



FALL 2005

## DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER



### Part One: Greetings from Kuwait!

#### Ramadan in Kuwait

As we write this, Muslims all around the world are celebrating the holy month of Ramadan. Muslims believe that Mohammad began to receive the Qur'an from God during this month. In the Islamic calendar, each month begins with the new moon. But since it is generally agreed that qualified religious scholars must see the new moon's white crescent, Ramadan does not necessarily follow the almanac. This year in Kuwait, Ramadan began as forecast on 4 October and at a different time in neighboring countries.



During Ramadan Muslims fulfill one of the five pillars of their faith by fasting during the daylight hours. Fasting is intended to demonstrate devotion to God, cultivate self-discipline, encourage a focus on faith, and allow Muslims to experience the hunger of the poor. The faithful awaken before the sun rises (which occurs here at about 4:30 AM) to eat suhoor, the morning meal. Until the sun sets at around 5:15 PM, Muslims do not eat, drink, smoke, partake in sexual activity, or even (in the strict interpretation of some Kuwaitis) swallow their

*Nearing the time for futoor.*

*(Photo courtesy Sam Lipkin and Shardul Oza.)*

own saliva. All restaurants are closed during the day. Those in Kuwait not observing the fast must dine clandestinely as it is illegal to eat, drink, or smoke in public before the maghrib (sunset). Individuals caught violating this taboo are subject to a KD 100 (\$340) fine and potential jail time; male offenders will also have their hair shaved off. As the sun nears the horizon, the streets are flooded with people rushing home to enjoy futoor (the meal breaking the day-long fast) with their families. Some restaurants are open at this time, but as relatives almost always share futoor in their homes, most are empty. The streets are eerily quiet as families break their fast with dates and laban (a yogurt drink) and then spend hours talking, praying, and dining (according to some Kuwaiti students, it is not uncommon to gain

weight during Ramadan.) After 7:30 PM, shops reopen and young people gather across the city to shop and spend time with friends, often until early the next morning.

School and work hours are often shifted or shortened during Ramadan to accommodate the extra time devoted to prayer and family. The university's office schedule, for example, was reduced by two hours per day, and classes that normally met in the afternoon were scheduled to begin as late as 10:00 PM. Many students remained at the university until it closed at 1:00 AM to chat with friends outside of Starbucks, play volleyball or football, or study. The school also provided a free weekly dinner during the month (with exotic delicacies from Pizza Hut and McDonalds) and the student government organized a potluck gathering for Gurgai'an (roughly, the Kuwaiti equivalent of Halloween).

Muslims believe that on one of the last ten days of Ramadan Mohammed received the first sura (chapter) of the Qur'an. This night is called Laylat al-Qadr, or the Night of Destiny. Since no one is sure the exact day this occurred, all ten days are observed with particular devotion and additional prayer. Even the cinemas are closed during the end of Ramadan to encourage young people to focus on their faith. It is said that on Laylat al-Qadr prayers and a sense of connection to the Divine are intensified. Many Muslims believe that whatever one prays for on this night will be realized, provided the desire will not eventually cause harm. Once the month ends, a three-day holiday, Eid al-Fitr, commences. Schools and offices are closed, and families and friends gather to spend time with one another. Many also choose to witness the slaughter of a sheep during the holiday. It is said that witnessing the blood passing from the animal provides the viewer blessings.



*Strolling the Kuwait City seaside.  
(Photo courtesy Sam Lipkin and Shardul Oza.)*



*Shardul and Sam, here shown with an AUK student, invite you to create your own caption.*

*(Photo courtesy Sam Lipkin and Shardul Oza.)*

Our schedule during Ramadan was irregular and hectic. With the Office of Student Affairs here at the American University of Kuwait, we organized several different events and activities for AUK students throughout the month. One such activity was educating non-Muslims about Ramadan. Another was a weekly dinner on Sunday nights in which students enjoyed their favorite foods (usually fast food) for free. These weekly dinners were highly successful and students would often be anxiously waiting outside of AUK's Ramadan Tent for the food to arrive. We also helped Pakistani students on campus organize a Pakistani Earthquake Relief Dinner, raising more than 400 KD (around \$1400) for the relief effort. At the end of Ramadan, we catered a futoor for more than 60 students. During Ramadan as during other parts of the year, events involving free food seem to be pretty well attended.

