

What I got as a CS Major out of my Internship at the American University of Kuwait

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Kuwaiti Fishing Boats at Sunset

First Impressions

My layover in Amsterdam is roughly 4 hours. After eating a proper meal (following 8 hours of airplane food) and charging my electronics, I sit down at gate E22 and wait. The seats slowly fill in. Mostly tired-looking Arabs who I assume are on a connecting flight from another location. Mostly families comprising of young children and mothers halfheartedly attempting to restrain their antics. Several elderly gentlemen occupy the seats closest to the boarding lanes. Time passes until the European and American businessmen begin to file in roughly 15 minutes before boarding. When the terminal attendants open the first boarding lane, there is a lazy but hurried crowding, as several Arab families and an elderly gentleman form the beginning of a line while the speakers overhead crow in English, “families with children under the age of two may board now, all other passengers are advised to remain seated,” which the mass of Arab families now forming completely ignores or does not understand. As the airline begins to take its three classes of elite passenger passes, the Arab families seem to become confused as the attendant begins to admit only the straight, orderly line of white businessman who now begin to trickle in from around the corner in surprising numbers.

The elderly gentleman at the head of what he had believed to be the correct line began to question the attendant after each batch of tall, greying white men in suits were allowed down the lane towards the plane and he was shunned to the lane which read “Economy class” on a television above his head. Not only him, but various other Arab individuals would approach the attendant, attempting to show their passport and boarding pass as all the white, predominantly male, passengers were being boarded. The attendant would politely attempt to explain across a language and cultural barrier that they would simply have to wait, pointing to the economy line. Each time she did this the individuals would look, not even perplexed, but a mixture of surprised and disbelieving, and eventually quietly sulk away nonetheless, few returning to repeat the question. As this process repeated itself over and over, however, the stewardess began to become more and more exasperated. Central to her woes was the elderly gentleman at the head of the line who would continually approach her, asking “Can we board?,” and, clearly impatient, respond “How come?” in an aggravated tone before she had finished repeating her message, which was clearly not getting across in any real sense.

The line of first and business class passengers dwindled from the orderly businessmen with suits and leather luggage to a rowdier procession of casually dressed, shorter, stockier white passengers who spoke (unlike their almost silent predecessors) in excited, louder, and increasingly more casual English. Having lived for a time in rural Mississippi and Vermont, I noted a number of passengers with southern drawls and other regional rural dialects among them. (Later on, once the flight was well under way, I struck up a conversation with the passenger next to me, who mentioned that he worked for Halliburton, an American multinational petroleum field services company. When we touched down in Saudi Arabia and he disembarked along with many of the casually-dressed white passengers, I realized that, like him, many of them were likely there as consultants on some level for the petroleum extraction industry in the Kingdom).

But looking past the end of the priority boarding party, I noticed an extensive and disorderly line of Arab families had developed behind me in the economy line, with a single white, male passenger sprinkled, like myself, among ever so many passengers. It was then that I began to notice a pattern of silent, lone, embarrassed-looking Arab passengers, three total, who had quietly and very meekly slid into the priority boarding line, attempting as best as they could to avoid drawing attention to themselves in front of the long line of their fellow, yet economy

class, Arab passengers. Two out of the three had first joined the economy line towards the front, and slid slowly, but nervously to the other line just at the point where the attendant was checking documents. I assumed they did so to avoid the embarrassment of all the frustrated looks of the perplexed economy-class Arab passengers, many of whom, like the elderly gentleman up front, were clearly having their patience tested.

No passenger I saw was as indignant as him, however, and I assumed that it was because he was accustomed to being addressed in a social system that venerates age and experience, and not one that prioritizes capitalist values via the passengers who are able and willing to pay more for priority service. Eventually, the boarding process resolved itself and all the passengers heading to either Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, myself included, boarded the plane and a separate chaos ensued as the Arab families hustled past the businessmen, who were by that point already settling in to sleep or work on their laptops or watch a film. Children were climbing excitedly up and down their seats and the overhead compartments seemed to create more baggage as time went on rather than store it, and then there was the bargaining and seat switching.

