**The Motorcycle Diaries—Reviews**



# **On the Road With Young Che** By [A. O. SCOTT](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/a_o_scott/index.html) SEPT. 24, 2004

In the spring of 1952, two young men set out by motorcycle on an ambitious, footloose journey that they hoped would carry them from Buenos Aires up the spine of Chile, across the Andes and into the Peruvian Amazon. (They made it, a little behind schedule, though the unfortunate motorcycle did not.) Their road trip, however inspired and audacious it might have been, could have faded into personal memory and family lore, even though both travelers produced written accounts of their adventures. The older, a 29-year-old biochemist named Alberto Granado, is still alive and appears at the very end of "The Motorcycle Diaries," Walter Salles's stirring and warm-hearted reconstruction of that long-ago voyage. Granado's companion was a 23-year-old medical student named Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, whose subsequent career as a political idol, revolutionary martyr and T-shirt icon -- Che! -- reflects a charismatic, mysterious glow onto his early life.

"Is it possible to be nostalgic for a world you never knew?" Ernesto wonders as he contemplates Inca ruins in the Peruvian highlands. Mr. Salles's film, as ardent and serious a quest as Ernesto's turned out to be, poses a similar question. In making their movie, the cast and crew retraced the route of Granado and Guevara three times, trying to connect not only with the varied, rugged landscape of South America but also with the hopes and confusions of an earlier time: an era before the Cuban revolution, before the military coups and dirty wars of the 1960's and 70's, before the democratic resurgence and economic catastrophes that followed.

The filmmakers are not so naïve as to suppose that the old days were simpler or more innocent than the present. The movie's feeling of freshness and possibility comes from the wide-eyed intelligence of its heroes. But one reason to explore the past is to try to rediscover an elusive sense of forgotten possibility, and in Mr. Salles's hands what might have been a schematic story of political awakening becomes a lyrical exploration of the sensations and perceptions from which a political understanding of the world emerges. What "The Motorcycle Diaries" captures, with startling clarity and delicacy, is the quickening of Ernesto's youthful idealism, and the gradual turning of his passionate, literary nature toward an as yet unspecified form of radical commitment.

In declining to follow the subsequent course of that passion -- into the Sierra Maestre, the Congo and the mountains of Bolivia, where Guevara met his bloody end -- Mr. Salles risks being accused of idealizing his subject. It's a fair charge, but one that misses the director's fidelity to his literary sources. Guevara's diaries, discovered in a knapsack long after his death, were published in 1993, and much of their appeal lies in the sense of immediacy they convey. Their author did not know who he would become, even as the notebooks themselves dramatize a crucial stage in his development.

At the beginning, at home with his bourgeois Buenos Aires family, Ernesto (Gael García Bernal) is not Che, but "Fuser" -- sensitive, asthmatic and perhaps a bit of a dilettante. Alberto (Rodrigo de la Serna), lecherous, plump and gregarious, full of good-natured, blustery trash talk, is Falstaff to Fuser's Prince Hal. While there is a worthy goal at the end of their journey -- they intend to work in a leper colony in Peru -- the main purpose is tourism, both high minded and low. They want to see as much of Latin America as they can -- more than 8,000 kilometers (about 5,000 miles) in just a few months -- and also bed as many Latin American beauties as will fall for their ridiculous pick-up lines.

Alberto may be the self-declared ladies' man, but Mr. Bernal, with his smoldering eyes and equine features, is the movie's heartthrob. Though the film does, by the end, view Ernesto as a quasi-holy figure, turning away from the corruptions of the world toward a higher purpose, he is also portrayed as a mischievous, eager boy. Early in the film, the travelers stop in the seaside town of Miramar to visit Ernesto's girlfriend, Chichina (Mía Maestro), whose wealthy parents clearly disapprove of him, to say nothing of the uncouth Alberto (who promptly seduces the family's maid). The scenes between Ernesto and Chichina have the delicious ache of late-adolescent longing, a feeling that suffuses the film even as it turns its attention to graver matters.

At times, "The Motorcycle Diaries," which opens today in New York and Los Angeles, bounces along like a conventional buddy picture, animated by Ernesto and Alberto's mechanical mishaps and good-natured squabbles. But the film, written by José Rivera, is really a love story in the form of a travelogue. The love it chronicles is no less profound -- and no less stirring to the senses -- for taking place not between two people but between a person and a continent. Mr. Bernal's soulful, magnetic performance notwithstanding, the real star of the film is South America itself, revealed in the cinematographer Eric Gautier's misty green images as a land of jarring and enigmatic beauty.

