WASHINGTON, DC, OCT. 26, 2017 – Four weeks after the State Department issued a travel warning recommending that U.S. citizens refrain from traveling to Cuba, the students and crew of a 130-foot U.S. schooner launched an educational voyage to Cuba yesterday. The Harvey Gamage, operated by Ocean Passages, pushed off from the Capital Yacht Club in Washington, D.C., where it had been moored for a week as the students, ages 18 to 24, met on Capitol Hill with a dozen members of Congress.

Those students as well as representatives of organizations involved in people-to-people travel to Cuba used the deck of the boat as a platform for discussing the impact of the travel warning with the press.
“This will be our third year in Cuba, with students sailing from Portland, ME, to Cienfuegos to engage in people-to-people exchanges and ecological research assessing long-term sustainability,” said Greg Belanger, president of Ocean Passages.

“After carefully assessing the safety of our students and crew, we are confident in our decision to continue our mission—and we sailed here to Washington to brief our representatives,” he added. “Over the past week, students and crew visited Congress to explain why we believe our work as citizen diplomats is so important, especially at this critical time.”

The travel warning was issued on September 29, when the U.S. announced it was withdrawing most of its embassy staff and suspending consular services in Havana. The State Department said it was taking these actions because of unexplained “sonic attacks” which have reportedly harmed more than 20 U.S. Embassy employees in Havana, and has warned that other U.S. citizens could also be at risk.

This recent diplomatic meltdown has created uncertainty and confusion, and resulted in the cancellation of U.S. college programs in Cuba, including an innovative boat-building project affiliated with Ocean Passages.

The broader impact was addressed at the press conference by Chase Poffenberger, executive vice president of Academic Travel Abroad (ATA), a 67-year-old travel provider, who told reporters, “Our company has weathered many storms, worked under many administrations, and has faced many geopolitical climates in our six decades of work. Regardless of government policies, our work and our passion is to transcend borders, and build bridges across countries and cultures.”

Mentioning that ATA always puts safety first, she added, “First, no one, including the U.S. government, knows exactly what caused the serious medical symptoms our diplomats have experienced. Second, no other country, including Canada, whose diplomats were also affected, has issued travel warnings for Cuba. And finally, according to Cuba’s Ministry of Tourism, 500,000 U.S. citizens and over three million
foreigners have visited Cuba since January without incident. There are no verified reports of a private citizen being affected."

Peter Kornbluh, director of the Cuba Documentation Project, National Security Archives, and historical guide for The Nation magazine’s trips to the island, said he’s been to Cuba more than 120 times, “and it’s one of the safest places to travel.”

“I’m excited for the mission of this ship,” he added. “It represents the best of people-to-people diplomacy. This is about our right to travel and to interact and engage with the people of Cuba. We need more boats like this one.”

“This is a great opportunity—to travel somewhere most people don’t get to go,” student Cody Wells, 19, of Portland, Maine, said during the press conference. “The environment there is pristine, and I want to see the wildlife the way it is, the way it should be. I also want to meet and mingle with everyday Cubans. That’s why I’m on this trip.”

Shortly thereafter, the Harvey Gamage left D.C.’s newly renovated Wharf area, with all hands on deck, preparing for the leg of the journey that will take them, eventually, to the southern part of Cuba, with stops at Charleston, SC, and Key West, Fla.

The decision of the schooner’s owners, crew, and students to “stay the course” and sail to Cuba, despite the increasingly turbulent political winds coming from Washington, is being applauded by other U.S. organizations and tour operators.

“Our association—RESPECT, Responsible & Ethical Cuba Travel—was meeting in Havana when the travel warning was announced,” Bob Guild, vice president of Marazul Charters, Inc., and co-coordinator of RESPECT, said after the conference. “Based on all of our members’ experiences, and the lack of evidence of any actual health threat to our travelers, we concluded that the warning was unwarranted and we have continued to send our clients to Cuba. We applaud the schooner’s owners, crew and students’ decision to stay the course, to exchange with their Cuban counterparts, and to engage in their important program of ecological research on the island.”

“Many of the U.S. tour operators we’ve spoken with, while obviously apprehensive about Washington’s recent actions, are encouraged by Ocean Passages’ resilience,” says Martha Honey, executive director of the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) which co-sponsored the press conference. “But until Cuba and the U.S. can work together cooperatively, to determine the cause of the diplomats’ health problems and to re-establish positive relations, the travel warning will continue have a chilling impact on people-to-people exchanges.”
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