

## American University Cairo Reflection Paper 1 Spring 2008

Feelings about host country before and after program

I had no preconceived notions about Egypt. And this in the end really gave me the upper hand in enjoying my experience. I wasn't expecting a fairy tail, nor was I expecting to get accosted. And as fate would have it, neither of these came to pass. Before ever thinking about studying in Egypt, I had read some of the last two thousand years of Egypt's rich history. Those were times of great change and great people. For this I knew that Christ and his family had lived on Egypt's soil and there too the Church spread almost immediately. As an Orthodox Christian, I felt a great attachment to Egypt, a country to which I had no other connection.

After spending some time in Egypt, the reality of being a minority truly began to sink in. As a white-American Christian I was automatically part of several minority groups in the blink of an eye. But in the midst of this status came community, an Orthodox community who themselves have been the minority in their own country for 1300 years. But besides this community of faith, friendships quickly developed all around me. Egyptians are amongst the most friendly and open people. They want any excuse to laugh, and jokes abound all the time. It is in this environment of laughter, hospitality and simply utter genuineness that I spent four and half months of my life. I breathed, I ate, I slept and I lived Egypt. It became home, these people became my family and they will forever be my friends.

Egypt is a country abounding in poverty and hunger and yet they do not give up hope. I was given the amazing opportunity through my Development class to interview those living off of less than one US dollar a day. Even the most poor of this community did not worry from where food would come, for as she said it always comes. The expectation that things will work out, that God will provide, invokes the very common phrase *Inshallah* or God willing. And when things do, as expected, work out they will say *Hamdulileh* or Thanks be to God. But at the same time, it doesn't take long to see that Egyptians are impatient people. I recently read in a New York Times article, which I might add brought me feelings of nostalgia, how Egyptian taxi drivers are so used to honking their horns you can find them honking even when no one is in the road.

And with issues of poverty and a government of questionable democratic values, it shouldn't surprise the visitor that there aren't quite the same expectations for cleanliness and health as we are accustomed to in the US. There are no trash cans. Trash is everywhere. The Nile is polluted. Dust abounds. And as I experienced there is also this interesting season of *Hamseen* where sandstorms are a common occurrence. Luckily my spring break came in the middle of this time, and I was able to avoid it almost completely. In this two week break, I was able to travel to Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and the state of Israel. Traveling is very easy in the Middle East and I was also able to visit Istanbul during another long weekend. Now let me provide some more specific information regarding my experience.

Accommodations

AUC just moved to a new campus on the edge of Cairo, therefore I'm not completely sure what accommodations they will offer in the future. But the dorm where I stayed was located in the uppity district of Zamalek on the island fittingly named *Al-Jazeera* or the Island. It had security, cleaning services, a gym, computer lab, laundry services, a cafeteria and a few cats

which were continually pregnant and hungry. The new campus is large, brand new and the dorms there I hear will be top notch.

#### Classrooms/Instructional styles

The classrooms were in the older campus so I can only speak of the professors which I can only assume will remain the same. I had great professors at AUC. They were all friendly and helpful. Two of them were even educated at Oxford. I was able to get an American style education with Egyptian classmates. The classroom discussions were amazing and the differences in opinion made for a great environment for exchange.

#### What you wish you had or had not packed

If you go in the Spring, you NEED a coat. It is very cold in the first month or so of the semester and there isn't good insulation because it gets so hot in the summer. Guys can wear shorts as nearly all the guys at AUC do so. If you plan to enter a church or a mosque or if you are going to go walking in a conservative part of town it would be advisable to wear long pants. Girls have different dress code expectations than guys. They probably shouldn't ever show their shoulders or above their knees as a rule. There is no need to cover your hair unless you are going into a religious institution. Shoes are inexpensive, as are most clothes so there isn't much need in bringing your entire wardrobe.

#### Friends you made

Oh the friends I made! The first wave of friends came from the International community of mostly American students. I met the most amazing people that have the same interests as myself. I will stay in touch with these people...*inshallah*, for the rest of my life. Secondly, I met full time students at AUC. I got to know Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike. Of the foreigners I knew mostly Palestinians and a few Sudanese. I joined Al-Quds Club which aims at educating the AUC community about Palestinian culture and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here I met many Palestinians with whom I learned to dance *Dubke*, traditional Palestinian line dancing, which we danced together at public events twice. Many of the friends I made were simply by random conversations. Many were initiated by food (asking about good restaurants) or politics (the most popular of conversations) or religion (my personal favorite.) As I already touched on, Egyptians love to make friends. Whether they are classmates, dorm mates, random strangers or taxi drivers, they all want to have a conversation. I quickly learned my Egyptian friends were passionate people, and they are all great friends.

