

Bill Rea ? How great was Fidel?

Over the last couple days, I have encountered a couple of people who have been to Cuba.

Some of them have been there multiple times.

It makes me feel a little inadequate to realize I've only been there once, and that was more than 40 years ago.

Like so many others, I have been thinking of Cuba a lot in light of the death of Fidel Castro.

He ran the country for many years, and there are vast differences of opinion as to how good a job he did, and many of them have been dredged up over the last several days. I have my own opinions, some of them based on the seasoned observations of a 17-year-old kid who was making his first (and so far only) visit to a communist country. Suffice to say I was glad at the time I didn't live there. And based on my memories of the place, my mind has not changed much.

I was there not long after Canadians started visiting the island, and long before Americans would have gone.

My memories, however, are not so much about geopolitics as they are about a young man experiencing for one of his first times a different culture. I had been to Montreal on a school trip a couple of months before. I lived for a couple of days with a family who would switch from English to French and back again easily; often in mid-sentence. But I was still in the country in which I had been born and raised.

Cuba was something else. It was a culmination of something my parents had promised my brother and I ? namely that there would be one major trip abroad (actually, another sprang up later, but that's the topic of another column).

The trip had been planned for some time, with developments in the planning stages being unveiled at certain intervals. For example, I came home from school one day and my mother greeted me with an announcement that she had learned two crucial facts about Cuba.

?I've got good news and bad news for you,? she said.

The bad news was we would all require inoculations before we could get into the country. What the hell! I was a big boy by then. I could handle a needle.

The good news is there was no drinking age in Cuba. That was a major consideration for a kid who had not yet reached the legal drinking age, which in those days was 18. Of course I had taken a few illicit snorts, as had most of the contemporaries I had hung around with, but I had never got into serious drinking. I think most people remember their first hangover. I sure remember mine. It came in Cuba.

On yeah. My mother was mistaken. As things turned out, we didn't need needles.

It was a memorable trip for other reasons too.

We flew out Boxing Day 1975, and the morning came with a major blizzard. Indeed, the airport limo we had ordered never showed, so we drove ourselves to the airport, dropping a spare set of car keys with my uncle who lived on the way so he could drive the car to our home later (no one in my family ever acknowledged it, but I was the one who came up with that idea). The good news was there were a lot of passengers in the same mess as us, so the flight was delayed a couple of hours.

The point is we flew out of a blizzard and landed in sunshine.

Once we were off the plane, it was obvious this was a different culture.

There were posters bearing Fidel's face everywhere one looked, and many of them also bore a message (in Spanish of course) of the ?The Revolution is endless? variety.

We were herded onto tour buses, which were just about the snazziest buses I have ever been on, before or since. They even had bars. I had my first legal beer riding on a bus into Havana.

There was a tour guide on the bus, pointing out various sights of interest, with much positive reference made to Fidel (they always referred to him by his first name), and many negative references to that ?bad man,? namely Fulgencio Batista, the man Fidel overthrew.

There were also a lot of references to how bad the United States was (remember this was 1975, when Gerald Ford was president and Americans were still licking the international wounds they had endured from Vietnam). There was one very interesting exception.

We passed a park, and in the middle of it was a memorial pedestal bearing a bust of Abraham Lincoln.

While riding in these snazzy buses, we of course could observe the other vehicles on the road. It looked like a scene right out of the 1950s, although the taxis were clearly a lot more contemporary (?70s vintage Chevs). And I felt a certain amount of guilt viewing from the bus I was on the buses that the local population was expected to use. Paul Bernardo gets better transportation when he has to appear in court.

There was obvious adoration for Fidel. We were guided through many interesting places during the week we were there, and one of

the people of the tour asked a guide where Fidel lived.

"He lives in the hearts of the people," he replied with a broad smile.

There were a couple of reactions to that, and I thought my brother's was the best. "Home is where you hang your hat," he casually said.

Being tourists, we were being told stuff the government wanted us to know, and nothing more. And we were Canadian tourists, meaning we were treated nice, but there were other tourists who were treated better.

We were there for New Year's Eve, and there were parties held throughout the National Hotel, which was the swanky place in Havana in its day. The Canadians were stuck in one of the side rooms, which was nice enough. The people visiting from the Soviet Union got the plumb placements.

You knew where you stood when you were in Cuba, and you knew Fidel was the man in charge. And you also knew who was on his good side.

But there is an argument that didn't have to be.

Former American president Harry S. Truman believed it was lack of action on the part of his successor Dwight Eisenhower that allowed the Soviets to buddy up with Fidel.

In the early '60s, Truman sat for a series of interviews with writer Merle Miller, and they were the basis of the book *Plain Speaking*, which was published a couple of years after Truman's death.

In the book, Miller recounted how Truman explained how he would have handled Fidel.

He would have invited Fidel to the White House, confident that he would have come.

Once there, Truman said he would have complimented Fidel on the success of the revolution, and would have offered him any help he might need.

"Now Fidel, I've told you what we'll do for you," Miller quoted him as saying. "There's something you can do for me. Would you get a shave and a haircut and take a bath?"

We'll never know if Truman would have actually done that. How different might the world have been?

