

Freie Universität, Berlin

Auslandstudium WiSe 21/22

4 February 2022

I had the great opportunity to complete an exchange semester for the winter semester of 2021/2022 at Freie Universität and the corresponding fall semester of 2021 at the American University in Cairo. My time spent in Egypt was exciting, challenging, and although it sounds cliché, life changing. Of course, with the ongoing pandemic there were more challenges than there would be during a 'normal' time, but it was well worth it. The community at the AUC and wherever else I traveled was friendly and welcoming, the history and culture of Egypt excited and engaged. The semester provided a unique opportunity to have a different perspective through interacting with local and international students and meeting others not connected with the university.

At first, finding housing was a challenge, but thankfully I had a friend who had lived in Cairo before and he helped me make connections with others in the city and join social media groups. Despite the connections, it was still difficult to know before traveling to Cairo where would be the best place to live. I would recommend asking around to see if you know anyone who has lived there or lives there currently, joining social media groups, and reaching out to fellow students who are also studying there. While living in Cairo and looking back after having completed the exchange, I feel glad that I lived near downtown Cairo and commuted to New Cairo, instead of the reverse. I know many who lived on or near campus instead and also enjoyed their living experiences. However, it was important for me to be near cultural sites, have easy access to visit them during my time off, and not solely interact with fellow students in a school setting. And although the commute to campus on school days was long, it was worth it for me to live in a different neighborhood. For transportation, students could buy tickets for a university-provided bus, which I used regularly along with ride-sharing with other students—as it was usually cheaper than using the university bus.

While living there I visited numerous amazing historical and cultural sites from Lower to Upper Egypt. With so many activities in Cairo and amazing places in Egypt to experience, my suggestion is to plan some things ahead of time, but also leave plenty of time open for spontaneity and rest. Striking a balance between the education and social parts of life was another challenge. I would recommend planning out the semester as soon as courses are settled to be aware of small and large deadlines—so you don't get overwhelmed and aren't tempted to procrastinate—and then noting down events or trips you would also like to take. The

semester really flies by and if there is something you would be disappointed to miss, write it down. On weekends and holidays, I traveled regularly to cities and sites outside of Cairo. While I'm thankful I did and would still visit them all again given the choice, it was exhausting. So it's useful to plan some days of going nowhere and doing nothing.

The university is full of people and it can be difficult to make connections, so find at least one other person in each class that you reach out to early on. All of my classes had a group chat going that would be helpful for asking questions and sharing information. I also found my professors to be open to helping with questions or concerns, whether via email, before/after class, or during office hours. There can be a heavy workload and high expectations depending on the course, communicating challenges or asking for assistance early on can help. I had the opportunity to take engaging courses that had specific themes on Cairo and Egypt. The classes also allowed me to participate in fieldtrips in and around Cairo, which was one of the best ways to learn about my home-for-the-semester. I also took a language class, and although I was in no way at a proficient or fluent level, it definitely helped with communication and appreciation of the culture.

It's also useful to take advantage of the other offices and groups at school. The international office answered so many questions and if they couldn't either contacted the person who could or directed me to the office. The student organizations planned fun and informative activities that helped forge friendships and create a welcoming environment. Even though it's only one semester, I recommend looking for and utilizing all the services the university has to offer. The library had many study spots, but an air conditioning that never turned off even on cold days (and it turned cold in Cairo!). Students can reserve places at the AUC gym area and pool—which was especially refreshing on the hot end-of-summer days. There are also many food and snack places on campus and outside areas to eat a meal. My mouth still waters when I think of a particular sandwich stand.

Overall, the experience of studying abroad was such a growing experience, and worth all of the challenges. I'm grateful for all of the learning experiences, in and out of the classroom, and connections made throughout the whole semester.