



Taking the long way home

By Shehla Anjum

In April 2011, excited about a full athletic scholarship offer from UAF, Stefan Tica called his family in Serbia. His father was not as delighted as Tica had imagined. “He was quiet for about 10 or 15 seconds and then he said, ‘Well, I have a friend in the Amazon, so if you are also interested in playing in a rain forest, I could arrange for that next,’” Tica recalls.

At the time, Tica (rhymes with *pizza*) was finishing his associate of science degree at a community college in Texas. Over the course of several long-distance conversations with his parents, Tica explained his reasons for wanting to attend UAF, to allay their misgivings. “I told them I’d be playing

master of science degree in petroleum engineering at UAF. People told him, “Alaska is too far, too cold. It has polar bears.” Ikewun won them over by emphasizing the high ranking of UAF’s petroleum engineering program. He wasn’t worried about the cold. “I would be able to handle the cold if people in Alaska could handle it.”

When Ryota “Kaji” Kajita quit his secure job at a major Japanese television network to enroll at UAF in 2005, his family and friends reacted in different ways. His mother and grandmother supported his decision. Friends, however, questioned his sanity and wondered why he would go to what they thought of as the end of the earth.



basketball for a larger school, and that UAF’s business administration school had the highest accreditation.”

The 6-foot-7-inch Tica arrived at UAF in September. He is now a forward on the Nanook men’s basketball team and studying for his bachelor’s degree in business administration.

International students at UAF come from all over the world. They speak different languages, eat different foods and practice different religions. But all seven interviewed for this story share one experience — the stunned reactions of family and friends when they learned about the decision to attend UAF, in remote Alaska, rather than well-known universities in places such as California, New York or Texas.

Peter Ikewun (*ih-kay-woon*), from Lagos, Nigeria, remembers well the comments made about his decision to get a

▲ *Peter Ikewun prefers not to eat out, so he regularly makes egusi soup. He brought the egusi from Nigeria and had a friend send red palm oil from New York. Other ingredients he can easily find in Fairbanks, including salmon (instead of traditional tilapia), curry and habaneros.*

“Find a good woman in Japan, marry her and have a stable job,” they advised. “That’s the way you spend a happy life.”

Such remarks failed to dissuade him. “I wanted to come to Alaska ever since I saw a movie about photographer Michio Hoshino’s work here.”

He also had an answer for his friends: “Life is shorter than you think. I would like to die after I’ve done what I want to do. My first priority is to pursue my own way and without any regrets.”

Hassab Elrasoul Ali followed a circuitous route to UAF. He left Sudan after high school to attend college in Pune, India, where he received a bachelor's degree in geology and a master's in petroleum technology. Later he earned a master's in international peace studies from the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana.

Ali's family, which still lives in a small village between the Blue Nile and the White Nile, encouraged and supported all his education efforts. But his plan to move to Alaska surprised them. Alaska is a place where unwanted people go, they said. But Ali wanted to study Alaska's experience with oil development and apply it to Sudan. He's now in a PhD program in interdisciplinary studies, working on a thesis that explores the effects of oil development and wealth on Sudan and its people.

Adverse comments, even disdain, about their choice do not deter students from attending UAF. In 2011, 224 students from 44 nations and five continents enrolled at the university. The total includes 141 graduate students, 80 undergraduates, and three not affiliated with a specific program. The students' homes range from the southern reaches of Australia to the northern latitudes of Russia and Norway.

China and India sent the most students, 47 and 43 respectively. All but two Indian students are in graduate school, the majority in engineering and a few in the sciences. Chinese students, also mostly in engineering and science departments, are nearly evenly divided between undergraduates and graduates.

Each year a flag dedication ceremony recognizes UAF students from around the world. The row of flags affixed to a soaring, curved wall of the Wood Center lobby acknowledges their presence. The number of flags has increased steadily, from 30 in 2003 to 44 this year. Two new countries, Indonesia and Poland, took part in this year's dedication ceremony.

Carol Holz, of the Office of International Programs and Initiatives, says the flag ceremony never fails to move her. When international students see their flags in Wood Center, she says they "feel they are linked to home, and are glad that UAF recognizes their presence and contribution to the community."