#### Culture shock experienced

To be honest, I experienced NO culture shock. Maybe I'm an odd case, but I don't remember any of my friends at AUC experiencing it either. The Egyptians are so welcoming and if you REALLY wanted to experience American-ness you could go out of your way to find it. It might cost more, but you could find it. The hardest thing was finding a restaurant with free-refills or for me, SWEET tea. My American friends and I began to dream of lines that actually worked. You see, people don't make lines in Egypt. Clusters of people simply congregate and the strongest wins. By the end of the trip, many of the Americans simply dreamed of quiet roads where regulations were followed and where trashcans existed. The simple things, the things you take for granted in the US. Bring peanut butter. The peanut butter is really expensive imported, and Egyptian brand peanut butter is simply not the same.

In my first day in Egypt, I was in a smaller city (a beautiful and friendly city I might add) called El-Fayoum which is about an hour or two south of Cairo. My friend took me to her beautiful home and showed me hospitality I had never before experienced. But what they could not control were the dozens of mosque speakers which all did the call to prayer nearly at once, five times a day. As it was a Christian home, the call to prayer did not invite them to pray, it simply meant that all conversation had to stop simply because we could not hear one another. I found this not to be a problem in Cairo as the neighborhood I lived in as the mosques were further from my dorm.

## Food

Don't expect Lebanese food. But also don't think that you will get sick from everything, because even if you do at first, you'll adjust. I had amazing food and I paid very little because I adjusted to Egyptian ways. I rarely ate at American style restaurants, which are far outside the Egyptian budget. I quickly found a new love, Egyptian fast food. *Foul* is a type of bean that is cooked and served generally either alone or with some vegetables in pita bread. Pita bread is simply known as *Aish balady* or Country Bread. The Egyptian version of the falafel is the *Ta'mia* which does taste a little different and is much lighter than its Lebanese cousin. There are dozens of different things one can put on bread in Egypt besides *ta'mia* and *foul*, but my top favorites were a fried egg concoction or eggplant. All of these sandwiches will run you, with Spring 2008 prices, a whopping one pound, or roughly 20 US cents. With a great, and slightly different tasting Coke, Pepsi or Fanta product a filling meal with drink will cost less than a dollar if you shop right. A favorite of Egyptians and Americans alike is *kushari*, an amazing mix of rice, lentils, pasta, dried onions, garbanzo beans and tomato sauce which you can choose to put vinegar or hot sauce on. This will run you 3, 4 or 5 pounds: all under one dollar. You will eat until you nearly explode of carbohydrates, as portions are huge.

Traditional home cooked food, which you can get in the AUC cafeterias is generally amazing buttery rice served with some sauce. The sauce will generally consist of chicken, beef or for much less money, vegetables. There is also a tasty green vegetable soupy mix called *molokhiya* which is served over rice but which puts off some who aren't acquainted with its slightly slimy consistency.

Fresh juices are very easy to get and are delicious. Amazing orange or tangerine juice is the cheapest. Pomegranate is delicious as is strawberry. If you want to be traditional try sugarcane juice or *tamr hindi* (tamarind) juice. You must drink *'ahuwa* or Arabic style coffee. It will cost you one pound (20 US cents) and is amazing. It comes with the fine grounds still in the bottom of the cup, but you simply sip the coffee off the top. You can also drink a loose tea which will cost you roughly 50 piasters more than a coffee and is equally refreshing. If you want a more traditional and unique alternative, drink cold or hot *kerkede*. *Kerkede* is a bright red tea made from hibiscus flowers which give the drink an amazing sweet and tart flavor.

## Surprising cultural differences

Never call someone rude. They take extreme offence to it. Also, don't be surprised by the gender boundaries. The border between men and women is very clear. For instance, guys dance with guys and girls dance with girls. Guys walk hand in hand or with their arms around each other in public, which should not be construed as anything besides friendship. There is also a culture of fluctuating prices. As foreigners, you are expected to have more money and therefore people will automatically charge more. It isn't because they are rude or lack morals, it

is simply because they see it as a good opportunity which doesn't come often. It just takes some getting used to how much taxi fares should cost, as there are no machines that tell how much to pay. I recommend always paying after getting out of the taxi and then walk away before they can argue with you. It isn't out of fear of danger, but simply in order to avoid any ill-founded dispute. This won't be as much of a problem as the new AUC campus is out of the city for the most part.

