



**FALL 2008**

## **DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER**



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Staring out the airplane window as we landed at the Kuwait Airport, I scrutinized the sandy, dusty environment that greeted me. Dusk was falling on a landscape that was part desert and part bright city lights. Jet-lagged and exhausted, I noticed signs and announcements in Arabic everywhere, and noticed men in long white robes and flowing head coverings, and women dressed in a variety of ways, some traditional, some not. It was an exciting moment full of wonder and opportunity.

At the Kuwait City Airport I obtained my three-month 'tourist' visa, luckily beating the crowd of American military personnel behind me. After passing through passport control and customs, I was met by Tadd Kruse, the Assistant Dean of Students at AUK and Intern Coordinator. An unforgettable wave of heat enveloped my senses when I walked out of the airport. One can always be warned about the intensity of summer heat in the Persian Gulf, but I was unprepared to experience just how intense and humid the heat was—and it was six o'clock at night. Luckily I arrived in September, when the highs only reach the low 40's (Celsius) rather than the high 40's and even 50's in July and August. After a meal at T.G.I. Friday's, Tadd drove me back to the intern apartment.

It was a fabulous apartment, furnished by past Dartmouth interns, so I already felt at home. Most surprising was the beautiful view of the Persian Gulf right from my living room. There was a large, comfortable bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. The bedroom alone was twice the size of my room during the summer in Hanover, so I felt quite spoiled.

My arrival coincided with the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, during which all Muslims fast during daylight hours, and this experience

added a dimension to my first few weeks in Kuwait. Although I tried fasting (not hydrating was the most difficult part), I typically made myself a sandwich in the apartment after walking the two blocks back from AUK.



*The main hallway of the American University of Kuwait bustles during the fourth annual Health Fair. Dozens of local gyms, fitness centers, health-conscience restaurants, and health-focused organizations advertised to students throughout the day.*

Ramadan also brought with it exciting social events and opportunities. Numerous co-workers invited us to dinner parties at their homes. Their hospitality and graciousness was a great help in adjusting to Kuwaiti society, traditions, and customs. Most Kuwaitis stay up quite late in the evening during Ramadan – even young children are out with their parents well past midnight. Most shops and malls closed during the dinner hour until nine p.m. or so, but then stayed open past midnight. Oftentimes Kuwaiti society seemed to have gone nocturnal. For me, early working hours meant frequent naps.

In some ways Kuwait seems like an Arab version of America. There are fast food restaurants like Burger King, T.G.I. Fridays, KFC, and Pizza Hut. Dozens of large SUVs, Hummers and other luxury vehicles line the streets, and most store and hotel signs are in English and Arabic (sometimes transliterated from English). It was always ironic and funny sounding out the *ho-li-daay-inn* sign in Arabic near my apartment.

### **The American University of Kuwait**

The American University of Kuwait maintains a relatively green, neat, and vibrant campus filled with kind faculty, staff, and students. Although certainly smaller than Dartmouth, the campus adequately fulfills the needs of its students—reserving the outdoor soccer (football) field is one of the most common student requests. There is an impressive amount and variety of student-organized events which bring the campus alive.

I worked in three different departments, spending the mornings in the Student Success Center, updating career services tools for students, helping organize campus-wide events, and working on the coordination of “Pink Week” with the Student Government Association to raise awareness about breast cancer and prevention methods. There is no equivalent Kuwaiti Cancer Society similar to the American Cancer Society, so AUK and its students are certainly pioneers in raising awareness. I relished the opportunity to work with and get to know these student leaders, and we raised over \$4,000. Together we all learned some of the difficulties and challenges of event-planning. I also helped advertise for and invite dozens of companies and organizations to the Health Fair, where roughly 30-40 local gyms, health restaurants, clinics, and other health-oriented organizations operated booths in the main hallway and advertised their services to students. Hundreds

of students attended the event and learned something new about their health, and it is now an annual favorite. Another task involved helping to organize a graduate school question and answer session with three American representatives, something that will certainly grow in future years.

Most afternoons I worked in the Student Life Department, which has grown considerably in the past year.



*Here I am with friends and co-workers in the Student Life Office after they surprised me with a going-away party.*

There is a constant ebb and flow of students in the office throughout the day—it seems to attract them with its friendly and welcoming environment. The office was always bustling. My main projects included assisting the Student Government Association with creating a working, serious Constitution; organizing student discipline files and records; and planning a “welcome packet” for parents of incoming freshmen. Assisting at numerous campus-wide events during Orientation and Welcome Week was a pleasure—one night we even went ice skating and shot bb guns at a local range. My creative abilities were put to the test while creating the slideshow presentation during AUK’s first Convocation ceremony. AUK’s administration understands that a liberal arts education entails more than an academic range of classes. While in Student Life, I enjoyed participating in and watching AUK students develop themselves as leaders and individuals—AUK’s students are educated throughout the entire campus, not just in its classrooms.

