



## LFS 302A

### International Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture - Cuba

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# Cuban Delights! Visit Cuba in April/May 2015

By Sophie Gardner (<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/author/sophiega/>) on September 18, 2014

Until they rename UBC “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”, it’s doubtful books will ever literally “come to life and jump off the page”. However, CTLT’s Distance Learning department offers the next best thing: Land and Food Systems’ three-credit course “LFS 302A: International Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture – Cuba” (<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/distance-learning/courses/lfs/lfs302a/>) where your studies *are entirely* off the page: a twenty three day field studies trip to Cuba to experience what sustainable agriculture is all about, from April 30 – May 23, 2015!

Cuba’s unique combination of a socialist society, the loss of many farm inputs such as machinery, chemicals and feedgrains due to the Soviet Union collapse, Castro’s prioritizing of science, and strong and cooperative farming bodies (and conditions) has resulted in the country’s largely organic and sustainable agricultural and food production system: a fascinating study for many outsiders.

Students who undertake this course will experience a view of Cuba very different from that of tourists. Amongst other things, they will meet with professors and students from Cuba’s leading agricultural universities, training schools and Agricultural Circles; visit soil and plant protection labs and learn more about Cuba’s development of biological controls (and use of botanical and medicinal herbs); visit Cuba’s cooperative farms, develop an understanding of social/cultural institutions; and spend time in such important ecological areas as Las Terrazas, Viñales Valley and Topes de Collantes.

A desire for a summer experience abroad during her Undergraduate degree led Brittany Buchanan to undertake the course in 2009, and as a direct result, she switched her major from Nutritional Sciences to Applied Biology, Food and the Environment.

“In Cuba I saw first-hand that human health is first and foremost dependent on food system health,” she says. “The most interesting thing I learned is that “new ideas and old tools will always beat old ideas and new tools.” The future of a healthy food system is that we are innovative in how we do things.”

A diverse group of fellow travelers, including British Columbia, Ontario and the United States, with a variety of different ages and reasons for undertaking the trip, meant that Brittany also learnt much outside of the textbook (which itself was also used innovatively, in that each student was assigned a different section to read in preparation and then present to the others during their travels).

“Cuba is a case study of what agriculture might look like if we no longer had fossil fuels or an import export market.” Brittany recalls.

"A fellow student felt that if something happened where we suddenly had no fuel/external inputs in a free market food system, people would be greedy and not as successful in overcoming as Cuba has been. This is one factor to contemplate, but more importantly, even with fossil fuels and global markets, in what direction does our food system need to go in order to feed our grandkids? I do not have the answer but I do have a passion for trying to learn how it is working right now, and attempting to address what I can contribute to help improve the long term health of land, food systems and farm operations."

She is pictured here with fellow traveler and now friend Natalie, who has since returned to Cuba on further study trips.

Many students also keep in touch via a closed FB group for all alumni.

Brittany likens Cuba to "living in an old fashioned book" with beautiful classic cars driving down brick roads.

"We were able to enjoy some of the vacation/resort luxuries (with incredible beaches, endless mojitos and cheap and delicious food) but as we saw more agriculture and the diversity of their food production systems, my impression changed. Cuba has an excellent education system, and impressive science supporting agriculture. It was enlightening to see how respected and supported farmers were. That was something I didn't really expect (probably in part because we don't see it here)."



Brittany and Natalie. The sign translation is: "Project to Strengthen Milk Production, Long live the friendship between all people of the world, CPA 26 Julio."

Course instructor Wendy Holm says "This course is a wonderful experience for anyone who wants to understand more about sustainable food systems and resilient communities. Travelling for 23 days across Cuba, visiting its farms and research stations, you will learn how this tiny nation managed to receive - virtually overnight - the Right Livelihood Award of the Swedish Parliament for world excellence in organic agriculture and the "Sustainable Nation" award of the World Wildlife Fund based on ecological footprint and social development indices. Importantly, you will also connect with a network of Cuban change leaders that will be invaluable if you plan future work in the areas of community food security, sustainability, cooperation and resilience, and/or Latin America."

"Working in the industry I recognize what a need there is for all kinds of talents and knowledge base," Brittany concludes.

"Agriculture needs the best and the brightest. People assume that because farms have grown in size and mechanization there are less jobs in agriculture. This is not at all the case; there are more job opportunities than qualified graduates. Farmers have a multifaceted profession and need support in all kinds of categories. Agriculture needs engineers, software developers, technicians, lab support, agronomists, mechanics, accountants... the list goes on."

Since returning, Brittany has completed a full year practicum on the UBC Farm, worked on/ helped develop two small scale farms in the Vancouver area, worked for Farm Credit Canada and also for a farmer owned co-op. She has recently commenced studying for her online Masters in Plant Health Management, and her Cuban experiences and influences have assisted her with her current work servicing the specialty market in Southwest Michigan, focusing on the fruit industry by scouting orchards, researching alternative application strategies regarding air blast sprayers, and helping growers implement Integrated Pest Management.

"I think that anyone who takes the time and makes the investment to travel to Cuba with Wendy would not regret it. Regardless of your area of interest or focus of study there is something to learn and someone to meet on the May 2015 trip."

Registration is open to both UBC and non-UBC students, but enrolment is limited to 24 students. To find out more, including course details, trip itinerary and costs, and to watch some short video interviews with Brittany, Wendy and other participants, click here (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/distance-learning/courses/lfs/lfs302a/>).

This article was published in the September 2014 CTLT Newsletter, Dialogues. Below is a list of articles included in the issue:

- Celebrate Learning Week 2014 (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/?p=23667>)
- Reshaping the Campus Experience: Learning Design Environment Workshop (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/2014/07/31/reshaping-the-campus-experience-learning-environment-design-workshop/>)
- ECAR Study of Faculty and Technology 2014 (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/?p=23302>)
- Time and Place at UBC: Our Histories and Relations (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/?p=24145>)
- Cuban Delights! Visit Cuba in April/May 2015 (currently viewing)

Find out more about the CTLT Newsletter, Dialogues (<http://ctl.ubc.ca/about/newsletter/>).

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## Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology

Vancouver Campus  
Irving K. Barber Learning Centre  
214-1961 East Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z1  
Tel 604 827 4494  
Fax 604 822 9826  
Website [ctl.ubc.ca](http://ctl.ubc.ca) (<http://ctl.ubc.ca>)

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