

## Guantánamo Baywatch

**Cubans living close to the American military base at Guantánamo Bay are no longer bothered by exchanges of fire. The friction is now kept at a strictly verbal level.**

From the 320-metre-high hill of Mirador de Malones, the US military base Guantánamo Bay looks like any other sleepy small town. But then again nothing that has made this place world-famous is visible: neither the purported 550 Taliban sympathizers nor the 75,000 buried mines.

The North American combined air and naval base on Cuban territory was established a little more than a century ago, when the US filled the void after the Spanish withdrawal that followed their colonial war against Cuba. In 1959 the revolution against the US-backed dictator Batista swept over the island, but the base was retained. At that time more than 3,000 Cubans worked at the base, but now, 45 years later, only four remain.

In principle nothing ought to prevent anyone from having a chat with these grown men, but our telephone enquiries are met with polite reservation. One of the four apparently ran into trouble with the government recently because he was seen with a foreigner. These workers have always been in a privileged position, one that otherwise only people working in tourism or with family abroad share: they have access to dollars. So it is easy to understand their denial; they would only jeopardize themselves without any obvious gain.

### **Mines abound**

Instead, we talk to the psychologist Adám (34), who is the only blind academic in the province. He lives in Boquerón and works in Caimanera, two small towns situated inside the Cuban military area that surrounds the US base. In order to get to his job in the polyclinic, he has to travel by small passenger boat across the inner parts of the bay, because what the Americans control is in fact only the eastern and western parts of the outlet; not the bay itself nor its interior. Adám is himself equipped with a special passport, and any outsider wanting to visit him would need a permit.

“It was much worse during the 60s and 70s,” Adám says. “Back then, the North American soldiers were very provocative, and quite a few Cuban frontier guards were killed. I also remember the military manoeuvres they held, when explosions made the window panes shake and paintings fell to the floor in our home. The US is still looking for an excuse to invade, but there are currently no shots fired, they only abuse us verbally. But you can still hear the odd mine go off from time to time. They would be contact mines that explode when they are touched, but it’s probably a bird or rat rather than a human.”

Nowhere in the Western hemisphere has a higher density of mines than this area under our gaze from Mirador de Malones, we are told.

### **The sea route to Florida**

For Cubans seeking a way across to Florida, the rule *pie seco/pie mojado* (dry foot/wet foot) applies. This means that those who reach the shore will automatically be granted a permit to stay in the US. This rule is only for Cubans, and is part of the propaganda war that goes on between the two archenemies – or, more to the point, part of the election campaign to win the state of Florida, where most of the exiled Cubans live. The same rule used to apply to those

who found their way into the US base at Guantánamo, either by sea or across the minefield, but after the “fleet crisis” of 1994, when more than 30,000 hopeful Cubans were picked up from the sea, an exception was made. Until then all Cubans had been sent to the Guantánamo base before they could enter the US, turning it into a provisional equivalent of Ellis Island – but, since 1994, they have simply been returned to their point of departure.

“There is a well-known figure here, a frontier guide, who tried to save a poor fellow who had stepped on a mine, but as it turned out, he himself lost a leg. It’s not uncommon to see people maimed by mines here in the province. It’s rumoured that there’s a secure path across the field, but in these times it is of less importance; you will be returned anyway, and now as a marked man, a traitor.”

“However, the Cubans that work at the base are not viewed as traitors,” Adám says. “Apart from the fact that it’s paid in dollars, it’s a normal job. They’ve been lucky, that’s all.”

### **Illegal dollars**

The use and possession of dollars was prohibited in Cuba from the revolution until 1993, but finding the country in a severe crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro had to reverse this policy in order to get hold of foreign currency. In October 2007, however, the dollar was again banned.

You will encounter two types of local currency in Cuba, namely *pesos cubanos* and *pesos convertibles*. The latter was introduced in 1993, at the same rate as the dollar, and gives the owner the possibility of acquiring goods in the so-called “dollar shops”, which look like Western discount stores, although with an attached grocery store and electrical department. The quality of the merchandise is variable, and there is no embarrassment at offering watches for sale with a seven day warranty.

