Over the years, more and more AUC (American University in Cairo) students apply for a semester abroad and come back with their stories unheard although they had some of the most enriching experiences a person can have.

As an exchange student myself, I can tell you that such a journey truly changes who you are and the way you think and view the world. It’s an emotional as much as it is a mental roller coaster ride that deserves people’s attention and is worth learning from.

*MUSIC: Vladimir Sterzer – Forgive me [RT 00:00:00-00:00:11] fade in under sound bites*

*FARRAH ESSAWI (FE): “I’m a little bit sick of Egypt.” (:02)*

*SAHAR SHOKRY (SS): “I’m not sure I like living in Egypt anymore!” (:03)*

*ASHRAF SABKHA (AS): “I really wanted to go. I really wanted to leave.” (:03)*

*FE: “I was sick of being in a box.” (:02)*

*SFX: DJ break (:02)*

*SFX: Truck backing up [RT 00:00:13-00:00:16] fade in under narration*

Okay back it up people, back it up. You all sound so depressed. This is not a sad story. This is supposed to be a cheerful one. Well, well, I am depressed too but still! And now people are probably wondering why we’re all depressed. Hmm, well to answer this question, we need to go back in time to 2013 where it all began

*NATSOUND: Me and my friend May talking [RT 00:00:37-00:00:54] fade in only under end of previous narration and fade out under beginning of next narration*
Yeah, that’s me, Kanzy Mahmoud, I was 20, sitting with my friend May and I was trying really hard to make up my mind on whether to go on exchange to University of Washington in Seattle for six whole months.

*MUSIC: Louis Armstrong “What a wonderful world” [RT 00:00:57-00:01:26], fade in under next narration*

It was actually the International Student Services Study abroad office, who enabled my exchange. Fun fact: Since its establishment in the 1960s, its name and services have changed like three times: from International Student Services Office to 2007 splitting into International Programs Office and International Student Affairs, dividing academic and non-academic work for both incoming and outgoing students and finally in 2014 joining back as the ISSA.

*MUSIC: Michael Ortega – Sad Piano [RT 00:01:26-00:01:53] fade in under next narration*

But back to our story: So, yeah at the time, I remember it was during fall 2013, I was trying so hard to find anybody to convince me not to go. I was terrified actually, leaving everything I know, my family, and most importantly, my comfort zone and why? Just to explore new things and learn to be on my own. It was a horrible feeling actually and I’m sure others felt the same.

*MUSIC: Akashic Records “Enjoy your life” [RT 00:01:55-00:02:42] fade in under coming narration/sound bites*

*FE: “Actually, before I left” (:01)*

This is Farrah Essawi
FE: “like a few months before” (:02)

A journalism junior at the American University in Cairo

FE: “I was really, really excited for it.” (:02)

Okay Farrah. Thank you for that, but I’m sure others disagree. Perhaps Ashraf Sabkha, he’s a Libyan accounting senior also at our university.

AS: “Full on excited.” (:01)

Okay, maybe Sahar then

SS: “So, the day before travelling” (:02)

Sahar is my friend, she’s a political science major and she went with me to UW in Seattle

SS: “I was very excited, I was super excited always laughing.” (:04)

Okay, not my friend anymore! No, no, I’m just kidding but seriously, I wonder why were they so excited to leave?

FE: “Abroad, I mean, you can be whoever you want to be” (:05)

True

FE: “and you can do whatever you want to do and you will not get judged or criticized or ridiculed for any of it. You’re your own person.” (:08)
Actually, that was one of my main motivators that made me take the decision. Like I was

*FE:* “*sick of being in a box.*” (:01)

Exactly! I felt trapped and I could no longer relate to many people and I had to abide by what the society tells me to do, so

*AS:* “*I really wanted to leave.*” (:01)

Hahaha. You too?

*AS:* “*Since, I’ve been living in this side of the world for my whole life, I wanted to get exposed to, you know, something new, uhm, the Western life.*” (:10)

Which makes sense why he went to George Washington University in Washington DC.

*AS:* “*Like I want to see how people go on with their daily lives, how different is it, like what cold we take from them, what could they take from us if anything.*” (:09)

Any other reasons?

*FE:* “*Well*” (:01)

Yeah?

*FE:* “*Like part of the program?*” (:01)
The program of??

  FE: “The Danish school of media and journalism.” (:02)

Okay, So?

  FE: “The government in Denmark would give students money to like live.” (:05)

Wait, what?

