



Dartmouth College-American University of Kuwait Project
14 South Main Street - Suite 2F
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755-2015
Phone (603) 646-9671 – Fax (603) 646-9673
e-mail: American.University.of.Kuwait.Project@dartmouth.edu



Dartmouth AUK Newsletter
Fall 2010 – Christina Chen '12

Deciding to go to Kuwait for my off-term abroad was a curious decision. Most people travel to Europe or Africa, but the Middle East, especially the Gulf region, is not commonly touched. I had my many reasons for going, but those around me were still intrigued by such a decision. Their reactions betrayed a humorous mix of temporary aphasia and ignorance of the Gulf Coast Countries, something I laughed even more at upon learning about Kuwait's high safety ranking, and thoroughly Americanized culture that provides both California Pizza and New England Clam Chowder. Chances of me getting mortally wounded or mortally famished were admittedly, miniscule.

Landing in Kuwait was at first suffocating. The temperature was around 115F, and squiggles of heat rose from the ground, terrifying me away from anything exposed to the sun. But I had gotten lucky, Ramadan had been over for a few days already, and throughout my two-month stay, I did not experience a single dust storm. Towards the end of October, the weather even adopted a pleasant Southern Californian (from which I hail) temperament. The cherry on everything was the intern apartment, situated only two minutes walking distance from the University, and five minutes from the pedestrian path along the Arabian Gulf Coast.



The Kuwait Towers

I was living the high life by myself, in a two-bedroom apartment, complete with IKEA furnishings and wireless Internet. Except, being in Kuwait as a lone female can become tedious as no matter what, there are social norms constraining your freedom of movement. So, beginning work at AUK was refreshing as I was able to finally converse with people other than my own reflection, and indulge myself in the country's culture and history.



Along the Arabian Gulf

The American University of Kuwait, being a non-residential campus with a student population of only around 2000, is small. It reminded me a lot more of high school than anything from Dartmouth. My first few days were spent finding departments for which I could provide my interning services, and I finally settled with the Office of Student Life, the Arabian Heritage Project, and the Computer Science department working with Dr. Amir Zeid.

My luck extended even to my work life, as my placement with Dr. Zeid was an impromptu but blessed opportunity. He had conceived of the idea to conduct sociological research on female computer science majors while a visiting faculty at Dartmouth in summer 2010, and it just so happened that I was there to drive his idea forward. I became well acquainted with his family, as his wife, Rehab El Bahey, was my co-worker in the Arabian Heritage Project. It was a pleasure to work with both, and my time at AUK was very much brightened because of them.

Each placement had its own character and color stemming from the different personalities present. For the Office of Student Life, I was able to revise the Clubs and Organizations Manual, as well as assist in executing a Self-Image Exhibition for Social Awareness Week. The rest of my time was spent in hilarity, where the minutiae surrounding my every day tasks made this placement unforgettable. Trevor, the Kentucky-imported sports coordinator, was constantly forgetting what he had stepped out of his office for, and was the center of debate on whether his hair color was orange or yellow. The AUK student workers' personalities constantly clashed, providing me with endless entertainment. Student Life was a multi-colored bouquet - spontaneous, maddening, and always a bright spot in my day.

In contrast, the Arabian Heritage Project was significantly quieter, but I always tried stirring things up with Rehab whenever I could. The Project puts on a recital every term featuring AUK music professors and students and their Dartmouth counterparts. With very short notice I was able to pull off some solo performances and accompaniments and had a wonderful time making music with other passionate people. While not rehearsing, I sat in my office, directly across from Rehab, and from time to time, would scurry over to her room and discuss my Chinese-American identity, being

female and by myself in Kuwait, Egypt, China, and so many other things. I learned a great deal from Ms. El Bahey, and her conversations provided me comfort and a familial base during my time in Kuwait.

Last but of course not least, was my work with Dr. Zeid. This placement was by far the most serious, but I never lost a chance to poke fun at my supervisor who smiled so little, yet always evoked a warmth and kindness. Dr. Zeid became interested in studying female participation in Computer Science after realizing a major difference in statistics between AUK and Dartmouth. Fifty percent of Computer Science (CS) majors are female at AUK, but only 10% are female at Dartmouth (and many other American liberal arts institutions). This disparity was striking as considering how liberal the US is compared to any Arab country. It should have higher female participation in a subject such as CS, not vice versa.

I went about prepping for our research by interviewing female CS students at AUK. In the process, I learned about the magic of Computer Science, but also came to understand more about the women, the history, and the identity of Kuwait. One of my most striking interviewees, Hajer Nothary, was a mother of two, and a Computer Engineering student. She wore a hijab (the traditional scarf worn to cover women's hair and neck), was ambitious, beautiful, and very proud of her heritage. Having lived through the 1990 Iraq invasion, she recounted the dramatic change in national psychology after that traumatic incident, and was the first of many to comment on how different Kuwaitis became. She showed me pictures of her two children, told me that going back to school was strategic in furthering her career, and that her husband was fully supportive of her academic endeavors.

My conversations with the Kuwaiti women were not always as revealing, but the more we talked, the more impressed I became with this nation's people. They deal with countless restraints that as residents of the US, we cannot begin to comprehend; yet the Kuwaitis still persevere. The country doubtlessly has its flaws and problems, but at the same time, so do we.

I am so grateful for having had this opportunity to live in a country I might have otherwise never visited, where I spent countless hours talking, laughing, and learning. Going to Kuwait, I had a few pre-formed opinions of the Middle East, but coming back, I have a very positive first-hand account. Thank you to those who work to maintain the relationship between Dartmouth and the American University of Kuwait, and may it continue to offer students possibilities for new experiences.