

# Walking, Dressing, Eating like Egyptians

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This summer was exciting for 15 Island students who took part in an exchange programme between UPEI and Misr International University (MIU) in Cairo, Egypt. Only a small handful of us had visited the Middle East before so for all of us this trip was a unique experience.

The exchange lasted one month and we took courses concentrated in Middle Eastern studies such as Arabic language, contemporary Arab issues, ancient history and politics of the region. Several other Universities participated so we met students from England, Germany and Austria as well as the Egyptian students at MIU.

We began classes roughly a week after landing. Egypt is a predominantly Muslim country, for them Friday is a holy day so their workweek starts Sunday. We attended classes from Sunday to Wednesday every week. Classes were more casual than they are here; professors often answered their phones, interrupting the middle of a lesson.

One of the first and most notable changes was food. Some of the students wanted to ease their transition into the culture by eating Egyptian renditions to food we could find at home. It wasn't

too hard to find 'Western' food, as there was a McDonald's, KFC and various Italian restaurants and steakhouses near our apartments. After a few days our wallets got a little lighter, as that sort of food is expensive. Soon we began to eat like real Egyptians sampling the delights of falafel, fuul, shawarma and our favourite, koshari. Koshari is an Egyptian staple because it's cheap yet filling and delicious, being very similar to pasta or stir-fry. Our group frequented a small

bakery that sold baklava and other lovely Arabic deserts and pastries, many drenched in honey (yummy!). Some people were adventurous enough to try other traditional foods such as pigeon and fried cow brain sandwich.

It catered towards a vegetarian diet with its abundance of protein rich foods like beans and lentils and was also full of carbohydrates that gave us energy to last through the hot and tiring days.

The relationship between men and women and roles they play are different

in Egyptian society. For example it is more acceptable in public for men to have a physical relationship with the same sex than with the opposite, likewise with women. It is not uncommon to see two men or two women walking down the street arm in arm or even holding hands. They also kiss and may call each other habibi (meaning sweetheart) when greeting each other. It was refreshing to see how open the relationships between people of the same gender were - homosexuality was rarely given any acknowledgement. The

same could not be said for the interactions between men and women as societal constraints call for the separation of the sexes. As mentioned before, Egypt is a Muslim country and Islam states that men and women are equal but ought to be separated in public life. It is a common misconception that Islam is a male dominated religion and the women are suppressed. Even though some women wear scarves to cover their hair or burkas to cover their whole face, this is done in modesty and to protect them from the lustful gazes of

men and give them privacy. Men are also required to dress moderately and not show off their bodies too much. In Egypt these standards resulted in us seeing women dressing in a wide range from Hijabs to Burqas or demure Western clothing while men usually wore long pants and shirts or galabeyas (a plain gown reaching the feet).

Aside from a rat in one group's apartment and a few nerve-racking treks down dark back alleys, we felt very safe during our stay in Cairo. We never witnessed or heard of petty crime,

