

FALL 2007



DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER

Daniel O'Brien and Weston Sager
Part 1



Coming to Kuwait

During the flight from Heathrow to Kuwait International Airport we sat next to a Kuwaiti teenager named Muhammad. He eased some of our travel anxieties by describing what we could expect to experience in Kuwait. While much of his advice about the people and the culture proved true, we regret to say that his favorable reviews of the Kuwaiti Burger King and KFC were less accurate.

We landed in Kuwait City on September 3rd at 6:30 A.M. Kuwait time, 11:30 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. The entire trip from Boston to Kuwait City took roughly 15 hours, including layovers. We were both exhausted upon arrival.

At the Kuwait City Airport we bought our visas from a visa counter, proceeded through customs, and met up with Tadd, our boss and greeter. Driving us to our apartment from the airport, Tadd gave us a brief introduction to Kuwaiti living. The first thing we noticed was the driving style of most Kuwaitis, which is typically fast, erratic, and exceedingly dangerous.



Unlike most Dartmouth student accommodations, our apartment has new furnishings. Here's our living room.

After a heart-wrenching drive over to our apartment, we were pleasantly surprised with the accommodations. The apartment is huge in comparison to the college dorm rooms that we are used to. Each of us has his own bedroom and bathroom, and we regularly take advantage of the kitchen. Also, the apartment is conveniently located—about a two minute walk from work.

After settling into the apartment, we went to dinner with Tadd and his co-worker Alia, who runs the American University of Kuwait's testing center. We enjoyed several Lebanese dishes, and afterwards we smoked fruit-flavored sheesha, which was so potent that it gave us both severe headaches. Despite this, we were both happy to be in Kuwait as we finished settling into the apartment.

Several days later we began work at the American University of Kuwait. The campus is small and attractive. Despite being only a few years old, the University is well-funded, and the staff and students have all been friendly.

Weston works primarily in Student Life with Tadd Kruse, the Assistant Dean of Students, and Fattoom, the Student Activities Coordinator. The three of them are responsible for overseeing and coordinating student events, clubs, and programs within the University. Weston has been developing a new leadership program at AUK that will begin in a couple of weeks. Weston also works in the Writing Center as a consultant and as a private tutor through the Intensive English Program.

Dan devotes most of his time to the Student Success Center, where he is developing a “Job Opportunities Directory,” which consists of a set of binders containing information about employers seeking AUK students for hiring, and an accompanying database. He also assisted with PAR (Placement, Advising, and Registration) during new student orientation, and will participate in organizing the upcoming AUK Health Fair. Along with these responsibilities, he works part-time in Student Life and is involved with the Campus Activities Board, the Student Employment Program, and developing a Student Ombudsman position.



Dartmouth-AUK interns share an apartment in this modern building, located a short walk from campus.

We were surprised to find that most people in Kuwait speak English—at least those whom we are meeting. Similarly, many people here were surprised to find that we speak Arabic. The people here who discover this about us are generally very impressed and often insist on having at least a brief conversation in Arabic—just to make sure. Before coming on this trip we had hoped to practice our Arabic, and we have had many opportunities. Additionally, we are using this opportunity to learn Kuwaiti colloquial Arabic.

In our first weekend here we went with Tadd and Muhammad Assam, the AUK Registrar, to an arcade and a bowling alley. The experience was oddly similar to life at home. We have discovered that much of Kuwait open to us is just like the United States; there are fast-food restaurants like McDonalds, Krispy Kreme, and KFC at every corner; giant SUVs in every parking lot; kids dressed in jeans and t-shirts mall-rattling. However, mixed in with these familiar, Western surroundings are several reminders that we are in a devout, Muslim state: many women wear the hijab, and there is an obvious lack of bars and clubs because of the prohibition on alcohol. We are also very aware that we are living in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. There are oil tankers in the harbor, massive petroleum silos on the outskirts of the city, and gas stations that sell a gallon of gasoline for a mere 70 American cents.

Mona Kareem and Our Kuwaiti Crash Course

Before starting our internship, Professor Kadhim of Dartmouth’s Arabic Department recommended that we get in touch with Mona Kareem, an AUK student and published writer whose poetry he had read. Having heard that we were hoping to meet her, she came by our offices to introduce herself. After a brief



*The View from the Student Affairs Office
American University of Kuwait*

conversation she offered to show us the remnants of the “old Kuwait,” away from the big, Western-influenced districts.