Finally, three times a week I led two separate Intensive English Program (IEP) reading groups. Students can only enter the undergraduate program at AUK once they improve their English skills in IEP, and these reading groups gave them frequent practice reading so they could improve their pronunciation and comprehension. Some students were fond of testing authority, but it was a wonderful experience. We read

American classics like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, and the books really came alive for these teenagers. Regularly attending an Arabic language class gave me the opportunity to maintain my Arabic language skills and also see how an average AUK class operated. The professor had an impressive love for the subject and passion for his students. Such a positive classroom environment is typical at AUK.



Here I am working at my desk in the Student Life Office on my last day. I am wearing the traditional, formal male Kuwaiti dress complete with the dishdasha (flowing robe), ghutra (red and white checkered cloth), and igal (black bands).

Those who discovered my interest in Arabic were initially surprised and delighted, but preferred to speak with me in English since I was unfamiliar with the Kuwaiti colloquial Arabic. By the time I left AUK, I was familiar with Kuwaiti greetings like “*shlonik*,” and many others.

Outside of the university, I tried to use my Arabic whenever possible. Since many workers in Kuwait are Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Iranian, or Filipino, something like ordering a meal in English was oftentimes easier than in Arabic. It was amazing to find English used as the “common” language—in a peculiar way English sometimes unified people of various nationalities living in Kuwait, since a majority of residents in Kuwait are not citizens.

## Sandstorms, Culture, Gyms, Politics and the Streets of Kuwait

There was only one sandstorm during my stay, and it was ferocious. Fine grains of sand were sprinkled in large patches on the apartment floor through miniscule door and window openings. Having spent part of a freshman summer in the Saharan desert on the Arabic Language Study Abroad Program, I was still surprised by such a blinding and dangerous storm. Already in the apartment when it began, I enjoyed staring out my window at the empty streets below—in some ways it was like a blizzard in Chicago in January, without the cleanup afterwards.



*I enjoyed this gorgeous view of the Persian Gulf and AUK Campus from my office in the Student Success Center.*

I am on the heavyweight rowing team at Dartmouth, so in order to train and lift weights I joined a local Kuwaiti all-male gym close to my apartment. Much like a Moroccan gym two years ago, my time spent in the *Ras Al-Salmiya* gym provided fascinating insight into Kuwaiti customs and culture. There is an Arab “macho male” weightlifting culture—many Kuwaiti men enjoy spending hours in the gym mixing social time with extreme weightlifting. Some truly looked like Popeye their arms were so enormous. The sense of community and brotherhood was evident, as roughly one-fourth of the

men were always on their cell phones texting or talking while working out. There was constant laughter and camaraderie, and most men were friendly, but I always stuck out like a sore thumb.

As an enthusiastic supporter of Barack Obama, the American Presidential Race and Election was an addiction throughout my time in Kuwait. By the time Election Day (finally) came, most of my friends and co-workers knew how invested I had become in the outcome. I woke up at four a.m. for each debate (they were broadcast in English on Al Jazeera International and CNN International), and enjoyed multiple political discussions with friends, students, and co-workers at AUK. So when November 5<sup>th</sup> (eight-hour time difference) finally came, I woke up early at 6 a.m. to get an update on CNN, and was greeted with the outcome by seven a.m. A wave of emotion and tears suddenly hit me while watching thousands celebrate in Grant Park. I will always remember sitting on the table staring closely at the television in disbelief.

Leading up to the election the IEP students and other undergraduate friends had asked me about Obama, so on Election day and throughout the week I received hugs and hi-fives of congratulations. The Kuwaiti reaction to the Election was fascinating and revealing. Practically all of the students loved Obama (oftentimes too much, elevating him to an unreal celebrity status), but had also assumed he would win. He really was on a pedestal

for most Kuwaiti students who were not yet too cynical about politics. But, most Kuwaitis age 50 and older supported McCain because the memory of the 1990-1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was still fresh in their minds, when George H. W. Bush and the Republicans saved their nation. There was a clear generational division much like in the United States, except more extreme. Not only were students interested in the American election, most of them knew more about American politics than they did about Kuwaiti politics. For example, the democratically elected Parliament was almost dissolved by the Emir two days before my departure, but I heard about it from a politically active co-worker and friend.

Throughout my time in Kuwait, I was humbled and impressed with the kindness and hospitality of so many people, including Americans, Kuwaitis, Egyptians, and Indians among others. Every week and weekend I was invited to various co-workers' homes, to restaurants, and out to new parts of the country they wanted to show me. I learned as much from these experiences in the "streets" of Kuwait as on the AUK campus, and am deeply indebted to everyone who took the time to drive around, shop, and explore with me—they made the time in Kuwait enjoyable, meaningful, and thought-provoking. AUK is a truly vibrant, expanding place filled with dozens and dozens of kind, hard-working people who love learning in all its forms. They make AUK a special place of higher learning and are helping craft and mold the next generation of leaders in Kuwait. Dartmouth College should be proud of its relationship with AUK, and I sincerely appreciated the opportunity to represent Dartmouth to AUK faculty, staff, and students.