

SPRING 2007



DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER

**Nicholas Williams and Edward Kim
Part 1**



Nick and Ed were swiftly swept out of the Kuwait International Airport in the early hours of March 27th, 2007 and driven to our new apartment in Salmiya, Kuwait City, just blocks from the campus of AUK. We began work the next day. Thankfully, the 28th was a Wednesday. Because the Kuwaiti weekend begins on Thursday and Saturday was the Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, we were able to enjoy three full days to adjust.

We were both initially struck by how “western” Kuwait appears. Both of us had traveled to the Middle East before – Nick to Morocco and Ed to Lebanon and Syria – so while neither of us had fantastic images of camels and Bedouin tents in our heads, we were nevertheless surprised. Kuwait City, in fact, appears more “western” than many American cities. On the drive to our luxurious two-bedroom apartment, set in the heart of Salmiya, an extremely commercial district in the city, we could not help but notice the abundance of American brand vehicles and English printed everywhere we looked. Salmiya itself boasts three shopping malls, nearly every major American fast-food chain, and stores lining nearly every inch of sidewalk down the main thoroughfare. The only significant difference in a visit to the Sultan Center, Salmiya’s local grocery store, from a stop by Hanover’s Co-op is the clientele.

Despite the superficial resemblance to American life, we slowly have become more attuned to the Kuwaiti lifestyle. For example, the city is one of the least pedestrian-oriented cities one is likely to encounter. Walking in Kuwait is generally avoided for at least two good reasons. Why walk when you have cars, and nice ones at that, which you can fill up with locally drilled petroleum for about US \$7, especially when summer temperatures can soar above 50 degrees Celsius? Still, car-less and ready to take on the city, we spent the first week walking to restaurants, to the University, and along the Corniche as taxi drivers gleefully beeped at us in the hopes of snagging a couple of Americans, presumably with loaded pockets (they presumed wrong).

Following our long weekend and eased entry into life in the Gulf, we settled into our daily routines. Nick was assigned to the Admissions Office and Ed to Student Affairs. We quickly got to know people in the AUK community—faculty, staff and students alike—who graciously invited us out to dinner, local hangouts, and University events.

Because AUK is a school that opened its gates to students only in 2004, it is much smaller than Dartmouth. It isn’t a residential university and the campus itself isn’t much larger than the size of Occum Pond, although with its contemporary architecture and palm trees, it does have a rather nice view, especially in the evening. In addition, there are only about 1,900 students currently enrolled in the university, about a third of the number comprised solely of Intensive English (pre-University) students. Despite the small size, however, the students are lively and engaged with the University, as we have both seen hands-on.

Working in Student Affairs, Ed has had the opportunity to interact closely with AUK students. As can be expected, their personalities, lifestyles, work ethic, self-motivation, and level of friendliness cover a wide range. Although a small number of students appear rude and somewhat spoiled, the large majority of students has been overwhelmingly welcoming and willing to accept us into their community. Working in the Student Affairs Office entails a great deal of planning and coordinating, but perhaps even more important than outlining the proper protocols that pertain to the student activities is the encouragement that the students get from those working in our office. Because of the cultural divide between America and Kuwait, many students at AUK are not familiar with the idea that student-run organizations are just that, and therefore require a lot of guidance. While the seeming hand-holding often leads to feelings of exasperation, it just as often leads to feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction. The great thing about AUK students is that many of them are willing to learn to take charge and responsibility, to become leaders with goals and opinions. In a society that on many levels still distrusts innovative ideas and concepts, this willingness is both surprising and inspiring.

Across campus and not quite as deeply involved in the daily lives AUK students, Nick has been working spending about half his time in the Office of Admissions. Working closely with administrators, he has been given the task of editing and updating the Admissions website, developing brochures, and maintaining the constant ebb and flow of current and prospective students filing through the office. Working in the Admissions Office has presented sometimes frustrating, but mostly rewarding, challenges. The admissions staff has been eager to gain the perspective of an outside student. Everyone seems to both trust and value Nick's opinions and insight, asking for input on a variety of issues. While at first there seemed to be not enough work to do, Nick quickly realized that he had been given more responsibility than he expected. The work tends to be coordinating and managing projects, rather than constant minute secretarial tasks.

Just like AUK itself, the admissions office staff is much smaller than one at older institutions. With only five permanent, non-student professionals, everyone must be willing and ready to fulfill a variety of roles and accomplish whatever tasks are at hand. The environment is flexible, not only in this way, but also in regards to defined working hours and languages of communication used in the office. Breaks from the drudgery of office duties are encouraged, and Arabic and English freely mix in a linguistic situation that blurs the line between code-switching and pidgin-formation. The view from the Office of Admissions at AUK has given Nick the opportunity to witness the vivacity with which a nascent institution is able to adapt.