### Language barriers

This was probably the most frustrating aspect of my time in Egypt. I did not go to Egypt to become fluent in Arabic; I wanted to experience the country with all of its cultural idiosyncrasies good and bad. I had taken Arabic for a year and a half and therefore I had a nice background but I had to learn colloquial Arabic on my own through practice. My favorite and most used words are as follows:

*Inshallah*-God willing, literally, "If the will of God"

*Hamdulileh*- Thanks be to God

*Mumkin*- it's possible, maybe

*Mish mumkin*-it's not possible

*Ya'ni*-like, um, so, (literally) "it means"

*Ma'lish*- oh well!

*Bas*- only, that's it.

*Yimeen, shimaal, a'la tool*- left, right, straight (useful for taxis)

*Enta min ein*, or, *balad eh?*- Where are you from?

*Amrika*- America, which means the USA

*Bikam di*, or, *bikam da*- How much is this?

*A'rif*- I know

*Mish a'rif* or *ma'rifsh*- I don't know.

*Ahuwa mazboot*- literally "perfect coffee", it's sweet Arabic/Turkish coffee, essential and only costs 1 pound if you go to the normal *Ahuwa* (Café) where locals go.

### What you wish you had known before you left

More colloquial Arabic. That school goes from Sunday-Thursday and the weekend is Friday and Saturday. I may have known this, but it is still shocking the first few weeks.

### Why you are (or are not) glad you chose this particular program

Egypt is amazing. AUC is amazing. Arabic is an amazing language to learn. I'm 1000% satisfied with my experience and I recommend it for anyone and everyone.

### Public transportation

The metro is fast, reliable and cheap. There are separate cars for women if so desired. I never took buses. Taxis are everywhere and if you know how much you should pay, they're easy. It's also a great chance to practice your Arabic.

### The impact this experience has had on you

How do I begin to explain how Egypt has affected me? I am still the same person I was before I went, but I am most definitely different at the same time. I have seen so much, heard so

much, learned so much. Though it goes without saying, studying in Egypt is completely different from studying in Europe or Latin America. Egypt has a completely different culture than that of the West, a language with little to no cognates and a majority and minority religion which most in the US know surprisingly little about (I speak both of Islam and the Coptic Orthodox Church.) Besides this, Egypt is a developing country (if you will excuse my use of a slightly taboo word.) I had to learn at the beginning of my trip that things don't always go as planned. The first few weeks there was no internet connection to sites out of the country as the cords were cut in the Mediterranean Sea. I had to deal with it. Things weren't always easy to accomplish and frankly it was oftentimes near to impossible if you were not willing to cause a bit of a stir to do it. This is something one must get accustomed to, and afterwards it will make you a more assertive person.

There is an amazing word in Arabic, *ma'lish*, which has become a regular in not only my daily vocabulary but also in my personal philosophy. It means "oh well" or "eh, whatever!" You say it when you miss a cab, an appointment, or when you do poorly on a test. It's the Egyptian way of saying it'll be alright *inshallah*. I learned to accept life more in Egypt. We can't always get stressed out over the little things. There are much more important things in life, such as one's family, friends and as Egyptians know best, their God.

Even today, nearly two months after leaving Egyptian soil, I am using random Egyptian Arabic words. I'm studying now in Argentina and yet *ah* and *aiwa* come out of my mouth to mean yea or yes instead of the Spanish *si*. I simply smile, laugh a bit to myself and carry on. I have adjusted *hamdulileh* and *inshallah* to their Spanish equivalents of *gracias a Dios* and *si Dios quiere* though I am afraid that "thanks be to God" and "God willing" don't translate into American culture quite as well.

As I have not moved back to the United States, and I have not had time to interact with my American friends again, I don't know how my time in Egypt will truly translate into my day to day life. What I do know for certain is that my time in Egypt was the single most important period in my life. I may not be able to elucidate my feelings or put them into pen and ink, but I do know the feelings that well up when someone mentions the Middle East or Egypt. I get pangs of homesickness and feelings that I'm missing out on time there. But the simple fact is, I have new amazing things to experience. What I hope now is that you too will take that leap and experience all that is awaiting you in my home away from home, Egypt.

