Al Akhawayn University
Ifrane, Morocco
Fall 2016

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Major: International Studies

A stand selling dried fruit in Jemaa el-Fnaa market in Marrakesh, Morocco.
1. Preparation for Exchange

When I received an acceptance letter from Al Akhawayn University’s Office of International Programs, I was provided with the term dates as well as recommended times to check in and out of residence housing. Based on the preparations I made for my trip, I would recommend that future outbound students take the following into consideration.

- **Travel and transportation**
  Orientation is mandatory and I would recommend that you plan to arrive in Morocco one-two days prior to when it starts. Flights can be booked through companies such as Ryan Air and Royal Air Maroc directly to Fes (about an hour from the university). Air Canada also flies to Casablanca with Royal Air Maroc providing flights between Casablanca and Fes or, alternatively, you can choose to take the train with ONCF ([http://www.oncf.ma/](http://www.oncf.ma/)) or the bus with CTM ([www.ctm.ma](http://www.ctm.ma)) which will take you directly to Ifrane.

  The university provides a pick-up service for international students from the train station or airport in Fes. Since the taxi system in Morocco can be daunting or confusing at first, I would recommend that you take advantage of this service.

- **What to bring**
  The university provided me with a bed, bedding (mattress pad, sheets, blanket, pillow), a garbage can, and a desk and chair. There is also a mandatory meal plan for all students; however, if you are like me and wish to have a taste of home you may want to bring some basic cooking supplies.

  In addition, I would recommend that you pack:
  - Loose clothing (for the hot weather)
  - Towels
  - Travel backpack
  - Shopping bag (plastic bags are banned in Morocco and markets generally sell unpackaged goods)
  - Bathing suit
  - Medicines (you will not find any North American medicinal products in the pharmacies)
Modest clothing may make you feel more comfortable on the streets and attract less attention. However, university students generally wear a variety of European styles.

**Financials and Paperwork**
Morocco is a cash-based society. The national currency is the Moroccan Dirham (MAD) sometimes called ‘deeze.’ You will need to always have cash on you to pay restaurants, shops, taxis etc. It is important to remember that many street vendors and taxi drivers will have difficulty providing change for 100 MAD and 200 MAD bills. I found that North American debit cards did not work in Morocco; however, Visa and Mastercard could be used for making cash advances at ATM machines. I was told that I could not open a local bank account in Morocco without a residency card which I did not receive before my departure.

The cost of living is significantly less than in Vancouver. For example, a dozen eggs will cost approximately 24 MAD ($3 CAD) at the local market in Ifrane and a kilo of oranges will cost around 10 MAD ($1.30 CAD). However, this is only the case if you are in the regular neighbourhoods of Morocco. Certain districts tend to be more expensive and you will be paying higher prices for imported goods at the supermarkets in larger cities like Fes and Casablanca. You can find cheaper goods at the local suq, a farmer’s market which takes place in Ifrane on Sunday mornings. (To give you an idea of the price differences, a kilo of oranges at the suq will cost 3 MAD/ $0.40 CAD.)
2. During the Exchange

- Arrival and Orientation

I would highly recommend that you have Al Akhawayn University pick you up or assist you in your travels to the campus from the nearby city of Fes. The campus is located in Ifrane, a city in the Atlas Mountains only accessible by Grand Taxi or Bus (note, there are no trains to Ifrane). The Al Akhawayn University campus is not open to the public and everyone needs to get clearance to enter the campus prior to student cards being issued. Security at the campus gates will usually process your passport in order to allow you entry into the university.

I opted for the pick-up service. Student ambassadors were available to pick me up from the airport and on campus to show me to the Housing Office to pick up my room key and student card. The AUI student card is often referred to as the ‘cash wallet’ as it will be preloaded with a balance of money that can be used at the restaurant, café and campus store for meals. Without a cash wallet it is not possible to make any purchases on campus.
There are three restaurants on campus: a pizza restaurant upstairs and two international restaurants on the main floor of Building 3.

As for shopping, there is a local market in Ifrane. Shops and restaurants do not have regular opening hours, but during the summer months (exceptions are made during Ramadan) generally many stores begin to open by 10am and do not close until 10pm or later. It is easy to reach the market by foot (20 minutes) from the university campus or by taxi. You can find the location of the market, called the Marché Municipal, on Google Maps or by following the signs in town. During my stay the taxi price was fixed at 12 MAD (15MAD in the evenings) one way.
There are also shops, restaurants and offices (Maroc Poste, Banque Populaire, Attijariwafa Bank, Crédit Agricole du Maroc) nearby at the downtown area referred to as the centre ville, near to the Le Lion d'Ifrane landmark on Google Maps. This area is typically frequented by local tourists and items are slightly more expensive.

Orientation is mandatory and provides an opportunity for students to meet others on exchange who, in my case, became my best travel companions. The student ambassadors were also available to show us around campus and to various locations in town during this time.

During orientation, the university staff provide assistance with visa applications which I had to submit to the local police station. For this, the Moroccan government required passport-sized photos and a scanned copy of my passport. Student ambassadors were available to help me get those requirements.

I highly advise that you ask the student ambassadors to take you downtown to buy a Moroccan SIM card or a Moroccan phone (old-style flip phones are available at the marché for less than 100MAD) and assist you with setting the phone up. Maroc Telecom and Orange are the two main telecommunications providers in the country and cell phones operate on prepaid cards.