Our Ramadan work easily integrated with our more essential responsibilities: assisting students in organizing, planning and publicizing events on campus. Our duties range from designing and putting up posters for events to meeting with students and faculty to brainstorm about upcoming events to selling tickets ourselves for events. We also help manage the student employees in our office. We assign them tasks and sometimes proofread their work before their boss, Student Activities Coordinator Tadd Kruse, reviews it. Additionally, we are responsible for several long-term projects. For example, Sam has written a Student Employee Handbook and drafted a proposal for a student Leadership Development Program, while Shardul compiled policies and procedures concerning the reservation of university facilities as well as an Organizational Handbook for student organizations and clubs.

## **Social Life**

During our stay here, we have made friends with students from fairly diverse backgrounds. We met most of them at the university or through our university friends. Our friends, hailing from such varied nations as Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, and Denmark, reflect the diversity of Kuwait's (guest worker) population. Though Kuwait does not really have the nightlife of a Dubai, Beirut, or Cairo, there are places one can go at night. The Marina Mall serves as one of our main hangout places with dozens of restaurants to choose from and an adjacent beachfront area. Once in a while we will make a trip to the Ice Skating Rink in Kuwait City, which is usually extremely crowded. Other than that, the cinema is not a bad option when one is tired of the mall scene, although the English-language offerings are often of dubious quality. But whatever the nature of Kuwaiti nightlife or film imports, we have never felt bored thanks to the excellent company of our friends.

## **Kuwaitis and Expatriates**

It may seem odd to many Americans that the majority of people residing in Kuwait are not Kuwaiti citizens. This is partly due to the difficulty of obtaining Kuwaiti citizenship (jinsiyya). One is granted citizenship only if one's paternal ancestors resided in Kuwait prior to 1920, when Kuwait was still a center of fishing, pearling, and trading. One can also apply for citizenship after one's family has resided in Kuwait for 50 years, but such appeals are rarely granted. Wasta (connections through family and friends) can cut through layers of bureaucracy to provide driver's licenses, expedited access to public services such as a home phone line, quick delivery of forms to ministries, and good jobs, but it cannot guarantee that one will receive citizenship.

Jinsiyya is greatly desired because of the financial benefits it provides. Citizens are guaranteed housing loans and employment, and the Kuwaiti government automatically doubles their salaries if they work. What's more, only Kuwaiti citizens are eligible to own land. Education and medical care are free to Kuwaitis, retired citizens receive a generous pension, and wedded Kuwaitis receive a marriage allowance. The vast majority of employed Kuwaitis work for the government, while private companies are overwhelmingly staffed by expatriates. Government jobs are, according to reports, decidedly less rigor-

ous than those in the private sector. Ministry offices are open from 8:00 AM - 1:00 PM, while Kuwaitis in the private sector will generally work eight-hour days.

One can find people from all over the world residing in Kuwait. We have observed a large number of Americans and British working in the professional sectors alongside a continental Europeans as well as some Africans and Latin Americans. The bulk of laborers and shopkeepers come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, while cooks, maids, and restaurant staff are primarily Indian and Filipino. Under Kuwait's sponsorship system, every foreign worker must have a Kuwaiti citizen act as his or her legal sponsor. If the employee wants to switch jobs, he or she must have the sponsor's permission. It is not unusual for expatriate staff to work 12 hours a day every day of the week. They may only receive about KD 45 (\$155) to KD 70 (\$240) per month, but this is much more than many could receive at home. In fact, their salary can provide for the needs of four to six family members at home. Every year, the approximately 13 million expatriate workers in the Gulf region remit \$30 billion to their home countries. The foreign workforce is overwhelmingly young and male. Most hope to stay here for a few years, earn enough to support family at home, and ultimately return with sufficient capital to get married and start a family.



