

# UAS Millennium in Cuba

By Chris Flanagan  
Whalesong Reporter

Most of us won't forget where we chose to welcome in the year 2000. Some were at home in front of a fire with the one they love; others went out kicking up what nightlife Juneau can offer. Many kept it to a minimum (transiting a new millennium seemed more meaningful, more solemn, even more dangerous to some) while others went all out cruising the international date line on rented yachts, or bending elbows deep into the night with friends. Some traveled to exotic locales uncounted. But few, if any, brought in the New Year with as much panache as the 13 UAS representatives who gathered on an isolated stretch of tropical beach near a place called Rancho Luna on the southern coast of Cuba. With the Caribbean lapping upon the warm sands of Rancho Luna, the group witnessed an unforgettable big-yellow-beachball-sunset.

"That was the most amazing sunset I've ever seen!" Said Assistant Professor of Spanish Rick Bellagh, who organized and led the trip. The group built a big fire on the beach and enjoyed the cheer and good company of their fellow explorers.

Two weeks earlier, on Dec. 17th, Spanish professor Rick Bellagh and 12 UAS students embarked upon a unique month long adventure from Alaska to Miami, to Havana and the Republic of Cuba, well beyond the narrow confines of what our beltway spinnemasters have formally referred to as the new world order.

Having organized and led two previous student expeditions, one to Mexico and another to Ecuador, Professor Bellagh and his students had some differing interest in mind for this trip, namely the heightened challenge of navigating an ostracized country struggling with the decline of its own socialist system, a country just before the fall, a tropical agrarian republic with a deep, rich culture and no established



Rick Bellagh (far left) strolls with UAS students through the ragged fields of Cuba.

transportation system or traditional western tourism infrastructure.

Only a year ago this trip would have been illegal. When they say "change is good" they mean changes that go something like this... In 1998 Pope John Paul II made a historic visit to Havana, where at one point during a speech to millions, he faced north, and made a veiled plea to America insisting "the world should open up to Cuba!" Then in November of 1999 the United Nations made its most resounding statement ever on the subject, voting 155 to 2 demanding the United States put an end to its 40 year embargo of the island. Up until late last year all contact, even humanitarian in nature, was severely restricted by an outdated Cold War component of the Trading with The Enemy Act.

President Clinton's response to the Vatican, to the U.N. and to the world was to initiate a new, forward thinking direction

in US policy toward reasonable and open relations with Cuba. Without these corrective policy advances these Alaskans would not have found themselves in Miami International Airport anxiously waiting...and waiting, for the go ahead to board a plane to Havana.

After a substantial wait they boarded their charter and were off to Havana, a metropolis with a population of 3 million souls. Ironically the first thing most noticed was how small and sleepy this airport seemed, no hub this. In Havana, imposing Colonial Era defensive walls and Spanish castles still stand today. One of the next things they noticed was how, in style and pace, Cuba seemed to scream the 1950s. The cars sported fins and the settings were gritty images out of Hemingway's sometimes dark but always machismo world. Havana and its incredible music and

see CUBA page 3

## CUBA...

continued from page 1

cabarets were not primary on the agenda. They had a country to see.

After a few days of acclimation in Havana the group headed to the southwest end of the country to Penar Del Rio, a city where neoclassical colonnades line the city streets, a city with more bicycles per capita than any city in Cuba, and a whole lot of tobacco processing and cigar making factories.

By now the group was getting used to the music that was everywhere. The rhythms of Africa married to the melodies and guitars of the Spanish evolved in the hills of the oriente before the turn of the century incorporating guitars, tres, bass, bongos, claves, maracas

limestone hills rise out of green fertile plains. The group cycled through the valley, and hiked the nearby mountains. The hills are replete with cliffs sinkholes, fissures, underground rivers and innumerable caves, and the group actually got to explore those underground sculpture gardens.

"The caves were awesome!" said an excited Tia Anderson. "I've been spelunking before in Indiana and Kentucky but this was just amazing. There wasn't a specific path, it was just exploring. At one point in the dark we realized we were stepping on these tiny stalagmite formations on the ground. They were just crunching beneath our feet, and I shuddered each time I heard that."

Next stop was the coastal city of Cienfuegos, roughly translated city of 1000 fires. Some thought a better name would have been "ciencia/brica", or city of a 1000 factories! This is where the group found themselves as the New Year was approaching. They had other choices of where to spend the millennium, but as a group they chose a deserted beach near Rancho Luna to make their millennium stand; with a sunset, a bonfire, the stars, and each other.

From Cienfuegos the students traveled southeast to the city of Trinidad. There they saw Baroque church towers, carrera marble floors, museums; sun lit red tile roofs and cobblestone streets. I asked Kean Kuttall to describe the groups' living arrangements while exploring the country and he explained... "The accommodations while traveling Cuba were really interesting. Often we stayed with local families. We got a much deeper look at Cuba beneath the surface of things, a look inside the communities, inside families and inside people. The meals for us in these homes were always a massive production, and the phone would ring off the hook all day,

"Cuba was such a musical place, a very musical culture."

-Tia Anderson-

and voice. From these have evolved mambo, salsa, son, chachacha' and a half dozen other forms popular across the world today. "Cuba was such a musical place, a very musical culture," said Tia Anderson. "Their music was so beautiful and passionate. Everywhere we went there was music being played or being broadcast."

The next stop for these travelers was a more remote part of the country north of Pinar Del Rio, a natural Eden known as Vinales. They spent Christmas in Vinales, in the shadow of Sierra de Vinales. In the spirit of our holiday, while in Vinales everyone got a special pal to whom they would provide a kindness of their own choosing, something to make life a little easier for that person. At Vinales, local



Tia Anderson sits in a tree, checking out her surroundings.



UAS students hang out with Cubans and enjoy the native music.

friendly neighbors interested in the Americans. We stayed with a string of families, just private citizens...it was sort of like an Underground Railroad, when we'd go from town to town we were going from family to family. When traveling, often our ride wouldn't buy gas openly, they would instead drive around to friend's houses' to buy it from them, buying black-market gas. The black market in Cuba is just tremendous, you can find anything there it's just a matter of going out and finding it.

From Trinidad it was northward and inland to the city of Santa Clara, site of The Battle of Santa Clara, where Che' Guevara and his rebel column defeated Batista's troops, effectively driving the Dictator out of Cuba, and winning their revolution. Santa Clara is where some of the group was hit with something resembling a flu. At this point some stayed in Santa Clara to repair, while others went their separate ways, some ventured to the north shore for the small villages and the white beaches nearby.

After some rest and relaxation in Santa

Clara it was on to Playa Giron, or the Bay of Pigs, sight of the failed CIA-backed invasion of Cuba in 1961. There was a small museum there to honor the battle. Playa Giron offered a hot sun, good beaches, and a number of snorkeling opportunities on the offshore reefs in the area. Throughout Cuba the students encountered numerable swimming, snorkeling, and even diving opportunities. Cuban waters are a netherworld. These waters have the advantage of warm, nutrient rich currents, which produce an aquatic nirvana of abundant sea life that few places on earth can match. Adrian Berg told me, "I've kept aquariums most of my life, but it was something else again. It was like swimming in a fish tank."

From Playa Giron it was back to Havana for a few days. Time to see some shows, some cabarets, some truly amazing bands, and even a magic show. Then it came time to bid beautiful, sleepy, Cuba goodbye. I'm glad I didn't go, only because I might've stayed.