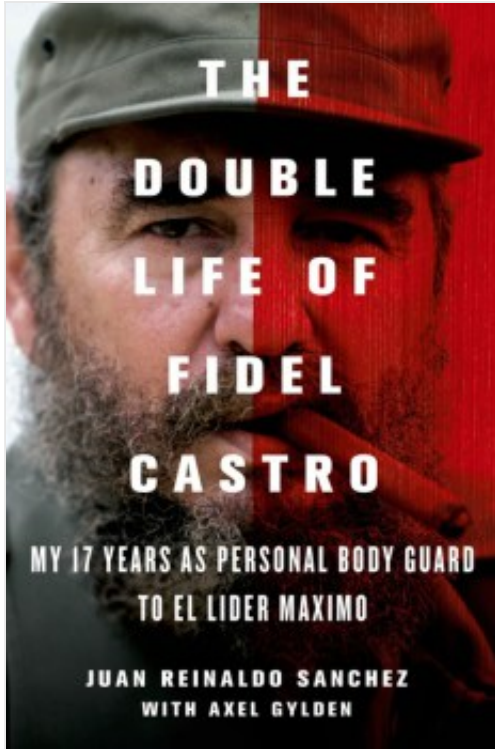


Inside Fidel Castro's luxurious life on his secret island getaway

For 17 years, Juan Reinaldo Sanchez served as bodyguard to Fidel Castro. But when he became disillusioned with the Cuban dictator's hypocrisy and tried to retire in 1994, Castro had him thrown in prison. Sanchez made 10 attempts to escape the island, finally making it to the US in 2008. Now he reveals all in his new book, "The Double Life of Fidel Castro." In this excerpt, Sanchez exposes "El Jefe's" privileged life.

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"The Double Life of Fidel Castro: My 17 Years as Personal Bodyguard to El Lider Maximo" by Juan Reinaldo Sanchez (St. Martin's Press)

To Cubans, Fidel Castro presents himself as a man of the people, claiming to make only 900 pesos a month (about \$38) and owning no property other than a modest "fisherman's hut" somewhere on the coast.

In truth, El Jefe is worth hundreds of millions and owns 20 properties, including a chalet where he goes duck hunting every year and a private marina in the Bay of Pigs.

His main home is Punto Cero, where his family was kept hidden away. No one knew until recently that he had a wife, Dalia, with whom he had five sons, all with "A" names: Alexis, Alex, Alejandro, Antonio and Angelito. Even Fidel's own brother, Raúl, did not meet them until the children were adults.

Few, meanwhile, know that Fidel has had at least three children out of wedlock, including one with his personal interpreter and longtime mistress, Juanita.

Castro may not be as ostentatious as Khadafy or Saddam Hussein, but he's rich beyond most people's dreams. His simple appearance is due more to laziness than austerity. Castro, who rarely wakes before 10 a.m. or 11 a.m., is happy not to wear a suit and confessed that the main reason he has a beard is so he did not have to shave every day.

But there were plenty of perks to being the depository of Cuba's wealth. He has his own private basketball court where he never lost a game. And his own private hospital housing two people full-time simply because they shared his blood type.

At Punto Cero, each member of his family possessed his or her own cow, so as to satisfy each one's individual tastes, since the acidity and creaminess of fresh milk varies from one cow to another. And so the milk would arrive on the table, each bottle bearing a number, a little of paper scotch-taped onto the bottle,

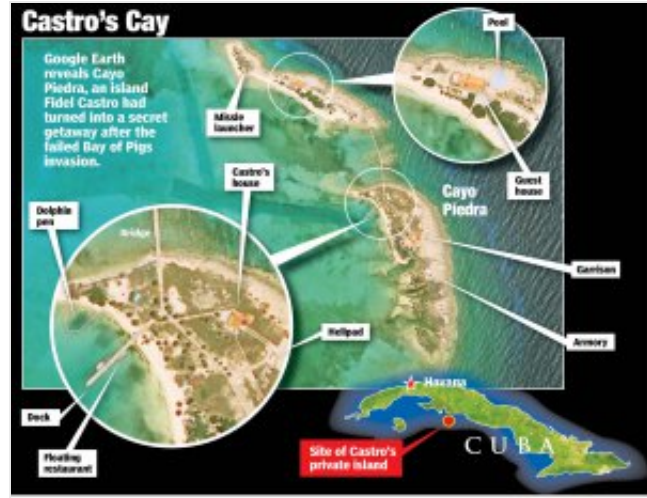
corresponding to each person's cow.

Antonio's was No. 8, Angelito's No. 3, and Fidel's No. 5, which was also the number he wore on his basketball shirt.

There was no question of deceiving him: Fidel possessed an excellent palate that could immediately detect if the taste of milk did not correspond to that of the previous bottle.

Stone cay

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Perhaps most extravagantly, Fidel Castro has his own secret island.

Ironically, he has John F. Kennedy to thank for it. In April 1961, a group of CIA-trained exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs tried to overthrow the Cuban government. It was a completely fiasco.

In the days following the failed attack, Fidel came to explore the region when he encountered a local fisherman with a wrinkled face whom everyone called El Viejo

Finalé. He asked Old Finalé to give him a tour of the area, and the fisherman immediately took him on board his fishing boat to Cayo Piedra, a little “jewel” situated 10 miles from the coast and known only to the local inhabitants.

Fidel instantly fell in love with this place of wild beauty worthy of Robinson Crusoe and decided to have it for his own. The light house keeper was asked to leave the premises and the lighthouse was put out of action and later taken down.