A kind, middle-aged father with a watch bearing a leather strap offered me to switch with his business class seat so that he could sit next to his family. With the language barrier I didn't quite realize that he was offering me an upgrade but I accepted it nonetheless, not wanting to separate his family. I sat down in my seat, took a deep breath, and began to scroll through the airline's video selection until I settled on a feature-length standup comedy by Louis C.K. and was quickly put at ease. Within a short while the plane took off, and I was left feeling elated and nervous, glancing excitedly past the heads of passengers and out the porthole window at the lights of Amsterdam. I'd never been to the Middle East before, and here I was plunging into the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. 'Here we go,' I thought to myself, 'time for another adventure.'



A Morning Stroll along the Corniche on the Persian Gulf

The Internship Placements

Before I left Dartmouth I had filled out a preference form which listed the various departments of the American University of Kuwait (AUK) that I could apply to work in for the internship. I was to have one primary placement of 20 hrs. /wk. and two secondary placements of 10 hrs. /wk. each. Tadd Kruse, the Assistant to the President for Institutional Planning & Effectiveness, quickly got a hold of me and informed me that I had been placed in the Library and Intensive English Program (EIP) as my two secondary placements, and the Center for Research in Informatics, Sciences, and Engineering (RISE) within AUK's Computer Science Department for my primary placement.

On the night of my arrival, by the time I had disembarked the plane, claimed my baggage, and obtained my Visa it was well past midnight, yet Tadd was waiting patiently for me in the airport lobby. When I first saw him, he was emailing on his smartphone while also talking to someone via the Bluetooth mounted in his ear. Wearing a red ball cap and an athletic shirt, He seemed more ready to pick up a bat and swing than to don a suit and manage a fairly young and large institution. But as soon as he was free, Tadd introduced himself and gave me a tour of his fair city, swinging by an American fast-food restaurant on the way. By the time we got to the intern apartment it was almost 2:30 am but Tadd was still chipper and ever helpful. He made sure I was settled and then told me to meet him in the morning at his office for the first day of orientation. And from that point on my internship had already begun.



View of Salmiya from the Intern Apartment

The AUK Library

In the schedule I was asked to make for myself, I listed the Library as my first placement of the day from 8:00 am – 10:00 am Sun-Thurs (the weekend being Fri & Sat). When I first walked inside the building I was right at home. It's a large, spacious building with glass walls up both stories on three out of four sides. The second floor houses the extensive print collection, a conference room, and many bookable study rooms, and on the first floor was a computer lab, the reference collection, an audiovisual collection stocked with every documentary known to man and many popular western films. The library director, Dr. Asma Al Kanan, and the staff of the library, Hana Kaouri, Zainab Al Attabi, and Thomas Kutty all welcomed me and helped me get

situated and perform my tasks from day one.

I started by learning to catalog incoming book orders and enter them into the library's digital system. Then, I helped organize and host a talk by Kuwait author Dana Aljouder (poster pictured) about her newly published novel, *Evora: The Secret Child*. After that, I helped add security seals to the Library's DVD collection, and staffed the reference desk. I also took it upon myself to re-shelve several sections of the library's print collection that the students were particularly fond of, namely the sections on Arabic poetry and computer programming. I even wrote an article for the AUK website on a Springer Workshop the Library hosted on a weekend that I attended (and embarrassingly took 14 legal pages of notes on). Finally, I concluded my tasks at the library by editing and improving the Library's digital LibGuide (short for library guide) on Computer Science and Engineering, and fixed broken links in several other libguides.

Throughout my time at the library, I

*A Book Talk by Kuwaiti Author Dana Aljouder
that I Helped Organize and Curated*



have been nothing but engaged. Ms. Al Kanan always went out of her way to find a project that I could be both helpful on and that would suit my skills and interests. I frequently interacted with both the student workers and AUK students, at an average of two a day and easily over fifty total. I met many wonderful AUK students through my time at the library and even though it was one of my busiest placements, it was also one of my most visible, as a significant portion of the student body could be found on the ground floor of the library due to its air conditioning and friendly environment. Overall, my placement at the library was so stimulating and enjoyable that I found it very hard to leave all my new friends. As a hardcore nerd, the opportunity to handle a vast, diverse collection of knowledge with my own hands and keystrokes was an enlightening and unforgettable experience, with a possible

career opportunity in the form of academic publishing (from the Springer workshop) as a result. I owe the staff at the library so much for their kind camaraderie, instruction, and support, and I look forward to seeing where the Library goes under their care and guidance.



