

Before setting out for Kuwait, I consulted a travel book that advised, “There’s nothing worse than going to the Middle East, only to find that it’s summer and it’s Ramadan.” Matt Forman ’11 and I arrived at the start of September. Temperatures averaged in the 120-degree range, and there was still a week and a half left to go in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, a time when during the day virtually no businesses are open, and when the public consumption of anything – food, water, tobacco – is expressly forbidden during daylight hours. Our apartment stood quite close to the beach, with a beautiful view of the Persian Gulf. But it was as elusive as a mirage: going outside meant simmering in a singularly uncomfortable and muggy sun, and merely standing around for any period longer than ten minutes earns a shirt drenched in sweat. I quickly developed a healthy respect for anyone who has lived or worked in that climate – particularly the Bangladeshi and Filipino foreign workers who form the backbone of the labor force in Kuwait, as they do throughout the Arab Gulf countries.

It was easy in those first few weeks to bemoan life in Kuwait. Even many locals are often all too dismissive of the place. “There’s nothing to do here,” goes a common refrain, “except go to the malls.” In time, however, I came to love Kuwait not just for its remarkable culture and history, but also for the potential the emerging Kuwaiti political model harbors for the Gulf and for the Arab world at large. Particularly as Dubai’s startled economy recovers from its credit collapse, Kuwait’s oil-driven wealth – for all its faults – could power a social and political liberalization worthy of emulation by its neighbors.



*Downtown Kuwait City reflected on a building's façade*

My work at the American University of Kuwait was taken up by two lines of duty: the first, as a teaching and research assistant for Professor of History Christopher Ohan; the second, as an administrative and research assistant at the university's fledgling

Gulf Studies Center, which sponsors guest lectures and coordinates interdisciplinary studies of the region's economies, politics, societies, histories, and arts. In addition, both Matt and I served as advisors to the student newspaper, *The Voice*, where we introduced journalists' writing workshops and sought to systematize the leadership structure of the paper.

Professor Ohan's Oral History course, in which I served as a teaching assistant, provided me with among the most valuable experiences that I had in Kuwait. In addition to other coursework, each of the 12 students in the class was assigned two oral history interviews: one hour-long phone interview with an American; and a second, two-hour sitting with a native Kuwaiti. Since I would be coordinating most of the American interviews, sitting in on all the interviews, and editing most of the transcripts, I became familiar with the worldviews of the Kuwaiti student-interviewers and the Kuwaiti interviewees: ideals, prejudices, and shared experiences were all there in the questions and answers of mostly ordinary Kuwaitis, speaking in their own words. The stories revealed powerful emotional experiences – a middle-aged female bank executive whose eyes glistened as she recalled getting the chance to meet and kiss both Gamal Abdul Nasser and Nikita Khrushchev as a young boarding school student in Egypt; or an older man from a prominent tribal family who recounted sneaking back and forth across the Kuwaiti-Saudi border during Iraq's occupation in 1990 so that he could tend to his immobile and ailing father in Kuwait while taking care of the rest of his family in exile.

Our time in Kuwait also afforded us the chance to witness continued progress in the battle for women's rights: four recently elected female members of the National Assembly were seated for their first parliamentary session, and succeeded in quickly passing legislation that frees Kuwaiti women to obtain passports without seeking the permission of their fathers and husbands.

Of course, many of the old restrictions still exist – classroom gender segregation at AUK, constantly bemoaned, looks like it will be around for quite some time – but one thing gleaned from the oral histories is that Kuwaiti society has undergone a massive shift over the last 30 years, becoming more cosmopolitan, less traditional, and particularly in the last 10 years, much more open politically. Newspaper headlines in the fall were dominated by coverage of a parliamentary investigation into an alleged vote-buying operation conducted by Prime Minister Nasser al-Sabah, a member of the royal family. While such corruption is endemic to Kuwaiti government, only recently has it become acceptable to publically address and condemn that corruption, a major step forward in a region mostly characterized by absolutism.

Meanwhile, contrary to initial reports, it was possible to venture beyond Kuwait's many luxurious indoor shopping malls – populated by stylish Kuwaitis of all ages and filled with upscale Western retailers – and see something of what Kuwait had been before the modern age. *Souq Mubarakia*, the old bazaar in the center of the city, contains every spice, textile, jewelry, or junk shop a foreigner could ask for, and provided a wonderful training ground for the art of the haggle. *Beit al-Sadu*, a museum dedicated to the traditional weaving methods of Kuwaiti women, and housed in a beautiful traditional Kuwaiti house along Kuwait Bay, gives wonderful insight into the lifestyles of pre-modern Kuwait. Nur Soliman, Matt, and I were frequent visitors to *Dar al-Athar*, the House of Culture. Nur, a senior at AUK who spent last summer working at Dartmouth's Hood Museum of Art, introduced us to the Dar's fantastic array of concerts and other

cultural events. Nur's family, who took Matt and I in as if we were their own, was our greatest support in Kuwait. We were lucky to spend an *iftar* dinner at their house during Ramadan, and to celebrate the feast days of Eid al-Fitr with them, marking the end of Ramadan. And I had the great privilege of tagging along with Nur's father to a Friday Prayer service at a local mosque, a delightful and memorable experience, not least as it provided a rare opportunity to listen to Classical Arabic, with which I am more familiar than the Kuwaiti dialect.

Moreover, Kuwait, with its diverse mix of native Arab Kuwaitis, expatriate Arabs from Egypt or Lebanon, Persian Kuwaitis, and migrant workers from South Asia, provided countless opportunities to get a taste of a wide variety of cultures and cuisines, and to observe the often yawning social divides that accompany this tiny, polyglot city-state.

Most of all, it felt good to be part of an experiment at AUK that seeks to advance Kuwaiti higher education, to provide a genuine liberal arts experience to Kuwaiti students in a mission that is at once foreign and necessary. It was a true pleasure to see this process happening and to contribute to it, even in a minor way, and even when it seemed to be moving at a glacial pace (as it often did). I had the privilege of working with some professors, administrators, and students of first-rate devotion and skill in applying and instilling the principles that communities like Dartmouth have long held dear: academic honesty, a spirit of free inquiry, and a resistance towards stale orthodoxy or unquestioned obedience to the status quo. Dartmouth is lucky to be partnered to a university with AUK's potential, and I consider myself luckier still to have had the chance to have spent a season contributing to AUK's important mission, and to have become acquainted with a culture as complex, and a people as graciously hospitable and kind, as Kuwait's.