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When I first arrived in Kuwait, I was greeted by an extremely different environment, culture, and people. I spent the next ten weeks (the term of my internship) learning about, experiencing, and coming to terms with those differences. My experience in the Middle East gave me a greater understanding of a different—not better, not worse—culture than the one I grew up in here in the United States. Were it not for Dartmouth's relationship with the American University of Kuwait, I would never have been able to have this experience.

The Environment

The physical geography of Kuwait is something I had only imagined in my fondest dreams. Its deserts, and those of other Middle Eastern countries, expand for miles and miles with beautifully rippling dunes and swirls. The rustic red and yellow colors create a canvas of warmth, a real treat for the eye. The temperature matches the color scheme. Temperate climates do not compare whatsoever to the unforgiving heat and humidity of Kuwait. The temperature was around 90F, and by the time I left the thermometers were creeping above 125F. The warm winds blow against you in bursts like space heaters going on and off, an experience I quite enjoyed and will never forget.

Luckily, during my stay, I experienced several rain showers, somewhat of a rarity in the area. The storms are beautifully violent, tragically short-lived and bursting with the desert sands. After a rainstorm, almost everything is covered in the brown residue of the passing event. Sand storms are more common. There were some nights in Kuwait when walking outside meant inhaling sand. The wind carries a lethal amount of sand, verified by all of the locals wearing surgical masks to protect their faces and lungs.

Although the environment is vastly dissimilar to anything I had experienced before and was “miserable” for my first few weeks, I quickly acclimated. Kuwait's geography and climate, from the Persian Gulf to the oil fields, directly affects almost everything in Kuwait's culture and economy. Kuwait controls a decent expanse of the very profitable and strategic Arabian Gulf, a resource that has largely been neglected thanks to the overwhelming oil industry. The Gulf used to



The Kuwaiti Towers (seen at night) hold most of the city's water supply.

serve as the main economic resource, in the country's past, where pearls were Kuwait's main export. After the discovery of oil, though, the focus changed completely -- a switch that is quite evident when you notice that a gallon of water in Kuwait is about a hundred times more expensive than a gallon of gasoline.

Kuwait, at this point, still contains approximately ten percent of the world's oil reserves. The change of economic focus from marine to land resources has affected many aspects of Kuwait's ecological health. Over its history, Kuwait has seen great ecological disasters. When the Iraqis evacuated after the first Gulf War in 1990, a large amount of oil was burned and released into the surrounding land creating great expanses of oil lakes. After the polluted areas were declared livable again, Kuwaitis and others reclaimed the damaged land. Recently, due to increased health risks and concerns, the Kuwaiti government has decided to provide a stipend to Kuwaitis to move away from these still damaged lands.

The other part of Kuwait that has suffered immensely from economic growth is the Arabian Gulf. What used to be one of the only sources of revenue for older Kuwaitis is now polluted beyond recovery, and the health of the subsequent ecosystems is suffering. Very few organisms can live in the pollution near the shore; one has to go out to the islands in the Gulf or farther to find healthy ecosystems. The pollution is from a damaged infrastructure during the Iraqi invasion, followed by blossoming economic growth after the occupation. Kuwait City and its surrounding towns grew into bustling city centers with more waste than the Gulf could handle and no infrastructure to manage the waste.

The health of Kuwait's environment is not going unnoticed, however. Environmental



Inside the campus are several greens filled with native desert plants.

health is one of the main topics that Kuwaiti policymakers focus on, and that concern is reflected at the American University of Kuwait. One of the major focuses of all the Chemistry classes that I tutored during my internship was environmental health and chemistry. The country is trying to train a network of environmental professionals to rid the environment of these problems. I hope that one day Kuwait will have its beautiful beaches and healthy ecosystems back. It is also worth noting that Kuwait is not the only Gulf country to suffer from pollution in the Gulf.

Kuwait is not the only culprit, and the Gulf overall is suffering from pollution due to the immense economic growth without adequate infrastructures necessary to support that growth.

The University

During my internship at the American University of Kuwait (AUK), I worked in three different departments: the Biology Department, the Office of Admissions, and the Intensive English Program. Each of these programs had its challenges, but each in its own way gave me a look into Kuwaiti culture. I am very pleased with my placements, as they afforded me the opportunity to work with students first hand in many venues.

When working for the Biology department, I worked as a teaching assistant in five biology lab sections. The labs on AUK's campus are quite rudimentary compared to most labs in the United States. Despite the fact that universities originated in the Middle East, scientific research in the region has fallen behind the West, and AUK is working to change that. There has for decades been a focus on engineering sciences in the Gulf thanks to the oil reserves, however, classic Biology and Chemistry in many cases are simply underdeveloped disciplines. Many labs were only equipped with elementary tools such as microscopes and Bunsen burners. Despite the lack of advanced equipment, many of the students love biology and take it as a serious discipline. They were astonished to find out that I am a biology major. AUK lacks a biology major and minor, so to know that in the States I was studying biology as my sole concentration was a new concept to my students.

