

# **INFORMATION SHEET ON KUWAIT FOR FULBRIGHT RESEARCHERS, LECTURERS, AND STUDENTS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to Kuwait! We hope that the time you spend here will be rewarding, both professionally and personally. The following information is meant to provide you with a general outline on what to expect during your stay. It cannot be considered all inclusive.

## **TRAVEL AND DOCUMENTS**

A visa is required to enter Kuwait, and it can be obtained relatively easily from the Embassy of the State of Kuwait in Washington, D.C. Americans can receive a one-year, multiple-entry visa. Once you have arrived in Kuwait, your sponsor (usually Kuwait University) will apply for a residency permit. Obtaining a residency permit is not a problem for most Americans, but you should expect a fairly long delay. Patience is of the utmost necessity when dealing with a slow working bureaucracy. While waiting to get your residency permit, always carry your passport or a photocopy of it with you for identification purposes.

## **PHOTOS**

We recommend you bring a supply of passport-sized photos with you for the ubiquitous forms and IDs requiring your photo. This will also save you time when applying for visas to visit neighboring countries.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

Kuwait is an automobile society, and very few people do without a car. If you plan to be here for an extended period, a car can facilitate your movement around the city. Used car prices start from under 500 Kuwaiti dinars (KDs) for a 10-12-year-old American or Japanese model in fair condition.

Probably the best way to purchase a car is through one of the many car agents in town. There is also a large open market for used cars held every Friday morning in the Shwaykh District. You can also find "for sale" notices posted at co-op stores and large supermarkets, such as the Sultan Center. There are also numerous car rental agencies with prices starting at 15-20 KD per day for a short-term rental; long-term (a month or more) rentals run a bit less.

If you buy a car, you will need to register it, obtain a Kuwaiti license, and purchase insurance. This is not especially difficult and insurance is inexpensive, but the entire procedure can be time-consuming.

We recommend you obtain an international driver's license, available from AAA, in the U.S. and also bring your valid state-side license with you to Kuwait.

Auto mechanics abound in this mobile society, and parts and expertise can readily be

found for most standard American, Japanese and European makes.

Taxis, though not cheap, are available and can be hired by phone. Some of these neighborhood firms specialize in English-speaking drivers. Rates are set by distance, not metered, and examples are usually posted, though it's often best to agree on the fare with the driver before accepting a ride. You should also ensure that the driver knows your destination before you start out. Fares range from 1 KD for a ride of 2-3 kilometers to 6 KD from the International Airport to the city center, a distance of about 15 kms.

Public bus transportation is steadily improving, but still unreliable. However, it is cheap. Routes are fixed and buses numbered, though timings are erratic. Schedule info, while not printed and distributed, is available for the asking at the many bus terminuses. While personal safety is generally high in Kuwait, buses are among the least safe environments, especially for a woman traveling alone.

## COMMUNICATIONS

Telephone communication in Kuwait is reliable, and long-distance connections are usually very clear. Direct dialing to the U.S. is very simple and quick. Recently, international rates have come down, though they are still high by U.S. standards. We recommend you obtain an AT&T, MCI or Sprint calling card before coming to Kuwait. For calls exceeding five minutes, this is still the cheaper option. Calls within Kuwait are free, though there is an annual charge of 30 KD for the line. In addition, it is the rare Kuwaiti resident who does not have a mobile phone, for which costs are higher than in the U.S.

Electronic mail has recently caught on in a big way in Kuwait, though the telecommunications infrastructure still does not universally support data transmission. There is a (limited) choice of Internet access providers. A dial-up account can be had for about 2-3 times the cost in the U.S. There are also a few "Internet cafes" in town; surfing charges range from 1-3 KD per hour. Many travelers set up "Hotmail" or other personal e-mail addresses, which can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection.

Fulbright grantees have access to the Embassy's APO (Air Force Post Office). However, access is for first class mail only. You can neither send nor receive packages through the APO. This service is for the use of the Fulbright grantee and family only. Also no alcohol, pork products, or what is considered pornography by Kuwaiti authorities can be sent to you through the APO.

If you use the APO, you should bring a sufficient supply of U.S. first class postage stamps for personal use. Rates are the same as within the U.S.

The APO address is:

Your Name  
USIS Kuwait  
Unit 69000, Box 12  
APO AE 09880-9000

You may also have mail sent to the Embassy's international address, which is:

Your Name (USIS)  
Embassy of the United States of America  
P.O. Box 77 Safat  
13001 Kuwait

Delivery of international mail to and from Kuwait is fairly reliable.

