I was fortunate enough to be awarded a grant from the Expeditions Fund during the final year of my undergraduate studies. The grant allowed me to pursue an Arabic summer course at the International Language Institute in Cairo, Egypt.

During the summer before this course I had undertaken similar study at the University of Damascus in Syria. The award from the Queen Mary Expeditions Fund allowed me not only to build on this base and enhance my proficiency of the Arabic Language, but also to expand my knowledge of Middle Eastern cultures by exposing me to another very distinct culture within the region.

The sheer size and population of Cairo has come of a shock, especially since my last experience of the ‘Middle East’ was living in Damascus. Property for students in Cairo is of a much more modern standard than what is on offer in Damascus. Luxuries such as Wifi Internet and air conditioning seem to be a standard inclusion in the majority of properties.

When people talk about Cairo the first thing that comes up is usually the traffic and pollution. Whilst this is a problem in Cairo, and the majority of major cities in developing countries, once you get past it a bustling metropolitan city containing both modern and ancient sites is revealed. I have been fortunate enough to have the time to explore some of Egypt during my time here, but due to the sheer size of the country some areas (such as Luxor) are out of reach unless there is at least a weeks holiday to dedicate to such a venture.

5 hours by bus from Cairo is the beginning of the Western Desert. 1,100,000 square kilometres of complete nothingness. The area is populated with a small number of Bedouin tribes who continue to adhere to the traditional nomadic lifestyle despite the encroachment of the modern World.
The Sinai Peninsula is another sparsely populated area of Egypt and is also populated with Bedouin. Most European tourists who make it to the Sinai Peninsula visit the resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh. I chose to visit the slightly less developed towns of Dahab and Neuwiba.
During my visits I spent my time sleeping on the beach under the stars as well as drinking tea and eating fish with the local Bedouins. As modern developments are starting to pop up in both Dahab and Neuwiba it seems that it will only be a short time before both have been turned into bustling tourists like Sharm El-Sheikh.

The above photo is taken from the grounds of the Cairo citadel. From the monument you can see the whole of Islamic Cairo. The traditional nature of Islamic Cairo is in stark contrast to the largely westernised areas outside of it. Further more areas such as these seem to be becoming rare as the modern part of Cairo swallows up older areas such as these.

Following the completion of the two months of summer language school I had originally come to Cairo for I was fortunate enough to be offered a position at a non-governmental organisation. Therefore I have decided to stay on in Cairo for the next year to continue studying the Arabic language and gain some work experience before continuing my studies. My role at the NGO in Cairo has given me an extremely important insight into the realities of working in developmental organisations and has helped me to make an informed decision on what masters course to take and at which institution I want to study at.

My time in Cairo has so far been a thoroughly rewarding experience. I am confident that during my planned 15 months stay in Cairo I will be able to get a good grasp on the Arabic language. Further more I believe that my work experience will well prepare me for postgraduate study and future work in a developmental organisation afterwards. Finally, I would like to again say how grateful I am to have had the award as it is allowed me to pursue my interests and get me started on my chose career path.