

The best dance instructor for all

The language school in Havana provides Spanish lessons, obviously. But after you talk the talk, you walk the walk: two weeks of salsa lessons with your own private dance instructor. ‘Can I borrow yours for a minute?’

‘Cuba just isn’t a oil producing country’, Fidel Castro said in 1982, to explain to his people why all of a sudden hotels instead of houses were being build. ‘And we haven’t yet struck a goldmine either. So we must exploit what our country does have to offer: the climate, the sea, the sun, the palm trees.’

Presently the tourist industry is a huge success. Cuba receives almost two and a half million tourists a year. Though in Castro’s recital one very important tourist magnet was missing: the salsa. Maybe because Castro himself is a notary non-dancer; el máximo líder doesn’t care for the two things a Cuban lives for: music and dance.

¿De donde vienes? This Monday morning, just after our first Spanish lesson, we don’t get beyond the ‘where’re you from’. About 25 tourists are seated on the terrace in the garden of an Havana villa: the Plus Language School. Naturally we’re here to learn Spanish, but the language school offers another course: salsa. This Cuban speciality will be taught by Cubans, and we will all get our own dance instructor. And while we size each other up, we all think: gracias a dios – that’s just as well.

Out of a backdoor, a group of men and women appear, they’re in their twenties, and wear red T-shirts. Salsa music sounds: ‘Somos Cubanos; Español y Africanos’. They start dancing skilfully. From beneath the pergola the tourists are looking on. The dancers gyrate their hips, shake their torso’s. ‘It’s like sex with your clothes on’, Elfride whispers. Nearly just as enticing as the moves, are the smiles the dancers aim at their audience, from which most shyly avert their eyes.

The group of course-members is an mishmash: German, Finnish, Austrian, Swiss, Dutch, Brazilian, British and Turkish, up from 18 years old till late fifty. Apart from a father and son, everybody travels on their own and men are in the majority. Not everyone signed up for salsa lessons. Another reason for our future dance instructors to display this exhilarating bit of salsa. They perform complicated steps and turns. Instead of gusto, anxiety draws the faces of the winter pale section: how are we ever going to learn that?

Step by step, we take our first paces, in a long row alongside one another, with the mirror wall as a critical spectator. As soon as we –more or less – master the basic steps, we’re supposed to choose our partner. The procedure is far from systematic. The men look at the women, the women look at the men. Who’ll make the first move? Still, all of sudden everybody has a dance instructor. ‘I am very lucky I picked you,’ Yoadni later on says in fluent English, but I’m quite sure it’s me who did the picking.

‘Uno, dos, tres, cuarto’, Yoadni urges on, while I stomp around like I’m squashing grapes. He’s remarkably patient, probably since he’s studying to be a primary school teacher. At the moment he’s doing practice, with the youngest children. ‘Those little ones know how to dance better than you lot’, he says. ‘But of course you can’t help it. We dance as soon as we’re able to walk. There’s never a party that doesn’t involve dancing. And where’s there’s music, there’s a party, so we’re always dancing.’

By the look of it, most of us are doing it for the first time in our lives. Then I do a flawless turn. Yoadni nods, pleased. ‘Good. That’s turn number óne. On to number two.’ He laughs.

‘And then 23 more.’ After two hours we stagger out of the steaming dancehall, soaked to the bone. ¡Hasta mañana! See you tomorrow!

In the following days we obtain more legroom. Stefan is suffering from an old knee injury, Charly and Mico aren’t ‘feeling well’ and Björn decided salsa just isn’t his thing.

Sergio, staff member, isn’t in the least bit surprised. ‘There’re always people who quit, and with salsa that’s always the men. Recently there was a Finnish guy that gave up after five minutes, though he had paid for a full week.’

On the other hand, Frederique and Kate sign up for additional dance lessons and drop Spanish. We’re basking in the afternoon sun by the poolside of the luxurious hotel and Frederique, a 26 years old manager, beams how much she enjoys the dancing. Partly because of Jorge, she says: he’s so supple and such a terrific lead. But we all think we couldn’t have done better. Davide is lean and strong, Alex is supersexy, Alejandro is virtuoso and nobody has more rhythm than Yassel. In any case, they all have got the best dance instructor, though I know for sure that’s Yoadni, with his wonderful touch. On top of his gentleness, he’s got the look of a gangster; a sharply trimmed goatee and slick hair he frequently moistens with water, since you don’t have gel here.

‘I might get pimples again, I feel fifteen years old’, Hanna, an 45 year old publisher, declares. Last night she attended a baseball game that went on and on. Finally she left at twelve o’clock, well before the last inning. To the people around her in the stadium she had clarified: ‘I really have got to go, since I have to go to school tomorrow.’

