



FALL 2006

## DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER

By Dominique Gergen  
Part 2



### *Settling In: Leisure time in Kuwait*

Ramadan began two weeks after we arrived in Kuwait. During that month, breaking the fast was a central social activity. But we soon saw a fuller picture of Kuwaiti recreation. Young people like to meet with friends and hang out at the mall. Businesses are not slow to exploit this market. It seems as though a new shopping mall is going up every day. Marina Mall, the newest and most fashionable of Kuwait's malls, is conveniently located along Gulf Road in Salmiya (an expatriate-laden district of Kuwait City.) Our most frequent destination at Marina Mall was Tche Tche, a hip hookah bar where we spent many a night relaxing with friends in the cool evening air. Other evenings were spent strolling the palm-lined pedestrian walkways along Gulf Road. As temperatures cool with the setting sun, many people, young and old, head to these walkways to relax, get a little after-dinner exercise, or meet up with friends. Others, ourselves included, seemed drawn to the place because it is ideal for reflection and observation; more than once we noted people praying or meditating. The fresh sea-air and relaxed atmosphere, together with its proximity to our apartment, made the Gulf Road our favorite evening retreat.

We were gradually introduced to more 'traditional' Kuwaiti pastimes. These include the ritual of retiring to a seaside chalet over the weekend (a warm-weather practice) and – when the weather begins to cool – the custom of desert camping. The chalets are often family-owned, complete with well-maintained private beaches. While the weather was warm, we had the good fortune of being invited to a colleague's chalet and could easily understand the draw of such weekend retreats. It was low-key and relaxing, in contrast to the see-and-be-seen hustle of daily life. Similarly, desert camping seems to originate from a desire to escape from familiar environments. It involves driving out of the city, eventually veering off the road into the open desert to pitch a few tents and camp out for the weekend. Though we did not go desert camping ourselves, we did see others doing so. Some joke that the pastime reflects some Kuwaitis' desire to "return to their Bedouin roots."



*A relaxing weekend at a chalet*



## *Social Hierarchy*

In our first newsletter, Rose and I expressed surprise at Kuwait's diversity. As my internship progressed, however, I learned about the relationship between nationality and social hierarchy.

### *Kuwait Bureaucracy and 'Wasta', Otherwise Known as 'The Most Important Word in Kuwait'*

Wasta, or "influence," is a key element of life in Kuwait. Applying for a new driver's license, replacing a lost license, or paying a traffic ticket can require a significant amount of paperwork. One may have to visit multiple officers several times just to get the necessary papers filed. Because Kuwait's formal bureaucratic procedures are inefficient, people routinely attempt to use wasta to circumvent them. Because rule-bending is routine, those who lack wasta suffer a particular disadvantage when they wish to navigate Kuwait's red tape. That said, a combination of patience, obstinacy, and perhaps nationality can yield results. For example, a colleague at AUK once related how she helped a friend penetrate Kuwait's bureaucracy by sitting in the office of an unwilling official and refusing to move until he agreed to grant their request. Though some can manage without it, most view wasta as a scarce and valuable resource. We learned about wasta first-hand on the day of our departure from Kuwait when a friend of ours used his wasta to sneak us into the VIP line and thereby speed us through airport security.



*Gulf Road: a group of men enjoy an evening of fishing*

## *Standards at AUK: Building a 'Brand' with Extracurricular Experience*

AUK is a young university, but is gradually earning a reputation for setting high standards both in and out of the classroom. One reason for this growing reputation or 'brand' is the range of new experiences and opportunities offered to AUK students.

Under the Division of Student Affairs, the Student Success Center (SSC) offers students social and cultural resources such as personal, academic, and career-oriented counseling. The SSC staff often reaches out to students, hosting weekly workshops on a range of topics relating to both academic and post-graduate life. The SSC's "Healthy Lifestyles" workshops are also an important contribution to the AUK community. These workshops address topics that might otherwise receive little exposure. These range from depression and anger management to eating disorders and the best way to have a healthy Ramadan.



In the Office of Student Life, students and staff collaborate to build a sense of community and tradition at AUK. They have founded sports programs such as the men's and women's soccer teams and encouraged students to form clubs and organizations that reflect their interests. However, student support for and participation in AUK events, programs, and organizations is uneven as is also the case at Dartmouth. AUK boasts many enthusiastically active individuals, but it also has students who are interested in little beyond attending class. To spark wider interest, the Office of Student Life has offered prizes at events. Persuading students to become more actively involved on campus remains a challenge and goal.

### *Government-mandated segregation in the AUK library*

AUK's unique position as Kuwait's first private liberal arts university means that it is subjected to a fair amount of public scrutiny. The university keenly monitors its public image, and public relations sometimes constrain the activities of student organizations or even academic departments. However, such limitations only provide more opportunities AUK students and staff to express their creativity and determination to succeed.

Most of the students we met were happy to be at AUK. Many had transferred from other regional institutions. AUK's admission numbers and the quality of its applicants are increasing annually as word spreads about the attractions of this new institution. AUK hopes to make its name synonymous with a unique, desirable, high-quality liberal arts educational experience.