Lifestyle Columnist

Ralph De La Cruz

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Back to the future: You can go home again, via satellite

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"What's the first thing you'd like to see, if you could see Havana?" I asked my father.

"The Rincon Martiano," he answered, faster than I'd expected.

"It was once a rock quarry where prisoners were sent to do hard time," he continued. "When Marti was imprisoned, he broke rocks there. And then, after he became a national hero, they erected a park in his honor there."

Gee, I knew my father considers himself a disciple of the turn-of-the-20th-century Cuban poet/patriot. But this is the first place in all of Havana he'd want to see?

"I proposed to your mother in that park," he added. "It's where we had our first kiss."

I could almost hear him smiling through the phone line.

"Hold on, Papi, I think I've found it." I said. "Sorry, the Web page is kind of slow."

As we spoke, I was searching Terrafly (terrafly.com), a Web site set up by Florida International University, NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey. Terrafly lets you do "flyovers" of places all over the United States. Which is neat. But not exactly ground-breaking. When we were looking for houses five years ago, I was able to look at prospective homes and surrounding neighborhoods by using satellite images at the property appraiser's Web site.

But to be able to see Havana ... that is, as my father said, "Truly a marvel."

Between travel restrictions and the embargo, the only way Cuban-Americans have been able to see images of their homeland has been to buy videos made by visitors to the island. Or to find old photos online. So when I read about Terrafly, I simultaneously went online and on the phone.

"How about Basarrate Street?" my father asked excitedly. "That's where I lived when I went to the University of Havana."

No problem.

"And Tropical Stadium? Do you see ... "

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Battling runaway dune daisies, discouraging jatropha

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Here we were, 1,000 miles apart -- him in Texas and me in Florida -- doing what we've fantasized about for years: touring Havana.

And without having to wait for Fidel to die.

"Are you able to see Matanzas?" my father asked of the port city where he grew up. "Or Cabezas (his birthplace)? That's the most beautiful town you'll ever see."

Of course, time-trippin' is not limited to only Cubans.

Since Terrafly makes it easy to hop around the U.S., it can be a great way-back machine for any in our transient society.

I looked for the house where I grew up in Austin, Texas. Still remember the address: 7502 Daugherty. Which should have made it easy.

But I got an error message.
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However, because I was able to remember our old ZIP code, the program dropped me into the general area. With street names layered on the map, I moved closer and closer to my childhood.

Pegram, Greenlawn, Richcreek ...

Daugherty.

Finally, I was home.

But sometime between childhood and middle age, the number had been changed from 7502 to 2534.

And the little tree in the front yard that used to be home plate during our whiffleball games is no longer there. Neither is the tree whose branches used to scrape my bedroom window at night, scaring the bejesus out of me. Or the neighbor's guava tree that dropped the sticky fruit into our backyard.

There's now a pool in the backyard -- a testament to rising property values.

Man, I could hardly wait to show the kids. It was my Rincon Martiano. "You know, the Rincon showcased some of Marti's most beautiful work," my father said as we finished our tour. "There's a letter he wrote his mother: 'If, as a slave to my age and doctrines, I’ve filled your heart with thorns, remember that, in the middle of thorns, roses are born.'"

What a satellite can't pick up, the memory can see.

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