With our internship less than halfway over, we have a lot more to learn and experience in Kuwait. From fashion shows, lectures, camel races, boat races, awards ceremonies, and open houses, our work here is really just beginning. Having finally settled in, we're looking forward to six more weeks in the "desert" and still waiting on that reported 50+ degrees weather



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Part 2**



Tying Up Loose Ends: Our Final Impressions of Kuwait

Despite having comfortably settled into Kuwaiti life by the middle of April, neither of us were quite sure what to expect during the remainder of our stay, except of course, the weather, which had already reached a scorching 115 degrees Fahrenheit. Because the end of the AUK academic year was quickly approaching, the both of us were busy helping prepare for multiple academic and cultural activities.

The Raft Race

One of these activities was the annual Raft Race, which brought together both students and staff from AUK (including Ed) in both building the raft and participating in the actual event. We initially thought that the raft would be made up of inflatable rubber, but turned out to be horribly wrong, as it was constructed entirely of empty oil barrels (this is Kuwait, after all)! The Race was held at the Aqua Park located near the famous Kuwait Towers, and consisted of a 400-meter course. The AUK teams, which included students, staff and faculty, fared well despite the lack of practice and the difficulty we faced in building our raft. The overall experience was remarkably enjoyable; sentiments of unity and team spirit prevailed, providing an emotional high that some of the students had clearly never experienced, as organized sports opportunities are not as popular or well coordinated in Kuwait as they are in the United States.

Social Awareness Week

In the beginning of May, AUK participated in its inaugural Social Awareness Week, organized by Hema Mohan '06, a Fulbright Fellow and one of Dartmouth's first interns at AUK, who is volunteering her time at the University. The week's programs were designed to increase awareness in the AUK community of social justice and equality issues at the local, national and global levels. The programs involved with Social Awareness Week included a Hunger Banquet (the first banquet of this sort that most AUK students had ever participated in), a speech by Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer, founder of Kuwait's first children's hospice, a clothing drive, and a Social Awareness Film Festival. The films shown included a short but powerful and revealing documentary on Bangladeshi street workers in Kuwait, a documentary about cheap labor and its connections to WalMart, the film Blood Diamond, and the documentary An Inconvenient Truth. The issues addressed in these films and other programs of this week seemed to open eyes around the AUK community concerning the many socioeconomic injustices both around the world and within the Kuwaiti community itself. Moreover, it provided outlets for those who desired to make a change in their own society, something many students appeared eager to do. It was great being a part of such a burgeoning and successful process, and even more so to see many of the students and staff respond with a passion and vigor for change.

Our Final Days in the Desert

With a couple weeks remaining in the internship, Nick decided to move to the Office of Student Affairs after completing his projects from Admission, in order to help Ed and rest of the office prepare for the third annual AUK Awards Night. It was great having the opportunity to spend time in another department. Spending most of our time in one administrative department, it was easy to assume that “this is how things at AUK function.” Working together and sharing experiences there, both of us came to a better understanding of what a struggle it is to keep a nascent institution running. Building infrastructure to make a school run smoothly involves more than simply laying the groundwork, creating the office and positions, and hiring employees. Reliable infrastructures are built over time and grow as the people involved become more comfortable and familiar with the needs of the community in which they are working. It was exciting and stimulating to work in a place where these things are still being constructed.

The last week of our internship was filled with activity, both in and out of the office. We traveled with our colleagues from Student Life to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates for four days. Our view of Dubai was quite different from that of Kuwait. We both agreed that Dubai seemed to lack a certain “Arab-ness” that was present in Kuwait; as we saw it, Dubai was the Las Vegas of the Middle East. Enormous skyscrapers, indoor ski slopes, and giant mall complexes were only a few of the new and glamorous attractions that Dubai had to offer. A few of us were even able to attend the Aerosmith concert on our last night in Dubai (their first appearance in the Middle East!), after spending an extremely humid afternoon on the Jumeirah Beach, catching our last few rays of the blazing desert sun.

Returning to Kuwait, we had to immediately help to put the finishing touches on the aforementioned Awards Night, which recognized student for their academic, athletic, occupational and volunteer achievements and efforts for the 2006-2007 academic year. We witnessed the work, involvement, and most importantly, flexibility that such a ceremony entails, and the overall result left us both with a satisfied feeling of helping to accomplish such a large and at times daunting task.

Parting Thoughts

For both of us, the internship was a deeply fulfilling experience because it let us see how people on the other side of world interact with foreigners and with each other. Despite the somewhat rigid rules that dictate social interactions, people in Kuwait manage not just to survive but also to thrive. During our time there, we were lucky enough to observe the concern and push for change by young people first-hand when many AUK students reacted instantly to news that some degree programs at AUK had not been licensed by the Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education. This controversy highlighted the students’ concern and dedication regarding the future of AUK and the university’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Kuwaiti people as the first private liberal arts institution of higher education in Kuwait. Students at AUK seem to have created a space for themselves that is neither fully Kuwaiti nor fully non-Kuwaiti, forming a fascinating dynamic that influenced the way we experienced life at the university.

In a way, by not expecting historic or life-changing events as part of our agenda (such as witnessing Kuwaiti women being given the right to vote, as some of our predecessors have), we were able to take in much more of the strange and wonderful blend of culture and language that exists in Kuwait. Our time in Kuwait left us both hoping to return to the country in the future – the experience was not only pleasurable, but extremely enlightening as well.