HAVANA, CUBA -- Hola from Cuba! Our group from Durham Tech had a busy first 24 hours of our trip. We visited Little Havana in Miami, boarded a plane for Cuba and touched down Sunday afternoon.

We're visiting Cuba through our Center for the Global Learner. Our group is made up of 14 people, some of who are Durham Tech students and others who are Triangle residents interested in Cuba. From the outset, we wanted to learn more about Cuban culture and daily life here.

And one thing is clear: Cubans are about community. Shortly after landing, part of the group took a short stroll through a nearby park, which had horses and ponies, families, basketball and soccer matches, and ATVs and trampolines.

There was a sense of family and safety to the park and that feeling of community carried over into a residential arts district this morning. The entire neighborhood was comprised of art pieces and paintings and we toured a home of a local artist who decorated the outside of his home as one big mosaic.

We'll send along more photos and adventures soon and you can follow us on our trip on Twitter at @DurhamAbroad.
HAVANA — The community art project Wednesday in Cuba was spectacular. Some local musicians put on a brief show for us and told us about their work on the neighborhood reclamation program. The group cleared trash and debris that filled more than a block of residential area and now uses a building and large water tank they unearthed to host art lessons for young artists.

It’s one of several community development projects going on in Havana, where our group of 14, some of us Durham Tech students, others Triangle residents, are learning about Cuban culture and daily life.

Wednesday night, our group went to see a traditional Cuban music performance similar in style to the Buena Vista Social Club in downtown Havana. The club’s venue was surrounded by towering Cuban architecture and the musicians put on a rousing performance.

The performers often danced and sang with those in the crowd and led a congo line through the second-floor, open-air club before retiring for the night.

To add to the night, the performers exited along side the crowd and shook hands and took photos with the attendees.

Early this morning, we had a walk through a neighborhood and community market where we saw children playing in their schoolyards and vendors exchanging Cuban pesos for produce with local residents. The bustling markets in Cuba are always exhilarating as hundreds of residents banter about loudly as they pick up food rations or grab fruit from longtime sellers.

Making our way through the fast-paced vehicle traffic and residents who by the dozens at bus stops, we made our way to a local dance studio.

The group performs in many countries in Central America and trains one or two times a day and up to three days a week. Some of the performers have been training for more than 10 years. The group has been experimenting with using Afro-Cuban influence in their dance and drumming, including using cowhide chairs as drums.

Today, we’re traveling about five hours round-trip to a farm outside Havana.
HAVANA — After a day in the mountains, we were back in Havana for more sightseeing on Friday.

We visited the school for the national circus and learned that children interested in dance can enroll at elementary schools with a speciality in dance and art as early as seven or eight years old.

As children get older, they are tested for flexibility, agility, stamina and strength and only selected students can join a specialized dance school like the national circus school, the school’s director said.

Our group of 14, a mix of Durham Tech students and Triangle residents, are finishing up a weeklong trip in Cuba to learn about Cuban culture and daily life here.

After a brief introduction about the school, our group was led into an old gymnasium buzzing with students who were chatting animatedly with each other or sharing headphones and listening to music.

One by one, students began entering a giant ring that took up most of the floor and began juggling, doing balancing acts and performing high-flying acrobatics.

Their peers in the bleachers cheered them on, regardless of whether the student landed the trick, until the group filed out at the finish.

Following the performance, we toured the students’ training area, which was a mix of balance beams, a high wire and circus equipment.

Our next stop was a local elementary school where parents were picking up their children after classes ended. Some of our group dropped off some school supplies with the principal and some of the parents smiled as they helped their children with tiny umbrellas in the rain. The principal was especially grateful for the donations.

Next, we’re headed back out of town to another area of the countryside that is supposed to have excellent views. So far the views haven’t disappointed.

Adiós!
HAVANA -- Hola! We visited another beautiful mountain village in western Cuba today.

The village was dotted with a series of small lakes and streams and was part of a reforestation project by the government.

We were lucky enough to catch one of the two town doctors between patients and had a chance to ask her about her practice. The 25-year-old has been out of the university since July, she said, and was stationed by the government in the small village, Las Terrazas, about a month ago. The town has a little more than 1,000 residents, and she has seen on average about 30 patients a month. Cuban residents get free healthcare and free education, she said.

The town is so isolated, she said, that most issues are handled by the community and the village has relatively no police presence.

On the way home, the group talked some about what has surprised them in Cuba and what hasn’t. Here were some of the responses:

Mike Herrera, a Durham Tech student in the Arts, Sciences, and University Transfer Program:

What has surprised you about Cuba?

"People are so happy here. At least they put off an air of kindness which I think is legit. They're really friendly, they love Americans for the most part, the ones I've spoken to. Obviously some may put on that facade of friendliness to Americans for money, but most of them, if not all that I've spoken with, there’s been a genuine happiness."

What has met your expectation in Cuba?

"Not a lot of control, at least open control. There's not flood lights and barbed wire and police patrolling the streets. That's changed a lot, I think, over the years. I think at some point it may have been like that. Cuban Americans that I've spoken with told me prior to coming here that the perception of a militaristic state wasn't accurate and the research that we did in class also painted the same picture."

William Arrington, a political science student in the Arts, Sciences, and University Transfer program at Durham Tech:

Met expectations?
I didn't really have any expectations coming in because I expected it to be a completely
different experience from the United States, of course, but I wanted to go into it completely
unknowing of what to expect. Everything has met my expectations.

Surprised you?

Two things: "One is how very little these people have but how happy they are, how
content they are. And the diversity of the culture, things to do lots of unexpected things. I
didn't expect to see synchronized swimming in Cuba nor did I expect to come across a
Mozart Festival attended by German tourists."

We will leave for home tomorrow.

Adios!