

## Los Tatuadores de Cuba

Amongst all the changes happening in Cuba right now one thing is staying the same, owning a tattoo shop and giving tattoos are prohibited. They are the only art form in Cuba that is still frowned upon. I took it upon myself to investigate this matter, and see just how far it goes. Despite the governments' suppression tattoo artists have managed to create a thriving underground tattoo scene. This subculture can be found throughout the whole island. You walk the streets of Havana, or any other city, and see people adorned with tattoos. The questions remain the same, where are they getting these tattoos and how are they so well done?

Tattooing in Havana came about in the 90's. There were many men who started it, and still around today. One is a man named Che. I tracked him down, as well as many others, and their stories are just as compelling as their dedication to tattooing. He like all Cuban tattoo artists is self-taught with very limited resources and has done it all. Che is still an icon in the tattoo scene today. He as well as some others help out beginning artists by showing them alternative ways of sterilization, since autoclave machines are also illegal to own. This usually entails using a pressure cooker to its' maximum.

Since the government outlaws tattooing, typical tattoo supplies are hard to come by. Supplies are either brought in by friends visiting or bought via black market, and come with a major price tag. Prices for ink and needles go for 4x what you would pay in the states. A good tattoo artist gets paid cash, pays no taxes on their income, and makes upwards of 300 CUC a week. To put that in perspective a typical government worker makes around 25 CUC a month. A doctor makes around 50 CUC a month. Most tattoo "shops" are found in the living room of an artist's home. Some of the more successful artists have managed to have another space outside their home, and more like an actual shop. To find one of these artists or shops you must know someone who knows an artist. They are quietly tucked into the Cuban streets like any other building.

Tattooing has spread to every city throughout Cuba, not just Havana. The names of some of the extremely talented ones have even spread abroad. People travel to Cuba just to get tattooed by a certain artist they have heard of. Whether or not they are able to find the camouflaged shop remains its' own adventure.

So why doesn't the government give in and legalize tattooing? Tax the artists like any other Cuban business? Charge for a permit and make even more money from them?