



Dartmouth-AUKuwait Internship Program
Intern Newsletter – Fall 2017
Mary Versa Clemens-Sewall '20



Learning through the Unexpected

I arrived in Kuwait with only the impressions of the Arabian Gulf region I had heard in Morocco and the vague and biased image of the region presented by American mainstream news media. My primary concern was the weather forecast; I had few concrete expectations other than heat. In contrast to my priming, I found limited evidence of Moroccan-supplied stereotypes, I felt safer in Kuwait than in the United States, and I regretted having packed only two sweaters.

My hosts in Morocco painted the Gulf as a place with strong commitment to Muslim and Arab norms. In fact, I found that residents of Kuwait—rather like Moroccans—have diverse views on appropriate dress, conduct between teenagers of different genders, and balance between individual aspirations and family wishes. When I asked friends about their opinions on these issues, they gave thoughtful reflections on religious injunctions and cultural values. Meanwhile, news reports in the United States highlight violent incidents in the Arab world. This selective coverage can teach its American audience to unanimously associate Arabic slogans and desert landscapes with danger. But the only impacts of regional conflicts I saw were increased security measures, so on balance, I felt more secure than I do at home. And as for heat, I need not have worried because all structures are well air-conditioned.



A midday walk along the Gulf with three friends from the Tutoring Center

As with all my times abroad, the best and most significant experiences were those I did not foresee. Friends gave me special glimpses into their values and family life through firsthand experiences and wide-ranging discussions. A highlight of my cultural immersion came when I spent the night with a Kuwaiti friend at her home. I joined her family for an evening beachside barbecue, and spent the following day with a dozen female relatives at her grandmother's house during their weekly family gathering. My hostesses gave me cultural artifacts like food and clothing. More significantly, they gave me a window into how they interact with one another. As they greeted, served, instructed, and listened to one another, these women communed with one another and brought younger girls into their fold. I will remember this image of life-giving female social space.

Also, through conversations, friends taught me about the role of religion, the challenges of growing up, and the politics of nationality in Kuwait. A conservative Muslim explained how faith impacts her decisions, and an agnostic student reflected on the religion she left behind. Sisters from a middle-class family recounted attempts to convince their parents to buy expensive, brand-name accessories so that they could fit in at school. Egyptian citizens, who have lived their whole lives in Kuwait, admitted that they are not seen as locals in either Egypt or Kuwait.

Lastly, colleagues at the university gave me exciting opportunities. For instance, a math professor entrusted me (with supervision) to teach his Statistics and Calculus courses on one occasion each. He provided feedback, but he insisted that I compile my own lecture notes and homework assignments for the students. Nerve-wracking yet energizing, the lectures themselves afforded me firsthand insight into the job of a professor. In reflecting and debriefing on the lectures, I came to see my own strengths and weaknesses as an instructor.

I am most grateful for the friends I made in Kuwait, and I hope to visit them soon!