

UAS students find Cubans friendly, but wary

■ Primitive culture, strong government influence seen during month-long trip

By ERIC FRY
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The streets are clean, but some people raise pigs in the bathroom. Oranges are green. Beggars ask for soap. If you see a black-market transaction in an alley, it's not for drugs. It's for milk.

Those are some of the impressions Juneau college students garnered from a recent visit to Cuba, an impoverished Communist country partly isolated from the world's economy by an American embargo.

"It's in a time warp and it's very run down," said Travis Hawley, one of 12 students at the University of Alaska Southeast who visited Cuba from Dec. 17 to Jan. 15 with Spanish assistant professor Rick Bellagh.

The students stayed mainly at Cubans' homes. There and in encounters in the streets, the Alaskans met friendly people who differentiated between the American people (good) and the American government (bad).

But the students heard nervous laughter when they tried to ask Cubans what they thought of president-for-life Fidel Castro, whom they call "la barba" — the beard.

"There was a lot of figuring out to do in Cuba," Bellagh said Thursday at a student presentation at UAS. "Their political system is very different from ours. There was a lot of fear

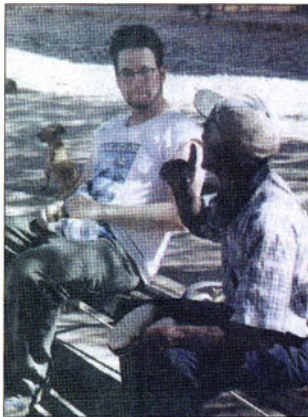


PHOTO BY ARLO MIDGITT

Finding a groove: Jason Messing talks with a Cuban in Trinidad who plays bongos purchased by Jason.

in talking about the political situation."

Cubans were more open in one on one exchanges. "If you buy them a lot of beer, then you really get the real situation," Bellagh said.

The students saw fear in their hosts' faces

even about food. Government inspectors arrived on their doorstep to make sure they weren't feeding the American guests illicit foods such as lobster or fish, which are earmarked for export or tourist restaurants.

"Even in the house, you were supposed to call the lobster or the fish chicken," said Nina Jahnke.

It was a snapshot of the lies and evasion a rigid government fosters in people.

"Every Cuban has two faces — what they really think, and what they're willing to tell you," Hawley said in an interview.

The students learned that every neighborhood is watched by members of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. One host described everything Jahnke had done and whom she had talked to when she walked down the street the night before.

At a Havana rally of mothers for Elian Gonzalez, the 6-year-old Cuban boy who is the subject of a custody dispute with relatives in Florida, the Alaskans saw Cuba's own differences between the people (indifferent) and the government (enthusiastic).

The government gathered bored people together in the demonstration. As the government's television camera-carrying helicopter flew over sections of the otherwise passive crowd, they erupted into flag-waving life on a signal from committee members.

"Pretty much everyone thinks Elian should come home," Hawley said. "But it was not at all the situation it's made out to be in the media,

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not at all the situation it's made out to be by the Cuban government."

But the trip also made the students reflect on their own country and way of life. They saw steep poverty and young prostitutes, but

not homelessness.

"Why do we think it's better that some people have lots and lots and lots of money, and other people are in the streets?" Tia Anderson said.

Amber Lee realized how much property she has that she doesn't

need.

Hawley came away feeling the American embargo is wrong.

"If they could trade with us, they could be flourishing," he said. "We have definitely caused a lot of the suffering that goes on over there."