At the end of the film, after his sojourn at the leper colony has confirmed his nascent egalitarian, anti-authority impulses, Ernesto makes a birthday toast, which is also his first political speech. In it he evokes a pan-Latin American identity that transcends the arbitrary boundaries of nation and race. "The Motorcycle Diaries," combining the talents of a Brazilian director and leading actors from Mexico (Mr. Bernal) and Argentina (Mr. de la Serna), pays heartfelt tribute to this idea. In an age of mass tourism, it also unabashedly revives the venerable, romantic notion that travel can enlarge the soul, and even change the world.

"The Motorcycle Diaries" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) for strong language and sexual references.

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

Directed by Walter Salles; written (in Spanish, with English subtitles) by José Rivera, based on "The Motorcycle Diaries" by Ernesto Che Guevara and "With Che Through Latin America" by Alberto Granado; director of photography, Eric Gautier; edited by Daniel Rezende; music by Gustavo Santaolalla; production designer, Carlos Conti; produced by Michael Nozik, Edgard Tenembaum and Karen Tenkhoff; released by Focus Features. Running time: 126 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Gael García Bernal (Ernesto Guevara de la Serna), Rodrigo de la Serna (Alberto Granado) and Mía Maestro (Chichina Ferreyra).

# [Movie Review](http://nymag.com/nymag/critics/movies/archive) from *New York Movies*

## **Che Sera Sera: Gael García Bernal’s South American road trip turns him into the revolutionary of everyone’s dreams.** By [Peter Rainer](http://nymag.com/nymag/author_180)

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| http://images.nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/moviereview040920_175.jpg |
| Gael Garcia Bernal and Rodrigo de la Serna in *The Motorcycle Diaries*.   |

In January 1952, an asthmatic 23-year-old medical student, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (Gael García Bernal), and his biochemist friend Alberto Granado (Rodrigo de la Serna), two upper-middle-class Argentines, set out on a battered motorcycle to explore the South America they knew only from books. Their journey took them across the Andes and the Atacama Desert, the Amazon Basin, and ultimately the San Pablo leper colony near Iquitos, Peru. **The Motorcycle Diaries**, which is based on memoirs written by Granado and by Guevara, who would become the revolutionary “El Che,” is structured as an inspirational road movie in which Ernesto “discovers” himself in the process of witnessing social injustice. A voice-over at the beginning tells us that this is “not a tale of heroic feats,” but that’s just what it is. Directed by Walter Salles in cooperation with Guevara’s family and the 82-year-old Granado, the film is a deeply felt and beautifully acted hagiography—a portrait of a citizen of the world as a young man. Ernesto may not have known that he would become Che, but we are never left in any doubt.

The film’s thesis is that true revolutionaries are guided by great feelings of love—as opposed to, say, a desire for power or fame. From the start, in contrast to the carousing Alberto, Ernesto is almost poetically sensitive; his brimming eyes take everything in—the aggrieved miners and lepers, the tattered descendants of a once-great Incan civilization. Even his asthma attacks symbolize a kind of romanticized frailty uniting him with the sick and the poor, whose faces, of course, are presented without exception as tragic and accusatory. He refuses to wear gloves to shake the hands of the lepers, and this action is meant to be emblematic, just as it is when Ernesto, celebrating his birthday with the colony’s caregivers, swims across the Amazon to the far shore where the lepers have been segregated. About the only thing one can say against Ernesto is that he can’t mambo—and I have a sneaking suspicion that this is also meant as a plus. Saints aren’t meant to dance.

*The Motorcycle Diaries* may be a sophisticated snow job, but it’s also true that the brutalities it serves up are not fictions and, in many ways, still exist in Latin America. Ernesto may not be the “real” Che—his diaries, for one thing, were written several years after the trip, when he was already embossing his image—but he represents a wish-fulfillment fantasy of how virtuous and humane we would be if we were revolutionaries. And since Salles doesn’t deeply explore Ernesto’s nascent communism, the film has the odd and no doubt intentional effect of seeming depoliticized. The young man of this movie transcends politics—which, of course, is the way to make his sainthood less controversial.