Fear factor

Students from other nations have long studied at American universities, but mostly at Lower 48 institutions. Alaska might loom large in the imagination of many people in the world, but mostly as a curiosity — remote, majestic and

forbidding — a tourist rather than an academic destination.

UAF has had international students for most of its existence, but in recent years it also set up official agreements and programs to attract more such students. In 2003, the university signed an agreement with an Indian university, followed in 2006 with one in China. The latest agreement, with Mongolia, signed in June 2011, should add to the six Mongolian students already enrolled in graduate and undergraduate studies.

Students who move to another place for school often contend with their own fears as well as their parents' concerns. Some international students have never left home before. And many envision Alaska as a realm of cold, ice and six months of darkness. "There is a fear factor about Alaska for parents and students who come to hear about UAF in Pune,"

says Shirish Patil, a professor and director of the Petroleum Development Laboratory. He has been instrumental in recruiting international students.

Patil, a Pune native, came to the United States in 1981 for graduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh. He moved to UAF in 1983, and earned two master's degrees and a doctorate from the school. Today, in addition to his teaching duties and research, Patil is

active in recruitment, and travels to Pune and elsewhere to participate in UAF information nights.

A longtime Fairbanks resident with Indian roots, whose wife and two children are also UAF alumni, Patil possesses the authority and credibility to speak about the city and the school. "I am honest about the extremes — the beautiful summers, the harsh winters and darkness," he says. "I also tell them the advantages UAF offers — a small university in a small town, a strong community that is home to several Indian families, research opportunities for students, and the number of Indians who work here."

His talks have helped. Indian students arrive to study at UAF every year.

A period of trepidation follows the initial euphoria and excitement about going abroad for higher education, students say. Concerns that appear minor to Americans can stress those used to a different way of life. For someone from a culture where household help is common or where parents take care of many things for their children, even when those children are young adults, life in the U.S. can be daunting. Pune native Prachi Vohra had never left her family home for school. "I didn't worry so much about coming to Alaska, but more about having to do everything myself. I wondered if I'll be able to take care of myself and be able to do well in my studies."

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▲ Students rave about Alaska's vast and beautiful landscape. Ryota Kajita, originally from Japan, studies photography, documenting the landscape and his surroundings. Photo courtesy of Ryota Kajita.

She fretted about things that might seem trivial to Americans. In India, she'd never shopped for groceries, driven a car, cooked any big meals or maintained a bank account. "Now I can do all those things. I shop and cook for myself, I learned how to drive and hope to have my license before I graduate in May, and I take care of all my finances."

Certain adjustments that students face are unique to Alaska. Alaskans are accustomed to the sight of wild animals in both urban and wild settings. Bears and moose ambling down streets and roads are commonplace; bears overturn garbage cans and raid bird feeders, and moose munch on trees. They are part of the landscape, and Alaskans accept them as a normal part of living here.

Encountering wildlife within a city was an unusual experience for Australian May-Le Ng (*may-lee*, plus *ng*, as in *sing*). She moved to Fairbanks with her husband, a postdoctoral student at UAF, and takes classes in photography as a non-degree student. As the husband and wife readied for the

move to Alaska, they felt no anxiety about Alaska's weather or its far-from-anywhere location, Ng says. What worried her most were bears, she admits. "Our kangaroos are not that scary."

Many students, especially those from warm-climate countries like Thailand, India, Sudan or Nigeria, harbor fears about Alaska's cold and dark. Several researched Fairbanks' weather on the Internet and noted the extremes — temperatures soaring into the high 80s in the summer, plunging to 40 below in the winter.

In Lagos, Nigeria, the coldest it ever gets is about 45 F, Ikewun says. "I read up as much as I could about the cold here, but I was unable to figure out what such cold felt like. I couldn't imagine a cup of coffee or water thrown up in the air and freezing as it comes toward the ground."

He knew nothing about central heating, and thought that temperatures in buildings and outside were the same. "I couldn't visualize such low temperatures and finally decided

it must be like being in a freezer. I was sure I would not lead a normal life,” he says.