That Friday, the first day of the new Kuwaiti weekend of Friday and Saturday, she drove us over to the last remaining traditional souq in Kuwait, Souq Baroukiya. Vendors shouting at us to buy their wares, it reminded us of the markets in Morocco that we visited on last summer’s Arabic Language Study Abroad program in Fez. Mona was a gracious and generous host, leading us through the fish and meat markets, haggling with vendors on our behalf, and even buying Dan a pair of stylish aviator sunglasses.

After about an hour, we drove to a mall called Souq Sharq (often translated as “the East Market”) and saw the largest fish market in Kuwait. Hundreds of seafood distributors were standing in the middle of the market floor, shouting prices at the fishermen who just arrived with a fresh catch of prawns. It resembled of the frenzy of the Stock Exchange.

After Souq Sharq, we drove around to popular tourist destinations, including the Parliament, the Islamic Cultural Center, and the “Big Mosque,” but each was closed because it was the first Friday of Ramadan. Every restaurant was also closed because it is against the law to eat, drink, or smoke in the daytime during Ramadan in Kuwait.

After sundown everything opened back up, and we decided to eat at a Kuwaiti restaurant. We all ordered matbug zabaiedi, a traditional kind of fried fish served on a bed of Basmati rice. We also drank tea and ate lugaimat, which are little balls of fried dough typically served at Ramadan. By the end of the meal, we all were stuffed, a feeling we found characteristic of breaking the fast.

After a fascinating day of seeing “old Kuwait,” Mona kindly offered to drop us off at our apartment. This, however, proved more eventful than any of us could have foreseen. About 500 feet from our apartment building, Mona rear-ended another Jeep. Luckily, we were all safe. Mona had only been going about 15 miles per hour when we crashed, leaving a minor dent in both cars’ bumpers and breaking the taillight of the car in front of us. Seconds after we made contact, the angry driver ahead of us stormed out of the car and started yelling at Mona in French. In her rage she had forgotten to put the transmission in “park” and her Jeep drove itself into a parked car. Although Mona offered to pay for the damages that she caused, the other driver insisted that we call the police. Mona dialed the police department’s number on her cell phone, and shortly thereafter a policeman arrived and took down both drivers’ identification information and revoked Mona’s driver’s license on the spot. Thankfully, the situation was more or less resolved in about half an hour and we made it back to the apartment safely, albeit a little shaken up.

Since that incident, the three of us have become great friends. She frequently stops by our office to visit at the end of the day. We regularly have dinner with her, and we enjoy talking with her. Her kindness

has been one of the highlights of the trip. She gave both of us copies of her books and often drives us around Kuwait when we need to run an errand. Even though we do not like the way Mona drives, taxis are expensive and the dollar is weak. Besides, it adds some excitement to life here. At least that's what we keep telling ourselves.

Pots, Pans, and Bathtub Laundry

Also, we have been busy redecorating the AUK apartment. We were impressed with how spacious our apartment was when we first moved in, but it was, admittedly, missing aesthetic appeal. To help make the apartment a more livable space, AUK provided us with a roughly one thousand dollar budget to refurbish the rooms. The new couches we bought are immensely comfortable, and the pictures add some color to the otherwise stark white walls. We also bought several cooking utensils for the kitchen, and since we prepare most of our meals at home, these things have come in handy.

Before coming to Kuwait, the best dishes we could prepare were the most basic of necessities. However, we have both taught ourselves how to make a great variety of dishes (with the help of some advice from our mothers). We have found that eating in is cheaper than eating out and was a near-necessity when high temperatures were almost unbearable outside, even at night. Despite our unfamiliarity with the kitchen before our arrival to Kuwait, we consistently prepare quality dishes for ourselves. In addition to cooking meals about four nights a week, we keep the place clean and wash our clothes by hand. We did not realize that this internship would have us doing a variety of domestic chores, but it doesn't hurt to know how to wash socks in a bathtub.

