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Sept. 28, 2008----

TORONTO, Ont.---A tiki bar in the heart of Little Italy is incongruous to most cities.

But Toronto is not like most cities. With more than 240 ethnic origins bouncing about like marbles in a bag, it is arguably the world's most multicultural city.

New Yorkers would argue that observation. Of course.

Which certainly makes Toronto the world's friendliest multicultural city.

I visited Toronto twice this summer and both times wound up talking to Gina and the locals at the tiny Sutra Tiki Bar in the Little Italy conclave of the city. And that was after I picked up used Cuban vinyl at She Said Boom!, 372 College St. I ate some of the most spicy roti I have ever enjoyed at the Real Jerk Restaurant, (ex-girlfriends comment here). I heard live calypso and soca music from Trinidad, which is impossible to do on a regular basis in Chicago.

I did not know Toronto actually has a beach north of the city along Lake Ontario. And "The Beaches" neighborhood is where I heard the Sicilian Jazz Project interpret the 1954 field recordings of folklorist Alan Lomax's tour of Sicily. The group, of course, was from Canada. Open minds, open hearts.

Much of the cultural harmony came about in the Immigration Act of 1976 enacted by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He opened the doors to refugees and the first wave of Caribbeans (From Barbados, Jamaica, St. Vincent, Trinidad) who arrived in Toronto came to work as domestics. Trudeau didn't duplicate American politics. In 1976 he visited Cuba and he later denounced American policy in Central and South America. A gentle sense of reason still defines any visit to Toronto.

By 1989, then-Toronto Mayor Arthur Eggleton said, "Toronto is noted by the United Nations as being the most racially and diverse city in the world," according to Michael J. Doucet's "Toronto's Multicultural Reputation," published in October, 2004 by CERIS (The Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement) in Toronto.

Toronto and Chicago often get compared because of similar lakefronts, weather and cultural diversity. But the boundaries of most Chicago neighborhoods are defined. I live in West Ukrainian Village and it is easy to tell when I cross over into Humboldt Park. In Toronto, neighborhoods blend together.

"This was originally a Jewish neighborhood," said Sid Dichter, owner of the Sutra Tiki Bar. "It's not really Italian anymore. Then it became Portuguese. There are still a lot of Italians north of the tiki bar on St. Clair." Dichter is a Winnipeg native who has lived in Toronto for 20 years. He also owns Souz Dal, a Moroccan-themed martini lounge a few doors south of Sutra.

Want more?

The tiki bar is next door to the Royal Theater, originally a Chinese cinema and now an art film house. The 150-capacity narrow tiki bar features a back door beach patio with a sand floor. Drinks include the forbidden Havana Club rum to bottles of Tiger beer from Thailand (\$6). Although the house drink is a mojito (\$8.25), the Sutra is not a full-tilt tiki bar. For example, on weekends the house DJ will play techno instead of Don Ho.

Every tiki bar needs a good beach.

The Beaches is a distinct neighborhood (pop. 25,000) about five miles north of downtown or a half-hour ride on the Queen Street East streetcar. The Beaches was a resort area in the early 1900s and there still are vintage cottages along the lake. Films like "The Tuxedo" with Jackie Chan and "Angel Eyes" with Jennifer Lopez have been shot in this neighborhood. "Chicago has always been an inspiration for Toronto," said Deborah Etsen, executive director of the Beach Business Improvement Area. "We look to Chicago for its waterfront."

The Beaches features more than 350 shops and restaurants including a Fidel Castro/Che Guevara bar called Castro's Lounge I found that wasn't in any promotional brochures. Filled with wooden tables and chairs, the 35-seat bar looks like it would be at home in Old Havana. There are posters of Steve McQueen on a motorcycle and Jack Palance portraying Che. On a mid-Saturday afternoon a few regulars were in the bar as Dub music played loudly in the background. Castro's Lounge serves nearly 100 beers, and food like creole fish stew (\$13) is served between 5 and 11 p.m. daily. Check it out. Have a cigar for me.

The Beaches also includes a two-mile boardwalk and a park that grew out of the Woodbine Racetrack, which operated from 1873-1993. The park now features wetlands, naturalized meadows and an amphitheater where the neighborhood hosts an outdoor jazz festival. That's where I ran into Michael Occhipinti, bassist and leader of the Sicilian Project. The folk-jazz group played a set at the 20th Annual Beaches International Jazz Festival, always held at the end of July.

In the early 1950s Occhipinti's parents immigrated to the Beaches from Sicily. "There are 400,000 people of Italian heritage in Toronto," he said before his band's set. "My wife was born in Portugal and her family came in the '60s. The Canadian government actively recruited people in waves. My dad was a stone mason in Italy. They needed people to build. My wife is a schoolteacher and now she's seeing a lot of Tibetan immigrants. It is great. It makes the city so vibrant. You might go to an 'Italian' neighborhood or 'Greek' neighborhood, but it is never exclusively that."

That is what makes Toronto unique in my eyes.

Occhipinti, 41, continued, "I've traveled in the States a lot and the color barriers seem stronger there. Maybe its because slavery was done away a lot sooner here. Some people say there's a Canadian psyche in that it is a cold country that is spread out and people need to rely on one another. But Toronto is a city where the core never emptied out. And that makes a difference."

In the premiere 2008 issue of Toronto Magazine, noted author-sociologist Richard Florida wrote, "To me it Toronto is the quintessential city. It's not as big as New York or London, but it has much or more diversity as either of them. And to its credit, it has not become completely gentrified and yuppified." Which is what I worry about with the growing inner ring of Chicago. Toronto looks to us for our lakefront. We can look to Toronto for understanding that like a good tiki drink, a city works from the bottom up.

[A great planning resource is www.torontotourism.com. And I drove to Toronto this summer to see the Cubs. It's a seamless 7œ-hour drive through Detroit from Chicago.]