Pop culture, in fact, has already done that. Che’s murder by the CIA in 1967 sealed his martyrdom and made him a counterculture hero in the seventies—it was the rare college-dorm wall that didn’t sport his portrait. Today, Che’s image is on designer bags toted by people who have no idea who he was at all. If those same people see *The Motorcycle Diaries*, they still won’t really know who he is, but they’ll feel a lot more virtuous showing off those bags.

<http://nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/9889/>

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Review by| [Roger Ebert](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/roger-ebert) October 1, 2004   |

"The Motorcycle Diaries" tells the story of an 8,000 mile trip by motorcycle, raft, truck and foot, from Argentina to Peru, undertaken in 1952 by Ernesto Guevara de la Serna and his friend Alberto Granado. If Ernesto had not later become "[Che](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/che-2009)" Guevara and inspired countless T-shirts, there would be no reason to tell this story, which is interesting in the manner of a travelogue but simplistic as a study of Che's political conversion. It belongs to the dead-end literary genre in which youthful adventures are described, and then "...that young man grew up to be (Benjamin Franklin, Einstein, Rod Stewart, etc)."

Che Guevara makes a convenient folk hero for those who have not looked very closely into his actual philosophy, which was repressive and authoritarian. Like his friend Fidel Castro, he was a right-winger disguised as a communist. He said he loved the people but he did not love their freedom of speech, their freedom to dissent, or their civil liberties. Cuba has turned out more or less as he would have wanted it to.

But all of that is far in the future as Ernesto and Alberto mount their battered old 1939 motorcycle and roar off for a trip around a continent they'll be seeing for the first time. Guevara is a medical student with one year still to go, and Alberto is a biochemist. Neither has ever been out of Argentina. From the alarming number of times their motorcycle turns over, skids out from under them, careens into a ditch or (in one case) broadsides a cow, it would appear neither has ever been on a motorcycle, either.

First stop, the farm of Ernesto's girlfriend, whose rich father disapproves of him. Chichina ([Mia Maestro](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/mia-maestro)) herself loves him, up to a point: "Do you expect me to wait for you? Don't take forever." Shy around girls and not much of a dancer, Ernesto is unable to say whether he does or not.

The film, directed by [Walter Salles](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/walter-salles) ("[Central Station](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/central-station-1998)"), follows them past transcendent scenery; we see forests, plains, high chaparral, deserts, lakes, rivers, mountains, spectacular vistas. And along the way the two travelers depend on the kindness of strangers; they're basically broke, and while Ernesto believes in being honest with people, Alberto gets better results by conning them.

They do meet some good new friends: A doctor in Lima, for example, who gets them an invitation to stay at a leper colony. The staff at the colony, and the lepers. A farmer and his wife, who they meet on the road, and who were forced off their land by evil capitalists. Day laborers and their sadistic foreman. A garage owner's lonely wife. To get to the leper colony, they take a steamer down a vast lake. Guevara stands in the stern and looks down at a shabby smaller boat that the steamer is towing: This is the boat carrying the poor people, who have no decks, deck-chairs, dining rooms, orchestras and staterooms, but must hang their hammocks where they can.

By the end of the journey, Ernesto has undergone a conversion. "I think of things in different ways," he tells his friend. "Something has changed in me." The final titles say he would go on to join Castro in the Cuban Revolution, and then fight for his cause in the Congo and Bolivia, where he died. His legend lives on, celebrated largely, I am afraid, by people on the left who have sentimentalized him without looking too closely at his beliefs and methods. He is an awfully nice man in the movie, especially as played by the sweet and engaging [Gael Garcia](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/gael-garcia) Bernal (from "[Y Tu Mama Tambien](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/y-tu-mama-tambien-2002)"). Pity how he turned out.

The movie is receiving devoutly favorable reviews. They are mostly a matter of Political Correctness, I think; it is uncool to be against Che Guevara. But seen simply as a film, "The Motorcycle Diaries" is attenuated and tedious. We understand that Ernesto and Alberto are friends, but that's about all we find out about them; they develop none of the complexities of other on-the-road couples, like Thelma and Louise, Bonnie and Clyde or Huck and Jim. There isn't much chemistry. For two radical intellectuals with exciting futures ahead of them, they have limited conversational ability, and everything they say is generated by the plot, the conventions of the situation, or standard pieties and impieties. Nothing is startling or poetic.