Adaptation strategies

The university’s Office of International Programs and Initiatives plays a key role in helping international students adjust to American life. The staff works with students before they arrive, follows their progress while here and helps with issues or problems.

Stefan Tica credits UAF’s orientation program for new and international students with helping him prepare for winter. “I was petrified before coming to Alaska. I saw it in April and it was beautiful, but I didn’t know how I’d cope when it turned dark and cold.”

Information about coping with inclement weather is included in the handbooks provided to all new students, according to OIPI’s Carol Holz. “The general orientation has also included a ‘fashion show at 40 below,’” she says. “From time to time I’ll bring my heavy boots and mittens as examples during orientation.”

Northerners sometimes suffer from seasonal affective disorder during the long, dark days of winter. Anyone can get SAD, but one might expect students from countries with small variations between summer and winter temperatures to be affected even more. But students interviewed for this story say they don’t mind the darkness. They stay busy and play sports such as indoor soccer, basketball and badminton.



The university has resources to help students deal with SAD and depression, Holz says. In eight years at UAF, she knows of only a few cases of SAD among international students, and none resulted in a student dropping out.

Alaska’s cold, and its predators, are not the only concern or change in store for international students. Another is the culture, such as the American style of education, knowing what classes to take, etiquette, and encountering different systems and bureaucracies.

Erica Iseri, the exchange and study abroad advisor in OIPI,

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often helps international students with practical issues such as how to make medical appointments. “Many students come from cultures where doctors don’t like being questioned. I emphasize to students that asking a doctor questions is not only OK but even recommended,” she says.

Hassab Ali knows about cultural barriers international students confront in visits to hospitals and with medical staff. He has helped African students with such problems.

“In three cases the patients were not fully aware of the financial consequences of going to the emergency room. After one to two hours in [the] ER and many unnecessary tests, they were told, ‘You are OK. You can go home.’ A week later a big bill was in the mail,” Ali says. He points out that health care is cheap in many countries. “There are not as many tests, and bills are paid on the spot. People don’t call ambulances, and [the] ER is the last thing they think about.”

Other cultural issues include interactions between people and how gender plays a role in such interactions, Iseri says. One aspect of American life that surprised Ikewun, on his arrival in Fairbanks in 2010, was the politeness of people.

“In Nigeria people are not as polite, and that is just the way they are. But here if a person is not polite it is considered offensive.” But politeness is relative. Where Ikewun comes from, “ladies have to be respectful to men. If there are four chairs in a room, and four men and one woman, the men expect the woman would let all the men sit.”

◀ Saying Tachit “Tay” Chairat is active just doesn’t quite cover it. The Thai native has dived into Nanook life, serving in student government and as a student ambassador, working as the media and web assistant with the student leadership program, and volunteering with UAF’s service-oriented alternative spring break program. UAF photo by Maureen McCombs.



▲ Asha Lal, a data technician at UAF's Rasmuson Library, helps light the ceremonial candles at the opening of Diwali, the festival of lights. She is joined by Shirish and Anjali Patil, Doug Goering (interim dean of the College of Engineering and Mines), and Sudha Naidu.

All staff and faculty help students adjust, but those who came from other countries, studied at UAF and now call Fairbanks home are particularly helpful. Shirish Patil is one such person; another is Ana Richards, who manages the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Diversity. Both came to UAF in the 1980s as students. Unlike Patil, who already held a master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh, Richards came from Panama at age 19 as a freshman on a full scholarship she secured with the help of the principal of an American school in Panama, where she had worked as an office assistant.

Richards arrived in the U.S. with limited English skills, acquired from her grandmother who spoke Jamaican patois, a local version of English. "I experienced culture shock to the fullest, especially because I didn't know English all that well," Richards recounts. "I spent a lot of time and energy figuring out what people were saying, trying to find out information, and sitting in classes not knowing what the teacher was saying. It was all very frustrating." Today, students who want to brush up on their English can take classes in conversational English through Richards' office.