Crustaceans for sale in the Souk Mubarakiya Fish Market

The AUK Intensive English Program (IEP)

On my first day with the Intensive English Program I was introduced to the director, Ms. Sandra Stein, who warmly welcomed me to Kuwait and introduced me to the staff. She informed me that I would be working with the IEP Instructor Ms. Alison Koushki. She also informed me that Ms. Koushki was responsible for the birth of the IEP's Bring Reading to Life (BRTL) program where students learn the English language and the novels that they read by acting out the scenes on-stage, and showed me some of the leftover artwork and props from previous productions.



As fate would have it, the next day right as I stepped out of the elevator to find Ms. Koushki's office, she was stepping into it with a procession of students following her. Upon seeing me she remarked, "You're Tim aren't you?" to which I responded affirmatively and she replied, without missing a step, "Well then you MUST come with me," beaming at me with a Ms. Frizzle smile and with a just as suitable an outfit from the earrings down. I promptly followed her and her squad to the library conference room where I was introduced to the rest of the gang and informed that I was attending the first meeting of BRTL's upcoming

ATLAS Logo as Displayed on First Day

Phantom of the Opera performance. There I met my first and best friends in Kuwait and also got to witness BRTL's transformation from an IEP-affiliated program to a full-fledged club with over a hundred members, the American Theatrical and Literary Arts Society, or ATLAS (Logo Pictured).

The following week I met Ms. Koushki's IEP class; a bright, curious, hilarious, and critically engaged bunch of students who didn't mind me sitting in on the class and offering an American perspective when prompted by Ms. Alison. Over the course of my time in Kuwait, I attended Ms. Alison's class for an hour a day and observed the process of teaching English language, literature, grammar, and culture to Arabic-language students, many of whom came from the government (public) secondary schools before entering IEP. At the same time, for an hour a day, I assisted with ATLAS's *Phantom* rehearsals and productions, eventually settling into a role as co-choreographer of the Masquerade dance, introducing a Ballroom twirl to the dance and teaching and correcting the students' moves. When practices for the Masquerade dance were well under way and the choreography had been smoothed out, Ms. Alison's class had just started their first week of lab, so I switched over to the lab, curious to see what kind of homework Ms. Alison would assign. I was not disappointed. Ms. Alison had assigned ALL her IEP students, not simply the ones who had volunteered to be a part of ATLAS's production, to act out specific page ranges from *The Phantom of the Opera* novel with emphasis on proper tone and animation, along with pronunciation and grammar. As I sat and watched the events transpire, I was soon roped into many of the male roles, as there were only three male students in a class of

thirteen. We had an absolute blast. I got to know many of the students quite well, bonding between class over similar interests in film and music.

Through Ms. Alison's class and the cast and crew of ATLAS's production, I met a very large range of happy, engaged Kuwaiti, Arab expat, and Western expat students, and grew quite fond of their openness and lack of timidity in both performing and enjoying each other's company. When the day of the final performance came, I met both groups of students in the audience, and wished those performing and manning the technical equipment good luck. The show was spectacular. Dozens of roles, hundreds of lines, all done with precision and heart. It was hard to believe the actors, dancers, and especially the singers were only AUK students, many if not most from IEP! The night was a huge success and left me with very many fond memories of my friends in Kuwait. Ms. Koushki, her class, and the students involved in the production were all a wonderful portal to the raw talent, drive, and human potential in Kuwait that they represented, and quite frankly shocked me with. Two of the actors/dancers/singers I met even went on to win the school's talent show, which had over thirty entries, with their guitar & singing duo! My time in Kuwait would have been absolutely incomplete without the invaluable human connections and interactions; insights into Kuwait's education, culture, and society; and reflection on the education, culture, and society of America I had as a result of my placement in



the IEP program.

Sunset over Salmiya as Seen From the Third Floor of the Sciences Building

The AUK Center for Research in Informatics, Sciences, and Engineering (RISE)

When I first met Dr. Zeid, I had walked into his office for an appointment scheduled for me by Tadd and had no idea what to expect, knowing nothing other than that he ran a research institute at AUK. My anxieties were soon put aside as Dr. Zeid immediately welcomed me and described his experiences with past interns and the numerous possibilities for projects to work on. We got along surprisingly well, and by that point, I could not have been any more ecstatic with how well suited all of my placements had been. Dr. Zeid then took me upstairs to a department administrator's office, and after signing a form, I was given the key to my very own office - and man was it nice. It was stocked with every amenity a professor would need, including three chairs, one for myself and two for any visitors I might have. It also had a large window to the hallway with blinds that could be drawn for privacy. I was elated to say the least.

