

Five Lessons from the Gulf: Anecdotes of a Young Woman in Kuwait
Dartmouth-American University of Kuwait (AUK) Internship Program

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My transition from the bustling streets of New York and the ever-buzzing Dartmouth campus to the serenity of Kuwait revealed mesmerizing lessons on culture, professionalism, and politics. When I started my Dartmouth journey, I never expected to spend most of my senior year abroad, let alone in a Middle Eastern country accompanied by fellow students I had never met. However, the lessons I learned and the relationships I built during the Dartmouth-AUK program were life-changing and, Insha'Allah, everlasting.

Below are five lessons I learned during my three-month exploration of Kuwait and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

1. Birthright citizenship is not universal.



On the balcony of my AUK apartment overlooking the campus.

Birthright citizenship per the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution declares that anyone born on U.S. territory is a citizen of the U.S. However, this principle of “jus soli” is not the predominant rule in most states of the world. In Kuwait I met people who don’t have a nationality. One may ask how this is possible. While native to Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government denies Bidoons (also transliterated as Bedoon, Bidun, and Bedun) citizenship. While there are several reasons why there is a stateless population in Kuwait, there is significant social and political concern for this population in Kuwait. My shock at the discovery of this population served as a reminder to decenter American practices.

2. Western countries are not necessary peace-keeping forces in the Middle East.

Before leaving for Kuwait, many people I spoke with had misconceptions about the political state of the Middle East. Some talked about the possibility of bombs going off unexpectedly and questioned whether I would be forced to wear the hijab or burqa. Every conversation I had with a loved one before leaving for Kuwait included negative, fear-based perceptions of the Middle



Dartmouth-AUK exchange students and interns at a basketball game.

East. Once I arrived, I found and communicated that in some ways I had found more peace than in the West. I refer to peace in multiple ways: work-life balance, day-to-day safety as a woman, and the acceptance of multiple ways of life. Whereas in the U.S., productivity is the goal of working, Kuwait seemingly emphasizes pursuing your interests and establishing comradery at work. Additionally, as a woman I never worried about being assaulted, whereas in the U.S. we are often taught survival tricks.

3. Political and social allyship between Middle Eastern countries varies and is not monolithic.

My experience was also different as we were in Kuwait and visited the United Arab Emirates after violence considerably escalated in Palestine, Gaza, and Israel. Whereas in Kuwait there were buildings illuminated with the message “Free Gaza” and Palestinian flags, in the U.A.E. there were no conversations or public demonstrations about or in response to the ongoing events. The difference in response to a major topic suggests that opinions in the region can vary. Learning about the history among countries is enlightening and helps demystify the region.



Palestinian art exhibition at the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centre in Salmiya.

4. Universally, we must eliminate xenophobia and discriminatory labor practices.

Participating in research in the anthropology department shed light on an important matter in Kuwait: the Kafala system. This is a system that binds employers to foreign workers, which often leads to the exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Considering that these workers are frequently Southeast Asian, there can be underlying racism. However, this reminded me that while migrant workers in the U.S. have more rights than in Kuwait, they also face discrimination and harsh working conditions. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the U.S. are particularly

underappreciated and underpaid despite making up most of the agriculture workers. My experience in Kuwait served as a reminder that xenophobia and discriminatory labor practices can exist everywhere and that to be an activist means to work for their universal elimination.

5. Western feminism is neither the sole nor the “correct” way to be a feminist. Islamic feminism celebrates and honors women and emphasizes multiculturalism, something Western feminism lacks.

Finally, I felt respected. I recall several conversations before traveling to Kuwait about Western men respecting women only if they are attracted to them. However, in the Gulf I felt that respect for women is rooted in cultural and religious beliefs that restrict objectification and sexualization. While in the West a guy friend may not hesitate to let a girl go home alone after dark, in the Gulf it is standard to drive your friend home, wait with her until a family member picks her up, or any other option that maximizes her safety. Overall, there are lessons to learn from Islamic feminism, especially when it comes to the inherent equality of all people and their deservingness of achievement, love, and peace. As I see the increase of a “soft girl” aesthetic and people entering their “soft girl era” online, I think of the women (non-White) for whom this was historically unattainable. Perhaps letting non-Western feminists influence our definition of feminism will help women find their place and fulfill their desires more easily in the world.

If you are considering traveling to the Gulf or the Middle East, make it a priority to deconstruct and analyze your perception of the region. Ask yourself whether you have been taught to fear the place, its people, and the culture. Ask yourself whether you have subconscious beliefs influenced by Western propaganda. After you have done that, remember that you will have fun, meet the most generous and kind people, eat some delicious food, and have a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



(From top left to bottom right): Asha, Jena, Lilo, Lynn, and I at an arcade in Salmiya on the last day in Kuwait.