



Arlo Midgett

Nearly a dozen UAS Spanish students spent most of last December in Peru to improve their language skills and to learn about the culture.

# Peru on \$20 a Day ...and Earn College Credit

By Scott Foster

The Frisbee spun across a hilly cornfield in a small village high in the Peruvian mountains. "All of a sudden the children came out to see what these crazy gringos were doing," Rick Bellagh said.

The village was one stop on a three-day hike on the Inca Trail. The hike was one part of a month-long visit to Peru last December of University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) students. Bellagh, a UAS assistant professor of Spanish, led the language and cultural trip.

"The kids lined up at the top of the nearby Inca ruins," he said. "The braver ones came down and stood next to me, and they started talking in Spanish."

Spanish was the children's second language. Their first was Quechua that is today spoken by about eight million people. Bellagh was not one of them.

"I started asking them how to say words in Quechua," he said. "As soon as they saw I was interested, they started

telling me, 'Say this in Quechua to the others on the hill.'"

"So I would say the words real loud," Bellagh said, "and everyone up there would start laughing." The first phrases Bellagh yelled were on the order of "Alajandro, come here." As a result more kids came down from the hill to join the Frisbee throwers.

Bellagh could tell by the enthusiastic look on the kids' faces that they were getting more and more daring about what they were asking him to say. The biggest laugh came when the kids gave Bellagh the Quechua words that he loudly yelled: "Which one of you women wants to be my wife?"

The games with the village children were the highlight of the Peru trip for Bellagh because it involved interaction with the people of the country. Others on the trip cited visiting the famous Machu Picchu Inca ruins, taking part in a Peruvian New Year's celebration, visiting a town built on floating reeds in Lake



Precolumbian mythological creatures





**pregnant women and new moms  
need help? just ask!**

- Walk-in pregnancy tests
- Free and confidential assistance
- Resources for housing, financial and medical help
- Maternity & baby clothes
- Baby furniture

**Sitka Pregnancy Aid**  
403 Lincoln Street in Sitka  
(above Colliver Shoes)  
Call 907-747-6955

**University of  
Alaska Southeast**

**Sharpen  
your skills!**



Juneau 465-6457  
Ketchikan 225-6177  
Sitka 747-6653

[www.uas.alaska.edu](http://www.uas.alaska.edu)  
UAS is an AA/EQ employer

Titicaca, seeing the large Nazca Lines made out of desert rocks and more.

Regardless of individual highlights, the group was drawn together and took the trip to improve their Spanish language skills, learn about another culture, travel, and have fun during the break between winter and spring semesters at UAS.

Five times Bellagh has taken UAS students on one of these month-long trips. They have visited Mexico, Ecuador, Cuba, Venezuela and this past year, Peru.

Arlo Midgett, a UAS graduate and current UAS staff member, has taken every trip. "Rick talked me into going on the first trip to Mexico," he said. "I went on the others because the first trip changed my life."

Before the first trip, Midgett admits he wasn't much of a traveler and had little desire to see places outside the U.S. That's all changed now. "I've got the travel bug," he laughs. "Seeing new places. Seeing new people. Seeing new cultures. It's fascinating because it's always so much different from what you expect."

Requirements to take part in the trips are simple: one semester of Spanish. Costs are purposely kept low: about \$20 per day for food, lodging and activities. Students also pay round-trip airfare: about \$1,000 for the most recent trip to Peru. "We always try to keep the costs at about the level of the Permanent Fund dividend," Bellagh says with a laugh.

Students receive three UAS credits and write papers upon their return. For the first time, the Peru trip also included an option for three additional credits in anthropology that was supervised by UAS Assistant Professor of Anthropology Dr. Dan Monteith who took part in the trip.

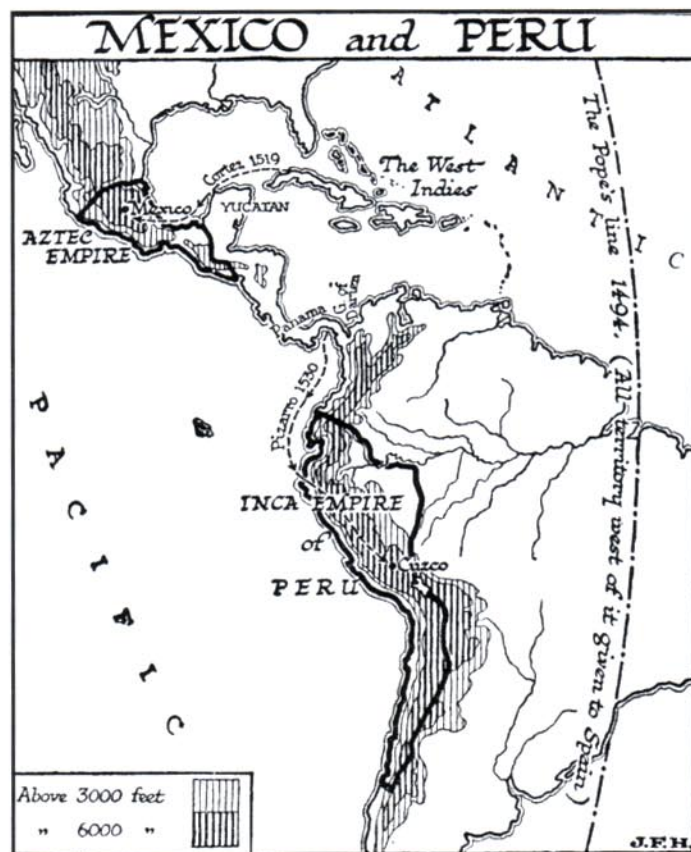
"The credits help," said UAS senior Adrian Berg who was on his third trip, "but it's definitely all about the trip experience for me."

