

HOTEL PRISON: The world seen from behind bars by Jan De Cock, published in Dutch by Lannoo, Tielt, Belgium, 2003. 5th printing, 2004.

The Book

The truth that prisons are a world unto themselves has never been more obvious than in this travelogue of a globe-trotting 'prison-hopper'. But Jan De Cock did not see the inside of 66 prisons in 42 countries because of a life of crime. He is a former teacher and currently a prison and hospital pastoral worker whose passion is to uncover the world behind bars in order to give voice to those around the world who, rightly or wrongly, are in detention. And along the way he spins a great yarn! His description of life in, but also around prisons (the families who come to help, visit, bring food, etc.) opens up a unique vision of many societies, one that is generally overlooked even by the Lonely Planet types. The ease with which he forms bonds with even the most hardened and cynical criminals allows us a glimpse into a world we scarcely knew existed.

Part adventure travel narrative, part 'cri-de-coeur' for a more humane treatment of all persons, the book aims to provide an 'insider-outsider's' perspective of life behind bars – from the 'luxury' of a northern European prison to the squalor and misery of an overcrowded West African cell. Yet his final conclusion is not only that one can indeed assess how a country is doing by the way it treats its prisoners, but that as far as he is concerned, he would take the solidarity, mutual help and camaraderie of a Southern prison (Africa, Latin America...) any day over the coolly efficient but isolating standoffishness of a first-world detention centre.

After spending a year visiting 66 prisons (in 39 of which he spent one or more nights), Jan De Cock returned to the tranquility of his West Flanders home to write about his experiences, published in Belgium under the title *Hotel Prison*. Already in its 5th printing in the original Dutch (first published 2002) and published in German in 2004 (*Hotel hinter Gittern*), the book has been an immense success. A French translation is currently in progress. Since its publication, there has been no let up in the stream of invitations to give interviews for the Belgian, French, German and Dutch press and television, and to give talks to volunteer groups, parishes, NGOs, religious communities and schools on his experiences and insights into the world behind bars.

No mere sensationalist, Jan turns his high energy, boundless enthusiasm and sincere personal commitment to raising awareness and supporting concrete projects to improve the lives of prisoners as far apart as Antwerp, San Salvador, and Butembe (Democratic Republic of Congo).

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Africa

Although the story has its prehistory in a prison visit in Chile, Jan began his travels in Africa, a land with close ties, of course, to the former colonial Belgium. Through contacts in Brussels with African church workers and prison volunteer organisations, his first prison stays in Africa are a story of finding old friends and making new ones. From Kenya through South Africa by way of Benin and Burkina Faso, Jan is introduced into the enormous capacity of Africans to celebrate, even when facing the greatest odds.

Europe and overland to Asia

Back in Europe, Jan follows an Orient Express-like trajectory, from Russia and Slovenia eastwards to Istanbul. to the Middle East and thence through to the Indian Subcontinent. Old English courtesy is alive and well in Pakistan and India, and no matter how hot it gets (both in temperature and in temperament), the good old cup of tea smooths many things

over. Prison life is no idyll in the Far East, yet, incredibly, Jan manages to penetrate even the feared prisons of China and Southeast Asia. Perhaps the sheer incredulity with which puzzled officials met his efforts to get into a Chinese jail (who would do such a thing? Why not profit at least from stealing a chicken to get you locked up?) opened doors to him.

America

Next, the American dream – more like a nightmare for those in the ‘joint’. Criss-crossing the USA and Canada, the author first tries to visit the notorious San Quentin in San Francisco, where he waits for several days – unsuccessfully – for the chance to meet the famous death row inmate Jarvis Jay Masters, author of the book *Finding Freedom*. (Nine months later, back in Belgium, De Cock finally got permission to see Jarvis and promptly made a second trip to San Quentin. This emotional chapter serves as a sort of epilogue to the book.)

From San Francisco his journey takes him to Clark County Jail (Oregon), the Fairbanks (Alaska) prison and Cook County Jail (Chicago). The author meets detainees in North Carolina (thanks to the Human Kindness Foundation) and at Abraham House in New York. While in New York he succeeds in entering Rikers Island. From there, he heads for Canada and later Texas (Houston - Carol S. Vance Unit).

Back to familiar turf: Latin America (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Columbia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile), where the idea of seeing and reporting on the inside of prisons first germinated. Thus, familiar territory for the fluently Spanish-speaking *flamingo* (with a Chilean dialect, yet). Cells combining tough drug lords and cheerful petty thieves, with the odd political revolutionary thrown in, make for a noisy and at times dizzying mix. Yet even there, timid signs of hope – a prisoner who despite the scepticism of the authorities, rounds up his fellow inmates to create a sports pitch in double quick time, and then mounts a sports programme that suddenly gives the guys something to strive for.

