

Traveling with Che Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary

Alberto Granado

Lucia Alvarez de Toledo, Translator

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Like the switchback mountains, lush valleys, and rushing waters of its setting, this account will capture readers with deceptively simple descriptions of life in Latin America. Only gradually, through the author's depiction of a seven-month journey he took in 1951 with his younger friend, Ernesto Guevara—later popularly called Che—does Granado's account become a powerful plea for the continent's exploited poor, ill, and disenfranchised citizens.

Written while Granado, as a twenty-nine-year-old doctor and biochemist, was traveling on motorcycle and foot from Argentina through Chile, Peru, Columbia, and Venezuela with his twenty-three-year-old asthmatic, medical student friend, the book was only recently translated into English, as a companion piece to Guevara's diary. (The translator is a journalist, filmmaker, and interpreter.) Recently, the two diaries were woven into director Walter Salles's new film, *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

As the title implies, this book provides readers not only with a kaleidoscopic view of the towns, beaches, mines, and hospitals of Latin America, but also haunting descriptions of its political, social, and economic injustices. Portraits of countless disempowered Latin Americans fairly leap from its pages. At sheep-shearing time in Chile, five hundred workers show up for three hundred jobs. Rather than going on strike, the lucky ones who win the jobs even agree to work for shamelessly lowered wages. On the eve of an important union meeting at a mine, foremen shrewdly invite large groups of workers to brothels to distract them from fulfilling a quorum for a vote.

The centerpiece of the book is Granado's portrait of his friend, a medical student with a specialty in leprosy. The one confusion in this otherwise lucidly written account is Granado's sudden use of nicknames for Guevara—among them Fuser and Pelao—which leave the reader momentarily puzzled. The author moved to Cuba in 1961, where he co-founded the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Santiago.

Sanguine, intractably idealistic, and unwisely honest, Guevara nevertheless emerges as a sensitive humanitarian, wavering between a medical career and a burning desire to correct the world's injustices. Guevara's refusal to be diplomatic, even to those who help the two friends, is epitomized by his ruthless critique of an unpublished novel written by their Peruvian friend, Dr. Pesce. "Look, Doctor, it's not a good book...says nothing new...doesn't seem to have come from the pen of either a scientist or a Communist," Guevara coldly observes. Appalled, Granado reminds Guevara that Pesce fed and sheltered them, provided them with medical contacts, and even paid their fare to San Pablo.

That relentless insistence upon staring down the truth in all human relations eventually would inspire Guevara to join Fidel Castro in the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and this book gives an intimate glimpse into that early inspiration.

NANCY RUBIN STUART (August 18, 2009)

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