## **MONEY**

One Kuwaiti dinar (KD) is roughly equivalent to US \$3.06 (in 8/99). Bills come in 20, 10, 5, 1, 1/2, and 1/4 dinar denominations. Each dinar has 1000 fils; coins are 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5 fils. Prices are usually quoted out 3 places to the right of the decimal point.

Kuwaiti banks can accommodate dollar or dinar accounts and are quite efficient. Money transfers to and from the U.S. are very easy. Many expatriates use the services of the National Bank of Kuwait, which has numerous local branches and an office in New York.

Fulbright grantees may cash personal dollar checks for dinars at the Embassy currency exchange, which has been set up with a local bank. There are also several private exchange houses in Kuwait that can exchange personal checks for almost any currency.

All the usual major credit cards are widely accepted in Kuwait, and most merchants will take a personal check drawn on a Kuwait account. ATMs are easily found; most are connected to international networks, such as Cirrus.

## **UTILITIES**

Electricity in Kuwait, at 220 volt and 50 Hz, is quite reliable. Outlets are bulky and generally of the British, three-pronged variety, though the continental European round pin style (in two sizes!) is also common. Fortunately, adaptors and transformers are readily available. Utilities are paid for by the sponsoring institution. If you are bringing a computer or other sensitive electrical equipment, you should consider bringing along a surge protector.

Gas for cooking ranges is sold in buta-gas containers available at many corner stores.

Water in Kuwait is plentiful, if slightly salty from the desalinization process and sometimes tainted with dust and other particles. But it is free of biological contaminants and safe to drink. Many houses and apartments have in-line water filters. Most residents, however, prefer the taste of readily available bottled drinking water.

## **GROCERIES AND SHOPPING**

Kuwait has many corner stores that sell the bare necessities. Every neighborhood has a large co-operative grocery operated by a local neighborhood association. You do not need to be a member to shop in these stores, which generally have the least expensive

prices. There are also several Western-style supermarkets, e.g. the Sultan Center, which sell groceries, hardware, personal hygiene products, kitchen appliances and house plants, among other items. Selection is generally quite good. Almost any American product can be found in Kuwaiti stores.

As Kuwait must import nearly everything, grocery prices, especially on many fresh fruits and vegetables, are high. Increasingly, some lower-priced local agricultural products are appearing. Pork products and alcohol are prohibited.

Clothing stores are plentiful in Kuwait, with many familiar European and American designer names represented. Prices are generally in between those in the U.S. and Europe. Prices for electronics and household goods, also plentiful, are usually competitive with U.S. prices. Many people shop in the Salmiya district, a long, tree-lined outdoor mall of shops and markets. Another popular area for shopping is the downtown souk, although the area still bears scars from the war. There are also a few modern shopping malls around the city, with correspondingly higher prices.

There is a daily seaside fish market that features fresh fish and seafood in season, and a weekly outdoor market for antiques, tropical birds, livestock, fruits and vegetables, electronic items -- you name it.

Kuwait is not the best place in the region to purchase gold and other jewelry, regional handicrafts and carpets. However, there are several reputable (and a few less so) merchants offering such items; selection is good and prices are generally reasonable by Western standards. South Asian handicrafts abound.

## **HEALTH**

While Kuwait has numerous pharmacies, it is a good idea to bring a supply of any prescription medicines. Contact lens supplies are available, and there are quality optometrists in Kuwait for eyeglasses. Contact lens wearers should bring spare eyeglasses, as the blowing dust and sand in Kuwait sometimes makes wearing contacts very uncomfortable.

Kuwait hospitals are staffed by well-trained personnel and are reliable for emergency cases, though long-term care can be uneven. Health care in Kuwait is paid for by the government, though there are plans to institute some fees for expatriates. There are numerous dental clinics, including some staffed with American and European dentists.

Kuwait's is generally not an unhealthful environment. However, the extreme heat and dryness especially of the summer months can dehydrate a person very quickly, as can the air-conditioned spaces people occupy most of the time. It is very important to stay hydrated through conscious effort, not just when thirsty. Some use humidifiers at home or in the office. The other major irritant is dust, especially late in the summer months. People with sinus problems sometimes find their condition aggravated by the dryness and dust, even when the air is still.

## **CLOTHING**

Kuwait's climate is surprisingly varied, particularly in the winter, when it can become quite cool and damp. We suggest you bring a couple of sweaters and a good windbreaker, useful especially from early December to mid-February. Although the winter of 1998-99 boasted only moderate rainfall, the previous year saw one of the heaviest downpours in Kuwait history. Several people drowned as they were caught in lower-lying areas. The rains usually fall from November until May.

Summers are very hot, with temperatures commonly reaching 115-120 F, and often hotter. It can also be surprisingly humid. Loose cotton clothing is best for this season.