The Author

Jan de Cock is certainly the first person in the world ever to try to get *into* places others spend all their time trying to get *out* of: prison. While working with street children as a volunteer in Chile, he first had occasion to see the inside of a jail. Upon his return to his native Belgium, where he has worked as a teacher, studied theology, and now works as a pastoral assistant in palliative care, he immediately became involved in volunteer work with detainees.

Gradually, he conceived his great adventure – to travel the world and experience first-hand the fate of prisoners, be they prisoners of conscience, petty criminals, serious offenders or wrongfully detained. Moved by the conviction that you cannot know the needs of detainees or truly help them without having gone through some of what they go through, he gathered the elements of a fascinating and engaging story while sleeping in the most miserable quarters, sharing sun, thirst, fatigue, solitude, hunger but also the solidarity, friendship, support and inspiration of thousands of prisoners worldwide.

He continues his travels to stay in prisons he has not yet had the opportunity to visit, and now state prison authorities (such as one recently in Norway) are inviting him to visit their prison, hoping in this way to make known their ‘progressive’ approaches and promote their efforts in rehabilitation and restorative justice methods. In addition to his native Dutch, Jan speaks English, French and Spanish fluently, as well as German and Portuguese.

Sample chapters from *Hotel Prison*

Happy New Year in Benin (West Africa)!

The last day of the year. Overnight in the Cotonou prison. It doesn't always have to be Times Square, after all!

Built for 400 detainees, the prison currently holds more than 1600, 300 of them Nigerians. Corruption and criminality reign supreme in the neighbouring country, and the phenomenon – together with its practitioners – has crossed the border. For foreigners, a stay in the prison is especially burdensome. They have hardly any family visits, if at all. Foreigners have to make do with one ladle of cornmeal mush per day. Sleeping mats remain a distant dream. And the Nigerian ambassador appears on paper only.

Talking about how awful prison food is proves to be a real conversation starter. One after the other tells me that no one here ever bothers to separate the rotten beans from the others, that the cook is a civil servant's wife, and that flour is sometimes mixed with motor oil (where have we heard that before?). For those of you who are fond of statistics: 70% of the prisoners are drug users, 35% first smoked or snorted drugs in prison, 65% of the more than 5,000 detainees in this country never receive visitors.

Christopher comes from São Tomé. His black eyes twinkle like coal when for the first time in four years he gets a chance to speak Portuguese. Zachary listens to the story of his visit to his family: “Qu'est-ce que vous nous donnez pour la fête?” [What are you going to give us for the holiday?], everyone starts asking me. “Mon amitié” [My friendship], I reply good-naturedly. They laugh appreciatively.

We walk through an open door and find ourselves in the prison's largest yard. The five dormitories surround it like enormous hangars. In the shadow of the toilets, dozens of detainees try to catch forty winks.

“They're the ones who will have to spend tonight sitting upright”, Christopher tells me.

“How come?”

“There's not enough space for everyone to lie down and sleep.” I'll soon discover this firsthand. In any case, the difference between prisons that have no water supply and those that do is like night and day. And yes, here too the sewer pipes are blocked, as the familiar stench suggests.

I am struck by the fact that there is no guard to be found anywhere. They are all hanging about the prison entrance. One of them even told me unabashedly that he had not set foot in Block B for eight months because one of the inmates had tuberculosis. The fact that two hundred other prisoners have to share the same dormitory does not make him lose any sleep.

Christopher thinks it's time to find a spot where I can at least stretch out tonight. You just have to push your way through. Olivier, of Congolese origin, is willing to share his mat with his Belgian 'uncle'. All in all, the atmosphere is pleasant. There is nothing to suggest the drama that will take place within a few hours.

A djembé trio is still playing, with a great deal of bravura. A quartet is busy with a game of cards. Gradually, we are squeezed closer and closer together. By last count 250 of my partners in misery will have to find a place under the same roof that is intended to house 50.

5:45 p.m., and the guards bolt the doors. Olivier tells us what he thinks of the war in Congo and of “le petit Kabila”. My other neighbour tells a joke, of which I once again miss the punchline, but I laugh out of politeness all the same.

At the entrance stand an oil barrel and an enormous blue 50-liter vat. The barrel is for excrement, the vat for urine. And I can assure you: a considerable quantity of both will accumulate with 250 people locked up in one place all night. And to think there was a time when I would plug in an electric air freshener because I found that my sink gave off an unpleasant odour!

Three fans hang high above us. Thank God one of the three is working. A second takes two minutes to go round 360°. And the third hasn't moved an inch in months, to judge by the spider webs.