Part of the problem may be that the movie takes place before Ernesto became Che, and Alberto (played by Rodrigo de la Serna) became a doctor who opened a medical school and clinic in Cuba (where he still lives). They are still two young students, middle-class, even naive, and although their journey changes them, it ends before the changes take hold. (Note: To be fair, I must report that a Spanish-speaking friend tells me the spoken dialogue is much richer than the English subtitles indicate.)

Salles uses an interesting device to suggest how their experiences might have been burned into their consciousness so that lessons could be learned. He has poor workers, farmers, miners, peasants, beggars, who pose for the camera, not in still photos, but standing as still as they can, and he uses black and white for these tableaux, so that we understand they represent memory. It's an effective technique, and we are meant to draw the conclusion that the adult Che would help these people, although it is a good possibility he did more harm to them.

As a child I faithfully read all of the titles in a book series named *Childhoods of Famous Americans.* George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, Benjamin Franklin got a job at a print shop, Luther Burbank looked at a peanut and got thoughtful. The books always ended without really dealing with the adults those children became. But, yes, in retrospect, we can see how crucial the cherry tree, print shop, peanut and Che's motorcycle were, because Those Young Men Grew Up, etc. It's a convenient formula, because it saves you the trouble of dealing with who they became. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-motorcycle-diaries-2004>

**The Motorcycle Diaries**: An extraordinary drama about the spiritual transformation that turns an intense young man into a revolutionary. Directed by [Walter Salles](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/search?author_first=Walter&author_last=Salles)

Review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

In 1952, 23-year-old Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (Gael Garcia Bernal) is two years away from completing his studies to become a doctor. His best friend Alberto Granado (Rodrigo de la Serna), a 29-year-old biochemist, has asked him to come along on a 5,000 mile journey on his motorcycle to see the continent. They will begin in Buenos Aires and travel across the Andes into Chile, through the Atacama Desert to Peru, and then into Venezuela. Ernesto's father is worried about his son's safety and gives him a gun. This intense young man is moved by the love of his family as they stand by the curb and wish him well. Then he and Alberto aboard "La Poderosa" (the Powerful One) and head out for their adventure. They barely miss crashing into a bus — a prelude of things to come as the motorcycle gives them all she's got, despite sputtering, leaks, and a bad muffler.

The first layover is in Miramar where Ernesto's fiancée lives on a large estate with her wealthy parents. He has brought her a puppy to try and appease her, but Chichina (Mia Maestro) is very disappointed about not seeing him for so long. She withholds sex as punishment but gives him 15 American dollars to purchase a bathing suit for her. Amidst many financial woes, Ernesto will hold onto her money even though Alberto continually tries to wrest it from him.

Not long after they are on the road again, the Mighty One breaks down. Tired of his friend's criticism of his arrogance and aloofness, Alberto places a story in the local newspaper about the visit of two touring doctors working on a cure for leprosy. It is enough to get a mechanic to fix their motorcycle and them invited to a local dance. However, when Alberto comes on to the wife of the man who fixed their bike, they are forced to make a hasty exit from town.

As they continue their journey, the upper-middle-class Ernesto is deeply angered by the poverty that he sees among tenants who have been kicked off their farms by wealthy landowners and indigenous peoples who have to fend for themselves by picking fruit or other menial labor. He is very taken with a penniless husband and wife who have been persecuted for their Communist ideals and forced to seek labor in the dangerous mines. His righteous indignation comes to the surface when he criticizes a man who hires men to work underground for the Anaconda Copper Company owned by an American firm, but does not provide any water for them. Ernesto curses the manager and throws a rock at his truck. In a vivid scene that conveys the hopelessness of these itinerant workers, Ernesto and his buddy are riding in the back of a truck with two peasants. "That cow is going blind," he remarks, and the young man responds: "So? All it will see is shit." Ernesto is stunned by the beauty of the ancient civilization of Machu Picchu and appalled at the rapaciousness of city life in Lima.

