

## **My personal experience of the Tunisia camp 2018**, by Ting Wang

Before the summer camp started in Tunisia, there were a few things that I thought might be difficult or problematic during the two weeks in Tunisia. First of all, as the last person added to the team, and the only non-Dutch one, I was afraid that I would not fit in well. Especially given the fact I live in Germany and was not able to attend several team meetings in the Netherlands at the beginning. My second concern was about whether I could handle the responsibility of working with children and adults with disabilities, since I've never had a real opportunity of working with any before. Thirdly, I was concerned about the communication. I was told that French and Arabic are spoken in Tunisia, but I don't speak any of those languages. Would I be able to make myself understandable to people?

With all these concerns, but also mostly excitement, we landed in Tunisia. My first impression already gave me some relief. Perhaps my initial worries would prove not to be so problematic as I had imagined on beforehand.

I remember getting out of the airport, being exposed to 35 degrees warm summer air and I thought to myself, summer back home in China feels exactly the same. But after we got on the bus and I saw a seemingly endless desert disappear behind us, it felt like I was in a completely different place. That is when I really realized this was Tunisia for real.

A lot of first impressions were made on our first day in Hammamet. The volunteers hit it off quickly, as if we had known each other for a longer time already. It seemed that everybody in the camp was very curious about the fact that I am a Chinese. Since Les Oiseaux Bleues has been a Dutch-Tunisian co-operation over the years, I was the first Chinese volunteer in the group. Most surprising was that we shared a lot of cultural similarities even though we have different cultural backgrounds. For example, I found out that one of the Tunisian girls is a big fan of the American sitcom "*Friends*", just like me. Another girl likes Korean drama series and she was thrilled when she heard that we both watched the same series recently. Or when someone played an Micheal Jackson song, everybody could mumble along a little bit.

Firstly, I didn't feel like an outsider of the Dutch group at all, which in my opinion has a lot to do with the international environment in the camp. Based on my observations, the Dutch volunteers also realized how uncomfortable it is to be surrounded by people who don't speak their language, when they were surrounded by Arabic speakers and couldn't understand a word of what they were saying.

Both the Dutch and the Tunesian volunteers requested to "*only speak English please*" during our meetings. At those moments, I didn't feel like an outsider of the two groups, but more of a connector of the two cultures. We would only understand each other better when being more considerate and stick to speaking English.

As to my second concern, it also went better than I thought. This has a lot to do with the help I received from other team members. I definitely felt more prepared after all the workshops we have done during the first week before the kids arrived. I got used to the routine life of getting up early; I was taught how to change a diaper if I was supposed to take care of a kid that is not autonomous; we had a brief introduction of the kids that we would take care of. I think the real situation is much easier to handle once you have already prepared for the worst possibilities. Luckily Lobna and Salwa, the kids I was appointed to look after, were much easier to take care of than I had expected. It has been amazing how fast we built up trust and bonded, even though we barely had verbal communication. Then I realized what is important, when it comes to taking care of kids, with or without disabilities: it is about having a generous heart and be there for them whenever they need help.

Luckily the language barrier didn't become an issue in the summer camp either. As most of the volunteers from both sides speak English well and people were always willing to translate if language-barrier problems occurred.

In comparison, I found out there were more differences in intercultural communication. I grew up in China where we tend to talk in an indirect way, we don't say "no" often and criticism is expressed in a more subtle way after compliments. I found that the Tunesian way of communication resembles the Chinese way a lot. But most Dutch people communicate in a different manner and they tend to be very direct when it comes to criticism. My personal experience living in Germany for the past four years told me how difficult it is to not take criticism from outside personally, especially at work. So I think I was able to hear the real criticism from a Tunesian compliment and on the other hand I could face Dutch criticism without feeling offended.

I have to say all in all I had a very positive experience of the summer camp. I appreciated the talks among team members in our free time. It was mostly about young people sharing their growing-up stories, life choices and concerns of the coming future, no matter what cultural background we are from. Although sometimes the fact that I am Chinese troubled me a bit when people made jokes based on prejudices of China or Chinese people and didn't realize how offensive this could be. This is also quite understandable if people barely have contact with any Chinese people and don't get pointed out what are prejudices and what are real facts. On the other hand, I did receive a lot of

extra attention from almost everyone in the camp, and I believe that curiosity is the first step of breaking prejudices.

So I was really glad that I had the chance at this summer camp to clear some of my personal prejudices as well. For example I found out that Tunisia has a very modern and European oriented culture, friendly and warm-hearted people, which breaks the picture in my head of it being a conservative Muslim country. Also I became more aware of the fact that people with disabilities have the same needs as other people, socially and emotionally. The experience of working in an international environment reminds me of a Chinese saying: "seek the similarities and tolerate the differences", which I think worked well in this past summer camp.