That weekend after my first full work week, Dr. Zeid took me to attend Startup Kuwait 2015, a programming and tech startup competition hosted annually at hundreds of locations worldwide and powered by Google Entrepreneurs. The conference was hosted on the 35th floor of Al Tijaria Tower in the heart of Kuwait City (the fourth tallest tower in the city at 715 ft.). We arrived during project idea pitches, at which point I immediately found the members of my team. Khaled & Khalid were friends who attended the conference for fun, each with their own app developed and with promising careers, one as a petroleum engineer, and the other as the CEO of his own startup. I approached them and we immediately took a liking to one another. Within minutes of the pitches finishing, the three of us were joined by the final two members of our team, Khaled & Yousef. The first was an incredibly gifted designer with several apps and projects under his belt, and the second was a prodigious high school programmer who hosted servers in his bedroom, ran his own freelancing business, and also developed iOS apps.



Team #WhatIf from Startup Kuwait 2015 (L-R: me, Khalid, Khaled, Khaled, & Yousef)

The five of us worked tirelessly over the next 52 hours to craft a successful startup idea and develop a bulletproof business model and prototype. Khalid A worked on crafting the UI and designed the app's logo. Khaled N. streamlined the design and presentation and put together a pilot video using footage and audio taken at the conference. Khalid M. stayed up all night to build the back-end and server structure to host the app-web interface. Yousef worked tirelessly, programming the app prototype in the C# language. And I went through version after version and revision after revision of the business model with various mentors until we were convinced we were going to market with the idea. All in all the process was exhausting, but resulted in a fantastic group of friends and memories to last a lifetime.

In the end we didn't end up placing, but were approached by a Swiss businessman very interested in our startup, and we continued to meet on the weekends to discuss and work on the project. Meanwhile, I began work back at RISE on both research and administrative tasks. On the one hand, amassing and ranking a list of visiting speakers who I thought would be a good match for the institute. On the other, under Dr. Zeid's guidance I began to research the effects of cultural differences on multi-site global software engineering projects, with an eye towards extracting a viable teaching model from the literature to implement in an educational game that would be used by AUK Computer Science and Engineering students. Looking back, there was never a dull moment during my time at RISE and I credit it with being the single most valuable experience for me academically at AUK.



Team #WhatIf Deliberating

Conclusion:



Sunset over Kuwaiti Fishing Boats along the Corniche on the Persian Gulf

I'd been abroad before several times to Russia, Canada, Cameroon, and China, but never for as long as my stay in Kuwait. My first few weeks in this small desert country I was all-eyes, all-ears, and always busy. I knew very little about the Middle East and was desperate to learn as much as I could, taking every chance I was offered to explore and understand this seemingly unknown world. Then, there came a phase where I began to truly miss home as I never had before. Hanover is only an hour and a half away from my hometown in Vermont and the sweet, green vegetation and clean, crisp, fresh air never left me when I went to college. I hadn't realized how much I love and miss my home state and even New Hampshire until I was in a desert nation which comprised of one sprawling city surrounded by oil fields on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula, but that phase didn't last long.

Very soon I began to fall in love with this small but beautiful and resilient country not for its exterior, but for the spirit and soul that its people possess. As I got to know my Kuwaiti and Expat friends better, and began to befriend more and more wonderful people I began to see that the Middle East, the Arab world, and indeed the Islamic world are terribly misunderstood back home in the US. Sure, Kuwait has many large, pressing problems and I'm not attempting to disguise that, but at the same time, as a nation these people have weathered incredible hardship

and unimaginably paced change with courage, unity, and a strong emphasis on family and culture. There is much more work to be done, both in the Middle East and abroad, to decide the fate of the region. But the spark, the spirit, and the resolve I have seen in Kuwait's youth and families has encouraged me that no matter what happens there will always be a sturdy hope for a bright tomorrow, a backbone for these societies, and an impetus for change from within that will benefit these societies, the region, and the world as a whole.

As for me, when it came time to leave I didn't want to, and had felt that way for quite some time. But I plan to keep in touch with the colleagues and friends I've met and I dearly hope that someday I get a chance to come back. As for my friends still in Kuwait, I can't help but think back to and sympathize with that elderly man at the airport back in Amsterdam, frustrated with the pace of progress, demanding, 'When? When will it be my turn?'



A Historical Kuwaiti Pearl Diving Boat on Display