*A close encounter with some lovely eyes.  
(Photo courtesy Sam Lipkin and Shardul Oza.)*

Unfortunately, some of the workers are exploited, denied pay, provided inadequate housing, or physically or sexually abused. Many guest workers are not aware of their legal rights or are afraid that contacting authorities will lead them to lose their jobs or be deported, although documented cases of abuse are prosecuted and bring discredit to the Kuwaitis who violate the law. Some embassies provide ad hoc shelters for abused workers seeking refuge, and ministries or charitable foundations occasionally purchase tickets home for runaway expatriates. In Kuwait, several Indian laborers recently organized a demonstration, claiming that their employer had not paid them for several months. Similar protests have occurred in Doha and Dubai; several hundred expatriates in the latter city shut down a road to protest late pay. The government there is taking a rather strong stance on the matter, promising to prevent delinquent companies from sponsoring workers in the future and deny them government contracts.

While the majority of people here are Muslims, most of them Sunni, the government allows free religious exercise, provided that there is no proselytizing. There is a sizable, busy Roman Catholic church that contains beautiful stained-glass windows and, behind the altar, depictions of an Arab Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. There are also Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant churches. Other faith communities, such as the Latter-Day Saints, Seventh-Day Adventists, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists, also exist here and meet in private homes and other locales.

Regards from Kuwait,  
Shardul and Sam

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### Part Two: An Evening in the Desert

One Friday afternoon, we were fortunate to be invited by a friend to an evening in a desert compound. Driving past Kuwait City, the highway runs through a trash-strewn desert interspersed by power lines and occasional campsites. Finally, we arrived at the walled residence, which was roughly an acre in size. After introductions in a large room, unfurnished except for several beautiful Persian carpets, we were free to roam the compound until dinner. The compound housed over a dozen goats and an equal number camels; the camels were quite friendly and surprisingly accommodating of petting and photographs.



After dinner, enjoyed outdoors in the calming ambience of dusk, we retreated to a diwaniya, or a sitting room, a large rectangular area surrounded completely by couches. A diwaniya is also the name for an important men's social gathering. Usually taking place weekly, a diwaniya allows Kuwaiti males to gather and discuss politics and business. Some argue that the diwaniya serves an important political function; when a well-connected individual hears enough similar complaints

*"...boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

from enough individuals at enough diwanias, he is likely to discuss the matter with someone in the ruling family who has the authority to implement or alter laws.

No political debates occurred this night, however; we simply relaxed, enjoyed coffee, and listened to a live performance of traditional music. Arabic coffee is extremely potent and fragrant; it is flavored with cardamom and is poured teaspoons at a time into a small porcelain cup. The cup is always to be held by

the drinker; leaving the cup on a table, even when finished, is a faux pas. If you don't want any more coffee, you rock the cup back and forth and it will be taken away. Otherwise, the cup will be refilled. Meanwhile, a wonderful three-person band played traditional Arab music. One man played the 'ud, a tradition Middle Eastern instrument similar to a lute. We left after dark had overcome the country, satisfied that we had experienced several more of the region's traditions.

## Education in the Region

Education is required in Kuwait from ages 6-14. Kuwaiti citizens often utilize the free primary, secondary, and university education offered to them; the government will even provide them scholarships to attend university abroad if the subject they hope to study is not available at Kuwait University. Non-citizens are not entitled to free education and take advantage of the many private schools that utilize many different academic models. Families can choose from Indian, Pakistani, Filipino, British, American, French, and bilingual schools.

The government subsidizes these schools, and the Indian, Pakistani, and Filipino schools in particular are cheap. However, the more well-to-do, including Kuwaitis, often send their children to the Western schools, which are several times more expensive than other private schools but are much more prestigious.

