

# The motorcycle diaries



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It is an irony that the guerrilla Ernesto “ Che” Guevara, one of the most intriguing figures of Latin America, has come to be immortalized as an icon of popular culture—a pin-up, poster boy of sorts that lends face to the mass-produced “ Che” shirts and pins. This massive appeal, however, needs to be rooted in the context of what prompted him to become a revolutionary, to a time before he took up arms and became a legend. Retracing such route to a decisive era in Guevara’s early life is the book “ The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America.”

The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America is the memoir of twenty-three year-old medical student Ernesto Guevara de la Serna when he embarked upon a journey across South America with his older friend Rodrigo Granado. In search for fun and adventure, theirs is a rather grand route that spans Argentina, Chile, Peru, the Peruvian Amazon, Colombia and Venezuela. The two start out aboard a lumbering 1939 Norton 500 motorcycle they named “ La Poderosa” (The Mighty One) which eventually crashes on the way and forces them to travel on foot.

Chronological entries in The Motorcycle Diaries detail Ernesto’s narrative of the eight-month journey, in which they initially wanted to seek bourgeois pleasures like getting drunk and getting laid. Early on, they pose as Argentinian leprosy doctors in order to gain accommodations and hospitable treatment from local folks. Further on the road, Ernesto and Alberto share a series of youthful misadventures, at times committing scams to get themselves by. In an event, Ernesto tries to work as a fireman but sleeps out on the sounding fire alarm so that the building on fire burns down.

Even if the diaries present the characters' bawdy behavior, it more importantly accounts for a great discovery that only such journey can offer them. As they themselves experience poverty and come face-to-face with indigent townsfolk, nameless people whose living conditions sharply contrast the lavish lifestyle they were born into, their view of the world changes. Incidents in the diaries concretely speak of these encounters with social injustice. When Ernesto sees a tuberculosis-stricken woman in her death bed, he realizes how dismal the public health system is. When he tours a copper mine (which has taken lives of miners), he discovers how laborers are famished and unfairly treated.

Throughout the trip, not only does Ernesto stumble upon the endemic poverty and subjugation of the peoples across South America. He is also able to make his stand regarding a "unified Latin America." A passage in the *The Motorcycle Diaries* reads

Although we are too insignificant to be a spokesman for such a noble cause, we believe, and this journey has only served to confirm this belief, that the division of America into unstable and illusory nations is a complete fiction. We are one single mestizo race with remarkable ethnographical similarities, from Mexico down to the Magellan straits. And so, in an attempt to break free from an all narrow-minded provincialism, I propose a toast to Peru and United America.

From various South American sights running parallel to each other, Ernesto sees his ideal of Pan-American unification which he would later brace politically. He maintains that since all of Latin America share a common

experience and long history of oppression, hence should they have an integrated movement towards their liberation. (Later in his life, Ernesto demonstrated how he lived up to this ideal, touring across the continent to unite different guerrilla units and revolutionary forces in different countries.)

What was originally meant to be a journey for fun and adventure turned out to be the provocation necessary to make a “revolutionary.” Immersion and encounters with workers being laid-off and fighting for jobs, starving farmers, and other vestiges of feudal rule on agricultural communities make only a few threads weaving the larger story of oppression that proved strong enough to catapult individuals like Ernesto Guevara to the fray.

These experiences caused such indignation in Ernesto, sending him to become the revolutionary who changed the history of South America. Both Alberto (who came back to Argentina to pursue medicine and dedicate his practice for the poor) and Ernesto show that the things they saw from their journey are hard truths—realities often obscured to the upper economic classes but inescapable realities nevertheless, needing to be dealt with actions more forceful than charity. The characters of *The Motorcycle Diaries* are a testament that revolutionaries are made, not born.

The ‘life-changing’ theme that prevails in *The Motorcycle Diaries* is conveyed by other allegories pertaining to the characters’ awakening. For instance, the river separating the leper colony to the medical staff’s island symbolizes the gap between the powerful and the oppressed. Ernesto’s act of dissolving this symbolic divide is a portent to the way he would later take in his life.

Ernesto's Diaries is written with such vividness and animation, and is punctuated with a range of ordinary human emotions, from mischief and vulgarity to a sense of righteousness and justice. He states even his most roguish actions in a matter-of-fact tone that you would think of " shooting a puma in the dark of the night" (which turns out to be a neighbor's dog) as if it is the most natural thing to do. Even if Ernesto writes The Motorcycle Diaries from his own viewpoint, it does not render him heroically ' larger-than-life.'

In 2004, a film bearing the same title was made based on the book. There are minor deviations from the book to account for, particularly the omission of several interesting incidents (like shooting of the " puma" and sneaking inside a shipment of melons, etc.). The film also romanticizes the love angle between Ernesto and his fiancée, which, in the diaries, does not appear to be such a highlight. Despite these, however, the film is still quite able to introduce the essence of the written memoirs to those who have not read them yet.

The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America has written down how witnessing concrete forms of social injustice could change a person's worldview and awaken him from his ignorance and unconscious indifference. At least for the man who later became the revolutionary Che Guevara, the journey even served to fuel his future actions in defiance of the prevailing system he found oppressive.

The catchphrase " Before he changed the world, the world changed him" (promoting the film version of The Motorcycle Diaries) speaks truthfully of

the bereted man we see ubiquitously as a pop icon. In turn, the book speaks of demystifying the face behind the shirt and the poster and understanding, from his beginnings, the persona who the powers-that-be, for so long, have come to vilify.

Guevara, Che, *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America*.

October 1996. New York: Verso.