  SFX: dun dun duuuun (:04)
  FE: “The government there pays you every month.” (:03)

Oh my God? Why hadn’t I heard about this before?

  FE: “It’s a stipend.” (:01)

Yeah but still, I hadn’t heard about this before, this is an amazing concept. My school didn’t offer that but in all cases I decided to go because as you said abroad, nobody can judge you and I can be as free as I want to be and enjoy something called privacy, which was seriously needed at the time, but I remember the first day I went to the dorms, my parents were with me. They were helping me move in the apartment and

  FE: “As soon as I entered the room, it was all white like it looked like a prison, I was so terrified, I was like what is this? Oh my God! (:09)
  SFX: prison door closing (2 sec from 00:04:24)

MUSIC: Mr Probz “Nothing really matters” [RT 00:04:30-00:05:02] fade in under next narration
Yes, I had the same experience as well. I remember I even crawled down under the sheets and I started crying as soon as my parents left.

Pause (2 sec)

FE: “The first night there I really was not happy. I was just nervous, you know, when I went, like I skyped with my mum & my brother before I went to sleep and I think I was tearing up and they were just like: Oh are you get/ are you catching a cold, I’m like yeah I’m catching a cold, hahah, I didn’t want to let them know I was upset but I really was not happy.” (:17)

Yeah, Sahar was not having a nice experience either. Like me, she lived in

SS: “It’s a four bed-room apartment so yeah, the one living right next to me, Ayala, who I got to meet afterwards, she didn’t open the door, so I knocked on the two other doors

SFX: knock on the door (2 sec from 00:05:12)

both of them opened, the girls, one was from Australia, the other from China and once they opened,

Pause (1 sec)

SFX: bomb explosion (3 sec from 00:05:19)

eh, like a bad, I can’t even call it bad, a horrible smell came out of one of the rooms and I was like please, just go back in, I’m sorry for knocking. It was probably the Chinese [y3ni], as we found out later, it was the Chinese girl.” (:31)

MUSIC: Akashic Records – Happy Whistling [RT 00:05:38-00:06:34] fade in under coming narration

Hahah, oh my God! But yeah, speaking of Chinese people and other nationalities, like I remember it was much easier making friends with internationals than with Americans. uhh Americans are very nice.
AS: “They’re friendly but like in class they’re not. This is what I found out like when it comes to academics they’re not the most open-minded people.” (:08)

But the internationals

SS: “They were all on a semester abroad, their grades didn’t matter and they were all there to enjoy the weather, enjoy their company and go out so this was the best.” (:09)

You’d meet people from

AS: “Italy, from France, from Brazil, from India, from China, from Australia, Argentine” [RT 00:06:09-00:06:17] (:08)

SS: “Tunisian, Moroccan, Turkish, Belgian, Swiss” [RT 00:06:12-00:06:18] layer under previous and next sound bite

FE: “People from Spain and people from Catalonia which I knew nothing about before I went. It was so interesting meeting so many different cultures.” [RT 00:06:14-00:06:23] layer under previous sound bite

Yes. It was also interesting to see how different the, the education was than AUC, like in the Danish School of Media and Journalism, Farrah

FE: “Got the opportunity to to interview like ministers and go to the European Parliament and meet people that I would never have dreamed of meeting.” (:08)

Which is very different than AUC because

FE: “Here, nobody takes you seriously. If you call up a minister and be like I’m a student from AUC, can I have a quote, they will hang up on you, they won’t even answer probably, they don’t even answer journalists, they’re not gonna answer actual students, like you know? (:13)

Sahar, on the other hand,
SS: “Found out that people don’t know much about the Middle East like I remember [aw] even our TA, she’s like the king of Saudi Arabia wanted to sell Palestine to the Israelis. I’m like no.

SFX: buzzer (1 sec from 00:07:07)

Hahah. This is wrong He didn’t want to sell it. He wanted it for himself. I’m like why am correcting the info of the TA. She’s the TA, she’s supposed to know.” (:18)

Hmmm, I didn’t notice this problem that much when I was there. But I did notice that after you finish your semester, when you try to find an internship as many students do after finishing their education you find out

AS: “It’s very hard for international students to get an internship in the US, especially if you’re on exchange.” (:05)

Yeah, Ashraf had also mentioned that employers would be looking for someone who has residency or a green card or is sponsored but even being sponsored was not always the solution. But at the end of the day

AS: “I got an internship in Congress.” (fast forward) (:01)

Okay, I’m sure people didn’t catch that? Can you say it again but this time slowly?

