

TRAVEL TALK - BOW STUDENTS VISIT CUBA

BY BRAYDEN BINDER

ELO by Chase Binder

Bow High School's Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) program gives students the chance to learn outside the traditional classroom, whether in structured learning activities in our own communities or in countries beyond our borders. Social Studies teacher Derek DeAngelis and World Language teacher Colony Barrett combine their disciplines and their students in a single guided trip designed to show students what different disciplines have to offer—and how the students can help each other decipher other cultures.

Last year DeAngelis and Barrett took a group of students to France and this year's ELO trip was to Cuba. My grandson, BHS junior Brayden Binder, participated in the Cuba learning experience and agreed to share his thoughts.

The Bow High School trip to Cuba was an awesome experience for me, and even a historic one—we were there when Fidel Castro died. Of course we researched Cuba before we left, but I can say that being there is a completely different experience than reading about it. I was wrong not only in my thinking about what Cuba would look like, but just about everything I expected before going on the trip was wrong. My senses were always in a new situation as I saw new things, felt new things, met new people and tasted new things.

It began mere minutes after the plane departed from Miami International Airport. I was in awe at the beautiful hues of blue on the water I was seeing right outside my plane window. On land, I immediately noticed the wide variety of color they use for their houses and other buildings. I had never seen so much color, and frankly seeing orange and light blue houses scattered around everywhere seem quite weird. With those odd (to me!) colors also came completely odd cars—American-made cars from the 1940's and 50's. An antique car anywhere in America would stick out like a sore thumb, but in Cuba they're everywhere. I was amazed that they were even still moving, let alone that they seemed to be just regular cars there.

Some parts of Cuba also looked very old, and in a lot of cases very rundown. Inside the cities, you'd see buildings with a lot of paint chipping off because of how old they were. The poor sections of Cuba are usually on the outskirts of cities, and are riddled with houses that looked like they were built with random materials from the dump. But these outskirts were completely countered



Front row (l to r): Anna Shepard, Payton Barrett, Maria DeAngelis, Elizabeth Dunn, Brayden Binder (author)

Back row (l to r): Cody McCluary, Brendan Fournier, Kenny Breen, Robert Kremzner, Brandon Parker, Evan Alfano, Alistair Mayo, Mason Elle-Gelerper, Keegan Orzechowski, Ethan DeAngelis (photo courtesy of Derek DeAngelis).

by the amazing landscapes of the countryside. I've never seen such beautiful landscapes just outside of my window. It was breathtaking and nothing I could write could describe the beauty. My photographs don't even give liberty to the moments in which I took the shots.



Las Terrazas, an eco-community offers a hotel, riverside and forest nature walks and small cottages for local housing.

Most of the places we visited were community centers of all types: night schools, dance academies, art schools and more. One of the biggest things there is art. Cubans love music, art, and dancing. Often we were asked to get up and dance. It's just the fun spirit of the people and they want to live their lives grandly. They want to drink coffee when they get up and dance until they fall asleep. These community centers teach kids in rundown areas or from disturbed families how to live a certain life, and how to have fun while doing it. I could tell that the kids there really love these places, and I know for a fact that anyone in

my group would say the same thing about the artistic culture there. At all of the community centers, there was a lighthearted and fun feeling.

I thought that we Americans wouldn't be too kindly accepted in Cuba due to the history between our two countries. Boy, was I wrong. The Cuban people can be summed up in one story from my last morning in Cuba, in the small city of Santa Clara, where the last battle of the Cuban Revolution occurred in 1958. When I learned of Fidel's death, a few of us went to the town square to find Cuban newspapers. No one was selling newspapers in the square, so we asked a friendly-looking local for help. He didn't speak English and we struggled to explain what we wanted in Spanish. He took us through the entire square, trying to help. At last he figured it out and found a store, but the papers hadn't been delivered yet. We parted ways—it was time for us to leave. But as we were sitting on the bus 30 minutes later, I saw our Cuban friend outside our bus waving a newspaper. He had randomly helped us, escorted us

through his town, and on top of that didn't give up until we had a paper to take home.

This *is* the people of Cuba. The feeling while there is warm, not only due to the weather, but also because of the people. Cubans are incredibly community-oriented people who have no problem helping you if you ask. The overall feeling I got while standing in the town squares, while in the various community centers, and while walking around on the streets was a tranquil and laid back one. It was actually pretty peaceful there.

Though the feeling there was great, I can't say we experienced the best food Cuba has to offer. Being on a tour limits your choice of food—and it's not what American teens are used to. Most of the country subsists on rice, chicken and pork...and the always-present dessert, flan.

There is so much to say about Cuba that I'm not sure I'll ever be done. Would I recommend going? I would wholeheartedly recommend going but I will say that the trip would definitely be more of an experience than a vacation.



Cuban middle-school students play a local game in one of Havana's many public squares.



Top students have classes and meeting space in the University of Havana's restored classrooms and lecture halls. (Photos courtesy of Brayden Binder)