

Celebrating Christmas in Cuba

Twelve UAS students to visit the Forbidden Island By Amber Lee

This Christmas break, 12 students from the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) have decided to forego eating turkey and dressing with their families to embark upon a one-month adventure in one of the few places in the world where most United States citizens are unable to travel—Cuba.

Organized by UAS Spanish professor Rick Bellagh, the trip is the third cultural and language immersion class that UAS has offered. "The first trip, I took 14 students to Mexico, and the second, I took 20 students to Ecuador," said Bellagh. "Cuba is definitely the most ambitious trip."

For nearly 40 years, U.S. sanctions against tourism to Cuba have made it impossible for Americans to travel to the Caribbean island. Only official

government travelers, journalists, Cuban Americans, those who are "fully hosted" by a Cuban organization, and educational groups are allowed to legally travel there. Last May, however, President Clinton signed legislation allowing direct flights to Cuba, and this prompted Bellagh to organize the educational trip.

"The United States seems to be making moves to end the embargo, and that will change Cuba forever," said Bellagh. "I really wanted to see what a country looks like after 40 years of an embargo."

According to Bellagh, although some members of the University administration have had reserva-

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UAS adventurers. (Top, l-r) Professor Rick Bellagh, Travis Hawley, Arlo Midgett, Adrian Berg, Tia Anderson, Amber Lee, Kean Nutall (bottom, l-r) Jennifer Berg, Nora Slye, and Jennifer Garland will be celebrating the Year 2000 in Cuba. Photo by Amber Lee

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tions about a student trip to Cuba, overall, the university has been very supportive. "I'll probably have reservations until I see their faces back here," said Roberta Stell, university provost. "However, it appears to be safe enough for an educational visit."

After having the course approved by the university, Bellagh sent a petition and a course syllabus to the United States Department of the Treasury to receive the special license that U.S. citizens are required to carry when traveling to Cuba. The petition was promptly approved.

The 12 students that will be traveling with Professor Bellagh are Arlo Midgett, Tia Anderson, Jennifer Garland, Travis Hawley, Nova Slye, Nina Jahnke, Jennifer Berg, Adrian Berg, Robin Fiscus, Jason Messing, Kean Nuttall, and Amber Lee. Although these students are of varied ages and backgrounds, and have different reasons for signing up for the class, all of them share an enormous amount of enthusiasm.

"It's been my dream to go to Cuba for the last eight years," said Garland, who holds a graduate degree in forestry, and has been taking Spanish classes at the university. "The culture, and sociopolitical structure fascinates me."

University student Arlo Midgett will be the only student in the group that has traveled with Professor Bellagh during all three of the immersion classes. "I'm addicted to these trips," he said.

Anderson, who is a Spanish tutor at the University Learning Center, went with Bellagh on the trip to Ecuador last Christmas, but is even more

thrilled about the upcoming adventure to Cuba. "I'm extremely excited to visit a place that has had minimal U.S. impact," she said.

Many of the other students mirrored Anderson's excitement about visiting a country that is relatively untouched by the influence of the United States, and others were looking forward to the recreational activities available, including scuba diving, hiking, and viewing the world's smallest hummingbird.

Although the course sounds like an exciting vacation, Bellagh expects a lot from the students enrolled. Currently, the students are reading books and watching films to learn as much about Cuba as they can before they go. They are also required to create their own itinerary on a website discussion forum that the university created for the class.

Bellagh has learned that allowing the students to design their own itinerary helps to maintain group cohesion throughout the trip, and gives each student the feeling that it is truly their trip. "If I don't plan everything and let everyone make their own determinations of where we go, where we stay, and that sort of thing, then they have to be responsible for their own happiness," said Bellagh.

After arriving in Cuba, the students will have to complete daily assignments for the course. "Every morning we have a short meeting, and I give them their homework for the day, which is something like 'Go sit next to some old man in the park and ask him about the church there,'" said Bellagh.

"You've got to remember that people live there every day, and if people live there every day, and if there is no overt violence between the people there, then we have to believe that there is no reason to be more afraid to go to Cuba than Seattle," he said. "Just because it's farther away, and a different culture shouldn't mean it's more dangerous."

Bellagh doesn't foresee any major problems during the trip to Cuba. "There could be transportation and lodging problems, and I'm sure the millennium thing will throw some sort of wrench into things," he said. But otherwise, Bellagh believes the event will be a very positive experience for all of the students.

said Bellagh. "If we stayed in nicer hotels, those are very separate from the Cuban people, and it's very important for students to get to know the people."

One of the most ambitious goals of the trip that Bellagh has planned is a potential meeting with Fidel Castro. "I wrote a letter to the governor, and we're hoping that the governor will want to send his greetings down, and I'm going to write a letter to the Presidential Palace in Cuba to tell Fidel about us," said Bellagh. "This is the first group ever to go from Alaska to Cuba, so it's a historic event. It's a long shot obviously, but it would be great." ■