Kajita echoes Richards in how he struggles with English. He finds Alaskans friendly, kind and easygoing, but he

has trouble communicating with them. He took classes in English as a second language his first year at UAF. "The classes at that time focused mainly on grammar and reading. My English problem was listening and speaking, and the classes didn't help me much," he says.

Limited English skills played a role in why Kajita enrolled in an undergraduate program when he got to UAF. "I had to start from zero, including language, study and my life. After spending several months at UAF, I learned I was qualified to apply for the graduate school. But I didn't choose to apply for a graduate school immediately because of my poor English and no connection to any professors." Kajita says he spent two years learning about graduate school, improving his English and getting to know professors.

Lacking proficiency in English hinders students not only at school but also in other situations. After more than a year at UAF, Ikewun says he is comfortable with nearly everything except English. "I still don't know a lot of things. I don't know what to order in restaurants. I can't differentiate between foods, and on restaurant menus I don't know what the names mean. I find that very challenging," he admits.



Great expectations

The perception of what constitutes friendship is another important aspect of cultural adjustment, according to

Brandon Ilgen, a coordinator for international scholars. Some international students come from more formal backgrounds, where an invitation to socialize is sincere. An American might say in passing, “Let’s hang out sometime,” and never follow through. That leads to confusion and slighted feelings because in the foreign student’s culture, that might be construed as an invitation, but here it could be just an expression and nothing more, Ilgen observes.

“I saw the aurora, something I never thought I'd ever see. I couldn't believe how awesome it was – full of bright purples and pinks and moving around in a dance.”

The interactive nature of the American education system poses yet another challenge. “In many places students may not attend lecture regularly but can show up for a final exam and pass,” Ilgen says. “Here, we expect students to give presentations, participate in class discussions and work on projects.”

On the other hand, Tica, who often travels for basketball games, marvels that his professors understand when he is absent for several days. He says their support helps him maintain his grade point average of 3.7. “I have never seen anything like this before. I was amazed when our team went to California and some teachers sent me notes from the classes I missed.” Such support from faculty is unheard of in Serbia, he says, where classes are held in auditoriums with up to 500 students, and teachers do not know anyone by name.

Food comes up a lot when international students speak about cultural adjustment. Some complain about not being able to find in Fairbanks grocery stores foods they ate at home. Some say local restaurants that serve their native cuisine don’t pass muster. Some bemoan the lack of any restaurant that serves food from their country. And some find the blandness of American cuisine disappointing.

Compared with the spicy foods of Nigeria, Ikewun thinks American food is both bland and sweet. By cooking in the dorm kitchen, he gets a taste of his home food. He stocked up on Nigerian spices before leaving, and often makes up a pot of *egusi* soup. The soup, a favorite dish throughout West

Africa, includes meat, vegetables and the ground-up seeds of a bitter West African melon called *egusi*. Ikewun says his *egusi* soup bears some semblance to the original. He achieves the piquant taste by using habanero peppers that taste as spicy as Nigerian peppers.

Memories of their mothers’ meals sustain students as they try to recreate familiar home cooking in Fairbanks. Kajita is wistful when he talks about his mother, an accomplished cook who runs a coffee shop and a bakery. “I miss her food the most.” He voices frustration that local markets seldom carry fresh fish to make sushi. However, last summer, he and his girlfriend dipnetted for salmon on the Copper River in Chitina. “It was a terrific experience. We got so many fish that we had to buy a new freezer.”

For students like Ali, the difficulty in finding the right food is not limited to spices or other ingredients. As a Muslim he is required to eat food that is *halal*, to meet Islamic dietary guidelines. Certain meats such as pork are forbidden, along with items that might contain pork products, such as lard.

Before moving, Ali called around to find out if any Muslims lived in Fairbanks. “After one month of surveying I found a Pakistani guy. I asked him about *halal* food and he said I had to order from Seattle.” Ali set up a system after he arrived — he buys fruit and vegetables in local stores, orders *halal* meat from Seattle, enjoys gifts of fresh salmon and berries from his Alaska Native friends, and butchers locally grown animals and chickens. “Everyone is happy — my family, the local markets and myself.”



Can you see me now?

