



Pedalling

REVOLUTION

in Cuba

story and photos by **Melanie Chambers**

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On the trail of a guerrilla with a flower behind her ear, two women find adventure and unavoidable activism

The Caribbean island is a beautiful, but challenging place to ride. There's a scarcity of supplies, rough roads and machismo. These challenges can be overcome.

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hero who fought alongside Fidel Castro. After reading Sánchez's biography, *One day in December: Celia Sánchez and the Cuban revolution*, I became enthralled with the woman Cubans say was made of iron and honey. Strong, yet compassionate.

As a lifetime cyclist and traveller, I identify with this. In 1996, when planning my first overseas trip to Europe, I decided to cycle from Amsterdam to Spain. When friends said a woman on a bike was a target, I scoffed. I could take care of myself. I would see Europe the way I wanted to see Europe: on a bike, alone.

On that trip, I remember sitting in my sweaty bike gear at a café in Vigo, Spain. I stood out. Maria, a local, recognized this and invited me into her home that night to stay with her family. She saw, and admired, what I was slowly discovering: that a woman on a bike can be just as resilient, strong and independent as a man.

It was never my intention to champion women's rights when I became a travel writer. But the more I travelled with my bike and the more Marias I inspired, the more I met women who inspired me. I also like to think some men, those who think this isn't my place, might see women differently, but I'll never know for certain. In this respect, I unwittingly became a women's rights advocate from my saddle, tacitly sending the message that I could do this all by myself, on my own terms, without anyone's permission. I wonder if Sánchez felt this way. She was never just a woman: she wouldn't allow herself to be defined by gender. She was many things. "The Mother of All Cubans" fought with aplomb and style, hiding messages in a butterfly jasmine, the national flower, behind her ear, faking pregnancy to access checkpoints and recruiting Cubans to battle in one of the most punishing environments on the island, her home and the headquarters of the rebels, the Sierra Maestra.

People said I was crazy to ride these mountains: "You know how steep it is, right? How hot?" The strategic jungle location of the rebels' headquarters is also one of the least-visited areas of the country. It's certainly not the all-inclusive experience of most travellers, but this is what I wanted. And, from a bike, I felt more connected to the place and, of course, Sánchez.

My timing, in February, didn't coincide with a Celia Sánchez tour run by Canadian-owned Canbicuba, so I hired one of the company's guides, Airelis Gomez. Our 400-km route began in Santiago de Cuba, the country's second-largest city, where Castro announced from a balcony in the main square the victory of the rebel army over the Fulgencio Batista-led regime. We'd follow

the Caribbean Sea alongside the southwest coast of Cuba through towns such as Media Luna, where Celia was born, Pico Turquino, the country's highest peak and location of the rebel headquarters, and Pilon, her childhood home.

I picked up Gomez, 31, in Las Tunas. Her long, painted nails and thinly shaped eyebrows epitomized the look of most Cuban women, especially Sánchez, known for wearing giant hoop earrings and accessories with her fatigues. (No woman should have to sacrifice style for function.) Once Gomez got to know me, she made me promise I would pluck my scrubby eyebrows.

Growing up in the countryside, Gomez learned about Sánchez in school. "Celia. Fidel, Che, Frank, Camilo – we learned about them all. She was fighting for the right things and for putting a woman in a place beside a man. It's not every day you see a woman fighting as she did," Gomez said.

Gomez's father encouraged her to ride. She won silver in a grade school level 20-km scratch race three years in a row. At 15, she was only one of three women on her school team – her sister was on the national team.

"She was known for wearing giant hoop earrings and accessories with her fatigues. (No woman should have to sacrifice style for function.) "Sánchez's father was also her mentor; when he first discovered she was holding secret rebel meetings, he gave her his monogrammed rifle. Cubans say he raised his daughter like a man.

For me, my stepfather was the first person to tell me a woman could do anything a man could do. He also gave me a book about a Canadian woman who volunteered in Belize to help save jaguars. She cycled every day after work as riding kept her grounded. Then, while living there, she conceived of a cycling fundraiser. I remember thinking, at 20 years old, you can really do that stuff?

And so, with inspiration from the jaguar lady and others like her, I wrote my own narrative. Never wanting to be tied down by a house, or things, I did want to see the world on a bike. Travel writing by bike became my career.