For men, jacket and tie are standard dress for office calls and meetings, even in summer. Casual wear can be most anything smart and neat. Sandals are common.

Women should dress conservatively, but not severely. Many Kuwaiti women of all ages are very fashion conscious. While younger Kuwaiti women increasingly dress much as they might in the West, particularly for casual social occasions and prowling the malls, it is best for a visitor to err on the side of caution. Bare shoulders, plunging neck lines, short hemlines and clinging materials still make many in Kuwait uncomfortable and can close doors. A large number of Kuwaiti women of all ages continue to wear the veil, which can range from a simple head covering to a full body wrap.

## **RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITIES**

Most Kuwaitis are Sunni Muslim, with a minority of about 30% Shi'a Muslims. Mosques are plentiful, and the call to prayer is part of the soundtrack of daily life. There is a large expatriate Christian community in Kuwait; there are two Catholic churches, an Armenian Orthodox church, and an Evangelical Protestant church located here. Other religions are also practiced, usually in private homes.

Kuwaitis are not as sensitive about religion as are some of their neighbors, but they do expect their religious sensitivities to be respected. Non-Muslims should not display overtly religious symbols, e.g., the cross, in public. Both men and women should dress conservatively. There are no laws requiring veils or segregation of the sexes. In general, women should avoid wearing tight, revealing clothing in public. Although many expatriate and some Kuwaiti men wear shorts in public, we recommend that you avoid doing so, other than to the obvious places -- sports clubs, the soccer field, and the beach.

## **RECREATION**

Although improving, Kuwait is somewhat lacking in recreational opportunities, and one often still hears the sad lament, "You should have seen it before the war." Still, there are some interesting things to see and do.

Many sport and health clubs have facilities for weight training, squash, handball, tennis, aerobics and swimming. Until recently, the vast amounts of unexploded ordnance and mines left over from the Gulf War made it highly dangerous to engage in many activities the Kuwaitis used to enjoy, such as beach parties or camping in the desert. However, the

past couple of years have seen the gradual return to these common pastimes, as most (though not all) of this war materiel has been cleaned up. A great many Kuwaitis fish or boat, and the occasional water skier and even para-sailor can be seen in the summer months. SCUBA diving has lately become an increasingly popular, if expensive sport. Many Kuwaitis go to the beach on Thursday afternoons and Fridays during the summer, but the beaches and water in the city can be somewhat dirty. Beaches at private clubs and homes are usually better maintained and the waters south of the city and around offshore islands are generally cleaner.

With a car, you can visit the dhow builders in old Doha, visit Entertainment City or one of the smaller amusement parks, prowl among the fishing boats harbored across from the National Assembly, or spend the weekend at a popular beach resort about one hour south of Kuwait City. A real treat is to be invited to a friend's beach "chalet," which can range from a simple bungalow to something considerably more opulent. In the winter months you can sample the traditional life of a bedouin, either by visiting a friend's seasonal desert encampment, or through the occasional special programs offered for visitors.

Kuwait University administers evening Arabic language classes for non-native speakers, and also teaches some other languages. There are also several other language and technical training institutes. Cultural events, such as concerts or plays, are few and far between, though there are a couple of Western-style choirs and ad-hoc instrumental ensembles, with mostly expatriate members. There are occasional programs of Arabic music and sometimes dance at the hotels or community auditoriums. Embassies will sometimes organize special programs to showcase the cultures they represent. There are two English-language community and some professional Kuwaiti theater groups, the latter producing plays with a mass appeal. Lectures and other programs on various cultural or historical topics are regularly presented by various groups, often in English.

There are good Indian, Iranian, Chinese, Italian and Lebanese restaurants, in addition to numerous American fast-food places, including McDonald's, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, Burger King, KFC and Baskin-Robbins. Some American family restaurant chains, including Chilli's, Applebee's, Fudrucker and TGI Friday's have outlets here and are quite popular. Hotel restaurants, including two offering Japanese cuisine, are excellent, but pricy. At the other end of the scale are lots of chawarma and falafel joints.

Much of Kuwait's traditional bazaar was destroyed during the Iraqi occupation, but there are sections of the gold market that are worth exploring. The Friday Market in Shwaykh is always interesting (if its parking lot ambience less so) and features Iranian and Bedouin merchants selling all kinds of items for the home and garden.

There are numerous video shops and video clubs renting censored copies of movies from around the world (and often non-censored pirated copies of varying quality). Audio shops sell cassettes and CDs, often pirated. There are also several good bookshops with large selections of books and periodicals in English and other languages, though the logic behind their organization can be obscure. Prices are significantly higher than in the U.S.