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First Impressions

I underestimated Kuwait. I had fallen victim to the Western stereotypical image of the Gulf region, expecting to see camels trotting across oil fields as I left Kuwait International Airport. Instead, I was quickly swept up in the chaotic whirl of life in Kuwait, finding both familiarity and surprising differences during my ten-week stay.

I vividly remember the drive from the airport to the apartment. My face was glued to the car window, trying to grasp some idea of what Kuwait was, a country that initially had sounded so foreign. I was surprised to see green landscaping and indigenous-looking trees flanking the Ring Roads, the main highway network of Kuwait. I was soon awe-struck by the driving around me. Cars darted in and out around each other at unimaginable speeds. Later I realized this was all too common for Kuwaitis, and I heard stories of daring feats on the road.

On the way to the apartment, Dinah Warren '10 and I peppered Tadd Kruse, the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) with questions. While we were talking, we passed two sets of water towers which looked as though they belonged on the set of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". Shaped in a mushroom-like form with blue and white striping, the structures hardly hinted at their practical use. They looked purely decorative. Similar to the iconic Kuwait Towers, these water towers have become well-known landmarks in Kuwait.

The most surprising part of my introduction to Kuwait was the lack of gas stations. In the United States, gas stations in urban areas are readily available. Gas stations in Kuwait are scarce everywhere but on the Ring Roads. This seems ironic in a country known for its oil exportation. Everything in Kuwait is delivered in abundance, but gas stations, something that I thought defined the development of Kuwait, were the exception to this rule.

Settling In

I was pleasantly surprised at the spacious apartment provided by AUK, quite unlike dorm rooms at Dartmouth. Stylishly furnished by previous Dartmouth interns, the apartment was modern and sophisticated. The queen-sized beds in each of the two rooms were an instant success. It quickly became home, a space that offered comfort and relaxation after a day of work. I could see the turquoise Arabian Gulf alongside a partially-constructed skyscraper from the windows, a view that sums up this ever-evolving country.

I quickly found that the most valuable part of the apartment was a small knob on the wall: the air conditioning gauge! Not surprisingly, Kuwait is extremely hot in the summer and I can't emphasize enough how wonderful it was to return to a little icebox,

after sweating from the two-minute walk from the university. The air conditioning and everything about our apartment made Kuwait home for our ten-week internship.

My first 24 hours in Kuwait left me with the impression that I had absolutely no style. Although I dutifully read *Vogue* and *InStyle* every month, I had not anticipated feeling that my appearance would come across as so... plain. Right away, I recognized that Kuwaitis master style in all aspects of life. Everything from clothes to architecture is glitzy and impressive.

Strolling around AUK's campus, I stole glances of students dressed in designer labels, young women with meticulous make-up (sometimes over the top). Young men sported aviator sunglasses in and out of classrooms. Even the *hijab*, (head coverings) worn by a majority of the young women at AUK, were embellished with crystal designs. The men looked elegant in their traditional *dishdashas*: long, flowing white robes and headaddresses. Similarly, the streets of Salmiya (the district in which AUK is located) are lined with designer malls and Western fast food chains. From the beginning, Kuwait impresses and surprises its visitors, overturning presumed assumptions.

The American University of Kuwait

As an intern at AUK, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to work in an environment that was both challenging and rewarding. The university is situated on a relatively small, urban space, with facilities including classrooms, social spaces, a soccer field and three basketball/volleyball courts. Despite its small campus, AUK has adapted well to the needs of students and faculty. The campus is quaint and open, with outdoor walkways connecting buildings that allow students to congregate outside between classes. The campus is also home to a number of cats, regarded by staff and students as part of the AUK family. There is a Starbucks on campus and it is a popular hangout for students. It was also the reason for my dwindling stipend. The exchange rate: \$3.49 U.S. dollars for every Kuwaiti Dinar means that a cup of coffee at Starbucks puts one back \$4.83!

During my internship, I was assigned to three placements in different departments to diversify my work experience. My primary placement was with the Gulf Studies Center. I was the first intern to work for the Center, so had an opportunity to be creative about what my work would be. The objective of the Gulf Studies Center is to enhance understanding of the Gulf region and encourage informed scholarship in all academic disciplines.

The Center also works to promote dialogue and understanding between Gulf countries and the West. I was fortunate to be able to work alongside two Fulbright scholars, one of whom, Dr. Gregory Gause from the University of Vermont, was on a teaching grant. Aiysha Bakali, another colleague, was a student scholar. I worked on a range of projects, from compiling an annual report and newsletter to promoting guest lecturers for the student body. My work at the Gulf Studies Center was by far the most enjoyable time spent at AUK.

