

## Education and Exploration: A Reflection of My F24 AUK Internship

As a Government major on the International Relations track, I applied to the AUK exchange program to learn more about Middle Eastern politics and culture by combining an internship and immersion into one. After 10 weeks in Kuwait, I can easily recommend this program to anyone with similar goals. The process was easy to follow with support at each step, and every part of my experience exceeded my expectations.

I was excited to get my first choices for my primary and secondary placements, the International Relations Department and Oral History and Documentation Project (OHDP), respectively. In the IR Department, I spent about half my time under Dr. Nizar and half under Dr. Velez supporting their research on the Kuwaiti legal system, Gulf monarchies' power succession, and the Arab Spring. I developed strong essential research experience for future positions and academic work and learned much about my researched topics. I also explored my passion for law, which has opened new potential career paths for me. In the OHDP, I transcribed an interview, reflected on readings about oral history, and created social media content. In this position, I learned a lot about historical documentation's methods, ethics, and importance, and how to interpret meaning from atypical sources, which greatly enhanced my social sciences research and analytical skills.



Living in Kuwait for a term also greatly contributed to my education. When studying and discussing politics at Dartmouth and the greater U.S., it's common and sometimes expected to center the U.S. and West, but this experience taught me what it means to decenter the West and trained me to do so. Discussing international affairs with AUK students, faculty, and alumni was a great way to hear non-Western perspectives, especially concerning what they thought of Western policies and adversaries. It confirmed my suspicions of how I thought international communities view policies and countries differently and trained me to approach politics in a new, more constructive way. Overall, I learned more as an intern at AUK and as a foreigner in Kuwait than at any previous work experience, and I am so glad to have developed the skills and acquired experiences I did.

In terms of daily life, Kuwait was much more like the U.S. than I expected— there are many Western chains and other stores that mimic home, English is widespread, and the buildings and streets look similar. Before going, I was very nervous about my level of Arabic, but I ended up not using it in daily life. The huge amount of foreign workers in service positions meant my

everyday interactions at shops and restaurants were in English, which was a surprise. This, combined with AUK being an English-language university, meant I rarely had to speak Arabic. I couldn't audit an Arabic course because the easiest option was taught in Kuwaiti and was intended for native dialect speakers, but if another course was available I would have taken it and practiced more in daily life. I also worked independently most of the time, which meant I interacted the least with other students and only met weekly with my bosses. I can imagine that in different working and learning environments, I would have more opportunities to practice. How widespread English was did help me adjust quicker to life in Kuwait and made me feel less like an outsider, though. I was very anxious about the language barrier and how I sounded in Arabic, so I was grateful for that upside.



Culturally, I expected modesty to be more of a concern, but covering up in public and respecting local values was easier than expected. It was super hot the first few weeks, but the dry climate and breathable fabrics made it much easier to wear more fabric without overheating. Before leaving, many people warned me I would have to dress super conservatively, but a t-shirt and jeans or a skirt were enough for any casual day, which is quite similar to my attire stateside. The concern fellow Americans had over my freedom to dress stuck out to me once I was in Kuwait, because life carried on pretty normally, and AUK's dress code is similar to most American high schools! The only concern I had was that my outfits weren't stylish enough—most Kuwaiti students wore fashionable smart casual or business casual clothes. There wasn't a pair of sweatpants in sight!

Many Americans also warned me that I would be treated very differently as a woman, but this wasn't the case. Other than my attire, there weren't many changes from the U.S. I was respected in professional, casual, public, and private environments to the same extent as in the U.S., if not more. There was some catcalling, but I'm used to that in the U.S. Because of the catcalling, I did not feel 'the safest in my life' like some other female students reported. However, Kuwait has very little crime and is one of the safest countries in the world, and I was assured by many Kuwaitis that catcalling is some of the worst it gets. On an average day, I felt freer than in the U.S. Some Muslims believe touching the other gender is forbidden, which made me more confident in daily life because men respected my personal space and I didn't have to worry about someone getting too close. In my experience, the false warnings about my freedom and safety were overblown and stereotyped the Middle East as a dangerous region that disregards women. As with any trip abroad, all students should be aware of their safety. However, I encourage future

students to think critically about American attitudes toward the Middle East before they go, as it was not deserved for my Kuwaiti experience!

The student's work culture at AUK was my biggest culture shock. In the U.S. and especially in highly competitive spaces like the Ivy League, students and workers prioritize their work and are constantly on the go. I didn't realize this until I left, but the hustle culture is insane, and I thought it was worldwide! Through observation and many conversations with students, I learned the U.S.'s hyperactive work culture isn't the baseline everywhere and I don't *have* to live that way to succeed. I found Kuwait generally has a much more relaxed approach to education and work and doesn't put them on such a high pedestal compared to the U.S. At times the attitudes toward education and work were too nonchalant for my preference. However, it was nice to properly reflect on hustle culture and realize other ways of living were normal and okay because it's easy to feel ashamed to take a break in the U.S.

There was also a lot to do and visit in Kuwait, and I made the most of my free time by visiting the Scientific Center's aquarium, Souk Al Mubarakiya, Al Salem Cultural Center, and more. Despite my efforts, I still have so much left for the next time I visit! A highlight of my abroad experience was our weekend trip to Dubai, where we visited Downtown Dubai and Old Dubai, and did a desert excursion in 24 hours! It was all surprisingly affordable and easy to navigate, so I recommend future students do something similar, and visit Abu Dhabi if they can fit in an extra day. My biggest piece of advice for booking trips abroad is to do so before leaving the U.S. I had to recruit my family in the U.S. to buy my Dubai tickets because of unexpected restrictions on my card and fraud notifications, and had to cancel a trip to Istanbul because not even that would work!



Overall, the best thing I did in Kuwait tourism-wise was to get out even a little every weekend, not be afraid to explore alone, and have a bucket list to choose from for easy planning. If I depended on others to go out I would have stayed in a lot more and missed out on lots of fun experiences. Group activities are great, but making the most of your time abroad may require going independent sometimes. Get comfortable alone and don't be afraid to take the initiative!

I highly recommend this program to anyone interested in Middle Eastern politics and culture. I not only learned a lot about international relations and non-Western perspectives but also developed the skills needed to decenter the West. My daily life, political discussions, and the cultural differences experienced, especially related to work-life balance, changed how I approach American society, international affairs, and my personal life. The AUK and Dartmouth staff and students were very supportive at all stages of this internship, and I had so much fun exploring Kuwait! Thank you again for such an amazing experience full of personal growth and fun. Inshallah, I will be back soon!

P.S. To any students reading this: you must jaywalk everywhere... I was not aware, but let this serve as your notice!

