

Regional

Cuba trip presents surprises for SIUE student

Cuba may be only 90 miles from the United States, but given all the travel restrictions for U.S. citizens it can feel like another world. So when Dean Gunderson, a graduate student in the geography department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, learned about a course being offered by SIUE this summer in Cuba, he took advantage of the opportunity.

"I heard that it was 'happening,' and it seemed like a unique experience," said Gunderson, a native of Alton. "It never occurred to me that I would get to go, so when I heard that there was the opportunity, I jumped at the chance." Once there, Gunderson said that he was caught off guard by the difference in terms of living standards.

"The people didn't have a lot of material goods," he said. "They said that they made \$12 to \$20 a month from the government, but at the same time they all were educated and had healthcare and homes. It was an interesting blend between the material wealth you have in developed countries and the lack of basic services you get in undeveloped ones." He said that the lack of resources seemed a source of inspiration for creativity among the Cuban people.

"We stopped at a farmer's market and we saw a guy with a stall whose job was to re-fill what we call disposable plastic lighters," Gunderson recalled. "Here you buy one, use it, and throw it away. There, they reuse it, and we saw a lot of that."

Gunderson said that he was most surprised that the Cuban society is not as closed as he had expected.

"We were surprised about how open everyone was, and how willing they were to talk about everything," he said. "There were several times when we would talk about something like government policy, and they would outright say, 'That was a poor decision,' or 'They acted too fast.'" Even the Cubans' opinions on socialism were an eye-opener, he said.

"They joked about having problems when they did have connections with the Soviets. They would buy or barter or trade with the Soviets. They would get clothes from them, and it would be wool hats and sweaters," he said. "People would wear them still, because it would make them



Photo courtesy of Osmin Gonzalez

Dean Gunderson, first from the left, together with other students and faculty from SIUE while in Cuba.

appear more in with the party line. The buildings, too, had some Soviet influences, but they would be more open. They might be drab for part of it, but other parts would be brightly colored and very Caribbean."

He said that he found Cubans very nice and open toward Americans despite the political differences between the two countries.

"When they asked where we were from, they didn't seem angry or anything like that," he said. "Most of them would tell us if they had family living in America,

and many of them did." The course took students to different places in Cuba, not only Havana.

"We visited Matanzas, which is a little East of Havana, and a very significant port which has a lot of oil development now. We went to Playa Girón by the Bay of Pigs. There's a big national park that was there, wetlands with a crocodile-breeding center for the Cuban crocodile, which is threatened with extinction. We also went to Santa Clara, where Che Guevara became famous," Gunderson

said. "There's a big monument and museum of him." Wherever they went, he said, communication was not an issue.

"There wasn't a huge number that spoke English fluently, but almost everyone you could kind of interact with," he said. "Most people seemed to know a little English, and we knew a little Spanish, enough that we could get by and communicate. People were very friendly and willing to talk." While the group visited many places where they could observe Cuban culture first-hand, probably what

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surprised them the most, Gunderson said, was to listen to Cuban rap music.

"We went to a meeting with a group of people from the Cuban Rap Agency where they taught us about rap music in Cuba," he said. "When we were talking to them they said that when they first heard American rap they didn't know what was being said because they didn't speak English, but they liked the beats so they started doing it too. They said when they learned what was actually being said they were appalled by the lyrics. They try to make their lyrics more positive. They even have rap love songs, which sounds interesting." Gunderson said that he thinks that more visits like these can help to improve Cuban-American relations and perhaps serve to eliminate the embargo or blockade, as the Cubans call it.

"People didn't seem hateful about it, but you could see how it impacted their lives in ways that are foreign to us," he said. "There were shortages in Cuba of things that we could get really easy, like toilet paper or even toilet seats. People on the street asked for soap, and it's really expensive in the stores. Shampoo was about \$15 for a bottle, and again people are making about \$12 to \$20 per month."

When asked how he will use the knowledge he earned from this experience, Gunderson said, "I would like to go back at some point. It seems like things are starting to change, so it would be interesting to see in a few years. I'm not exactly sure what I'll do with the knowledge, but it has definitely impacted my view on things, so maybe that will be how I use it."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.