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Joan Petit

Portland State University, jpetit@pdx.edu

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A Librarian in the Land of the Pharaohs

by Joan Petit

jpetit@pdx.edu

Humanities and

Social Services Librarian

Portland State University

In the summer of 2007, my husband and I packed up our house, our kids, and our cat and moved from Carrboro, North Carolina to Cairo, Egypt, where I was to spend the next two years working as Reference and Instruction Librarian at the American University in Cairo (AUC). While it was a big transition for my family, the university worked hard to make it as seamless as possible. They arranged for a shipment of 17 boxes of our most important possessions (including bikes, clothes, and toys) to Egypt. And when we arrived at the Cairo airport, where the hot, dry air was a refreshing change from the humidity we left behind in North Carolina, we were met by a friendly AUC employee who presented us with an envelope bursting with Egyptian currency and escorted us through immigration and customs to a waiting van and driver. The city lights twinkled as we drove to a furnished apartment in Maadi, a Cairo suburb. The shiny, bright, air-conditioned apartment on the 7th floor offered us extensive city views, three bedrooms, a bath and a half, and a comfortable home for our family. It even came stocked with cereal, bread, chicken, eggs, and milk, so we didn't have to venture out too soon. And thus began our adventure in Cairo.

Truthfully, working at the American University in Cairo was not all that different from working at a private American university. The classes were conducted in English; the students were mostly from wealthy families and were well-traveled; the professors griped about their students; the students always needed staplers—that is, when they weren't updating Facebook. But of course, there were big differences from American campuses. My students were primarily Egyptian and most spoke English and Arabic; most were Muslim, though of varying degrees of religious observance; and most lived at home. Many had their own cars and drivers. And many had attended high schools without libraries or research assignments.

As Instruction and Reference Librarian, I had responsibilities in several areas, including reference and collection development for my liaison departments. My primary role was to teach and help coordinate LALT 101, the required information literacy class. Students typically took (or tested out of) this class in their first or second year at AUC. The class met once a week for an hour, and we had about 11 class meetings during a typical semester; I taught two or three sections of 20–30 students each semester. The course was intended to teach information literacy skills, including library research and critical thinking; this was a particular challenge given students' lack of familiarity with libraries. At the beginning of each semester, I was always filled with great hope and anticipation; by the end of the semester, it sometimes felt like I had failed to do all that I wanted—a common scenario for many librarians in instruction sessions all around the world.

Fortunately, at the AUC Library, we were able to experiment. My first year in Cairo was the University's last year at its historic downtown campus (located on Tahrir Square, the site of early 2011 large-scale protests in Cairo). AUC was bursting at the seams downtown, and, in fall of 2008, relocated most operations to a large new campus east of the city in "New Cairo," formerly the desert. The new campus felt more like a typical American university with large plazas, purpose-built buildings, a student recreation center and pool, and dining halls, complemented by beautiful Arabic-influenced architecture and design (think granite, lots of granite). The air was cleaner and cooler. What we gained in amenities, however, we lost in convenience, as the new campus was many miles from downtown Cairo, and a particularly irksome commute given Cairo's inadequate highways. Cairo ranks with Delhi and similar cities for traffic congestion and pollution.

But perhaps because of this big transition, we also made some big transitions with LALT 101. We incorporated student blogging into weekly assignments and moved the



course materials into a wiki (<http://lalt.wetpaint.com>). Students loved blogging, even about benign issues like library research. They seemed to learn better and retain information longer. The blogging experiment continues at AUC, with great success.

The bigger transition for my family was cultural. We moved from a college town to a city of 19 million people. Even though we lived in a Cairo suburb, our neighborhood felt urban to us, with high-rise apartment buildings dominating the new developments. A welcome change for us included our employment of a part-time housekeeper and nanny, a lovely Ethiopian woman who worked for us for two years. She cleaned our house, did the laundry, cooked us dinner, and watched the kids. When my husband started working a few months after our arrival, we hired her full-time, and she picked up the kids after school. My house has never been so clean and my clothes so freshly pressed. And all this for \$500 a month—a salary that our Egyptian and expatriate friends considered exorbitant.

We also were very conspicuous in Cairo—not because we were Americans, but because my family is multiracial. My husband and I, who are white, adopted our children, who were born in Ethiopia, and formal adoption is uncommon in Egypt, as in most of Islam. More than once, strangers stopped us on the street to say, “Is this your son?” “Yes,” we answered. “But he’s black!” they’d inform us (as if we didn’t know!). In this case, it was an advantage not to speak Arabic; a friend of mine, an adoptive mother and fluent Arabic-speaker, heard terrible things said about her family by some Egyptians. I’m very glad my children couldn’t understand these comments.

Otherwise, though, life in Cairo was good. We felt very safe, even at night. We joined an American expat club with a pool, restaurant, and tennis courts, which felt especially luxuri-




Author and her family at the Great Pyramids.



ous given Cairo's lack of public parks and open spaces. We spent many evenings and most weekends at the club, visiting with friends, swimming, eating, and relaxing. We weren't rich (is any librarian anywhere?), but we were comfortable. We visited the Great Pyramids at Giza; we crept down into the Red Pyramid at Dashur, near the original Memphis. We went to Alexandria and visited an ancient Roman coliseum and gazed at the turquoise Mediterranean from the plaza outside the newly rebuilt Bibliotheca Alexandrina. We took a few trips to the Sinai Peninsula: we saw the (not) burning bush at St. Catherine's and snorkeled over incredible coral reefs where my kids joyfully shouted "Nemo!" every time they saw a clownfish. I also visited the White Desert, miles from any sea but dotted with prehistoric shell fossils.

And perhaps most interestingly, we experienced immersion in an Islamic culture. We were in Egypt twice during Ramadan, the Muslim Holy Month when Egyptians fast during the day and spend evenings with their families, eating huge meals and watching special Ramadan soap operas; and we loved the joyful holiday afterwards, when children proudly wear their new clothes and celebrate with their friends. Living in Egypt, I learned more than I ever could have studied on my own about the tenuous politics in the Middle East. I saw the joy of Egyptians when Barack Obama was elected and George Bush left office. And I gained a new perspective on my home, the U.S., from beyond the North American continent.

This insight has particularly helped me understand the recent popular uprising in Egypt against Hosni Mubarak, which has been raging for a week as I write this in late January. I've been concerned about our Egyptian and expat friends, though many feel safe and have chosen to stay. I am also very hopeful for the Egyptian people.

People often ask what took us overseas, and my husband and I don't have a convincing answer other than, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." And it was a great idea—even when Cairo was infuriating, with its pollution and overcrowded streets—we never, for one moment, regretted moving there with our two young children. My kids rode camels around the Pyramids when they were two and four years old; they swam in the Red Sea; and they interacted with people from around the world. The pollution and the complications for our multiracial family brought us back to the US—and we're all happily settling into Portland—but with a much better sense of the world and our place in it. 



Note From the Author

If you'd like to learn more about how to find a librarian position overseas, please read the articles I wrote for LIScareer.com:

Petit, Joan. "Working Overseas in a School or Academic Library." LIScareer.com. April 2010.
http://liscareer.com/petit_overseas_academic.htm

Petit, Joan. "Working Overseas as a Librarian for the United States or Non-governmental Organizations." LIScareer.com. June 2010.
http://liscareer.com/petit_overseas_gov.htm

