

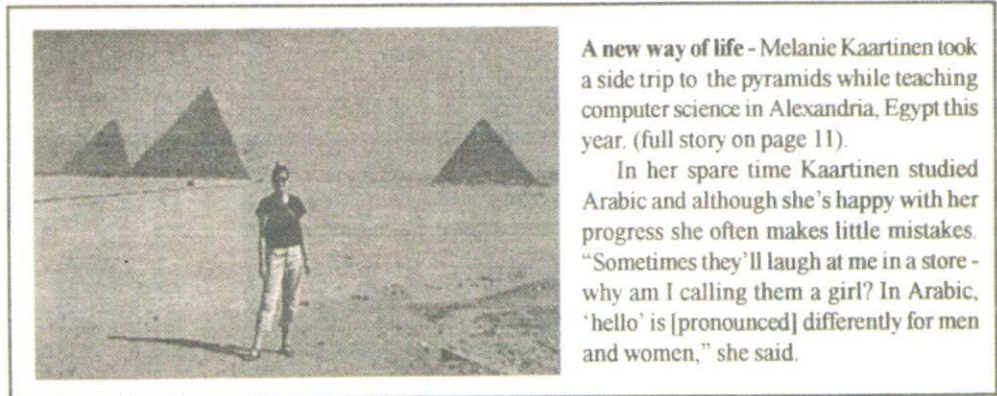
ATIKOKAN PROGRESS



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A new way of life - Melanie Kaartinen took a side trip to the pyramids while teaching computer science in Alexandria, Egypt this year. (full story on page 11).

In her spare time Kaartinen studied Arabic and although she's happy with her progress she often makes little mistakes. "Sometimes they'll laugh at me in a store - why am I calling them a girl? In Arabic, 'hello' is [pronounced] differently for men and women," she said.

A 6' tall Christian woman bound to attract attention in the Muslim world *Teaching skills put the whole world at Melanie Kaartinen 's doorstep*

Jacqueline Boileau

"With the government bashing me every day, and not being able to save any money, I was either going to leave teaching or leave Ontario."

Melanie Kaartinen grew up in Atikokan, and had been teaching computer science in London, ON for five years when she realized she'd had enough. Enough disrespect from students, enough put-downs from the Harris government, enough of not being able to teach the way she wanted to. She went to a job fair one day and everything changed when she learned about international teaching. The world seemed to open up in front of her.

"There are schools [where Canadians can teach] all over the world that you don't even know about. They don't teach you about this in teachers' college," she said.

Kaartinen took a year's leave from her job so she could try teaching overseas. She received job offers from several countries, but the prospect of living in Egypt took her fancy and she accepted a position at the American School of Alexandria. The difference between teaching in Canada and teaching at an elite private school in 'Alex' soon convinced her she had made the right decision.

Instead of having to teach classes of up to 36 students for 1,250 minutes per week as she had in London, her duties consist of teaching between six and 14 students for a mere 675 minutes per week in Alex. She takes off not only all the Christian holidays, but the Muslim ones as well, so in addition to days off here and there, last year she had 3 1/2 weeks off at Christmas, a week in March and again in April, and of course the usual July and August summer holidays too.

"I was underworked, but it felt so good to have a nice, cushy job. It's fantastic. I'm extremely happy and it's one of the best things I've done for myself," she said.

Kaartinen earns about \$20,000 American per year, plus transportation, accommodations and health care. The cost of living in Egypt is very low (electricity bills come in at a maximum of \$20 per month), food is cheap and the recreational opportunities are endless. She visited the pyramids, a desert oasis, spent hours

every week studying Arabic and took up scuba diving.

"My apartment was 40 feet from the Mediterranean Sea," she said. "This is the life. There's no stress and the kids respect you. The cost of living is very low and the seafood is very good."

Life in Egypt is very different from that in Canada. Being a 6-foot tall Christian woman in a Muslim country is sometimes difficult, because as Kaartinen says, she stands out.

"I didn't know what racism felt like from the other end. Some people don't want westerners in Egypt. I dress very conservatively - no shorts and no tank tops. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait women have to wear a veil, but not in Egypt, but men will say things to you on the street. Now [I understand some of the language] I know what they're saying and can answer back."

Kaartinen misses some things about Canada, like bacon, pork, the Young and the Restless, perogies and movies, and notes very few people keep pets there. Some of the changes surprised her.

"I was surprised that I needed warm clothes. There's no heating systems inside of buildings so I had to do my e-mail with a fleece blanket wrapped around my legs - but there's only cold weather (5-10°C) for about six weeks. Right now it's around 40-45°C, so I'm glad I'm here."

Before she goes back overseas, Kaartinen stocks up on things like her favourite brand of shampoo, and last year she had to send over for a plug for her kitchen sink.

"There are no measuring cups and no temperature gauges on stoves - it goes on and off, that's it. Electronics are very expensive. There are no dryers in the country and I paid \$60 American for a toaster. There's not just one place [to shop] like a grocery store. There's an ironing guy, a cheese guy, a bread guy, etc. I buy my fruit and vegetables off a donkey cart. [Muslims] are called to prayer four times a day on a loud speaker. They stop whatever they're doing and pray."

Kaartinen plans to fulfill her two-year contract in Egypt then head to another country for her next stint.

She's not sure where she will end up, but it doesn't really matter - as a single woman, she has only her own inclinations to follow.

"I promised myself - I want to see the whole world and I can do it now."