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Sunday, April 01, 2007



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St. Mary's students storm Cuba

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- Friday, March 23, 2007 @ 09:00

Working with Canada Cuba Sports and Festivals, students from St. Mary's Secondary School in Cobourg had a wonderful get-away in January - which, best of all, was part of their Canadian Academy of Travel and Tourism course.

Salsa dancing, visits to rum and cigar factories, and walking tours of Old Havana were enjoyed by Sarah Ashby, Travis Gibson, Sara Holek, Caleb Landry, Nicholas Lorenz, Meaghan Lowry, Justin Mihalic, Mary Richards, Amara Scott, Jordan Sine, Courtney Sokay, Ariana Van Laren, Nolan Walsh and Matthew Wannamaker, along with teacher Germaine Landry and volunteer Yvette McCartney (whose daughter Kristin recently graduated from the program).

"There were so many different things to do, but I really liked the waterfall," Mary said. The group had hiked up a mountain one day and then, just when they were hot and tired, found a cold glacier-fed waterfall on the other side.

"It was really slippery," she said. "It was an adventure to get up and stand below the waterfall."

Volleyball enthusiast Matthew was thrilled at the chance to play volleyball with a championship coach of international stature. It was fun meeting the other students they played with and against - at a facility originally built for the Pan American Games, though the government has not had the money to keep it up properly. "I got a couple of splinters," he admitted.

Meaghan and Sarah loved the beach with its fine, clean sand and crystal-clear water.

"Mathew and I were in the water for three hours," Meaghan said. "Our eyes were bloodshot, but it was so much fun!"

The snorkelling they planned had to be cancelled, Sarah said with regret, because there were too many stingrays around.

"We got to do so much more than if you went by yourself. We got to see so much more of Cuba - that's what I loved about it," Matthew said.

For Courtney, the biggest thrill was seeing it all come together. Among her duties, Mr. Landry explained, were marketing the trip in competition with other trips planned, like the Germany exchange during March break. She had to get a minimum number of people signed up, and she did it, he said with admiration.

"I enjoyed it a lot more because I did all the work working up to it," Courtney said. "I loved how it came together in the end, and we all had so much fun."

"They really tried to give these students a real interaction," Mr. Landry said. "We visited an art school, a tourism school and a sports school - three different sets of students and age groups."

"And it's so energy-conscious," he added. "The key that opens your door is kept in a little box. If you remove it, your lights and air conditioner go off. Multiply that by all the hotels in North America - why are we not doing that?"

It was important to him that the students not see just resorts, beaches and restaurants. They came away having seen the reality behind these amenities.

The lack of public transportation was surprising to Matthew.

"Everywhere you went, you have hundreds of people on the side of the road - kind of a shock compared to what you see here," he said.

Mrs. McCartney recalls talking to a waiter who lives 35 kilometres from work, and he must rise at 5 a.m. to be sure of getting to work by 8:30. And though he leaves after the supper shift, he sometimes does not get home until 1 a.m.



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Mary was taken aback by the beautiful homes and how close they were to homes that were completely run down, rusted over, half-standing. "In the poorest areas of Toronto, it doesn't compare with how poor these houses were," Sarah added. "There was no paint. They were falling apart."

The students were surprised to learn, however, that education is free.

"No tuition," Mr. Landry said. "They give you a uniform, and you can go as far as you want to go, as long as you have the ability."

There are 200 universities, but the young people choose their careers in high school. The instruction day includes a period of hands-on experience in whatever field they have chosen.

"And they have one doctor for every 75 families," Mr. Landry said.

Mrs. McCartney was impressed with the women's clinic, accessible any time without appointment. It is credited not only with the island's healthy babies but with wiping out AIDS.

Courtney mentioned how kind the people were, and how carefree they seemed.

"I was amazed at how safe it is," Mr. Landry agreed. "I find the Cuban people to be an amazing example of hospitality. They are most welcoming and friendly in all areas that tourists abound, young and old."

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