Kuwait University, founded in 1962, is a popular choice with Kuwaiti students; however, non-Kuwaitis are only admitted if they win a scholarship or their parents work at the university. The government very recently authorized the establishment of private universities; in the past three years alone, three private universities



*A typical scene: students after school diligently pursuing their studies*

have commenced instruction: the Gulf University of Science and Technology, the Australian College of Kuwait, and the American University of Kuwait. Many other nations in the Gulf, such as Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, are experiencing similar revolutions in university education; there is a demand for a Western-style university education that does not require leaving family and friends for four years. As of now, however, college degrees earned from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States provide the most prestige.

## Travels

Kuwaitis love to travel, particularly in the summer when the heat is unbearable. Kuwaitis will often summer in Lebanon, Syria, or other more temperate Arab nations; it is not unusual to own property elsewhere. Sharm el-Sheikh, the Gulf equivalent of Cancun, is popular with many Arabs; hearing an Egyptian talking about this city, one might mistakenly assume that they are describing Heaven. Kuwaitis seem to be in love with London, and many have traveled extensively in Continental Europe. Several Kuwaiti residents we met had traveled to the United States, to visit the major cities ( New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.) or to see family living there.

To celebrate the Kuwaiti infatuation with travel, we decided to make a couple of trips of our own. Over the break for Eid al-Fitr (a celebration of the end of Ramadan), we traveled to Dubai, one of the United Arab Emirates. We took Air Arabia, one of the region's new budget airlines, into Sharjah, a neighboring emirate. The first thing we noticed was the large number of Indians at the airport, particularly the number of Sikh men in turbans. The Indian population of the UAE is actually larger than the Emirati population; over 80% of the population does not have citizenship.



*The Gulf and the sun of the late afternoon.*

In the last ten or fifteen years, Dubai has boomed, becoming a technology, banking, business, and tourist center, and making relatively little from its modest oil deposits. Many Kuwaiti residents feel that if Kuwait is to survive after the oil inevitably runs out, the nation must follow the example of Dubai. The city is

new and clean (thanks in part to laws proscribing spitting and requiring that cars be clean), and though traffic density is higher in Dubai than in Kuwait, it seems to flow much more smoothly in the former city. Dubai has become a hip vacation spot for Europeans, leading to a glut of luxury hotels, including the Burj al-Arab, the famous sail-shaped resort that will fly you in a helicopter from the airport to the hotel's own helipad if you buy a suite. Many Gulf residents will come to Dubai so they can participate in activities that may be forbidden in their home countries (namely drinking and public dancing). Religion expression seems much more free here; many Indian households displayed lights to celebrate Diwali, the Indian new year, but we did not see any of these lights in Kuwait. We entered a beautiful Hindu temple and found it interesting that they used plastic, decorative chanukia (Jewish candleholder for Hanukkah) in a portion of their light display for Ramadan.

Bahrain is a very small island of 800,000 with an economy fueled by refining Saudi oil, tourism, and offshore banking. To get here, we took a 50 minute flight on the brand new Kuwaiti budget carrier,



*Sam communes with nature.*

homemade pottery can be had for low, low prices. There is also a bridge to Saudi Arabia, the King Fahd Causeway; many Saudi men enjoy visiting the island to enjoy the nightclubs and more relaxed lifestyle. Though the beaches here are quite poor, the tranquil environment and plethora of things to do and see make the country worth a weekend visit.

Jazeera Airways. Unlike Kuwait and the UAE, most people here (60%) are citizens; the rest are mostly Indians and Pakistanis. Manama, the capital of Bahrain and the home of most of the country's population, feels older than Kuwait or Dubai, and the island contains many historical sites, such as the beautiful Qal'at al-Bahrain, or "Portuguese Fort," and the burial mounds which cover 5% of the island. The National Museum is beautiful, sizable, and interesting. We also visited A'Ali, our taxi driver's home village, where beautiful