Major/Minor: Middle Eastern Studies and History

Country: Egypt Program: American University in Cairo, Arabic Language Institute
Term & Year Abroad: 2008-2009

Instructors
- What were they like when compared to UCSB instructors?
Within the Arabic Language Institute, teachers are strict in the sense they expected your best performance all the time. However, they want you to feel comfortable in the level you are placed in and will teach to the class’s ability—thus much more personal than normal classroom settings.

- Could you call them by their first names?
No, but many instructors are accessible and enthusiastic to make a relationship with you as an international student so more informal communication as you get to know some teachers or staff is not uncommon.

- Was the student/instructor relationship more formal than at UCSB?
Yes and No. Yes because especially the relaxed environment that UCSB is fosters tendencies like wearing less formal clothes, packing our bags up before class is completed, leaving early or coming late to class, where this is not as common in Egypt. In addition, most Egyptian students will refer to their Professors as ‘Doctor’. No in the very distinct component that you will be a foreigner and many instructors will offer their personal resources, advice, and assistance to you. With this said more common within the regular AUC classes (as opposed to intensive Arabic Language Institute), paper extensions and exceptions for absences are accepted.

- Were they available for help during office hours?
In my experience in ALI, yes, very much so—rather my instructors often times made office hours mandatory.

Courses
- Were the courses more difficult when compared to UCSB courses?
I have been told from my friends taking the regular AUC classes in English and for regular course credit (i.e Political Science, History, Anthropology, etc) that they were easier. However, the intensive Arabic language courses under ALI were much more difficult than anything I had taken at UCSB—but I have likewise heard that is because I learned more than perhaps students did in classes they were not pushed in.

- Was the grading system similar to UCSB?
The thing particular about AUC’s grading system from my experience, is a greater reliance on the individual instructors’ discretion, style, and criteria rather than a uniform and static standard.

- How did the course structure differ? Ex) did you have many assignments or just finals?
There are many assignments, and things like flashcards, repetitive quizzes and busy-work which would normally offend University level students here at UCSB are integral to learning a foreign language and become helpful rather than annoying. But again, this may differ if you are not taking the language integration approach.

- Did you have oral and/or written exams?
For the non-language classes, presentations and group projects were very common but examinations were written. For language classes, oral participation is weighed heavy, and depending on the class (ex. Colloquial Arabic, Media, Modern Standard Writing) you will have listening, oral, and written tests.

- **Was the final exam schedule flexible or inflexible?**

It was fairly flexible as students were often in discussion with the instructor regarding when and which format the final exams were to appear. However, absences during these times (if at all in ALI) are not tolerated (especially if not discussed on a prior basis).

- **What kind of academic support, if any, did you receive?**

The EAP Study Center Director (in my year Fadi Fathallah) was an enormous and unexplainable help with logistics and personal issues regarding academic classes. Within ALI, the majority of instructors are women, many of which are very caring and concerned for both your success and learning. This is not to say you will get off easy if you are struggling, and I personally was suggested a tutor for one of my core classes after a serious discussion with the head of ALI. The tutor was helpful and we developed a genial relationship and talked about many things about Egypt, yet the rigorous schedule of ALI left little time for me to really appreciate extra assistance and seemed to overload me a bit.

- **Did you find you needed to be more independent and take more initiative abroad?**

Of course, this is unquestionable and inevitable. In adapting to a new academic system, let alone a new and foreign country, struggling and making mistakes is part of the process of discovering new study habits and strategies in classroom and out. Do not be afraid to ask for help, and reach out to native Arabic speakers—many are willing to help you and it’s a good way to spend time with other people besides other EAP/international students.

- **Was classroom participation expected?**

In ALI, yes, but in regular AUC classes I have heard not many students speak up.

- **How were the host university courses different than UCSB courses?**

AUC offered much more diversity of subject matter and classes as with non-language classes one could have an entire class devoted to the Egyptian economic system, etc. The Arabic language courses both at UCSB and at AUC are difficult, but you have more of a devoted network of students at AUC committed to learning all they can which helps.

