

## **Demystifying the American Library Association Annual Conference and Exhibition**

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### **Preamble**

On the twenty-first of June 2007, I had the excellent opportunity of attending the ALA Conference and Exhibition which is held annually, this time in Washington DC. Even though I was an IFLA fan with regards to attending conferences, I had to pass this year leaving the turn to my colleague, the reference librarian who attended IFLA's two months later in Durban, South Africa. Upon returning I felt the urge to share the experience in writing to make-up for my shyness in speaking and describing the experience orally.

### **Visa Procedures**

I started visa procedures early in February very reluctantly, I have to admit. The political situation was very stressful and it was very painful to talk myself into leaving Lebanon under such circumstances. Luckily, these procedures were very straightforward. The application could be picked up from a local bank and the interview was set there for a month later. On the assigned time for the interview, I

took a cab to the American Embassy. I submitted the application and selected English (of course) as the interview language. Then, I started a long journey of waiting along with a large number of applicants who were seated in a classroom manner. To kill the boredom of the wasted hours, I started helping people with no or poor knowledge of the English language through filling what was missing in their application forms. It was fun helping out and jokingly charging them \$10 for each task.

## Visa Interview

Hearsays about my assigned interviewer were not very pleasant. His character seemed to be overly strict and I prepared myself for an uneasy task. Coming from an American University requesting to attend an American event put me at ease. Noticing that elaborated answers were not appreciated, I approached the assigned window and the nice looking but stern man started bombarding me with questions:

Q: Why are you going to the United States?

A: I am going there to attend the American Library Association Annual Conference.

Q: Where is it going to be held?

A: In Washington, DC (**of course with the accent**).

Q: Do you know anybody there?

A: Not really! (**Thinking that I might have if I search deep in my mind**).

Q: What do you mean?

A: I mean no I don't (**threatened**).

Q: Why did you say “not really”?

A: Just an expression! (**Looking him straight in the eyes**).

Changing his tone, he asked again:

What is the conference about?

A: Digitization, electronic resources, consortium, etc. to the end of a long list of professional jargon(**with relief and assuming he knew nothing about the subject**).

Track! He gave me a coupon.

Is this a yes? I knew it was but I wanted to be assured through eye contact with the people around. I sent the taxi driver back to the Embassy on the next Friday to pick up the passport. Yes I got the visa covering just the period when the conference was held. I hated waiting, but I had to wait for another three months.

Conference and Accommodation registration

Even though that wasn't the first time I traveled or attended conferences, I had an inhibiting feeling inside. Maybe this was due to the far off United States or maybe because I was worn out by the stressful situation in Lebanon. God Knows!

Concurrently, I was concerned with the huge changes taking place at the Lebanese American University and in the librarianship profession as well. Readings on strategic planning, reports on accreditation, listserv correspondences, and professional articles were accumulated and there came the time to clear and clean the attic.

Studiously I started my readings and generously the University started finalizing my registration to the conference, the empowerment workshop, and the accommodation.

Surprisingly, all the first six choices of hotels were sold out early in February and luckily, I was given the Washington Marriott as an alternative.

Through my quest to finalize all procedures, I accumulated some traveling hints that I thought I should share with any candidate planning to attend ALA in the future:

- Large cities have more than one airport, you should find out from your travel agency in which airport you are landing.
- Airport picking up of the ALA attendees is not available. You find out early enough that you are on your own especially if your mentor becomes severely sick right at the time when the conference is taking place. Thanks to Gale, shuttle buses are provided which makes commuting from and to the Convention Centre, where the Conference takes place, smooth.
- Hotel map in the printed program does not add anything new. Already the info is available online and you can always calculate in kilometers the distance between your hotel and the Convention Center, where major events take place.
- Print and online leaflets are useful in providing information about the International Librarians booth where you have special free but essential internet facilities.
- Overseas attendants (internationals) have to fetch their badges onsite. The Conference badge is not sent in advance.

### Setting My Personal Conference Calendar

I started reading the preliminary program from the very first cover. I wanted to live the experience fully and deeply. Due to the constant budget cuts, chances to attend conferences will diminish with time.

The program considerably started with a series of workshops meant for first time attendees (newbie's) followed by: ALA President's Program, Auditorium speaker series,

"The stacks". (Why not just the exhibition?).

