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Categories

- [Main Page](#)
- [Articles \[57\]](#)
- [Blogs \[255\]](#)
- [Podcasts \[2\]](#)
- [Reviews \[78\]](#)

Recent

- [Gold Country Carbon Fiber Tandem](#)
- [LA Times Recumbent Article](#)
- [Steampunk Trike](#)
- [Reverse Gear Launches](#)
- [New Catrike Villager!](#)
- [Max Townsend's HPVelotechnik Street Machine GTe](#)
- [2009 Shimano Dura-Ace](#)
- [Oil Free and Happy](#)
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- [UltraLite Cot](#)
- [Just Two Weeks to the RBR Rally](#)
- ['BentRider/TerraTrike Car-Free Challenge](#)
- [Bacchetta Cafe Inspection Notice](#)
- [New Headrest Option For Catrikes](#)
- [J&B Paying Employees To Ride](#)
- [CycleVision 2008](#)
- [Alan Barnard's New Ecovelo Site](#)
- [Catrike Expedition Civil Service Edition Project Trike](#)
- [New TerraTrike Website Launches](#)

[« CycleVision Dates | Fallbrook NuVicni »](#)

[The Handsomest Man in Cuba](#)

Larry | 27 January, 2007 14:41



By LARRY VARNEY
Co-Editor

I will admit it: I'm a travel-holic. And, as usual, I blame my parents. Some of my oldest memories involve the fabled "Sunday drive", which sometimes was nothing more than my father just picking a direction, and off we went for a day trip in the Packard station wagon. Sometimes we wound up in fascinating locations like Holland, Michigan. Other times we spent the day seeing endless rows of corn, interspersed with the olfactory delights of hog farms. But it didn't matter: it was the trip itself that was important. To contradict Ry Cooder, the object was not to go nowhere fast, but to go slowly, savoring the countryside, seeing what was "out there".

My parents stoked the flames of my growing obsession by getting me a subscription to National Geographic even before I knew how to pronounce most of the names, much less knew where they were. I pored over the exploits of everyone from Sir Edmund Hillary to Jane Goodall. Even though I knew that the chances were slim that I could duplicate any of these adventures, I devoured them regardless. And to this day, give me a map, a travel book, a tale of an adventure in some far-off (or near) land, and I'm happy. And, I'm especially happy to let you know that such a book has just come into my hands, **The Handsomest Man in Cuba**, by Lynette Chiang (<http://www.galfromdownunder.com>).

If you're expecting the "standard" bicycle travel book, you're in for a surprise. It may not be a pleasant one! If you're looking for the typical travel guide, one that describes the various routes in and out of a location, the places to stay and eat, perhaps with little symbols on a map indicating prices and level of service, then this isn't the book. But if you're looking for the bicycling equivalent of Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley*, you've found it.

Lynette describes how she got to this place, how she left her life in Australia (home, job, car, everything) and headed out to see the world on on a folding bicycle made by Bike Friday. Her adventures in Cuba run the gamut from voracious bugs to inept sailors, from sleeping in a small tent on the beach to officially-sanctioned guest homes. And all along the way she does what every good writer does: she takes us with her.

If you're planning a trip to Cuba, bicycling or otherwise, then I would suggest that this book not be your only travel guide purchase - but it should be your first. Yes, I enjoy the Lonely Planet and Rough Guide books, and recommend them. But if you want to know what it's like to visit a place, if you want to get to know the people, if you want to know why you should even bother going, then you need this book.

First published in Australia and New Zealand in 2003 by Bantam, and later in the United States in 2004 by Small Wheel Press, many may not have seen this book. If you weren't lucky enough to find it then, your luck has changed: *The Handsomest Man in Cuba* is now going to be published by The Globe Pequot Press.

If you are a glutton for adventures like I am, if you spend your winters making plans for what you're going to do next year, or if you know someone else who is: buy this book. Lynette Chiang tells us what it was like for her to travel by bicycle in Cuba. It's not just the bland and simple cue sheets that try to pass as bike travel guides; we get to see and taste and hear the whole experience, good and bad. This is what a good travel book should do for the reader. I may not go to Cuba this year, or even the next, but *The Handsomest Man in Cuba* has left me feeling like I've already been there, and want to go back.

