

Hippos

Through the Jewish Studies Fellowship at Rice, I was able to volunteer on an archaeological dig in a city close to Tiberius along the coast of the Sea of Galilee called Ein Gev. This trip was actually my second time in Israel, but I was able to experience it in an entirely new light by remaining in one location, rather than touring around the country. So, for two weeks in July, I participated in the twelfth season of excavations at Hippos, which is associated with the University of Haifa. During the dig, all of the participants stay in Kibbutz Ein Gev, which is about a mile from the dig site. This is where we ate most of our meals, and spent the majority of the time that we were not excavating. I was placed in a room with two Americans: one from Colorado and the other from Missouri. Both were close to my age, however, the volunteers ranged in age from 16 to 50, most in their mid-twenties.

The people I met on this trip were definitely an amazing part of this experience. I was surprised to find that the volunteers were so international, with people from Norway, Germany, the US, Israel, Poland, Russia, and more. A majority of the Israelis volunteering were completing hours they needed from the University of Haifa to get their archeological degrees. So, through them I learned a lot about Israel's educational system, and the general lifestyle of someone about my age in the country. The other volunteers were diverse as well, hailing from all different countries and making up several religions, with about half being Jewish. At Rice it is completely normal for such a diverse group to become friends, but in other places this can be quite uncommon, so it was a really amazing experience to see this happen elsewhere, particularly in such a war torn area.

For the excavations, we left the kibbutz at 4:45 am and returned at around noon. Waking up this early was difficult at first but became (somewhat) easier after a few days. Once atop the hill where Hippos is located, we were divided into several groups to work on different areas of the city. I was assigned to a new excavation area: the living quarters. Because this area had not been excavated at all before, during the first few days we mostly moved rocks and attempted to dig to the floor. Throughout the two weeks we found several walls and reached the floor in a few places. We even found a few really incredible artifacts: lots of pottery shards, a pot, a few coins, a ring, and a door latch. Finding these relics was the highlight of all of the digging.

Actually excavating the area was much harder work than I imagined it would be. We were constantly lifting and digging and sifting, in heat as great as 105 degrees, granted in much less humidity than the Houston heat. On top of this, we had to be careful to avoid the hundreds of bees that buzz around (I only got stung once) and the occasional scorpion. But, in the process I learned a lot about the science of archaeology, and how excavations are performed. I became accustomed to the idea of digging in layers according to stratification and dating artifacts based on the context around them. The pottery expert at the site was incredibly knowledgeable, and so I learned a lot about what the different types of pottery look like, where they came from, and what they were typically used for. It was surprising to learn just how much pottery was shipped in from other parts of the world during

this time. Participating in the excavations was such an amazing experience, not only because I learned so much about archaeology and the history of Hippos, but also because I was able to contribute to the findings and expose a previously covered area of the city.

During several evenings, the participants of the dig attended lectures ranging from preservation, to pottery, to the history of the city Hippos itself. Through these lectures I was able to learn even more about the practices and applications of archeology, as well as the history of the Hippos. Hippos was a Roman Decapolis, one of ten cities that was predominantly a center of Greek culture. Hippos was well structured and fortified, based around the decumanus maximus, the main street of the city, and the Forum, the main square of the city.

After returning from excavations, we rode the bus back down to the kibbutz and spent our remaining time there. During this free time, we often swam in the Sea of Galilee. We also explored the kibbutz, and in the process I learned a lot about the concept of kibbutzim and how they are run. Although this particular kibbutz is privatized, as are most all in Israel during this time, there is definitely a strong community present there, and a collective feeling to most activities, including meals. One weekend night the kibbutz threw a mud-wrestling event in an empty area next to a broken down building. A mud pit was dug out in the middle of the area, and seating was placed around all three sides. They played loud, metal music the entire time and an announcer narrated all of the matches in Hebrew. Young men and women came from kibbutzim all around the area to participate in, and watch, the event, so it was quite large, with around 200 people watching. Attending this event was one of my favorite parts of the trip, because it was such an amazing cultural experience!

We also took one field trip a week. The first was on a hike to an ancient synagogue, followed by a dinner, made by some of the Druze people in the area. I think that was my favorite meal that I had the entire trip, and was a really interesting way to see another culture in the area. For the second trip we swam and had a picnic along the Jordan River. During this trip I really got to know a lot of the Israeli students, and I got to meet one of the volunteer's sons, who is an American making aliyah and serving in the Israeli Defense Forces. He's a really interesting person, and it's amazing to see how easily and often he travels across Israel while he is on breaks, the amount of friends he's made from all over the country, and how he has become completely fluent in Hebrew in only a few years.

Overall, going to Israel to work on this archaeological dig was an amazing opportunity and a fantastic experience. I learned a lot about the different cultures in the area, as well as about how archeological digs are performed and what there is to learn from artifacts. On top of this, I had an incredible time and met a lot interesting and fun people that I still keep in touch with. This is definitely an experience I would recommend to someone else, and repeat myself.

Website paragraph:

Through the Jewish Studies Fellowship at Rice, I was able to volunteer on an archaeological dig in Israel, in a city close to Tiberius along the coast of the Sea of Galilee called Ein Gev. I participated in the twelfth season of excavations at the dig site, called Hippos, which was a Roman Decapolis, one of ten cities that were predominantly centers of Greek culture. Through this amazing experience I not only learned how archeological digs are performed and what there is to learn from artifacts, but made contributions by uncovering walls and discovering artifacts. During the dig, I lodged at a kibbutz, which really helped me to understand the culture and dynamics of the area, and allowed me to meet a lot of interesting people. Overall, this was an incredible experience, both entertaining and educational.