That day suddenly it feels like we have been dancing together for years. With a subtle movement of his hand Yoadni spins me around; in front of him, round his back, our arms intertwined like a pretzel. ‘Perfect’, Yoadni says content. I’ve never had a better compliment. ‘Now it’s time for your favourite,’ he announces. We do the combination, in which he whirls around me, while spinning, and still never lets go. It’s very Cuban, if the man does a lot of ‘work’ and makes complicated moves, Yoadni explains with a smile. ‘We want to show of, it’s our macho nature.’

In the evening we have a drink with our Spanish class, in cafeteria Sofia on La Rampa, where a live band is playing, like in most Havana bars. German Dieter works in ICT, Karl is a Swiss farmer who sold his cows, and now wants to see the world. Hanna gazes longingly at the couples on the dance floor. ‘Yeah, now miss our dance partners.’

‘Now, and the rest of our lives’, Elfride sighs. The ski instructor lives in a small village in the mountains of Austria, where she doesn’t expect to ever encounter a man who knows how to salsa.

She ponders on the thought to ask her dance instructor out, for a bit of extra tutoring. Betty has already been here for three weeks and warns her to ask the school for permission. ‘It’s not easy to see the instructors outside school.’ She herself had invited Alex to come by. ‘You know, I have this huge suite, and the TV has a salsa channel. But Cubans are aren’t even allowed to enter the hotels. Did you guys know that?’

Still, we all want to hang out with our instructors. To practise the most difficult steps and work on our dancing skills. Though it certainly helps that the Cubans are such charming and attractive companions. ‘You know what’s pretty special too?’ declares Elfride. ‘To have the undivided attention of a man, for two hours in row. Even in bed I don’t manage to get that.’

On Friday we have a party in Café Cantate with the whole school, including the students Spanish. The dance instructors will also join us. We’ll meet in front of the club at the Plaza

Revolucion. The tourists arrive in chartered minivans, the Cubans have squeezed themselves into overcrowded busses, or thumbed a lift, something a lot of people do around here. We enter the club separately; there's a different entrance fee for foreigners and Cubans, just as there are two different currency's; convertibles and pesos. The two totally divided worlds reunite on the dance floor.

After some time it becomes apparent that the students Spanish are totally bored. The men have no company but their own. And they can't ask anybody for a dance. Salsa turns out to be an excellent way to get to know Cuban people. Frederique whispers in my in ear: 'Yours definitely is the most handsome. Can I borrow him for a while?'

At the bar I bump into Karl, farmer without cows. 'I detest all this salsa, with its standard moves and steps', he says. 'Dancing is about passion.'

As the band leaves the stage, the DJ puts on reggaeton. Rakata! Rakata! Especially the Cubans are wildly excited. Reggaeton is an upcoming genre, an inciting mix of salsa and reggae. The dance style is truly something else. There's a lot of grinding of the hips, often up against one another, the man positioned behind the woman, given this is called perrear (perro means dog). But it's okay too to dance apart. Good news for the wallflowers.

And indeed. Dieter enters the floor and starts hopping about, waving his arms. Soon there's a no-man's-land around him, for safety from the swaying limbs. Yoadni trips up, for the first time. 'Look, that guy's totally smashed!' But Dieter only had two beers. It's his way of dancing. Yoadni can hardly believe it. 'So where's he from then?' A moment later Karl dashes by, and sort of ploughs the dance floor. 'Is he German too?' Yoadni informs.

Surprisingly enough Dieter signs up for salsa lessons. 'I'm not fond of dancing, but it's the perfect way to meet girls.' Exactly Hans' thoughts, though the car salesman initially came to Cuba for the ongoing auto show of American old-timers and Spanish lessons. The tall, blond Dutchman's instructor is Celia; a Snow-white, fair as a lily with raven-black hair. Hans has been dancing with her for two weeks now and he's holding her hand as they sit on the terrace. Last night he has taken Celia, and a couple of other instructors, out for dinner. 'I'm paying for everything', he had said. 'Money is no object. You can have anything on the menu, and don't look at the price.' Later on, they went dancing. An excellent night.

'If I'm honest, there's nothing I'd like better than to settle here. But Celia has a boyfriend, and I'm married.'

'And you have two children', I remind him. Hans continues, unflappable. 'But I told her, if you want me to, I'm selling the whole lot at home and come to live here.' How would you make a living, Celia had asked: we earn next to nothing. 'But still you manage, don't you? Then I will too. I'll live just like you do,' he had said. Hans leans forward. 'Of course I'll bring a stack of money.'

Caridad, the Spanish teacher, laughs out loud. She has invited me over for an authentic Cuban dinner at her house. 'A lot of foreigners go a little bit crazy. They're from cold countries, where people are distant and reserved. Then they begin dancing here and all of a sudden they're being physical. Holding a hot-blooded Cuban man or women in their arms for hours in a row. It makes their hormones go berserk.'

According to Caridad, it's rather the rule than the exception that people fall in love. With the salsa or the salsa instructor. Caridad smiles. 'Which in essence is the same.'