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DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER



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