To be precise, Cayo Piedra consists of not one island but two, a passing cyclone having split it in half. Fidel had, however, rectified this by building a 700-foot-long bridge between the two parts.

The southern island was slightly larger than its northern counterpart, and it was here, on the site of the former lighthouse, that Castro and his wife, Dalia, had built their house: a cement-built, L-shaped bungalow arranged around a terrace that looked out to the east, onto the open sea.

While ordinary Cubans suffered, this is where Castro would relax.

Dolphins and barbecues

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Juan Reinaldo Sanchez (left) was part of Castro's security detail for 17 years.

On the west side of the island, facing the setting sun, the Castros had built a 200-foot-long landing stage for his personal yacht. The Aquarama II, decorated entirely in exotic wood imported from Angola, had four engines from Soviet navy patrollers, a gift from Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. At full throttle, they propelled Aquarama II at the phenomenal, unbeatable speed of 42 knots, or about 48 miles an hour.

To allow Aquarama II to dock, Fidel and Dalia had also had a half-mile-long channel dug; without this, their flotilla would not have been able to reach the island, surrounded by sand shoals.

The jetty formed the epicenter of social life on Cayo Piedra.

A floating pontoon, 23 feet long, had been annexed to it, and on the pontoon stood a straw hut with a bar and barbecue grill.

From this floating bar and restaurant, everyone could admire the sea enclosure in which, to the delight of adults and children alike, turtles (some 3 feet long) were kept. On the other side of the landing stage was a dolphinarium containing two tame dolphins that livened up our daily routines with their pranks and jumps.

Fidel Castro also let it be understood, and sometimes directly stated, that the revolution left him no

possibility for respite or leisure and that he knew nothing about, and even despised, the bourgeois concept of vacation. Nothing could have been further from the truth. From 1977 to 1994, I accompanied him many hundreds of times to the little paradise of Cayo Piedra, where I took part in as many fishing or underwater hunting expeditions.

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The private life of the Comandante was the best-kept secret in Cuba.

Fidel Castro has always made sure that information concerning his family is kept private, so that over the course of six decades we have learned almost nothing about the seven brothers and sisters of the Castro family. This separation between public and private life, legacy of the period when he lived in hiding, reached unimaginable proportions.

None of his siblings was ever invited to or set foot on Cayo Piedra. Raúl, to whom Fidel was closest, might have gone there in his absence, although personally I never encountered him. Other than the closest family circle, in other words Dalia and their five children, those who can pride themselves on having seen the mysterious island with their own eyes are few and far between.

The guest list

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Castro in 1965. Photo: Getty Images

Other than several foreign businessmen whose names I have forgotten and several handpicked Cuban ministers, the only visitors to the island I can recall were the Colombian president Alfonso López Michelsen (1974–1978), who came to spend a weekend there with his wife, Cecilia, around 1977 or 1978; the French businessman Gérard Bourgoïn, aka the Chicken King, who came to visit in around 1990 at the time he was exporting his poultry producing know-how to the whole world; the owner of CNN, Ted Turner; the superstar presenter of the American channel ABC, Barbara Walters; and Erich Honecker, communist leader of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1976 to 1989.

I will never forget the latter's 24-hour visit to Cayo Piedra in 1980. Eight years earlier, in 1972, Fidel Castro had rechristened Cayo Blanco del Sur island Ernst Thälmann Island. Even better: In a show of symbolic friendship between the two "brother nations," he had offered the GDR this morsel of uninhabited land, nine miles long and 500 yards wide, situated an hour's sailing from his private island.

Ernst Thälmann was a historic leader of the German communist party under the Weimar Republic, ultimately executed by the Nazis in 1944. In 1980, during an official visit by Honecker to Cuba, the leader of East Berlin gave Fidel a statue of Thälmann. Very logically, Fidel decided to put the work of art on the island of the same name — which is how I came to be present at that incredible scene in which two heads

of state turned up on Aquarama II and disembarked in the middle of nowhere to inaugurate the statue of a forgotten figure on a deserted island, witnessed only by iguanas and pelicans.

The last I heard, the immense statue of Thälmann, 6 1/2 feet high, had been toppled from its pedestal by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

In fact, the only two really frequent visitors to Cayo Piedra other than the family were the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez and the anthropologist and geographer Antonio Núñez Jiménez. They were two of Fidel's close friends and the main users of the guest house on Cayo Piedra.

As Cuba suffers

Fidel Castro was an excellent diver and loved spear fishing. The ritual on our return was immutable. Fidel's numerous catches would be lined up on the jetty and sorted into species: breems together, lobster together, and so on. The fish caught by Dalia, who hunted separately under the protection of two combat divers, were arranged next to them, she and Fidel then reviewing the ensuing feast to the admiring, amused commentaries of their entourage.

"Comandante, ¡es otra una pesca milgrosa! [another miraculous catch!]," I would say, certain that my comment would win me the smiles of the main party concerned as well as of all those present.

This dolce vita represented enormous privilege compared with the lifestyle of ordinary Cubans, whose already Spartan way of life had gotten considerably harder since the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Subsidies from Moscow, which had maintained a certain level of prosperity, had dried up. The Cuban economy, which derived almost 80% of its external trade from the eastern bloc, was collapsing like a house of cards and households were surviving on the breadline while the GNP had decreased by 35% and electricity supplies were seriously inadequate.

Meanwhile, Fidel Castro sipped his whiskey on the rocks and ate fresh fish in the shade of his secret island.

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