

## Testimonial of the ISSI experience

My trip to Israel started with flying from Luxembourg to Vienna, and then Vienna to Tel Aviv on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023. I arrived at the Tel Aviv airport at the same time as a few other ISSI participants, so we were escorted to Rehovot together. Since all participants arrived at a different time that day, we did not have a fixed schedule and were free to walk around campus and socialize with each other. I got to meet my roommates and we clicked right away. Tuesday was our first proper day; we had orientation and safety guideline presentations, met up with our lab mentors and other members of our research group, briefly explored Rehovot and had a welcome party. Next day onwards we started going to the lab every day and working on our project. We spent most of the first week observing our mentor do the experiments and we took time to understand the theory. On Wednesday that week, we had the pleasure to listen to Ada Yonath, who is an Israeli Nobel laureate known for her discoveries on the structure and function of ribosomes. That day we also had the country presentation evening where I got to represent Luxembourg, listen to other participants' presentations, and exchange souvenirs. On Thursday we had a lecture on the biomass distribution on Earth and humanity's Impact by Prof. Ron Milo. One of the best ways of socializing with people was to have meals together (especially during pizza nights) and to visit the recreation center. Over the next 4 weeks we played tennis and swam in the outdoors pool, which is also a great way to spend free time in the evening.

The first weekend trip took place in Jerusalem. On Friday we got to visit many historical sites such as the Tower of David Museum, the Old City, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Jewish Quarter, and the Western Wall. We had tour guides that explained the history and culture wherever we visited. My favorite place to visit that day was the Tower of David Museum because of the rich history and importance of the city to Israel and the rest of the world. For lunch we got to visit Machane Yehuda Market where most students got tasty shawarmas. Finally, in the afternoon we arrived at Ba'it VaGan where we had a Shabbat dinner. Engaging in this Shabbat dinner, as well as the upcoming ones, was a unique experience for individuals outside of the Jewish community. The next day we hiked in Wadi Qelt in the Judean Desert, where we got to walk the short trek, refresh in springs and swim in a natural pool. I wish the trek was longer because we did not get to walk very far, but being in the springs was fun. After lunch in the afternoon, we visited the Mount Zion viewpoint and headed back to Rehovot after dinner.

Week two started off with Prof. Tzachi Pilpel giving us a lecture on evolution followed by a presentation on how to give talks and write mini papers by our counselors. On Monday we took group photos together and were welcomed by representatives from the Development of the European Committee of the Weizmann Institute of Science. That day we also had a 'build your own falafel' dinner and, one of the most memorable social activities in the whole stay, the dance party. It was extremely fun sharing the same music taste with peers from all around the globe. The following day we had a recital where students got to share many of their talents outside of the scientific world. We also got to briefly meet the Vice President of the Weizmann Institution. On Thursday we had another lecture 'Arts and Science' by Lior Ben Gai who showed us the wonders of combining programming and art. This week we were a lot more involved in the lab work. We did most of the experiments ourselves, with our mentor guiding and supporting us throughout the process.

This weekend's trip was to Galilee, the northern region of Israel where we visited several places. Our first stop on Friday was Caesarea- the visitor's center and tour of the site of ancient Caesarea. Here we were also closely followed by guides who enthusiastically explained the stories behind Caesarea. We then went to Haifa to visit the beautiful Bahai Gardens and have a Druze Hafla feast in Druze town Daliyat Al Karmel. This was an extremely special experience as a lady of the Druze community gave us an overview of this religious ethnic group. We spent the night at the Shlomi

Guest House where we had another lovely Shabbat Dinner. The next day we hiked on the En Hardelit trail which was quite nice because it was a longer hike compared to the previous week. We also visited the Rosh Hanikra Tourist Site which had the most beautiful and mesmerizing views of the Mediterranean Sea.

The following week was spent mainly on preparation of written reports and our presentations. We had time to plan everything out and write it out individually, but also to rehearse together. This week's lectures included lectures about the neoantigen approach for cancer immunotherapy by Prof. Yardena Samuels and 'The Magnificent Mechanism or the Mona Lisa of Astronomy' by Mr Ilan Maulis. After the second lecture we got a chance to participate in night sky observations, meaning we could observe the sky with telescopes. Wednesday was our last day to submit the reports and presentations.

We spent the following 5 days in the desert mainly hiking. On our first day, we hiked in the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve and had lunch at the Gedi Field School. This was my favorite hike because we made stops to splash around in beautiful natural springs, which was very fun. In the evening we toured the Kibbutz Ketura and got an insight on what living in a kibbutz was like. I found this very interesting because I have never heard of a community like this before. We were welcomed with dinner and a pool party. The next day was a pretty eventful one. We first hiked in Har Zefahot very early where we got to see the sunrise. Later, we arrived at the Alomg beach where we went snorkeling which I found very exciting. We then had a lecture followed by lunch at Eilat Field. Our final destination that day was Negev Mountains Field School where me and most of my peers spent the evening stargazing. On Saturday we started the day off doing yoga during sunrise, followed by Makhtesh Ramon promenade in the late morning, and a visit to Ramon Colors National Park in the afternoon. On Sunday we had a lecture at the Blaustein Institute for Desert Research and visited Ben Gurion's Tomb. In the evening we had dinner at Bendouin Hospitality at Han Shayarot, where we were served Bendouin Hafla and listened to the stories of a Negev Bedouin tribe. At night we went to the Masada campsite, where we had night observations with the guides and slept under the stars. That was one of the many distinctive experiences of this trip. We only slept for about 3 hours because we then had our last hike and watched the sunrise over Masada. Next, we had lunch at Kibbutz Kalya, following an amazing opportunity to swim in the Dead Sea at the Kayla Beach.

We spent our last week doing the final preparation of oral presentations and carrying out the seminar. Seminar day was a long day as we had to get through all groups' presentations, but it felt rewarding once it was done as this was something we worked towards the past 3 weeks. At the end of the seminar, we had free time during which me and my friends spent the afternoon in Tel Aviv which was quite enticing. That week we also had a lecture by Dr. Yossi Shvartzvald called 'ULTRASAT, Israel's first space telescope.' Our last day we spent summarizing the month and had a closing event with diplomas, pictures and the first peek of our photobook. I feel like the last day was quite emotional as I grew really close to some people.

Overall, I had an extremely positive experience with this program. I was put in a research group of my interest and worked on the kind of thing I would love to do in the future. My mentor was very supportive, friendly, and patient (as were all counselors) and I grew very close to one of my lab mates. I also made loads of friends, and I am planning on staying in touch with them. I had a lot of fun with social activities, hikes, and all sorts of visits. We got to see so many different sides of Israel and experience the culture and history in a more personal way than we would as 'simple tourists.' I feel like I learned a lot, both from the educational point of view but also from the cultural perspective. Participating in ISSI was a once in a lifetime opportunity and I am glad I had the chance to experience it.