My second placement was with the Writing Center. An incredible asset for the university, the Center allows students to consult with mentors on papers, assignments, or difficult reading passages. We focused on assignments in the English language, but I quickly found that a background in Arabic was particularly helpful for comparisons and further explanations. Writing is not my strength, so working at the Center was a challenge even as a native English speaker. Working with students who are desperate to be fluent in English allowed me to reflect on how little I knew about the technicalities of English grammar. To my embarrassment, I constantly had to look up the rules behind grammar that came naturally to me. Regardless, AUK students were appreciative of any assistance with English. It is the main language of the university so it is imperative that students become fluent. Despite its challenges, the Writing Center allowed me the opportunity to work one-on-one with students who were genuinely interested in improving their English.

My third placement was with the Intensive English Program (IEP). For the first five weeks I was assigned to a professor as a teaching assistant. I worked with Robert Hobbs in two of his classes, three days a week. I will never forget walking into an all-male class on the first day. Classes are segregated by gender at the American University of Kuwait, and working with a class full of young men was initially challenging. But I slowly gained their respect and, after five weeks, we developed a good working relationship – one that even included a lot of humor.

The second half of my internship with IEP was directing reading circles with a small group of students. Working with the reading circles was enjoyable and resulted in several friendships. The atmosphere in reading circles is more relaxed than in classroom settings, and thus I was able to interact with students on a much more personal level.

Life in Kuwait

The grounds of AUK offer a familiar haven of social liberties. Yet outside the university was a different environment. Life on the streets of Kuwait proved difficult for a blond, Western girl. I was excited at the prospect of exploring the city in my favorite way: by foot. Unfortunately, it is uncommon for a woman to venture by herself, especially in a city. I felt uncomfortable when I tried to discover the city solo. Initially frustrated by this social custom, I soon began accepting the situation after many helpful conversations with other female, Western staff at the University. Eventually I began to use taxis, the most common form of public transportation in Kuwait, to continue my exploration of Kuwait City.

Many of the places I yearned to explore required a male supervisor, which I was unaccustomed to and perceived to be a handicap. I wasn't prepared to encounter these gender barriers and felt they prevented me from experiencing Kuwait to the degree I wanted. Still, these experiences gave me greater insight into gender issues in Kuwait and an appreciation for some of the liberties at home that I take for granted.

Towards the end of my internship I was fortunate enough to experience the Kuwaiti elections, where four women were elected to seats in Parliament. Given the fact

that women only gained the right to vote and hold office in 2005, this is a major accomplishment. The elections were a celebratory time for all in Kuwait, not just women. The results suggest the speed in which the country is changing both politically and socially. The political women I met in Kuwait were all extremely focused, assertive and ready to lead. Women in Kuwait have had only four years with voting rights and are already comparable, if not more determined, than women in the United States. While I personally experienced gender frustrations during my ten weeks, the elections clearly display an evolving society where change for women is on the horizon.

One of the most enjoyable things about living in Kuwait is hearing the beautiful calls to prayer, sung five times throughout the day at numerous mosques everywhere you go. Giant speakers attached to the top of the mosques (minarets), create a beautiful echoing effect. Even when driving past a mosque when the call to prayer is being sung, people turn off their radios in respect.

Music is an important part of life in Kuwait, and is always identified by a three beat rhythm. Egypt and the rest of the Gulf have a four beat rhythm, whereas Kuwait is unique.

To my delight, AUK and the apartment we lived in are close to the Arabian Gulf. Seen easily from work and home, the Gulf's color and its waves change daily. As temperatures in Kuwait began to soar, merely looking at the Gulf made me feel cooler. There is a wonderful boardwalk along the beach, where I spent many evenings observing the locals and reflecting on Kuwait. The boardwalk is popular for walkers and runners in mornings and evenings, and is always crowded on the weekends for picnics or family outings. The view of Kuwait's coastline is incredible, and depending on the visibility, it is possible to see the Kuwait Towers far across the bay. This is an extremely popular spot for Kuwaitis young and old.

Upon arriving in Kuwait, I was pleasantly surprised by its beauty, or at least by the effort to invest in artificial beauty. Flowerbeds and the Emir's (ruler's) image fill traffic circles. Tranquil public terraces dot the coast. The architecture is flashy and impressive and buildings are constantly evolving upwards (sometimes it seems as though buildings under construction outnumber finished ones). On the surface, Kuwait is glitzy, clean, and organized. Yet looking closer, another reality exists. Like many urban spaces in the United States, there is a garbage problem along some side streets. Kuwait is making extensive efforts to transform the city's landscape into an "oasis" of shopping malls and restaurants, accented with abundant greenery. The country's more natural environment is in the desert, but I was there in springtime, when it's too hot to spend much time there. I often wondered what that natural environment was like and hope to see it someday during the cooler season.

Students, professors, and staff treated me with unbelievable kindness and generosity during my stay at AUK. Often students urged me to go out with them on the weekends in order to show me "their" Kuwait. I met incredible professors, who tirelessly

answered my many questions about Kuwait and often included me in weekend events. Similarly, the AUK staff always treated me with the utmost kindness.

I would like to thank everyone who made my internship in Kuwait so enjoyable. It is an experience that has altered my perceptions of the Gulf region and has left me eagerly anticipating my next trip to the Middle East.