Yet, we have not been confined to our apartment by any means. During the month of Ramadan, we were often invited by the staff to break the day's fast with them. Most often we either ate at our apartment or at someone's home, but when we did eat out, we ate at places that could be easily found in America: Johnny Rockets, T.G.I. Fridays, and so on. Truth be told, it is difficult to find pure and "authentic" Kuwaiti culture. Much of the surroundings have been deeply influenced by the West, and this hybrid Eastern-Western culture constitutes "Kuwaiti culture." There is something undeniably fun and novel about eating at a chain-restaurant whose menu is in both English and Arabic.



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**Surprises and Goodbyes:
*The Final Weeks in Kuwait,
October-December 2007***



In the second half of our stay in Kuwait, we settled into routines as we became accustomed to the Kuwaiti society and made a number of friends from the University. Still, we visited the better-known tourist sites, like the Kuwait Towers and the massive Avenues Mall.

Our last few weeks in Kuwait further confirmed to us that there is a real mixture of the East and West in Kuwaiti culture. *Hijab*-wearing women staff the Western stores and restaurants, and American goods are available in even the most traditional of marketplaces. Kuwait, better than any other place that either of us have visited, thoroughly mixes Eastern and Western culture in a way that works well for the people and businesses there.

The American University of Kuwait is a perfect example of this blending of cultures. Classes resembled those we would attend at Dartmouth, except that they were held in classrooms segregated by a partition. The Diner at AUK, mimicking the feel of an American diner, served dishes like the Eastern rice and vegetables, as well as the Western meat and potatoes fare. As for the dress, many students wore clothes from American and European designers, but they mixed into the crowd of men wearing the traditional long, white *dishdasha* and women dressed in the black, coverall *abaya*. At times, Kuwait seemed oddly familiar, though some ever-present differences reminded us that we were 6,000 miles away from home.

Halloween

Another excellent example of the connection between East and West was Halloween. We did not expect to celebrate this traditionally American holiday in Kuwait. To our surprise and pleasure, the Model United Nations at the American University of Kuwait (MUN at AUK) sponsors an annual "Pumpkin Festival" on October 31.

Dressed in makeshift costumes, we arrived at the American University of Kuwait ready to celebrate Halloween. The Diner at AUK served hotdogs and hamburgers, and the students sold treats and played games. Some students entered into the costume contest, and others bobbed for apples. Dan volunteered to be a target for the pie throwing booth. Seizing the opportunity to give Dan a pie in the face, Weston, along with a few of the student workers from the Student Life Office, paid one dinar to hit him with a plate filled with whipped cream.

Yet the centerpiece of the Pumpkin Festival was the haunted house. The students transformed one of the classrooms into a small maze filled with spooky decorations, props, and actors. We were led through the haunted house by a masked guide, who narrated the frightening tour in both English and Arabic. MUN at AUK did an impressive job recreating an American Halloween in the Arabian Gulf, and in many ways the festivities felt like Halloween in New England.

Surprise!

We often overlooked the fact that Kuwait was, indeed, our home for only eleven weeks. After decorating the apartment with new furniture, we made the place feel like our own. Yet, it was only during the last week that we really had the opportunity to have company over. The best opportunity to show off the new apartment came when Dan and Mona put together a surprise party for Weston's twenty-first birthday.

Even before we had left, Weston's parents had approached Dan about carrying on a Sager family tradition: hitting Weston in the face with a pie on his birthday. Dan took advantage of the resources of our good friend Mona Kareem, the Iraqi poet and our friend from AUK, and together they put together an American-style surprise party in the middle of the Arabian Gulf.

Under the pretense of "getting coffee," Dan and Mona went shopping for decorations and party supplies the day before at the Sultan Center, a Western-style supermarket and department store located in the heart of Salmiya. They found that everything that could be found at an American supermarket (with the exceptions of pork and alcohol) was available at the Sultan Center. After picking up decorations, cards, and rotating party lights, Dan and Mona had all the supplies that they needed to throw a surprise party fit for a young American.

On the evening of November 13, Dan had to "work late" in order to finish a project, so Weston and Fatoom, the Student Activities Coordinator at the American University of Kuwait, went out for coffee and sweets. With Weston distracted, Dan and Mona quickly decorated the apartment. Mona picked up the food while Dan worked on the final preparations for the party in the apartment. Our guests arrived, including Mona's younger sister, who was in charge of photographing the event.