The trips are purposely designed to be flexible as to activities, cheap in regards to meals and lodging, and encouraging in talking with local residents.

"We'll get to a town and go to the plaza," Midgett said by way of example. "Two people will watch the bags and the whole group splits up with guide books and goes out to find the best hotel at the best price."

The group reassembles in the plaza for the results. "I found a hotel with hot water but the rooms are kind of musty smelling," one team reported. Another found a clean room with a warm shower for \$5. The night's lodging was taken care of and in the process students had practiced Spanish.

Morning meetings of the group are for some language instruction and assignments. "One of Rick's favorite assignments," Midgett said, "is to have everyone go out and buy a small notebook and pencil so they can write down new Spanish words to add to their vocabulary list."



Inca Empire in Mexico and Peru



Although there is an academic structure to these trips, most of the time is spent exploring and experiencing. Activities are decided each day by group consensus rather than planned before the trip.



Arlo Midgett

The Inca ruins at Machu Picchu were the highlight of the trip for many of the UAS Spanish students who spent a month during the campus winter break in Peru.



Arlo Midgett

Shirlena Montanye holds up a charango during a Christmas morning gift exchange in Puno on shores of Lake Titicaca while Evelyn Cushing reads a card.



Pre-Columbian mythological creatures





Arla Midgett

One of the student choices for a day trip was river rafting the Urubamba River near Cusco, Peru.

Bellagh requires 20 new words a day. Students looking in a store window, for example, will see the items being sold and then look at the sign and realize that *ferreteria* means hardware store. And there's another word for the vocabulary list.

Although there is an academic structure to these trips, most of the time is spent exploring and experiencing. Activities are decided each day by group consensus rather than planned before the trip.

"The more I've done these trips," Bellagh says, "the more I've tended to believe in experiential learning. We can do the classroom stuff back in Juneau. I want them to experience the country and people."

For students with only one semester of UAS Spanish, initiating conversations in a foreign country can be intimidating. Evelyn Cushing, a UAS sophomore from Juneau, admitted her Spanish was limited, but she had to use it when she stayed in a family's home.

"The son would hang out with us," she said. "He didn't speak any English. In order to communicate you had to speak Spanish. It was frustrating, but I could always get my point across. They had a little daughter, too, who was about 10 years old. She was more on my level."

Rudimentary Spanish is just fine according to Bellagh. "You don't have to say things correctly. The purpose of language is to communicate."

Despite the initial frustration, Cushing said, "I learned a lot just during the first few days." By the end of the trip, she said,

"My Spanish was much better. A lot better. This next semester of class is going to be a breeze!"

Cushing had previously visited Mexico with no Spanish skills. "You can get by," she said. "But it puts an extra, huge wall in the travel experience. You don't get to talk to the people at all. It's really hard to get around. Everything is at face value. You don't get any deeper than that."

And that's a big part of the benefit of these campus trips according to UAS Chancellor John Pugh. "It's very important in a global society for students to visit other countries and become familiar with what they are experiencing," he said.

Speaking the language of local residents allows the students to better understand the real country and culture according to Pugh. "If you just see a country as a tourist," he said, "you just don't get the same feeling."

Bellagh agrees. One of the main reasons for organizing and leading the trips, he said, was to show people they can do this on their own. "Low budget travel is easy; it's fun. You don't need to go with a group. You don't need to be afraid of anything."

Bellagh has long practiced what he preaches. He has already visited half of the nearly 30 countries in the world where Spanish is the national language. His goal is to visit them all.

Bellagh, whose parents are from Hungary, grew up in Cleveland speaking

Hungarian as his first language. During high school he was an exchange student in Switzerland and learned German. He studied German and Spanish as an undergraduate and earned a master's degree in Hispanic Literature and Linguistics from the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

After graduate school, Bellagh wanted a break from studies, came to Juneau as a Jesuit volunteer and worked for a year at REACH, Inc. "I loved Juneau," he said. "I have to stay here." He submitted an application to UAS and was hired. In short order he offered to lead UAS trips during the winter holiday break.

He's already thinking about next year's destination. "I'd like to go to Cuba again," he said. "If not then the Dominican Republic."

Adrian Berg went to Mexico on the first trip in 1997 and has returned to take part in the Cuba trip in 1999 and the Peru trip this past December. He went on the first trip because it offered a chance for adventure in a safe way. "I continued to go because I had so much fun in Mexico with the group. The Cuba trip is another good example. I made life-long friends."

"There's a whole other world of people besides Juneau that I'd never really seen before," said the lifelong Juneau resident.

"To go and travel in a different country every year, have it work toward your degree, and have it be a lot of fun," Berg said, "it's amazing to have that opportunity right here at home." **AS**