file had resulted in thousands of files, sometimes dating back to the late 1800s, being kept on hundreds of shelves, making access to them hard and time-consuming. In one day I turned into an advocate of the move towards computer-based data saving. Still, regardless of the pitfalls of these arrangements, the system itself involved a great deal of human interaction and seemed to be working well enough for the time being.

Going to Izmir was a great choice. However, I had failed to take into account two things. Firstly, the Izmir office of the charity, whose work I wanted to observe, was not as involved with interns and had not the facilities to host us there for a longer amount of time. In that sense, my interest in the law had turned out to be a great thing, as I could be put to intern in the law office I was at, where albeit unexpected, I was indeed happy, because a mutually beneficial relationship flourished between me and the lawyers there. I was getting my hands on real

legal work and improving my Turkish, whereas they were getting some of their work translated into English through me. Secondly, I had not thought about the implications of interning at a firm in a Muslim country during the holy month of Ramadan, when the rush is nowhere near as exciting as it would be on a regular day, but quite the contrary, is nearly absent. I had managed to start my internship close to five days before the Holy Month commenced, but as soon as it started, the change was palpable and for understandable reasons. Fasting in the heat kept clients away from the firm in its daily working hours, and the nearby court often closed its doors for days on end. Last, but not least, the Bayram, which is the celebration ending the fasting was close to a five-day-long national holiday, which coupled with the weekend meant both the charity and the law firm were closed for a week of the month I was in Turkey. I was not able to celebrate the Bayram with anyone, but luckily, I was able to join a few of the open dinners organized throughout the city every night, and so can claim to have immersed into the holiday spirit to an extent.

My time at the charity was nevertheless really rewarding. I had the opportunity to work alongside many individuals who were deeply passionate about their work and committed to the idea of making education accessible to all, regardless of age or gender. I was also able to experience first-hand the working environment in a Turkish NGO. I was deeply impressed by the fact that one of the seniors came in the morning to greet every single person on the floor, including me, and asked how we were doing and whether we were enjoying the work we were assigned. It was an action with a lasting impression on me, which showed me a way to lead, whereby one is close to one's employees, regardless of the existing hierarchy.

The majority of the work I was given consisted of researching grant opportunities for the charity. I found out about a lot of grants offered by a diverse range of countries, whose consulates and embassies were located in either Istanbul or Ankara. I felt proud to be able to contribute to the effort of the team and to also make use of both my acquaintance with fundraising as a skill and my proficiency in English, as most grants were advertised in it.

All in all, I had an incredible summer in Turkey, which would have never been possible, had it not been for the QM Expeditions Fund. I improved my Turkish immensely, immersed into the country's culture during a very important religious holiday, and extended my professional network. Most importantly, thanks to Queen Mary, I got the chance to acquaint myself with the working environment in Turkey both at an NGO and at a law firm level: an opportunity I had only dreamt of before. The whole experience has provided me with an invaluable insight that I will certainly employ in my upcoming career decisions, and that I will always be deeply grateful to Queen Mary for.

With Gratitude,
Aysel Kucuksu