- **Were classes usually on certain days/times and for how long?**

Because you must commute to the New Campus, classes were early in the morning as opposed to spread out throughout the day or at night. It is normal to have class everyday, and for most students classes would last from 9 am to 2:30 everyday. For ALI students, breaks were very short on somedays and longer on others depending on your personal schedule. A discussion of a block system with rotating classes was presented, but not favored by most students so I believe class time remains 50 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minute classes.
- What is the class culture like? How important was it to be punctual? Could you eat/drink in class?

Punctuality is important, as teachers rely a lot on the impression you give them in classroom demeanor and respect to the instructor and other students. Depends on the instructor, as some teachers will provide you snacks on exam days. Otherwise there are small breaks and nearby vendors on campus to get a snack in between classes.

Language
- In which languages were the courses offered?

Within the Arabic Language Institute, depending on your level, classes were taught in Arabic with instructions/explanations in both English and Arabic. Otherwise, all the regular classes at AUC are taught in English except for the ALNG (which are Arabic language classes that can be taken as a single class in addition to others outside of the intensive ALI program) which are in English and Arabic.

- What language did you take your courses in?

Mostly Arabic.

- If you took your courses in a foreign language, please provide info about your overall experience, difficulty of courses, language acquisition, placement exams, etc.

Placement begins in the application, but upon in-country arrival, if you are to take part in the ALI program, a brief interview process determines your level. The second semester placement exams are different and consist of a long test on the computer (including reading and listening) and a writing portion. The first semester was pretty difficult as I was adjusting to an entirely new way of studying, but my learning curve went way up the second semester and I felt I was retaining a lot more and actually enjoying my classes. For a foreign language to be best absorbed, is best taken exclusive from a mix of other academic classes, therefore ALI was the most rewarding approach for me. Colloquial classes are less ‘intensive’ than the Modern Standard classes, but nonetheless require a lot of participation and diligence.

Host University
- How large is the university? Student enrollment and approx campus size (smaller than UCSB)? Is it an urban campus with many tall buildings or just a few building?

It is much smaller than UCSB. The new AUC campus is located in New Cairo and is a very nice campus but as far as I know construction projects are continuing. The campus is pretty much in the middle of the desert and surrounded by very little beside sprawling attempts at suburbanization projects. The gym complex is amazing. There are fields in addition to an auditorium and a pool, which I’m sure is more ready for use than it was when I was there.

- Do the local students live on campus, at home, or off campus?

Egyptian students will not live on campus unless their families are from another part of Egypt farther away than Cairo. Most of the upper class students are chauffeured or bused to campus from the central Cairo areas where they live.
- If not located in the city center,
  o How far or close is it to the city?
There is a small suburban town called Al-Rehab about 15 minutes bus ride away. However, the ‘city’ Cairo that most people will want to have access to is about 45-1 hr bus ride.

  o What type of public transportation could you take – cost?
  o Could students take cabs -cost?
  o How long would it take to get to the city center?

There is a bus system called ‘Family Transport’ in which you pay a fee for its use or if you live in the dorms it is part of the package. There are alternatives, but they are something you must actively look for. For example, two of my friends lived in an apartment rented from a family they had established ties with before traveling to Egypt and their ‘host uncle’ was a taxi driver. They cut a deal with him to be their driver. Many Egyptian students also drive their own cars to campus.

- Are there student clubs on campus that UC students could join?
Yes. Besides AUC student body leaders and an International Student Association, there are community service clubs, Business organizations, and clubs for a certain cause like Al-Quds (equivalent to Students for Justice in Palestine club at UCSB).

- Is there a bookstore on campus? Where did you get your books?
Yes there are two small bookstores and a big library which has many great resources.

