

Bill Rea ? About time to bury the hatchet

I was really intrigued by last week's news that the United States and Cuba are going to try and normalize their relations.

Granted, one of the main reasons I was interested is Cuba is one of the few foreign countries I've visited, although it was 39 years ago. My family flew out Boxing Day 1975 in a blizzard and landed in sunshine.

Canadians had only been travelling to Cuba for a couple of years at that point, so the tourism industry down there may not have quite had its act together. But for the 17-year-old youth who was myself, it was pretty intriguing.

For example, apart from a couple of illicit snorts, that my parents may or may not have known about, I had had very little experience with alcohol, largely because the law in these parts deemed me too young. But there was no drinking age in Cuba, at least at that time (I confess I don't know what the regulations are now), and my parents were pretty liberal in their response to that. I well remember my father telling me that there were no legal issues and I had pesos in my pocket, so if I felt like going up to the bar and having myself a drink, I was to go ahead.

?Just don't get smashed,? he told me (his very words). He should have known better, or maybe he actually did.

There are some experiences we always remember, and I think one's first hangover has to be on that list. Mine was a whopper. My head still hurts at the memory. My brother put it best when describing the issue to friends and relatives when we got home ? ?He was ILL!?

Despite the illness, mainly of my own making, there was a lot of interesting stuff to see down there, especially in Havana.

My father had done considerable travelling on business in years prior to that, so he got to spend a lot of time in some of the great cities of Europe, especially Paris, London and Barcelona. He had learned through experience there was one and only one way to really explore a city, and that was by walking. So that's exactly what my folks did through the streets of Havana. Had I been older and wiser, I might have joined them. But I found a few interesting sights of my own.

We stayed at the National Hotel, which before the revolution was evidently the pretty swanky place to stay in Havana. According to the Hotel's website (I was a little surprised that there is such a website), it accommodated the likes of Sir Winston Churchill, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Tyrone Power, Lucky Luciano, Rita Hayworth, Ernest Hemingway, Fred Astaire, César Romero, Gary Cooper, Nelson Rockefeller, Frank Sinatra, Spencer Tracy, Marlon Brando, John Wayne, Mickey Mantle, Walt Disney and a whole bunch of other illustrious people.

But long before any of these swell people (including the Reas) had checked in, there were fortifications added to the site to guard against the likes of pirates, etc.

The entire building was surrounded by a network of concrete trenches and bunkers. There was a guy on the tour of roughly my age named Doug, and he and I spent the better part of a day orbiting the facility, checking it all out.

But Cuba was more to me than a dreadful hangover and the intriguing ramifications around a hotel.

I was a Western adolescent in a Communist country for the very first time, while the Cold War was still raging. Gerald Ford was the American president who had to watch Vietnam being overrun. I was a student in a secondary school in Toronto, having spent my entire public education in the company of children of eastern European parents who considered themselves fortunate to have escaped the clutches of Stalin and Khrushchev. On the other hand, I was filled with a certain amount of youthful idealism that naturally carries with it an attempt to develop a social conscience. It is a fact that Communism, in its purest form, is based largely on a concept of a social conscience. That's theory, and as is so often the case, theory and fact can be two very different things.

I grew up hearing about Communist regimes in which dissention was not tolerated. There was one country, where it was well documented that the door prize for doing enough complaining about the way things were being run was an all-expense-paid trip to Siberia for you and yours.

But I had also read that Cuba was different.

Thus I was a very curious and naïve young man when I went to Cuba.

What I saw did not make me a fan of the Castro regime, although there was no denying the people there adored him.

The fanciest vehicles we saw were the buses on which tourists like us were taken from place to place. They were even equipped with bars, and I had my first legal beer on the bus from the airport into Havana. Most of the cars we saw from the bus looked like they were straight out of the 1950s, except for the taxis, which were relatively modern (by the standards of the ?70s) Chevs.

The sides of the roads were filled with billboards advertising only one thing; the Revolution, with many of them bearing a picture of Fidel, and sometimes other prominent Communists (I remember one sign with the pictures of Fidel and Ho Chi Minh).

There were tour guides on the buses, pointing out objects of interest that we passed, with emphasis on how good the revolution was and how bad others were, including Americans and Fulgencio Batista, the man Fidel overthrew. The words ?bad man? were used

whenever Batista was referred to.

There was one positive reference to Americans that was pointed out to us. Our attention was directed to a park, in the middle of which was a pedestal with a bust of Abraham Lincoln.

One the most telling moments came when one of the people on the tour asked one of the guides where Fidel lived.

?He lives in the hearts of the people,? was the reply she received, and that was the only reply such a question was going to get. It was obvious that the guide was briefed on how to respond to that inquiry.

?Home is where you hang your hat,? my brother muttered, as if there was anything else that could have been said at a time like that. The news that came out last week was good, if for no other reason than there's little to be gained by nations being at odds against each other.

Granted, the Bay of Pigs fiasco probably shouldn't have happened, but that was more than 50 years ago. Lots of time to bury hatchets.

Indeed, that debacle might not have been necessary, at least according to one of my heroes from history; Harry S. Truman.

He blamed his successor as American President, Dwight Eisenhower (it is well documented in history that the two men had very little use for each other), for basically sitting and doing nothing while Fidel aligned himself with the Soviets.

How different might have history been