However, it was not until the last minute that Dan and Mona realized that they did not pick up any whipped cream for the perennial pie-in-the-face. Dan ran to the neighboring *baqaala*, the Kuwaiti corner market, to pick up some whipped cream. Struggling in broken Arabic with the shopkeeper, Dan tried to explain that he wanted whipped cream. Despite the immense difficulty in finding the obscure word for whipped cream in Arabic, Dan still managed to procure the next best thing: a small carton of whipping cream. With only minutes until Weston returned to the apartment, Bedour, a friend and student worker in the Office of Student Life at AUK, helped Dan to whip the cream by hand. It was exhausting, but they finally managed to create a cream pie fit for Weston's face.

With everything finally in place, shades pulled and lights dimmed, everyone waited for Weston to come back. Restraining nervous laughs and giggles, the party listened as Weston fiddled with his keys. Unsuspectingly, Weston walked into the apartment completely and utterly surprised at the decorations and friends standing in the living room.

The birthday party was everything Weston could have possibly wanted. He received generous gifts and a delicious dinner. Finally, Weston was presented with a cake, complete with a picture of him on it. After singing "Happy Birthday" and blowing out the candles, Weston began to cut his cake. Unbeknownst to him, Dan was standing right behind, pie in hand. By the time Weston stood up straight, Dan had nailed Weston in the face with the cream-covered plate, successfully keeping the old Sager tradition alive.

Finishing Up

Unfortunately, Tadd, the Student Life Director and AUK internship coordinator, had to travel to the United States to attend a funeral. In his absence, Weston devoted all of his time to overseeing and working in the Office of Student Life. Although this meant giving up work in the Writing Center, Weston was able to devote more time to working on his major project for the term: a brand new leadership program at AUK.

In September, Weston was put in charge of developing this new leadership program, later named “L.E.A.D. (Lead, Experience, Achieve, Discover) at AUK.” This new program was to consist of a series of leadership-oriented lectures and workshops, each covering one facet of leadership, such as business etiquette or public speaking.

Starting from little more than a concept, Weston created all the materials and planned each event. His work will unfold over the course of the coming year, but he did get to see the first L.E.A.D. at AUK presentation in the final week of the internship. Although attendance was low, feedback about the program was very positive. Hopefully, L.E.A.D. at AUK will blossom into a full-fledged, honors-style program in the years to come.

As for Dan, finishing up his work meant completing the *Job Opportunities Database* and *Directory* for the Student Success Center. The Database allows students to browse and search a database of employers seeking students or recent graduates for work. The *Directory* is a three-volume collection of recruiter notices describing the types of positions available and the areas of concentration in which those companies are most interested.

Dan also worked on developing a temporary student-worker program at the University. Before leaving for home, he submitted a thorough, written proposal for implementing this program. The proposal will be considered by the Office of Student Life, and a similar proposal will be considered concerning a new Student Ombudsman position.

Going Home

The last few days of the internship were bittersweet for us: we were happy to be heading home, but it was also difficult because we were leaving so many good friends behind. The last day of work was filled with reminiscing and goodbyes. The Division of Student Affairs generously threw us a small party, and everyone made sure to see us.

The night before we left, we grabbed dinner at McDonald’s and played cards. The next morning, Tadd stopped by to check out the apartment and to wish us well. By 6:00 A.M. Mona and her sister had come to pick us up for our flight.

At the airport, we had one last coffee with Mona and her sister. Leaving for our terminal, Mona gave us a teary goodbye, and we exchanged contact information. An hour later, we boarded the plane for London, and arrived at Logan Airport by 6:30 P.M. It was literally the longest day of our lives—thirty-two hours long because of the eight hour time difference our origin and our destination.

Looking back on our internship, we were both happy to have experienced life in the Middle East. We

were particularly fortunate to have met so many wonderful people in Kuwait, both young and old. We look forward to meeting the AUK interns that will be coming to Dartmouth in the summer. The internship was rewarding, and in addition to the memories that we made there, we made a number of cherished friendships and hope to one day return to Kuwait, *inshallah*.