- Is there a computer lab on campus? Or, should students bring laptops?
Laptops are important if you would like to work from an apartment, dorms, a coffee house, or the old campus in downtown Cairo, but not necessary to bring it to the new campus. There are a good amount of computers in the library (probably more now as it was still limited during the first year of opening, 2008-2009).

- What types of establishments are in the university’s neighborhood? (cafes, stores, etc)
On campus there are several Cilantro’s which are expensive coffee shacks with some food and juice options. There is a Jaret’s Bagels which offers yogurt, bagels, and snacks. There are two different McDonald’s, one of which is one of the larger cafeteria area next to a Japanese food place and an Italian pizza and pasta place. The other cafeteria area has Egyptian fastfood and another restaurant offering all sorts of food. There are two places that make mixed juice and smoothie drinks. The Student Body and another quick snack shack have candy bar and drink options closer to the front of campus as well. Everything is pretty pricey though and many snack foods are taxed as they are imported.

**Housing**

- What types of accommodations are available to UC students?
While I was there in 2008-2009 the International Student Office had breakfasts and lectures. Many things are not publicized well so you have to be active and vocal about finding out what is going on.
There are many great speakers that come to the campus, and the Desert Development Center is a very interesting resource working with AUC.

- **How close are they to campus?**

There are events that happen in the downtown campus in the central Cairo (wost Al Balad) area as well.

- **How did you find your housing? Where did you live and with whom?**
- **If you lived off campus, was it difficult to find an apartment and roommate?**

I left the temporary ‘campus’ housing in an Egyptian Military hotel in the Heliopolis, Cairo area, half way through the first semester, and found an apartment downtown with some friends and with the help of some Egyptian friends we made. But generally apartment searching is not that difficult as you can merely walk up to a doorman (Boab) and ask if there is an empty unit in the building (fi sha-uh fadia fi amarat da?)

- **Were the rooms nicer or not than I.V./UCSB dorms?**

The dorms on the New AUC Campus are nice on their own accord and the austere simplicity of their surroundings (being on a campus in the middle of the desert) is beautiful, but it is more restrictive than those on a UC campus. There is not much opportunity or freedom to explore around the area in the day or at night. The apartments in Cairo are flexible in negotiating price and set-up, and come fully furnished, but are nonetheless latent with factors from coachroaches to loud busy streets outside. Despite some inconveniences and discomforts, you have many more opportunities in an apartment off campus.

- **Was it more expensive than living in I.V.? How much was a typical rent cost in US dollars?**

Yes, no doubt California realstate, especially hyped up student prices in Isla Vista is more expensive. You can rent a pretty large space for about $200/month in Cairo.

- **How/who did you pay for housing?**

In Egyptian cash.

**Food**

- **What was the food like?**

There are many outdoor fruit, bread, and vegetable vendors and in downtown they are cheaper than in areas with a lot of diplomats and ex-patriots like Maadi or Zamalek. However, the grocery stores are more frequent and supplied in those areas as opposed to downtown (a not so difficult taxi ride to make from Downtown to Zamalek). Kosheri is the carbohydrate-delicious street food on every corner, and there are some chicken and shwarma shops that you will have to explore to decide which are the best. I advise against street food that looks sketchy and sitting out for a while, and avoid leafy greens, salads, and other vegetables served by restaurants and vendors (especially in the beginning) as they are washed in the water. You will need to buy bottled water everyday, and there are small convenience shops and kishks (cigarette, newspaper, snack shacks) all over the place.
Where did you eat most of your meals? Cafeterias, restaurants, street vendors, etc?

Street vendors, local take-out restaurants, and cooking my own.

How much was an average meal?

On campus- $10-20, off campus in Cairo- $5.

What time of day did people eat lunch/dinner?

Would it be difficult for vegetarians to find meals?

No, there are a lot of vegetarian options, and a lot of vegetables, fruits and grains to cook with.

Travel/Safety

If not discussed above, describe the public transportation system around your host university/city?

Did you feel safe in your host city? Are there tips you would offer future students?

I felt safe walking around, even at night. Sexual harassment is a serious problem in Egypt, but rarely escalates into something physical.