**\*\*The reflection papers for fall 2008 have not been edited. Please keep in mind that AUC was undergoing a major move during this semester which resulted in many complications.**

## **American University Cairo Reflection Paper 2 Fall 2008**

Preface: Go to Cairo

Well, I'm back in the United States with all of those creature comforts that you miss, or think you miss while abroad, and I'm trying to reflect on advice for somebody thinking about studying in Cairo. First of all, it's worth it to go to Cairo, if not to study abroad you should go anyhow to experience what life is like in a place as incomparable as Cairo. That being said, The American University in Cairo was a constant source of anxiety. It's quite a shame that they chose

to move to the new campus during the semester I chose to attend because it was enormously frustrating. The academics however are quite good if you are in upper level courses. I was quite pleased with my classes and found them to be comparable to courses at JMU. I had figured that the classes would be extremely easy as friends of mine who have studied abroad have said their classes were but was pleased to have a challenge and actually learn a thing or two. It's also worth it if you are an Arabic student like some of my friends there because Cairo is an excellent social laboratory to practice your skills and if you speak a lick of Arabic Cairenes will show their friendliness in spades. My problem with the new campus and the administration is that it is extremely corporate so it feels like you in an open air mall in the United States, they haven't finished the damn thing yet so you are constantly walking around a construction zone in the desert, and it's an hour and a half away from Cairo by bus when you don't hit traffic which you will as it is as much a part of Cairo as anything. My back is still messed up from all the time spent on a bus. It's bearable but it really cuts into the time that you spend abroad. My advice to you is to go to Cairo anyways and enroll in a language school or one of the other institutions *in*, not outside, of Cairo. I'm fortunate to have spent the first month during Ramadan at the old campus and to have had experienced what the American University in Cairo used to be but sadly I cannot with a straight face say it is worth attending any longer. However I had the most amazing time in Cairo itself, learned so much, and made amazing friends so in that regard it might be worth it to put up with the American University in Cairo. I'm sure it beats the UAE! It's just the way it is, it's a shame that they're at the new campus but you really can't beat the experience of being in Cairo if you want to get credit at the same time which I'm sure you do. I speak without any authority on the matter but I'm sure you won't get the same experience in Florence. Go to Cairo one way or the other!

If you have made it this far and still think the American University in Cairo is the bees knees then I have some advice for you. First of all, get an apartment in Cairo for the semester or year. You can meet people online through facebook or whatever to be roommates as the semester approaches through the email lists they send out. It will save you lots of money as the rent at the AUC dorm is a rip off. I wish somebody had told me this and knew how easy it was. You can get an amazing apartment for half the price as dorm rent. When you get to Cairo you can spend the first week or two until you find a place at a hostel. This will make life much more tolerable for those who enjoy the fruits of the barley or who have friend of the opposite sex, both of which are not allowed in your respective wing of the dorm. Anyhow, aside from that minor note I am now obliged to provide you with advice on what to bring, what the weather is like, food, language, etc...

In the fall the weather is quite hot when you arrive in August, upwards of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It's hot. However you are expected to wear pants and at least a T-shirt in public. Towards the end of October it cools down to a comfortable 70-80 degrees during the day. The food is excellent and cheap. If your palette craves something other than falafel or koshary then you can go to one of the countless western restaurants. IF you are in the dorms in Zamalek then I highly recommend Otlob.com to deliver food. The language barrier was never too great for me in Egypt. I haven't taken any Arabic nor did I take any there but I got by. I really wish that I had but I was taking a full coarse load as it was. I recommend taking Arabic there even if you haven't taken it so long as you can accommodate it into your academic schedule. That is my greatest

regret. Maybe in the future I can return to Cairo and enroll in one of the innumerable language schools and master Arabic. Bring some cold weather clothes if you are there in the winter.

What is great about Cairo is its location. Hopefully Israel will discontinue its military actions against the Palestinians by the time you make it to Cairo and you can explore Israel. I took a trip to Jordan and Israel and then later to Morocco. If you book flights in advance you can get some good deals to Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, even Russia. Save up some money for any trips you plan on taking. You can explore Egypt during the time you have before classes start, the long weekends like thanksgiving, and after classes end with ease. During your breaks take full advantage of Cairo's centrality in the region. My roommate who is spending a year is going to Iran!

