Cuba in 2011 is a very unusual place. While stereotypes of Chevrolets, cigars, rum-fuelled salsa dancing and fervent socialism are on first impression well-founded, the opportunity to spend four weeks in Havana supported by the generous Pressland Fund gave me the chance to get under the surface of this island of contradictions and start to understand the unusual situation there.

My month studying Spanish in Havana has been one of the most fascinating experiences of my life, and not without its challenges. Having travelled through South America the summer previously, I felt reasonably prepared for the Latin culture that awaited, however the level of machismo in Cuba is almost shocking from the viewpoint of a European woman. The dual currency, rapid and idiosyncratic Spanish and baffling systems for taking a local taxi, bus or even the queuing habits took a lot of adjusting to, with what seemed like vast amounts of unspoken knowledge for a foreigner to become familiar with. Nothing is simple in Cuba, the bureaucracy involved in obtaining my student visa alone was a good indication of things to come and a reminder to slow down to the Cuban pace of life, where it may take a whole day just to get a photocopy done.

The four week course I took was at 'intermediate' level, and was good preparation for the C1 exam which I will be sitting this November. The classes every weekday morning required a great deal of concentration in classrooms at 30º C, with fans and lighting often cutting out. While being a prestigious university which attracts many students from across Latin America, teaching methods seemed decidedly traditional to the predominantly European group of students - we worked from booklets and the blackboard, with a complete lack of audio recordings and videos that are integral to language learning back home.

Our profesora had high expectations of us, leading our class to debate such abstract issues as the meaning of life, love, and even pitting the men against the women in the class to discuss whether all men are liars! Grammar was a key component of my level, as we sped through six tenses in the first two weeks, leaving time to grapple with the subjunctive mood. I learnt more than I would have imagined in the time available, feeling a particular sense of achievement on occasions such as when our teacher told us to speak slower as we were speaking too fast 'like real Cubans' and upon the realisation that the extract we were reading was Gabriel Garcia Marquez in the original Spanish.
Music is at the heart of Cuban life, heard everywhere in the streets as it's played as loudly as possible from apartment balconies, old 1950s American cars and even bici-taxis. Unsurprisingly therefore, much of the social aspect of the trip revolved around dance, with a group of us from my course taking Salsa lessons and even joining a local dance academy to learn Yoruba (Afro-Cuban) dancing. The former gave a fascinating insight into the Santeria religion which has mixed with Catholicism to form a syncretic religion with both influences, practiced in some form by almost 80% of the population.

Cubans seem to have been born learning how to dance, with even young children putting our group of foreign students to shame when we exchanged moves during a street party to celebrate the anniversary of the CDR (Comité de la Defensa de la Revolución) – a network of neighbourhood groups who have been described as the 'eyes and ears of the Revolution'.

Sport is also important in Cuba, with events priced to allow everyone to afford tickets. A particularly memorable evening was a baseball match of the Cuban national team against Puerto Rico. Despite being unfamiliar with the sport (which borders on a national obsession), I really enjoyed the atmosphere in a sports stadium with a strong representation from women and children, and Cuban tempers firing up as spectators argued over tactics and their local teams until the game finished at midnight. I look forward to watching Cuba's progress in the coming Olympics, bearing in mind the proud reminders from my host family that Cuba tends to do impressively well for a country of its size.

Having never travelled to a socialist country, this aspect of Cuba was one of the things which drew me there, keen to witness first hand the way in which people live. Being able to discuss grammar and politics with the owners of a local cafe was a pleasant surprise – one example of the high level of education evident among all members of society, with Cubans proud of their education and world-leading health service and eloquent in expressing their opinions.

Recent developments, such as introduction of mobile phones in 2008 and the right to buy and sell property being introduced next year, will gradually change this country, where the people are already aware of their lack of material wealth, and regard their country as technologically backwards, while all the time being exposed to more of the capitalist world.
While many Cubans I met would readily suggest that the government needs to make many changes to modernise Cuba, I feel that the high level of social equality would be compromised by any shifts towards a free market economy. That is not to say that there is no rich-poor divide; Cubans in the cities have fewer problems while certain rural areas suffer from unacceptably low standards of living (some of which I saw en route to the colonial town of Trinidad one weekend). However in comparison with the discrepancy between the wealthy and extremely poor seen in parts South America, which drives high levels of violent crime (particularly against tourists), there is almost no crime in Cuba and I have never seen a society which nears equality in the same way.

The Cubans I spoke to seemed generally content, many of them happy to grumble to visitors about the daily difficulties of life there and the barriers to going abroad, yet there is a genuine sense of national comradeship and pride in the revolution. Fidel and Che are held ever fondly as national heroes.

I would be very interested to return in a few years and see how this wonderful and unique country has changed in order to survive in a world very different from itself. The government certainly faces many challenges as the original revolutionaries age, sugar prices fall and the younger generation pushes for more material wealth. I would like to thank the Pressland Fund whose generous grant made this unforgettable trip possible.