

## Regional

# Suriname trip opens new cultures to students

Suriname is a country of which we hear very little. Many people can't even place it as being in South America. Yet, it is becoming a popular destination for students interested in knowing more about cultural studies, and was the destination for a group of students from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville this past summer. Two of the students were Jennifer Lewis and Alex Taitt, both anthropology majors.

"I always knew that I wanted to study abroad while I am here in college because it is a great opportunity," said Taitt. "A lot of people go to Europe, but this opportunity came along to go to South America and study cultural anthropology." Both students said that they had never heard of Suriname before this trip.

"During my interview with Dr. Cairo and Professor Bentley [the SIUE faculty leaders of the trip], I said, 'Anyone can go to Europe, not many people get the opportunity to go to South America'."

"Learn how to do field work, work with people, getting used to just walking up to random people and talking to them because that is really difficult for a lot of people to do," Taitt said regarding the main objective of the course. "You can learn a lot in the classroom, but until you actually go out into the field you don't get the full experience and that's really what the faculty wanted us to accomplish." Suriname is a particularly useful country in which to conduct cultural studies due to the tremendous mix of ethnic groups living there.

"You have the people who were slaves from Africa, you have a Dutch population, you also have a very large Hindustani population, and Javanese, and then Chinese. One of the great things that we kept seeing and hearing about this country is that on one street there was a mosque and then a completely different religious temple right next to it," said Taitt. "And they were able to get along. You have this huge mix of cultures and from what we saw it was peaceful. It was really great to see that." For Lewis the experience was also eye opening.



Photo by Aminata Cairo

The group of SIUE students who visited Suriname in the summer of 2013.

"This is a country where there were probably racial imbalances and gender imbalances, but overall there was a feeling that these people think of each other as pretty equal," she said. "It was amazing to see." And while Dutch is the official language of the nation, that was not much of a barrier for the students in interacting with the Surinamese.

"A lot of people could speak broken English because American television is pretty much everywhere," said Lewis.

"A lot of people said that they learned English in what we would call elementary school and they remember some of it. It wasn't too terrible, but sometimes it was difficult to understand. And usually someone around would know how to speak something so they would help us." Among the most interesting cultural experiences they had was attending the Carifesta.

"It is a Caribbean-wide festival that was being held in Suriname that year,"

explained Taitt. "So really everywhere we were going and doing our observations they were preparing for this by doing dances and skits and plays. So we really saw a huge variety of artistic things. On top of that, Dr. Cairo and Professor Bentley set us up with different cultural activities where we would do Hindustani dance one day and then an Amerindian dance, and played drums. So we really got a good taste of all the cultural activities that were there." Sometimes they

## Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

were approached with interesting questions because they were Americans.

"One of the things that struck me the most happened when we were in a small village that was in the interior, very cut off," said Taitt. "We had to get there after a very long bus ride and then a boat. When we go to the village they call us the 'Obama people,' because we were Americans. We did get questions like, 'How do you like it here?' and 'Is it different?' People were very open about us being there and curious about our journey." The overall experience, the students said, profoundly impacted them.

"We actually did a presentation for one of the cultural groups that we worked with and I said to them, 'When you hear about a country you may see pictures of the people, but it's hard to really fully realize what the people are like there.' Going to Suriname, a whole new culture, it's definitely a culture shock, but it was refreshing," said Lewis.

"Obviously we learned about anthropology and doing stuff out in the field," added Taitt, "but for me one of the best lessons I learned was to just be more confident in myself. I can do things. I can go travel and survive and I can find out more things about myself and it's ok to do that." Both students said that they would like to go back.

"I was talking to my grandma, who is Dutch," said Taitt. "I told her that we all need to go and that she could be our translator and we can make our way around there. We'll see if it happens. I would love to go back though."

*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](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*