Again another listing: Division President's Program, AASL, ACRL, ALCTS, ALSC, RUSA, YALSA, etc. Are the above mentioned programs redundant, held in parallel, more important, more focused, Not to Miss??? I was baffled still by the division of the program!!!

The preliminary program also advertised something called "Special Events". All these events were expensive. Some of them seemed specialized workshops on specific themes as Leadership, Management, Technical Services, and Trends in cataloguing ... Quite tempting. However, the exaggerated costing would discourage you especially that those courses would consume a whole day which could be filled by a variety of alternative activities. So those events should be considered carefully. Frankly speaking I couldn't be motivated enough to attend any of them.

Scheduling for the conference, assisted by the online calendar, was a great exercise, quite frustrating though. Under the description of a lot of lectures/programs/events I read the statement "this is paid, you have to book" or "this is free you have to book". Only onsite I recognized that the booking requirements were no more, IMHO, than a statistical device to measure the number of attendees since I was able to attend some of them even without booking (the free ones at least).

So my advice is, just ignore booking, go there, and sit on the nearest chair or the available spot of ground or a comfortable dust bin for the worst case scenario.

The same events were grouped in the preliminary program in a different manner. Through tracks and sub tracks, the conference tried to group some of the lectures to create one focused workshop to cover a certain theme, namely, Administration & Leadership, Human Resources & Staff Development, Collection Management & Technical Services, etc.

This didn't work for me. I went through 34 pages where 340 programs were listed. I formed my own package. My aim was to expose myself to a variety of offerings, i.e. the ALA structure, the authors' sessions, the new trends in technology and its profound effect on the life of the new generation and consequently on our profession.

Impressions from the sojourn

Only instinctively I registered for and attended a workshop described as Empowerment Workshop. You can never be sure how useful a workshop bearing the name: "Mama Said There'd be Days like This" would be. It was a lovely and informative one. It helped complementing what the big conference failed to achieve with regards to visiting the Library of Congress and other major features of the city.

I also listened to famous fiction and non fiction writers, beautifully describing their first hand experiences; attended lectured about gadgets which I saw my nephews and nieces manipulating, MP3, MP4, IPOD, etc. I consolidated my knowledge of wikis, blogs... I skillfully was looking patiently and persistently to regain my lost inspiration and the morale drastically chattered into pieces by the stagnant and shameful situation that Lebanon was trapped in.

## Tours

Tours were costly and the activities of the conferences did not include visits to any of The White House, the Capitol Hill, the Library of Congress (for God's sake), and the famous Smithsonian Museums? (Will I have time to discover which ones to visit? 18 Smithsonian Museums in D.C.).

Anyway by the time I was able to contain my surprise, all the tours (for my good luck) were booked. Why paying that much when you can attend them yourself free of charge? Moreover, the conference organizers were able to schedule at the last moment some tours and events to the Library of Congress, the dream place of every librarian.

## Conclusion

Attending ALA was of course a good experience, not quite fulfilling though.

I had a feeling (not very scientific; it has been a long time since I attended IFLA's Conferences), that lectures offered at IFLA's would be more satisfactory. But later it was explained to me as I could also figure out for myself, that ALA annual event was an umbrella covering different divisions competing to offer the best programs and foreseeing their execution rather than merely lecturing all day long.

Before leaving, my colleagues in Lebanon pointed to me the importance of the huge exhibition held. It indeed was, even though Thomson, Proquest, Gale, H.W. Wilson, OCLC, LC and their different products were not unfamiliar commodities to me or to my institution.

At the end, I extended my stay one more day on my own expenses. Plenty of intellectual activities were not to be missed. I took the superb trolley shuttle bus and marathonicly toured the Capitol Hill, the American Indian Museum, and the Air and Space Museum. In the afternoon, I treated myself into the famous DC Duck tour. It takes you by land and then by water to all the city's beautiful monuments and sceneries. This last tour summed up a beautiful experience in a city I could strongly relate to my country in lots of aspects.

### **Some useful hints from a lecture about professional development**

- Be a major player in your field.
  - Work in leading committees.
  - Get involved in various activities
- Learn how to do research.
  - Earn a doctorate degree: credential/respect/recognition
- Say **YES** to new opportunities even if it involves moving.
- Never lie.

• ALA American Library Association / Events & Conferences  
<http://www.ala.org/ala/events/eventsconferences.htm>