Well, if you have made this far then congratulate yourself with a vigorous pat on the back. Cairo is as Winston Churchill once said "an enigma wrapped in a riddle shrouded in mystery". I had some amazing experiences in Cairo despite the headaches caused by AUC. Go there! Seriously! You will not regret it. Your friends and family might think you are crazy but trust me it is such an interesting place. Oh, and go to Dahab.

### **American University Cairo Reflection Paper 3 Fall 2008**

I've just returned from a semester at the American University in Cairo, and it was an experience I have mixed feelings about. The trip as a whole was incredible and life-changing, and I really enjoyed traveling in Middle East. However, to say that the academic experience at AUC was disappointing would be a gratuitous understatement. The reasons for this are numerous and I will not get into too much detail with my complaints, but I'll start by explaining my experience with Egypt and its culture.

My culture shock was fairly slight, and I think there were two main reasons. One, the language barrier was not at all the problem I thought it might be. Many Egyptians, even those with little to no education, speak excellent English, and those who don't are very accommodating nonetheless. I never really ran into any serious problems with that. The other thing that I think helped tremendously was the warmth and friendliness of most Egyptian people. They really made the transition much smoother. I did learn very quickly, however, that when someone is being particularly friendly and talkative, there's usually a catch that involves you buying something from them. This was quite tiresome at first but it's something that after a while I more or less got used to. Handling vendors and touts also got much easier once I learned what to watch out for. I sometimes felt as if many locals see visiting Westerners as simply dollars with legs, and to be honest this is probably true to some extent. But once I realized the extent of poverty in the country it was easier to put the hassling into perspective and understand why they do it.

My favorite part of the experience was the time I spent exploring Cairo as well as the travel I did in Egypt and around the Middle East. I ended up going to Jordan, Israel, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey. It was extremely interesting to see different regions of the Middle East whose cultures really were profoundly different. I highly recommend to anyone

traveling in the Middle East that they not restrict themselves to just a country or two. Western eyes tend to lump the Arab world or the Muslim world or the Middle East into one big group with identical people and cultures and customs, and this simply is not the case. I can tell you from personal experience Egypt and Oman could just as well be on opposite sides of the earth. The only noticeable similarity between the two besides Islam was the language, but even Egyptian and Omani dialects are vastly different.

With regard to the American University in Cairo, to any JMU student considering spending a semester there I feel obligated to say this in the clearest, most unequivocal terms: DON'T DO IT. I honestly feel cheated of a semester of college coursework and cheated out of my tuition money even though I paid JMU tuition. As I said before I won't go into the gory details, but the new campus that was supposed to be finished in the summer of 2008 was maybe half done when we arrived for the first day of classes. There was no air-conditioning in the classrooms, no desks, no chairs, no electricity, no maps or signs on the buildings, no food court, no offices for professors, and no dorms. To top it all off the campus is in the middle of a massive new development in the desert that's really just a construction zone and is nowhere near completion. The utter lack of any amenities on campus was bad enough, but the way the administration handled it was even worse. They put forth what was in essence a steady stream of misleading propaganda to make it sound like everything would be finished tomorrow, when in fact nothing was ever finished. There was no accountability in the administration and all they did was point fingers at different offices and departments. No one answered questions or emails, and no one ever issued an apology for any of the problems that occurred. I am shocked that AUC is an accredited university in the United States, and feel that their accreditation should be revoked immediately.

I learned a great deal these last five months and gained perspective on an area of the world that most people in the West don't understand or have misconceptions about. I discovered that you really can't get a decent picture of the Middle East until you spend some time there. Having said that, I expected my experience there to shed some light on the nature of the conflicts in the region and why they occur. But the more I learned the more I found that there are so many historical, political, social, and cultural issues at play that nothing about the Middle East is clear-cut, least of all the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, this realization has fueled my interest in the Middle East because of how much depth there is to the region.

Though I used very strong terms to express my disappointment in the university, I highly encourage students to study in the Middle East. It was an enlightening experience for me on the whole, and I'm sure it would have been even more enlightening had I studied somewhere else. However, if you're considering studying in the Middle East, *do it somewhere else*. AUC is a waste of your time, a waste of your money, and it appears that the problems with the new campus will not improve for some time. While I do not regret going to Egypt, I seriously regret choosing AUC. Don't make the same mistake.