Describe the public transportation in your host country?

The large buses are very intimidating as they are packed with locals and do not stop for people to hop on and off. There are smaller micro-buses which are more accessible but you must know the route and its best to do with a local. The Metro system is pretty good and easy to learn. It is also very packed and a fight to get on and off however. Many upper class locals will not use any of the previously mentioned modes of transport, and either take taxis or drive. Taxis are everywhere as well and fairly easy to flag down. They are cheap, but you must know the rates in order not to get ripped off. I believe now there is a push for more metered taxis in Cairo to enforce price regulation. The train will go other places in Egypt from Alexandria to the South to the Delta region. There are buses you can catch that take overnight trips to the Sinai and close to the Israel/Palestine border. There is a ferry you can take to Aqaba, Jordan from the Nuweiba port in Egypt as well.

Was it difficult/easy to travel to neighboring countries?

It is something acquired with practice and takes time and patience, but fairly easy.

Host City/Country

What was the weather like?

In the summer it is very hot, and cools off a lot in the Winter reaching cold temperatures at night for about a month.

Describe your host city…which California/US city is it similar to (if any)?

What were some interesting/fun things that you did in the host city?
There are a lot of different sub-cultures in Cairo. There is a great music scene and venues like El-Sawi music wheel host shows from Egyptian Classical music to Punk Rock and Rap. There are international film festivals and theater shows that come through, and there are many bars and dance clubs as well. The best times were group trips to Sinai or the Black and White Desert. I also became involved with the Cairo Ultimate Frisbee community and we played pick-up games at a school and park in Maadi three times a week.

- How international was your host city in terms of tourism, cultural diversity, and international businesses?

There is an overwhelming commercial prescence on the AUC campus. The main gates, let alone security machines in the library and entrances are marked with Corporate logos. The atmosphere and upper class Egyptian sentiment (let alone the mini-McDonald’s franchise on the campus) almost seems a fight against Middle Eastern cultural authenticity, but nonetheless the academic lectures and conferences outweigh this visual presence. There are also initiatives to help refugees and there is a feminist monologue troupe similar to the Vagina monologues (called the ‘Bussy Project’).

Culture
- Describe the cultural differences that you observed/encountered.
  - Time & punctuality
    Efficiency will be replaced with bureaucracy and nonchalantness.
  
  - Eye contact & staring
    A lot of this is expected. React how you will, but your reaction may warrant additional attention.

  - Relationships
    Keep in mind cultural sensitivity, traditions of Muslim society and pre-marital standards, and appropriate public demeanor. People are very hospitable, but be weary not to give the wrong impression.

  - More formal dress in general, for women, for school, etc?
    The on campus environment is very different and Western dress is more visual with the upper class Egyptians than the foreigners. But especially downtown, wear loose fitting clothes, long pants, and at least a blouse that is not low cut and covers till mid arm.

  - Alcohol consumption
    There are bars and liquor stores. And there is even a service that delivers alcohol to your house. But remember that alcohol is still prohibited under the Muslim faith, and although there joints where locals will hang out, it is not appropriate to carry it around or show public intoxication.

  - What culture shock did you go through?
    Crossing the street was the first most intimidating thing. But you get used to it really fast. The potent smells and dirty sidewalks was the second. The sexual harassment and inevitable hypersexualization of the western female is the third and most sustainable shock.
Banking

- Were credit cards widely accepted?
I mostly used cash everywhere except buying plane flights from the AUC travel service.

- Did you open a local bank account? Was it easy?
No, I communicated with my Bank in the US as to what ATM I could draw money from abroad.

- If you did not open a local bank account, was it easy to withdraw money from the ATM?
  Which banks were popular & had low ATM fees?
ATM fees vary on the bank. They are pretty frequent in urbanized areas like Cairo. Barclays is a pretty popular bank in the area.

- Were there ATMs on campus?
There are probably more ATMs now than were there during the first year.