

AUK Spring 2011: Learning, Adventures, Friendship, and Revolution

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In the early afternoon of my third day in Kuwait I received a nearly panicked call from an AUK administrator who had an urgent warning: “Don’t go outside!” I looked outside my apartment window and noticed a dark billow moving in from the north. The wind began to howl, and minutes later the sun was extinguished, resulting in a night-like ambiance: the sandstorm had arrived. As I sat in my apartment for several hours, waiting for the storm to pass and breathing in bits of dust that entered my apartment, I knew that my time in Kuwait would be unlike anything I had ever experienced.

Reading the local newspaper the next day, I was relieved to discover that I had just weathered the largest sandstorm in decades and was unlikely to undergo anything of similar magnitude, but I did encounter many novel experiences while in Kuwait.



Taken inside Kuwait Towers with Kuwait City in the backdrop

Working in the Office of the Dean of the College and the Student Success Center at AUK allowed me to develop my understanding of the governance and student issues that affect a learning institution. In the Dean's Office I worked on several government and management issues including forming the bylaws of the faculty and of academic student groups, planning a liberal arts conference, and researching and making recommendations on student illness protocols. In the Student Success Center, I primarily assisted with academic advising, but since the department fulfills multiple purposes, I was also able to learn about how universities deal with mental health and academic performance issues.

All of my other work placements involved working directly with students. In the Writing Center, I edited students' academic papers and helped develop their writing abilities during individual conferences. This setting was particularly challenging and engaging, because all of AUK's students visited the Writing Center—from seasoned English majors to those who just began learning English. With the latter, I learned how to communicate and explain concepts in elementary terms. This skill was further refined by tutoring and leading classes of students in AUK's Intensive English Program. These settings allowed me to learn about students' perspectives on a variety of familiar topics, which allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the widely varying opinions within Kuwait, and they also fostered bonds with students.



A commercial area in Fahaaheel, a neighboring city of Kuwait City

My friendships with other students added richness and meaning to my experience in Kuwait. I came especially close with one of my coworkers at the Writing Center. Each day we exchanged our experiences and ideas on a variety of topics and even shared our love of poetry by exchanging poems. I learned a great deal about Kuwait, Arab, and Muslim culture from her, and we continue to stay in touch. I also became very close with two students from my Intensive English classes. One day they took me to their desert farm where I had a traditional Kuwaiti lunch with one student's family, followed by Arabian tea and coffee and a tour of his farms, which consisted of herbs, vegetables, and camels. At the camel farm our host served us fresh (i.e. just squeezed) camel's milk, which was quite good and would undoubtedly be even better served cold—at least for someone accustomed to drinking milk in the U.S. To conclude our night we traveled away from the farm where we attempted to catch wild gerbils—a popular pastime for teenage Kuwaiti males—and eventually succeeded. Other Kuwaitis were amazed that I experienced such things as a foreigner and told me that I had lived a day like a young Kuwaiti male. I would never have experienced such a day without the friendships I made at AUK.



Drinking Arabian coffee with my friend Salem at the desert farm

Although I spent considerable time with Kuwaiti students, much of my time was also spent in the company of fellow Americans. Kuwait has a considerable western ex-pat population, with whom I quickly found some common ground in a novel environment. They showed me around Kuwait and some of its nearby towns. One coworker's husband worked at the American Embassy, which allowed me to visit the embassy, during a weekly happy hour event where I found a sizeable American population ranging from young professionals to young families to older citizens. In some respects, this company of people, combined with the convenience of American grocery stores, enabled me to easily live a lifestyle similar to what I was accustomed to in the U.S. As previously discussed, however, it was of course even easier to branch out and engage in and learn about ways of life that were different than my own.

Traveling from Kuwait was fantastically easy relative to journeying to foreign lands from America. I traveled to Amman, Jordan where I spent several days exploring the city and the nearby area. I swam in the Dead Sea, hiked the lost city of Petra, saw massive Roman and Byzantine ruins, visited where Jesus was baptized and where Moses died, rode a camel, and enjoyed many other experiences I had believed unattainable. I would have traveled even more, but given the revolutionary events occurring in countries across the region, I limited my travels to Jordan.



Taken from a peak in Petra with the Monastery in the background

My time in Kuwait came during a tumultuous time for the Middle East, with revolutions and protests occurring across many nations. Aside from a few relatively peaceful protests, the wave of revolutions did not touch Kuwait. Given Kuwait's multi-national population, however, I was able to learn about the perspectives of those whose homelands were fighting for freedom and, in many cases, winning it. They were excited about the potential for liberty these movements brought their countries, horrified by the corruption unveiled once the regimes fell, and anxious about the future of their countries. It was and continues to be a time of excitement and unrest for the region.

Initially I had some minor apprehensions about being an American in the Middle East, but I quickly realized that the negative perceptions of America that the Arabs were purported to have are largely overstated as was the very notion of the "Middle East" existing as some generalizable entity. I met people from all across the Middle East and by far the majority of them were excited to meet an American. Many of them, as well as immigrants from countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and India, believed that America was a great country, full of freedom and possibility. After being often surrounded by cynicism about America within its borders, this perception made me appreciate my privileges and realize that in many places the idea of the American Dream is very much alive. Nearly all of the Arabs I met were also earnest in their desire to teach me an important lesson: Kuwait is not the "Middle East." While there are certainly many commonalities between nations, each country in the Middle East is distinct from its neighbors, having different languages, governments, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic conditions. This conclusion may seem obvious—and rightfully so—but lacking direct experience with people from the region and hearing mostly generalized accounts, I lacked such a fundamental understanding of the area's rich diversity. This led me to realize that although I had spent time in Kuwait and traveled to Jordan, I still had only a small conception of the region—though much vaster than my understanding before arriving in Kuwait. Fortunately my experience at AUK and in Kuwait inspired a deep interest and appreciation for the region, which will hopefully lead me back soon.