

Back from the Forbidden Island

UAS group returns with insight into Cuba

By Amber Lee

Over the holidays, 12 students from the University of Alaska Southeast had the opportunity to travel to a lush, tropical island that is forbidden to most United States citizens—Cuba. For nearly 40 years, U.S. sanctions against tourism to Cuba have made it impossible for most Americans to legally travel to the Caribbean island. Last May, however, President Clinton signed legislation allowing direct flights to Cuba for certain purposes, making this educational endeavor possible.

The 12 students who traveled with Professor Bellagh to Cuba were 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. The students had enrolled in a course called *The Language and Culture of Cuba*. For one month, they lugged their backpacks across the western end of the tropical island, practicing their Spanish and trying to understand what Cuba was really about. They stayed mostly in the homes of Cuban families, rarely staying in the areas that are most frequently visited by tourists.

At first the students were so captivated by the charm of the narrow colonial streets of Havana, and overwhelmed by the drastic change in language and culture, that Cuba seemed to many of them very similar to other Third World countries in



Black market food. Five of the students enjoy black market seafood with a Cuban family. Jennifer Berg, Amber Lee, Kean Nuttall, Aldo (Cuba), Mari (Cuba), Sylvi (Cuba), Travis Hawley, and Adrian Berg. Photo courtesy Amber Lee

which they had traveled.

"Once we settled down and got over the shock of just being in Cuba, we began to see more of how Cuba worked, and how the people actually lived," said Nina Jahnke.

There were many differences that Socialism had made on the small Caribbean island—some striking and

others more subtle and easily missed if a person didn't look carefully.

One of the differences was apparent immediately on the taxi ride from the Havana International Airport to the hotel.

"We're used to seeing advertisements for products everywhere," said Jason

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Messing. "There were still billboards and posters everywhere alongside the street, but instead of advertising products like Coca Cola, they all had slogans like 'Father Land or Death' or 'We have no fear of you Yankees.'"

Even though the country was covered by anti-United States propaganda, no one in the group ever felt that the people of Cuba harbored any feelings of ill will towards them personally or as Americans.

"In fact it was just the opposite," said Kean Nuttall. "People were really interested in hearing what we had to say, and really excited when we told them that we were from the United States. They made a distinct differentiation between government and individual people. One Cuban explained that there is a definite separation between how the Cubans feel about the United States government and the people of the United States, and the disagreement that their government has with ours does not effect how they feel about individual people."

"The people were so wonderful and friendly," said Nova Slye. "I always felt very welcome."

After walking through the streets of Havana, a huge city with a population of over two million, the students noticed other important differences.

"The most profound thing that I saw in Cuba was actually something that I didn't see; there were no street people," said Tia Anderson. "Because I have traveled so much in Third World countries, I wasn't surprised by the condition of buildings and homes, but I was very surprised that I didn't see any homeless people."

Lack of homelessness is a phenomenal accomplishment for a Third World

country. In fact, it is something that we can not even boast in our own country. However, even though every person had a home, the home that they had was not necessarily a place that a person would want to live. One of the group, Travis Hawley, described a situation where he was walking through a park in Santa Clara at night, and came upon a man sprawled out on a bench. Not having seen many people sleeping in the streets, Hawley's curiosity was sparked and he engaged the man in conversation.

"I asked the guy if he didn't have anyplace to live," said Hawley. "He explained to me that he did have a house, but that the bench was a lot nicer place to sleep than his house."

According to Hawley, buying and selling property in Cuba is against the law. You are able to trade your home if you can find another person willing to trade with you. "But who is going to trade with a guy whose house is so run down that he would rather sleep on a bench?" said Hawley.

Another phenomena that Cuba's socialist system seemed to encourage was the black market.

"Normally you would think of the black market as selling illegal weapons or drugs," said Hawley. "Instead these people were buying things like milk, fish, and building supplies."

One example of this was evident at dinner time. The families with whom

the group stayed prepared dinner each night. The students would choose from a list of main courses that morning and arrange a time for the dinner to be held. The Cuban government exports all of the fish and lobster caught in the country, only setting aside a small amount to be sold at exorbitant prices to tourists at the government-run hotels. Cuban

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—Travis Hawley

residents are not able to purchase these items for themselves. This means that the families that have permits to house tourists are not able to buy these foods legally to offer the tourists at reasonable prices. However, through the black market, these items are obtained, and secretly sold.

"Even in the houses while we were eating it, we weren't able to say lobster," said Jahnke. "We had to call it chicken of the sea."

Families that were caught with black market items such as fish or lobster were fined large amounts of money.

"I heard about one family caught with lobster shells that was fined around \$5,000," said Adrian Berg. "That's an impossible amount of money to pay when these people are making around \$15 a month."

While the students were off traveling, the controversy between the U.S. and Cuba regarding the return of Elian, the young Cuban boy found floating adrift in the ocean after escaping Cuba with his mother, heated up. This caused a little unrest

among the family, friends, and University administration who were waiting for the students' safe return. According to the group, however, the Elian controversy posed no threat to their well being.

The students even had the opportunity to witness one of the many protests that had been organized by a large group of Cuban mothers.

"It was really bizarre," said Arlo Midgett. "There were thousand of mothers marching and holding flags on the main road along the shore in Havana. The women were walking and talking, and not really paying much attention to what was going on. Every block there was a police officer standing and holding a whistle. When the helicopter with the camera crew that televised the event would come close to their area, the police officer would blow his whistle. Then the women would all start yelling and waving flags. It was kind of like a wave, as soon as the police officer quit, they would just stop yelling and go on talking amongst themselves, and the next block of women would start cheering."

Midgett explained that even at these Elian rallies that seemed anti-American, no animosity was shown towards the group. Cubans would often approach members of the group at these events, and engage them in friendly conversations.

Overall, the 12 students expressed that the trip was a tremendous opportunity to see the island before the embargo was lifted.

"The Straits of Florida are like the last remaining remnants of the Cold War," said Professor Bellagh. "They're like the Berlin wall separating Miami Cubans from Havana Cubans." ■