Gender segregation is one of the defining factors of education at AUK. Most AUK students find it extremely frustrating that all public spaces are segregated by gender, including their classrooms. The dynamics of an all-female classroom are very different than those of an all-male classroom. Some of my observations were that the females seemed to be a lot more apprehensive and inquisitive while being social. The all male classes were less social, but in my opinion, were much more competent scientists. From my interactions with many students, in my opinion, female students are much more serious about their education than their male counterparts. In many cases, males have more social rights than women still, and I think, because education is an outlet where women can excel and be recognized for their accomplishments independently, they take their own educations very seriously, or at least more seriously than males. However, there were definitely male students that were brilliant as well; my best chemistry student was, in fact, a Kuwaiti male. Gender segregation is not only frustrating to the students but to the faculty as well because segregation often requires more classes with fewer students. Overcoming gender segregation is one of the most complex problems facing



The American University of Kuwait campus spans nearly an entire block in Salmiya.

AUK, but over time, the professors and staff have become experts at supplementing facets of a coed classroom into their single-sex classes, by posing challenging opinions and thought-provoking questions.

The other part of my placement in the Biology Department involved tutoring in the Student Success Center in biology, chemistry, and math. Over the weeks I developed relationships with several “regulars,” who came to see me at least once a week. They all said I was very helpful, and I truly hope that I was. I would teach them mnemonic devices and shortcuts to chemistry problems that I knew, and they found them fun and engaging. It was wonderful to see how my teaching had an instantaneous effect on my students, and amazing for me to realize how much knowledge I had retained from my introductory classes at Dartmouth and from high school. The experience overall was excellent, serving as a social outlet for me, while also serving as a great review of the technical and theoretical knowledge of my major.

The Office of Admissions was probably my most useful placement. My first assignment was to make a presentation for the entire Admissions staff that outlined the American system of admissions to colleges and universities. Since AUK is a university based on the American model, it tries to mirror the American style admissions processes as much as possible. I spent a few weeks gathering information from different campuses in the United States and then gave my presentation to the staff. Many of them were surprised by the differences. Everything at AUK is done about three weeks before the new year begins; in the United States, the admissions process starts well in advance. After my presentation and with my consulting, Admissions developed a plan to slowly push deadlines up and change recruitment processes. I definitely left my mark on the Admissions staff, and they were very appreciative for my insights and suggestions.

My next assignment in Admissions was to develop a database to store and organize all of the applications that AUK receives, and prospective students with whom they work. I have had experience working with student databases from a previous job, but I had never created one. I spent the next few weeks developing, designing, redesigning, and perfecting a database. The staff loved it and has decided to use it from now on to organize all of their prospective student data. They even named the database after me, affectionately known as “the LB” database! My work in Admissions was very rewarding, and the effects I produced were obvious. I am really elated that I could help in so many ways, while also learning valuable job skills myself.

Finally, my placement in the Intensive English Program was one that I particularly enjoyed. The Intensive English Program (IEP) is a series of classes that students must take if they are not sufficiently fluent in English to learn at the university level. (English is a second language for many Kuwaitis). Once students have passed the IEP classes, they may formally matriculate at AUK. Most of my students were older than me, ranging in age from 22 to 30. Despite the age difference (which they did not realize until much later), they respected me, and they learned from me. I taught them a lot of English grammar because that is my specialty. Grammar is not always fun, but the group of boys that I taught were entertaining to say the least. I call them boys because many of them,

despite being older, were very immature. The class reminded me of prepubescent teenagers in a lot of ways. I feel that this is largely a product of the segregation system currently enforced by the Kuwaiti parliament. Without a female perspective in the class, all topics and responses are very misogynistic and biased, only one of the pitfalls. Over time the students warmed up to me and would even ask me to review sections of their textbook that they still did not understand, even though they had gone over that section in class. This was a great compliment. Overall, the experience in IEP allowed me to interact with male students on a friendly basis. They were the ones that taught me about important Kuwaiti concepts, like *wasta*. *Wasta* refers to “who you know” in important positions of power; it corresponds to somewhat of a spoils system in Kuwaiti culture, where having *wasta* can make things happen or not happen. I used my Arabic skills some, too, which was a pleasant surprise to my students. From my time at AUK, I experienced many different culture norms in education that are not present in the United States. These norms were hard to cope with at first, but once I understood the concepts behind them, they did not hold me back.

The People

One of the most interesting things that I learned in Kuwait was the Kuwaiti perception of America and Americans. During and immediately following the Iraqi invasion in 1990,



The campus, from the outside, is a green island in a surrounding city.

Kuwaitis loved Americans for “getting rid of Saddam.” In light of recent events, such as 9/11, heightened security concerns, and even racism, some Kuwaitis have started to like Americans less. Overall, though, most Kuwaitis are still very supportive of America, but they disagree with American foreign policy. America’s support for Israel was a relatively common conversation topic, where most Kuwaitis believe that Israel should be given back to the Palestinians. Kuwaitis have very interesting views of the American government system,

but most are very friendly to American expatriates and travelers.

Conclusion

My time in Kuwait was challenging but enjoyable. I loved being able to experience such a unique and diverse culture. However, it was hard not having a niche of American culture to fall back on. The internship has definitely sparked my interest in studying many different things in the Middle East, like hard sciences and education. I look forward to returning in the near future to see the progression of infrastructure and other improvements to the area. Studying at AUK gave me a new found love for the liberal arts and made me realize how much the liberal arts really mean to me.