

# Column

## Welcome to Cuba

Loes Magnin



Welcome to Cuba. Country of salsa, rumba, old Cadillacs and mojito's. Country of loud music from every room, of flirting men and women, of warmth and laughter. Country of sensuality and sexual equality. Country of sun and sea and old people still in love walking hand in hand. Country of old history, of deteriorated buildings, of political ideology. Country of long lines of people waiting in front of nearly empty state-owned shops. Country of propaganda, of embargo's, of short supplies, of hidden poverty. Country of non-accessible internet, of censorship, of never being able to speak your mind freely. Country of going to prison when trying to leave. Bienvenido a Cuba: the most confusing country I have so far travelled to.

This is where Africa meets Central-America. This is where the rhythms of Ghana mix with the music of rumba and salsa. Where the old voodoo-beliefs from West Africa are mixed with Spanish Catholicism, resulting in a religion called Santeria.

I was invited to a Santeria-celebration. This old religion based on African voodoo was brought to Cuba by the slaves who were shipped from West Africa. It was fantastic: I recognized the African rhythms I had learned to dance on in Ghana. We shared rum and cigarettes and I watched how people started to get into a trance. I clapped and danced and was embraced by the warmth of the Cuban people. For the whole month I was in Cuba I laughed, talked, drank and danced with Cubans.

Yet all this time... these Cubans were at risk, just for being around me.

I just couldn't get my head around it. How can a people be so free spirited, yet be so unfree? When travelling through this Caribbean paradise I felt safer than I had ever felt travelling through any African country. But that

safety was actually guaranteed by the restrictive politics of the island: tourists are not to be harassed – major penalties are involved if the state police catches Cubans trying to bother tourists. And the definition of 'bothering a tourist' is used quite freely: meaning one of my Cuban friends was immediately interrogated by the police when they 'caught' us talking to each other in a lovely little square in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Mind you, he was my friend, and I was voluntarily talking to him. The friend had to identify himself, pay a fine and was now marked for harassing a tourist. The tourist - me! - had nothing to say about the matter.

I asked my friend how the legal system worked in his country. What crimes do you go to prison for in Cuba? He said: "Well it's nothing different from your justice system; you go to prison when you murder or rape someone, when you're violent or when you try to leave the country."

I have never come across a legal system where leaving a country was equal to killing a person.w

Still I danced salsa, drank rum, and had a fantastic time with my warm, welcoming and intelligent Cuban friends. My Cuban friends who were risking being arrested just by talking to me. My Cuban friends who could never leave their country.

Boy. If you ever thought travelling through Africa was complicated...

Loes Magnin studied Communication and Literature in Amsterdam and wrote her thesis on development aid dilemmas in Southern Africa. She worked as a travel guide and took dance classes in different African countries.