• Accommodation and Living

Every student is assigned a room with one or two Moroccan roommates. Each building has one Residence Advisor (RA) who can help with filing maintenance requests and in the case of roommate disputes. There is a phone in every room which can be used to make calls within the university, including to RAs. Most buildings have at least one kitchen with a stove and toaster oven and one common room. Each room has a toilet, sink and shower to be shared between roommates. All buildings are gender-segregated and gender is normatively assigned. It is forbidden for a male to enter a female building and vice-versa. This is due, in part, to the nature of the laws on gender and sexuality in Morocco and efforts on the university’s part to provide an environment generally suitable in the eyes of parents.

For more information on housing at AUI, you can visit their website at http://www.aui.ma/en/housing.

There are various non-perishable food items, toiletries and household items available at the Campus Store located in Building 2. There is also an on-campus
café (Building 2) which serves drinks and pastries as well as three restaurants in Building 3. These options are open daily and provide various meal options. It is important to note that these restaurants have a reputation for causing food poisoning among students and staff. As far as I know, the university is aware of this issue. However, I would advise that students choose food that is thoroughly cooked and served hot (avoid any raw or cold salads if possible.) Furthermore, if you feel any symptoms of food poisoning while at AUI, you should go immediately to the Health Center located on the main floor of Building 26. The Health Centre is open 24/7 with a doctor always on call.

For those who, like myself, have dietary restrictions (vegans, vegetarians, persons with allergies and celiac disease), they will likely find few options among the Moroccan and international cuisine at the restaurants. I would highly recommend that people with dietary restrictions plan to cook their meals in their building’s kitchen and use their cash wallet for toiletries and snacks at the Campus Store. Cooking supplies and fruits/veggies/meat are all available at the marché.

• **Academic Information**

The average student takes between four and five classes (around 12 credits) per semester at AUI. Classes are usually two to three times per week. Enrollment is done entirely through the Office for International Programs based on a pre-registration form completed before prior to arrival. They provided me with my course schedule during orientation and assisted me with adding and dropping classes during the first week. Note, exchange students are NOT prioritized for enrollment at this university and it is likely that you will not receive all the courses you intended to take. I would advise that future students leave room for ‘elective’ courses outside of their area of study for their semester abroad.

Professors generally have high expectations, though the quality of teaching varies from class to class. The standards for grading are generally equal to SFU’s standards. There is also a university-wide attendance policy limiting the number of times students can be late or absent, if you exceed this limit you will automatically be withdrawn from the course and receive an failing grade.

Future students should come prepared to hand in high quality work and participate extensively in class. Therefore, if you wish to do traveling during your semester in Morocco, I would highly advise that you do not enroll in more than four courses (12 credits).
• **Extra-curricular Activities**

There are various clubs, sports teams and initiatives to become involved with on campus. Tryouts and a clubs fair are held in the first two weeks of classes. Additionally, the Student Activities Office hosts on campus events and off campus trips for AUI students.

• **Country and Culture**

Morocco is an Arabic-speaking country. However, French is spoken widely and I was surprised by the number of English speakers in the bigger cities.

The country may be located on the African continent, but Ifrane is in the Atlas Mountains and thus has weather comparable to Vancouver. In the summer months there is little rain and high temperatures (around 30 degrees) in the daytime. However, in October the weather begins to cool and you can expect to see intermittent snow November – March. Be sure to have winter boots and a winter coat. Buildings in Morocco are usually not air conditioned in the summer and not heated in the winter. I found the university residences to usually be adequately heated, but the library and classrooms were freezing.

There are a myriad of wonderful places to visit in Morocco. Some of the major tourist destinations include Fes, Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, Marrakesh, Chefchaouen, Merzouga, Essouara and Agadir. I found that people spoke French or English in tourist areas. Some important things to keep in mind while traveling is that, aside from the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakesh, and the mosque on the AUI campus, non-Muslims are prohibited from entering mosques in Morocco. If tourists wish to enter the mosques listed above, they should dress modestly and females should cover their hair (usually with a scarf).

Travel within Morocco is relatively cheap compared to Europe and North America. The taxis that travel within cities are called Petit Taxis and the taxis that travel between cities are called Grand Taxis. Most Petit Taxis have a meter and a trips usually do not exceed 20 MAD. Grand Taxis are available at designated areas in most cities and the prices are fixed by the taxi coordinator (the person walking around with a piece of paper). Taxis from Ifrane to Fes/Meknes cost 180 MAD for a full taxi and 30 MAD each for a shared taxi holding six people. The system is almost entirely informal and taxi prices can often be negotiated. I found that traveling with Moroccans at first helped me to understand how the
system worked. Alternatively, there are also reliable bus and train networks in Morocco.

Despite what I was told, I did not find the medinas (old cities) of Fes and Marrakesh to be dangerous. However, travelers should always be mindful of their belongings while walking in crowds, be prepared to say ‘no’ firmly while bargaining and be respectful in their interactions.
3. Reflections and Advice

I found that I gained a lot from the experience of living in Morocco. I had to be a lot more resourceful and learn to communicate across the occasional language barrier with Arabic speakers. However, I was welcomed graciously by friends and acquaintances during my stay and came to feel entirely at home in the country.

For those considering traveling to Morocco, I have the following advice:

- Be open minded. Don’t make assumptions until you have actually surveyed the explanations for specific practices, norms etc.
- Take a language course. French and Arabic will help you to feel more comfortable in the country and reduce your stress while traveling.
- Stand up for yourself. I found that processes at Al Akhawayn University and in Morocco has a whole were generally less standardized than in Canada. In order to make sure that my needs were met, I often had to advocate for myself and negotiate my situation with professors, administrators and other service providers.
- Don’t be afraid to ask your Moroccan friends for help. There are many things about Morocco which may be confusing at first, but with the help of friends you will get the system figured out.
- Get out! Have fun! There are so many exciting things to be a part of, make sure to make the most of your experience being in Morocco.