Even though Adám has received free education and has a job (he makes 15 dollars a month), he is forced to live with his parents. Adám is of the opinion that the Cuban constitution admits that the state has a special responsibility to accommodate people with a handicap like his, and he has asked “everyone” to look at his case. His determined dream is to get El Comandante himself to look into this matter, or at least to hand him a letter in person. The belief that Mr Castro is untarnished by the widespread corruption and tardiness in the country is surprisingly common throughout Cuba. Even if support for the revolution is definitely on the wane, and you would be hard-pressed to find a single Cuban who would not leave the island if he or she could, this seems to be due more to economic than ideological factors.

### **Changes**

Two substantial changes have become visible in all Cuban cities over the last couple of years. One is that small enterprise has, to a certain extent, been legalized. Now you can find people sitting on the pavement with a pile of avocados next to them, or selling eggs from their homes. These modest signs of private initiative are in fact a complete novelty here. Yet even more surprising perhaps is the latest youth fashion: to wear clothes sporting the stars and stripes, even if this is limited to the hours after school or work .

A stroll around the provincial capital of Guantánamo, which houses around 200,000 people, will reveal the typically Caribbean flair of the place. It is certainly more African than Latin American. Guantánamo is Cuba’s easternmost and poorest province, and here one will find the most blacks. That voodoo (and santería, its syncretic version) is vividly alive can be

observed along the train tracks that run through the city. The city dwellers have left “magic” coconuts on the ground here, believing ailments or diseases will be transferred from themselves to whoever accidentally touches these nuts.

Before the “special period” of hardship that followed the breakdown of the Soviet Union, it was more common to see beheaded and ribbed chickens serving the same purpose, but the locals can no longer afford this. Otherwise, during the day one can watch kids playing baseball using tennis balls and clenched fists, but at night, since both water and electricity are absent from different neighbourhoods approximately half of the time, groups of people gather out in the streets to watch the latest telenovelas through the windows of strangers.

### **Father and son**

At the central plaza we run into a group of youths who are flocking around a young man visiting from Florida. Miami is the poorest big city in the USA, with the starkest contrast between haves and have-nots, yet it is not hard to sell yourself as a success story on the main square back home. This young man has a beach boogie to show off with, and apparently has few problems impressing his friends.

Close by we also meet a father and son. The son is 26, and is scowling enviously over at the visitor from Florida. His example seems quite telling of Cubans his age: even if he has kids, he would not hesitate to leave for the USA, or Norway for that matter. He displays his Young Communists membership card, but makes no effort to hide the fact that its only purpose is to make sure that certain doors don't close on him for promotion at work, should that day come. He lives with his mum, half-sister and two nieces and makes nine dollars a month. Right across from his house, which is under construction thanks to remittances from a relative abroad, lives the local representative of the CDR (Comité de la Defensa a la Revolución). This is the civilian arm of the Communist Party, and the neighbour serves partly as a grassroots ideologue and partly as an informer. One of these is found in every neighbourhood across Cuba.

### ***Fatherland or death***

The father, who has remained silent until now, peeks over his shoulder before he explains that it is prohibited for him to keep more than a fraction of his produce from his little farm in the mountains; the state takes possession of the rest. His conclusion is hard to misunderstand: “It is better to die than to live under this system.”

This was probably not what they had in mind, the revolutionaries who launched the slogan *patria o muerte* (“fatherland or death”) – but this man, who has lived through all of the revolutions close on 50 years, has evidently lost certain illusions on the way. Not even the younger generation seem to be able to picture any radical changes when “the beard” is gone (when Cubans talk about Castro they rarely use his name; instead they make a swift motion with one hand around where his famous beard ends). During this year's hurricane season, he was on TV for hours every day double-checking the meteorologists and discussing weather charts with them. It must be hard for these people to imagine a life without the man who has ruled over them all their lives, and who casts his shadow over everything they do.