

My two-semester student Exchange at the AUC in Cairo

I had the incredible opportunity to spend the Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters at the American University in Cairo (AUC). After postponing my exchange for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I finally embarked on my journey at the end of August 2023.

Finding A Flat

Finding an apartment in Cairo is relatively easy. There are many options available in various Facebook groups (such as Cairo Scholars, Expats in Cairo) or through personal contacts. I found my room through a Facebook group. The apartment, located in Garden City and shared with two other people, really made me feel home. Garden City is very close to Tahrir Square, practically in the heart of Cairo. Despite its central location, Garden City is a green and quiet neighborhood (a rarity in Cairo). You could encounter tourist groups, expats living in Cairo and locals from all walks of life.

Beware that many Egyptian AUCians would find it weird that you live in Downtown if you do so. They find Downtown either dangerous or uninhabitably chaotic.

Don't hesitate to see where they deem inhabitable to understand their perspective. Visit Heliopolis and Maadi. There you would find posh cafés and restaurants with a good palette of food. By the way, live in the Downtown, it's the real Cairo.

Cultural Experiences

Cairo is a metropolis brimming with culture and history.

As someone from a Mediterranean country, I went to Egypt thinking another Mediterranean cuisine would be delightful. Sadly, the Egyptian cuisine did not particularly match my expectation.

Have a stroll in the historical Downtown of the city and admire the façades delicately built. It's marvellous. As an article we read in a module at AUC points out, Cairo allows you to travel not only in space but also in time. My personal favourites museum-wise were the Museum of Egypt and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization. These two harbour the biggest mummy collections (the second possesses the Royal Mummies) as well as other significant historical artifacts such as the Golden Mask of Tutankhamun. Visit the museums early in the morning to avoid the hell-like crowd.

Walk in Islamic Cairo. See Darb Al Ahmar, the Castle and don't miss the chance of seeing many of the best Islamic architectural wonders of the city. I was left amazed by the Mosque of Al-Azhar.

The price for tourists is way higher than the Egyptian price. That applies not only in touristic places, but nearly everywhere. A trick is to kindly ask an Egyptian to book a locally priced ticket. You could give them a small sum after you've got the ticket and would still be way better off.

Another trick: If you look like a southerner, another option would be to ask Egyptian student groups for a slot. They let you in inside their group, and often one of them deals with the cashier, you do not reveal your foreignness and get your locally priced ticket.

Travels

I seized weekends and holidays to travel around Egypt with friends and sometimes solo. From deserts and coral reefs to clear starry skies, impressive pharaonic tombs, and hikes up Mount Sinai – the experiences were diverse and unforgettable. I visited Alexandria, Siwa, Port Said, Fayoum, Black and White Desert, Mount Sinai, Dahab and Hurghada, among others. My personal favourite is Dahab. It sticks out, I had a swim in December there.

Travel in Egypt is affordable and fairly easy with buses, trains and flight options. I didn't fly inland, I travelled to Upper Egypt by train, and it was comfortable. The Mediterranean coast and the Red Sea are accessible by bus.

Go to Saqqara and Memphis to have a good one-day trip. It's a 2-hour drive from Downtown Cairo. You get to see pharaonic architecture in its rather early phases. It's worth it.

Transport (also to campus)

The commute, though long (often taking between one to one and a half hours) is worthwhile. The AUC provides a bus service that operates smoothly. I used it only seldom.

Often, sharing the cost of a ride with friends using InDriver or Uber is cheaper than the AUC bus. Form a car-pooling group on WhatsApp where you could ask your fellow students if they'd be up to a ride together. It works just fine.

Calling a motorcycle is always cheaper than calling a cab on Uber or on InDrive. Taking a motor-cycle ride to campus from Downtown takes courage though. Neither you nor the motorcyclist wear a helmet and you ride on the highway after you leave the Downtown. It's a tough sport. Do it if you dare, but beware.

In general, I encourage anyone to use public transport in Cairo. It's limited, but it has advantages. Metro is affordable and operates within the planned schedule. Buses are operated by different roof organisations and some of them are worth riding. I used car-pooling and public buses half-half to commute to campus.

Academic Experience

The courses at AUC were challenging and enriching. As a Bachelor's student, I chose 5 courses. My program at home is Turcology and Ottoman Studies, and at AUC, I took two courses on the Arab World history, two theoretical history courses, and one Sociology course. I took an extra-curricular Fusha course.

The workload for the modules was high, and I recommend maintaining a balanced work-life schedule from the beginning to avoid feeling overwhelmed, especially compared to the German university system.

Support and Activities

The International Office of the AUC is really helpful. They assist exchange students in solving the problems a student encounters. If you need help, definitely let them know.

The AUC organizes a load of activities you could participate. In the first semester, they brought us to the pyramids. In the ALIN-Programme, I had the opportunity to visit the most prominent museums and touristic attractions.

I formed wonderful connections with a group of AUCians coming from Egypt and other Arab countries. Beside that, we were a perfect match with my fellow students from the FU and organized trips together. I enjoyed exploring the city with my Egyptian roommate and friends I met outside AUC.

Last Words

Summarizing nine months in Egypt in just a few pages is quite a challenge. If I had to encapsulate the experience, I'd describe it as challenging, exciting, sometimes overwhelming, incredibly educational, and heartwarming.

One of the most remarkable aspects was studying history at AUC, which is truly a blessing due to its extensive and diverse academic offerings. The university provides an array of courses that delve deeply into various historical periods and regions, making it an enriching experience for any history student.

I wholeheartedly encourage anyone considering studying abroad to seize this opportunity. The city is a tapestry of daily adventures, and my experiences were filled with happy coincidences, growth-inducing challenges, and interactions with intelligent, courageous individuals. My time there underscored the importance of preparation, language learning, and staying politically informed to fully appreciate and navigate the environment.

Living in Egypt for an extended period was something I really wanted, and achieving it was incredibly fulfilling.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to the Direct Exchange team at my home university and the program coordinators for their support and for making this experience possible.