Shirish Patil and Ana Richards came to the U.S. in the 1980s, before the age of cell phones and social media. The past decade’s rapid advancements in communication technology make life away from home less lonely for all students, especially those from abroad. Patil recalls the days when calling India was so expensive that he could afford only five-minute telephone calls. “Each minute cost \$5, so the conversation consisted mainly of saying ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye.’”

Today’s students have the Internet — email, Facebook and such — and Skype, which lets users see each other on their computers while they chat. Skype can both elate and frustrate. Students like it because it costs little or even nothing when they place computer-to-computer calls. The downside occurs when they call home on special occasions. “When I call my family on festivals such as Diwali [the Indian festival of lights] and I see people there all dressed up, enjoying feasts and having fun, I feel very lonely,” Prachi Vohra says.

Overall, the international students at UAF have settled into their lives at the school. Many have friends in the

local community. For some, like Ali, living in a small city like Fairbanks allows him to interact with Americans on a more personal level and to familiarize them with Islam. “Sometimes it is a struggle to let people understand that Muslims are just like anyone else, anywhere.” But he says he has made many American friends. He speaks at synagogues and churches, and he regularly volunteers for community activities such as neighborhood cleanups and the Fairbanks Native Association’s rehabilitation center on Saturdays, where he counsels teenagers.

Some students have been able to explore parts of Alaska even many sourdoughs haven’t seen. Kajita relishes his experiences with Alaska Native friends in Shishmaref, a village he visited as a tourist in 2002, soon after seeing a movie about nature photographer Michio Hoshino. “I have gone hunting and fishing with them, and I still can’t believe that people here catch food by themselves. It’s totally different from life in Japan.”

Tachit Chairat, a mechanical engineering student from Thailand, also saw a different way of life when he spent a week in spring 2009 in Arctic Village, a Native community in the Brooks Range. “I helped haul wood, rode snowmachines, and I saw the aurora, something I never thought I’d ever see. I couldn’t believe how awesome it was — full of bright purples and pinks and moving around in a dance.”

Students give high marks to Alaskans, especially the friendliness people show them. Students who have had a car break down marvel at how quickly passersby stop to offer help. “The environment is harsh, and it makes people help each other and be considerate to each other,” Ali says.

As much as they like Alaska, Fairbanks and UAF, students find some things to complain about. May-Le Ng faults Fairbanks’ noxious air quality in winter, which makes it difficult for her to breathe outdoors. She laments the dearth of fresh fruits and vegetables, and finds herself longing for quintessentially Australian foods like Vegemite and Tim Tam, a popular chocolate cookie in Australia.

Ali is averse to “too many meetings and too much talk at UAF about how to change the university.” And he’d like to see more help for foreign students in navigating the U.S. health care system. The university, he says, “should provide information about the American health system in simple and clear language.”

The international students will in time get their degrees and move on. They might end up living in the U.S., in their own countries or somewhere else. But no matter where they go, they will take along memories of living in a place that changed them in many ways.

Ali came from Sudan to the U.S. “unprepared in any sense of dealing with anyone who would disagree with what I believe in and what I practice.” Now, in addition to having learned much in his university courses, he says he has also learned important lessons in tolerance.

Other students will take a newfound appreciation of the Alaska way of life, including subsistence and hunting. After spending a summer with subsistence hunters in Shishmaref, Kajita developed a taste for food that comes from the wild. “I love game such as moose, caribou, seal, whale and walrus,” he says. “My favorite among those is whale, especially the muktuk.”

Some have come to like the climate. Yes, even the cold. Says Peter Ikewun, the Nigerian who came to Fairbanks armed with several coats: “I love the weather. When I go outside I like the cold coming over my head and I feel relieved. I like the sensation it gives me.”



Shehla Anjum, a longtime Alaska resident who lives and writes in Anchorage, is originally from Karachi, Pakistan. She has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Alaska Anchorage and an MPA from Harvard Kennedy School.

▼ *Shehla Anjum, left, interviews May-Le Ng at a coffeehouse in Fairbanks. UAF photo by Maureen McCombs.*