AS: “I got an internship in Congress!” (:01)

MUSIC: FADE IN: American National Anthem [RT 00:07:54-00:08:14] fade in under next narration, fade out at the end

Congress, he said Congress! Oh my God! Oh my God!
AS: “I was fortunate enough to have a Professor, who used to work with a Congressman, ugh, he’s a senator of DC and I did very good in this professor’s class.” (:12)

Okay

AS: “And so he recommended me to, uhm, to this senator.” (:04)

What’s his name?

AS: “Senator Paul Strauss” (:01)

Republican or?

AS: “Democrat” (:00.5)

And the internship was?

AS: “legislation & public policy internship. There’s a lot of lobbying in Capitol Hill. There is some pressuring issues in, in Washington DC at the moment, which is of equality and taxation without representation, which is, which is mainly an issue of not not everyone has the rights to, people, people in Washington DC don’t have equal rights in Congress.” (:27)

Wow, Ashraf that’s intense, my man! But still you guys, we didn’t come to the best part of this experience

Pause (2 sec)

MUSIC: Destiny’s Child “Independent women” [RT 00:08:56-00:09:16] fade in under next narration

Feeling independent!
FE: “It was the best feeling in the world. I didn’t have to ask anybody for anything.” (:05)

Exactly, like when Sahar came back to Egypt, she said something that literally happens to me all the time.

SS: “I find my mum calling me at 10 asking where I am, I’m like, no I spent six months going out till 4 am and no one asked me and it was super fine, why am I, why are we in chains, you know? (:13)

Trust me, I really don’t know!

SS: “We have so many boundaries and it’s stupid.” (:02)

That’s because we have been exposed to a very open and civilized society. Like in Denmark Farrah said they have this law

FE: “I’m not sure I think this is all over Scandinavia, I don’t, I don’t know if it’s just Denmark but it’s called the You law, I think, something like that.” (:06)

Actually, after doing some research, it’s called the jante law

FE: “It basically means you’re not better than me, you’re not better than anybody. You’re not special, which sounds depressing but in a way it’s kind of like. You’re not better but you’re not less as well than anybody else. We’re all equal.” (:13)

And it’s this is not a written law, it’s like a social law that people abide by. So, getting exposed to this kind of mentality and living abroad
AS: “triggers something within you that screams for help once you go back. And after living there for a while and after having adapted, finally adapting to, to life there, it feels like a cultural counter shock.” (:12)

What about Farrah, how did this experience change her?

FE: “My mindset has completely changed because of this experience.” (:03)

How so?

FE: “The, just the way, I want to live my life now. I mean, I, I honestly don’t think, I don’t know how terrible this is gonna sound” (:08)

Hahaha go ahead!

FE: “but I don’t think it’s natural that we live with our parents until marriage.” (:04)

SFX: People clapping and cheering. [RT 00:10:44-00:10:51] (:07) fade in under next narration

Thank you Farrah, finally, finally, someone said it!

FE: “I really think as adults, you need your space, you need to be on your own for a certain period of time and I’m not saying be on your own so you could party and be wild. I’m telling you most of the time in Denmark we’d stay home, watch a movie and eat pizza, you know?” (:13)

I wonder if her mum knows that.

FE: “I think my mum now is more worried to let me travel than before.” (:06)

Sounds like my mum!
FE: “Now she’s like when you get married, you can travel with your husband. Hahahah, I am not gonna wait till I get married to be independent again.” (:07)

MUSIC: Mr Probz – Waves [RT 00:11:21-00:12:32] fade in under coming narration then fade out at the end

Hahaha same here. Having gone through this journey, I value independence more than ever before because I’m less scared of experiencing things for myself but reflecting back on what I said about Egypt, it doesn’t mean that I don’t love my country because I do but in order to have any chance of development as a nation, we need to change the way we think especially when it comes to women! If we listen closely we’d find that it was Sahar, Farrah and I talked much more about independence while Ashraf didn’t even touch up on that. That’s because as young women we’re treated differently than men in Egypt, with many boundaries and limits to our decisions. That’s why the society needs to change its view regarding women, especially that they are considered the main pillar for the development of any community.

Pause (1.5 sec)

This audio documentary was produced by Kanzy Mahmoud for the audio production course at The American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in spring 2015.

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Music from jamendo.com
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