Brazilian director Walter Salles has made another film about justice issues that most American directors would not touch with a 50-foot pole. Similar to [*Central Station*](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=1702), which probed the dynamics of compassion, and [*Behind the Sun*](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=1702), which examined a way to break the cycle of revenge in a rural community, this extraordinary drama delves into the spiritual transformation of a sensitive young man as he is exposed to a world of suffering and deep poverty. It is based partly on Che Guevera's own memoir and Granado's book *Travels with Che Guevera.*

The climax of the journey comes when Ernesto and Alberto meet Dr. Pesce (Gustavo Bueno) who has arranged for them to work as volunteers at a leper colony on the Peruvian Amazon. The physician, a leading authority on the disease, gives them a copy of his unpublished novel and asks for their response. Alberto says it is very good but the always blunt Ernesto advises him to stick to medicine. The doctor is pleased with this young man's honesty.

At the leper colony, Ernesto is taken aback at the rules and the regulations of the nuns who serve as nurses and caretakers at the place. They force everyone to wear gloves around the lepers and will only serve dinner to those who attend mass. Ernesto rebels and takes a special interest in a young woman whose arm is badly disfigured. He stays with her most of the night and convinces her to have it treated. He reveals the same selflessness he demonstrated in another town when he gave some of his medicine for his severe asthma to a dying woman.

At a party to celebrate his 24th birthday, Ernesto gives an inspiring speech about his hopes that one day all the diverse peoples of the continent will acknowledge and celebrate their unity. He raises a glass and toasts Peru and "a United America." Then in an act of spontaneous solidarity with the lepers he has served, Ernesto swims across the Amazon, which segregates the leper colony from the hospital, laboratory, and living quarters of the staff. This crossing over to the other side to say farewell to his outcast friends marks the transformation of Ernesto's heart. He has decided to fight for justice and align himself with the poor and the downtrodden.

The world would soon know him as Che Guevara. By the time of his execution in Bolivia in 1967, he had passed into myth. Jean-Paul Sartre called him "the most complete man in history" and in 1968 with youthful protests kicking up around the world the slogan "Che lives" appeared on walls from Paris to Berkeley and everywhere else where change was in the air.

It was a long and challenging journey for this earnest Argentinian who didn't have the faintest idea of what lie ahead of him when he took off on a motorcycle journey in 1952. It forged his character and set his course as a revolutionary who would advise the rest of us, "Always be capable of feeling deep inside any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world."

The above review is from a Website called “Spirituality and Practice: Resources for Spiritual Journeys <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/9212>

#  [The Motorcycle Diaries - Ernesto Guevara, a revolutionary in the making](http://www.marxist.com/motorcycle-diaries-guevara-review.htm)

Written by Maarten Vanheuverswyn Thursday, 23 September 2004

From a Web site called “In Defence of Marxism” (Yes, they spell it “defence”: British version.)

[Below is an excerpt, as the plot summary is the same as the others, pretty much.]

They continue their journey on foot, thus coming upon two homeless peasants who have lost their land. This is only the first of their encounters with injustice and inequality, and it marks a significant darkening of the whole atmosphere of the film. The jokes have not disappeared but it is clear something has changed – there is a growing awareness of injustice.

The climax is reached when Ernesto and Alberto arrive at a Peruvian leprosy colony. Even here the patients are treated with insolence and are kept apart from doctors and nurses. But Ernesto refuses to follow the rules set down by the nuns. Since leprosy is not contagious, he does not want to wear gloves when dealing with patients. No wonder both friends soon become popular figures with the leprosy patients. This is also the moment Ernesto starts to deliver his first political speeches. On his birthday he talks about the unity of all Latin American countries, hence defying the artificial boundaries imposed by imperialism. To his credit, he symbolically swims across the river separating the sick from the ordinary people. He is greeted by a mass of people welcoming him, just as the revolutionary Che will be greeted by the masses in Cuba years later.

However, *The Motorcycle Diaries* is not about the later revolutionary fighter Che Guevara. The viewer is not presented with a hagiography of a person so often the subject of myth-making. Above all, this film deals with the human Ernesto Guevara de la Serna. The Che we see here is a sincere and simple man (and a clumsy dancer) suffering from bad asthma attacks, but also a compassionate person caring for his fellow human beings who is unwilling to reconcile himself with injustice. In that sense, this film certainly claims artistic qualities that go beyond the ordinary biographical sketches. Of all its merits, *The Motorcycle Diaries* is primarily a most enjoyable documentary that also aspires to the more universal themes of exploration, comradeship – and resistance.

<http://www.marxist.com/motorcycle-diaries-guevara-review.htm> Bottom of Form