The Motorcycle Diaries
Viewing Guide

The Motorcycle Diaries follows the journey of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and his friend Alberto Granado as they travel around South America in the early 1950s. The motorcycle in question, an ageing Norton 500cc, collapses under the strain in the early stages of the journey, making the title somewhat ironic. Nevertheless, the pair continue on foot, hitching lifts where they can and meeting with people from all walks of life and from many different cultures. The film is a record of their true journey, a visual diary of the events and experiences that they encountered on their epic trek.

The journey Alberto and Ernesto undertake is both physically and psychologically rigorous. What happens to them in the course of their travels has a profound effect on their thinking and they end the trek quite different people from who they were when they started. Although Ernesto was already 23 and Alberto 29 when they set out, the journey is a kind of rite of passage for them: they set out as boys and return as men. Both Ernesto and Alberto are from privileged backgrounds and are clearly unprepared for what they see and hear as they leave the security of their regular lives behind.

Directions: Answer these questions on binder paper as we watch the film.

THE EARLY STAGES:
1. The two friends are introduced by the way of short ‘biogs’, like a fact file in a magazine. What details are we given about each of them and why?

2. What is the relationship between Ernesto and his mother like? What does this say about his character at this point in the story?

3. The first stop along the journey is at the home of Chinchina, Ernesto’s girlfriend. How are her family portrayed and why do you think this stay is presented in some detail in the film?

4. What is the mood in the early stages of the film? Consider: What do we see the characters doing and saying? What locations do we see? What effect do the lighting and sound have?

5. How is the difference in character between Ernesto and Alberto conveyed even in these early stages?

SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS:
The episode in which Ernesto visits the dying woman marks a turning point both in terms of his character development and in the mood of the film. Before this scene we have been watching the antics of two young men out for a good time. Beyond, the mood becomes much darker and the film seems to take on a ‘purpose’.
6. What do you think the filmmaker was trying to convey in the first half of the film? (It may help to think about how you were feeling just before this scene takes place.)

7. What aspects of Ernesto’s character become more prominent beyond this point?

8. Many biographies of Ernesto’s life state that his experience of the mine at Chuquicamata was extremely influential upon his political thinking, yet we do not see the treatment of the workers portrayed in any great detail in the film. Why do you think this is?

**LATER STAGES:**
The latter stages of the film take place in a leper colony where Ernesto and Alberto had set up some ‘work experience’ prior to setting out on their travels. By this point the story has become very focused on Ernesto and the effect that his experiences on the road have in terms of his future development as a hero of the people. The friends stay at the colony for three weeks, enabling both of them, and us as the observing audience, to become emotionally involved with the characters they meet and the situations they find themselves having to deal with.

9. How are the psychological changes that the pair go through on the road reflected in their physical appearance in this stage of the film?

10. What do you see as the main episodes in Ernesto’s psychological journey whilst at the leper colony?

11. The film takes on a much more symbolic tone during this stage; for example Ernesto talks about the river as more than just a physical division of the two parts of the colony. What other imagery or symbolism can you think of during their time at the colony?

12. Think back to the speech Ernesto gives at his birthday party. (Part of this is replicated below)* What indications are we given of his motivation for his future role as a political leader?

   Ernesto’s speech
   * “Even though we are too insignificant to be spokesmen for such a noble cause, we believe, and this journey has only confirmed this belief, that the division of America into unstable and illusory nations is a complete fiction. We are one single mestizo race from Mexico to the Magellan Straits. And so, in an attempt to free ourselves from narrow-minded provincialism, I propose a toast to Peru and to a united America.”

13. Is the film what you understand by ‘a diary’? What were your expectations before you saw the film and were they realized? Would you include more traditional ‘diary’ elements?