It is now 8 p.m. In the nearly complete darkness, this hotel seems more like a sixteenth-century slave ship. All of a sudden, pandemonium erupts out in the eastern corner of the dormitory.

“Les gardiens! Call the guards!” shout some of the detainees. It turns out that a thirty-year old guy has just died. Malaria. The heat finished him off. Two companions continue to try to revive him, but to no avail. What happened next was unbelievable. An explosion of solidarity and indignation. All the detainees began to bang with both fists on the doors and the walls. Simply unbelievable that this could fall on deaf ears. But not a soul appeared. “Imagine if a fire ever broke out here”, the thought suddenly crossed my mind. Everyone here would be roasted alive, as the officers refuse to open the doors. The temperature continued to rise minute by minute. People grabbed whatever they could. They threw spoons and plates, flip-flops and rush mats. Some in blind rage tried with all their might to climb the walls. Sure enough, cracks soon began to appear. It was as scary as it was unbelievable that I should find myself in the midst of a mutiny. But the thick walls held. As did the stubbornness of the guards. Or their disbelief. The next day they would say that they thought it was a deliberate ploy, a cover for a jailbreak, or a New Year's Eve.

Believe it or not, but at 6 a.m. a whole army of guards arrived at the ‘regular’ time to unlock the door. The night, that was no night at all, was over. But not the nightmare. Contrary to what some of the law enforcers had thought, no one rushed out. The detainees, to a man, stayed to keep vigil by the dead body and refused to turn it over unless the Minister of Justice himself came to confirm the death. In the meantime the stench had filled the room, but not a single detainee complained.

At 7 o'clock the prison director appeared. Goodness knows how he managed to quieten things down. The fact remains that he came up with a compromise everyone could accept, and Charles's body was handed over. From now on, the ‘gates of hell’ would be locked at 6:30 p.m. instead of 5:45, so that the detainees could spend a bit longer in the yard. For the prisoners of Cotonou, the day would last 45 minutes longer. So they received a New Year's gift after all. A death that would not be completely in vain.

Behind bars in San Salvador

“Cell 13 on the main floor of sector II of the Penitenciaría Central Mariona. This is where Emilio, my guide in Guatemala, did time. Emilio spent 42 days in this prison. ‘In prison you learn the meaning of true friendship. You discover solidarity,’ he said to me. ‘Some people become lawyers behind bars. I became a philosopher. Oh, how much I philosophized about life here!’ But the school was a terrible one.

‘During the first few days I wanted to die,’ Emilio remembered bitterly. ‘To be locked up caused me greater pain than I had ever felt before. The worst is the time between five in the afternoon and the morning. Then at last all the inner tension is released, you get news from your family, the latest from the lawyer. Boredom is a form of martyrdom in prison. Every day I went along to the

chapel of the Virgin of Mercies and offered up a quick prayer to her. One day I forgot everything, couldn't even remember a Hail Mary. But I heard her say: 'Change the atmosphere if you don't like it. Keep your mind occupied 24 hours a day. Make sure you have the upper hand and don't let the prison get the better of you.' Then the whole idea came to me: I would use the knowledge I had of sports administration to combat boredom in prison. Since then eleven different cultural events have been held and the prisoners are involved in 32 different types of sport. The national karate champion did some time here. You have to take advantage of such an opportunity. He became the coach of an entire team here. Channel their aggression and let them box, run... Since the start of the project the queues at the doctor's office are shorter, and aggression and drug use have declined before our very eyes.

Then Edgardo was brought in. Around his neck he was wearing white chains that shone against his dark skin. He had shared Emilio's vision of 'turning the prison from a weapons storehouse into a field to be ploughed.' He added even more fire to Emilio's strong language.

'In the past, people were being killed here as if for sport,' Edgardo said. 'But 109 dead in the half year that he spent here, as Emilio told me, surely that must be a slight exaggeration?'

'Not in the least', replied Edgardo. 'Ten deaths a week, that was the average.' 'Emilio claimed that once he even saw inmates playing football with the head of one of their fellow prisoners?' I asked, in the hope that he would deny it.

'Not only that,' Edgardo said, 'some pranksters even stuck a cigarette in the mouth of the football.' 'But since the launch of your programme ... there has not been a single death!' Edgardo interrupts me. He tells the story of the basketball court. Emilio had moved heaven and earth to persuade the director that the inmates themselves could build a sports field. With the financial support of a few golf buddies, and with the promise of a double portion of food and a later lock-up – 6:30 p.m. – Emilio made sure that the court was finished in 60 days. Twenty-five prisoners worked at it as if their life depended on it. After 36 days the first basketball game was played. 'And the best part,' Edgardo recalls, 'was that the director himself occasionally came to give us a hand.'"

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