Gomez was terrified about leading our voyage. It was her first solo-guiding trip. Getting stopped by the policia before we even began probably didn't abate her anxiety. After we pedalled out of Santiago de Cuba, through the filthy, gritty black exhaust from prerevolution Chevys and Fords, a cop stopped us for crossing the road in the wrong spot.

He asked Gomez for ID, looked her up and down and then turned his eyes to me. Scanning my legs, bike and face, his gaze was familiar. Anger started to build inside my chest, but getting scrappy with a cop wouldn't have gotten us out. So, I did what I know would. I smiled demurely. At this, I could feel the power shift. He won. He gained control. Why did it have to happen like that, still? With a gesture, he let us go. Pedalling until my legs began to hurt helped to work off the frustration.

As we left the city, the buildings changed to tall golden grass and stalks of corn and reminders of Sánchez: a school named after her, followed by billboards. Heroínas delapatriayl a revolucion, said one, with enormous faces of Celia and Vilma, Raul Castro's wife.

We arrived in Galleons, our first stop on the coast of the Caribbean Sea. We mentioned to the host, the mother of the family-run homestay (like a B&B, called casa particular), that we're here for Celia. "Uno momento..." she ran across the street and returned with another woman. The local librarian carried a picture of Sánchez. In the photo, Sanchez's hair was braided and wrapped around her head, like a Roman goddess. "She introduced women to the fight," said Dalvis Reyes Cobas. Iron and honey. For the rest of the evening, Cobas shared her stories of Sanchez, and the group of women listened intently.

The same happened again at the casa the next night in Marea del Portillo, farther along the coast. "Can you tell me about Celia?" I asked the owner. She too ran inside her house and grabbed a picture of herself as a teenager standing next to Castro. She worked at the nearby hotel that Sanchez helped build for Cuban farmers. "It was meant as a place for farmers to rest. She fought for the rights of farmers, labourers, women and children," she says. Three years after Celia died, it became a tourist-only resort.

On Day 3, we confronted the Maestra Mountains where horses and buggies substituted for cars. Our hybrid bicycles, laden with panniers, bounced over the cracked pavement and gravel. The road was a dividing line between two diverse topographies: to our left was a bright blue sea as wide as the sky, its spray sprinkling our faces; on our right, a dense and dark jungle emitting heavy humidity weighed us down.

The heat also emanated up from the black asphalt. No clouds offered shade as we began our first of many steep climbs. Legs slowing down to a painful rhythm, I saw the remains of a rusted ship's hull protruding out of the water. Revolution ghosts. Breathing heavy and taking it all in, despite the heat and pain, I felt it was moments like this that remind me why I love what I do. The farther I cycled through Sánchez's Cuba, the more I discovered stories of a similar self-assured and determined spirit. With every billboard, painting or other reminder of Sanchez, I felt like she was beside me, beckoning me to keep going, and to not take any crap along the way. Luring us up each peak was always a revolutionary plaque or symbol. But the most revered was a monument in the town of El Uvero. At 5:15 a.m. on May 28, 1957, the rebels won their first military victory. Sánchez was there. Pedalling on, it was eerily quiet with the background hush of ocean waves and revolution ghosts.

On our third day, during our longest ride of a tough 90 km, we rested out of the midday sun under a gazebo at the trailhead to Pico Turquino – Cuba's highest peak at 1,975 m. Just before the start of revolution in 1953, Sánchez and her father hiked 11 km to the summit carrying a life-size bronze bust of José Martí, the first national independence war hero, to commemorate his centenary. Sánchez's strength motivated me through the remaining hot and hilly 40 km.

On our final day, 80 km from Manzanillo to Las Tunas, the headwinds were so fierce the farmers in the rice field walked faster than us. Watching the tall golden stalks of sugarcane leaning sideways, I thought of all the places, and cultures, where I faced skepticism as a woman on a bike. "Why you no married?" asked the Italian shepherd. "Where's your husband?" queried the Peruvian B&B host.

In these contexts, I always felt I had to justify myself, my unique status, by riding faster than my usual pace to ensure I wasn't the "slow" girl. Or worse, I wouldn't have to push away someone's wandering hands. Can't I be alone and not be lonely or needy?

During our final evening in Las Tunas, I sipped strong margaritas at a bar with Gomez. My new skirt, purchased in the market that afternoon, fluttered delicately on my tanned muscular thighs. Wearing frilly clothes and lipstick, I revelled in being girly again. Feminine isn't weak. That I was feminine and fierce was glorious. We weren't dressed up to pick up. We were dressed up because we could be. Iron and honey.

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