



Fifteen years ago, Lynette Chiang abandoned her award-winning advertising career in Australia and hopped on a bike. First she rode the length of the UK, then ended up in Costa Rica from where she launched her assault on Cuba ... again on a bike. Her book, 'The Handsomest Man in Cuba', is a hilarious and touching account of her three-month journey cycling the highways and footpaths of Cuba. Since then her wheels have scaled volcanoes in Hawaii, explored the hilly Chiapas and the flat-as-a-tortilla Yucatan in Mexico, traversed Italy from Fano on the Adriatic to Porto Ecole on the Mediterranean, and conquered the world's highest payed road (all 16.000 feet of it) in Peru. Lynette's bike of choice was a folding travel number from a small US company called Bike Friday. She now works for Bike Friday blogging and filming her adventures.

#### Do you have a base of some sort? Df

Df

Df

I'm based in Eugene, Oregon, because that's where Bike Friday's based, but I spend very little time there. I spend most Lynette of my time on the road as a digital nomad, an ambassador at large for the company. I don't have kids or a family and there's no point coming home and staring at the television is there? So I basically stay moving around, living with customers as a surrogate daughter, aunt, sister ... For example, my Route 66 DVD was done during the three months I spent in Wisconsin. I staved with Lon Haldeman, who's the Race Across America champion, and his wife. They run a bike tour company called PAC Tour. I did the tour and then homestayed with them while I produced that video: that was my contribution. It's good for Bike Friday, it's good for PAC Tour, it's good for audiences who enjoy it and it's good for me too. I get a bit of kudos and I sell a few, getting a little bit of money to maintain the rage. It's also good for the Ocopa orphanage that we visited [in the DVD] because people now go there, donate and support those kids.

## win, win is my definition of success.

You win, I win, and at least three other people win. No one individual makes a ton of money but everybody makes a little bit, or wealth in kind. I actually think this the way to live, the way to have a rich life. You buy something to give yourself a good feeling, but if you've already got the good feeling, you don't need to do the intermediate step which is get money. I'd never thought of it quite like that, but you're absolutely right. Either that, or as one customer told me, "You don't have to be rich, just hang around rich people having fun." In any Lynette case, to me, being rich is not about making money, but about rich communication. What else is there? There's bricks and mortar and there's communication. Communication binds everything, or lack of tears it apart. So how does what you do reflect that? My official job title is 'Customer Evangelist'. It was a title I gave myself as a joke. I'd been reading about people like Guy Kawasaki and the whole Apple cult ethos, and I thought, that's what I am at Bike Friday: I am a customer evangelist. So I put that on my business card as a bit of a joke. They say America's a place where it's all about self, number one, the individual, but a the nice thing is they seem to really want you to succeed there. They're like, "Customer Evangelist? Cool!" If I call myself Customer Evangelist here [in Australia], it's like, "Who does she think she is?" I'm not sure I could've ever given myself this title six years ago had I stayed here (see page 105 \* Wings to fly). Maybe it's different now.

Lynette The word evangelist has pretty religious connotations doesn't it? Df

I think in this Google era, the era of hip new terms, people are making up new words and phrases all the time and finding Lynette new ways to express themselves. In my opinion, political correctness, another linguistic development of recent years, is a scourge, but where there's a scourge, there's a godsend, like yin and yang ... The backlash to it. Df

### Win, win, win,



## Do you live by rote and repetition? Why not imovation and greation?

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Lynette Yes. It's like there are terrible things happening in places like Burma, and yet in that part of the world there's also incredible spirituality. So at one extreme there's incredible philosophy and spirituality and at the other genocide. When you go so far one way, there's an equal and opposite ... Df

Something pulling you back. So let's pull you back. Was it six years ago that you gave yourself the title of customer evangelist or was it six years ago that you bought your first Bike Friday?

Lynette I bought my first Bike Friday almost 15 years ago now when I left Australia in 1997. I left Australia on a Bike Friday to travel from the bottom of Britain to the top; it was my maiden voyage. It was also me saying goodbye to two fairly decent careers, but ones that drove me up the wall in the end. I trained as a computer programmer. That was my degree.

### I don't know why because I'm an atypical Asian; I'm terrible at maths.

The other career I did after 10 years of that was advertising.

Why did you move from computer programming into advertising? Lynette I started thinking, who does these television ads, billboards and that stuff, someone must ... I don't know why, but I think it was because I saw an ad for Award School and I noticed the copy of the ad was very crisply written and it communicated to me immediately; it wasn't fluff. So I applied for that school. It's a very competitive thing; I think they get a few hundred applicants and they pick you from that. In the first year I approached it with my very left-brain and of course I didn't get in. Then I did an alternative, less competitive course called Ad School which was run by George Betsis and Phil Atkinson for people who basically didn't get into Award School. They taught us

## own inner creativity

Df

than writing ads. I applied for Award School the following year and got in. I was actually the national winner but I could not get a job. Everybody below me got the jobs. You can posture all you like, but believe me, when you're 30 years old and you're Chinese and outspoken or whatever, maybe you're not going to be everyone's cup of chai. Maybe I just wasn't that good either. How did you get someone to eventually give you a go? Lynette I learned that you've got to make your offer attractive for people to give you a go. Attractive people like the Cindy Crawfords or Paris Hiltons of the world have people just flock around them. The rest of us have to make an effort. I called up Siimon Reynolds who was one of the role models in advertising at the time and I said, "I'll work for you for free, do your laundry, buy you lunch, get your girlfriends presents ... and you teach me everything you know for three months." That was when Siimon was out on his own in a tiny serviced office. He was sitting on one side of the desk and I was on the other and I could watch him operate. Every morning he would have 10 appointments and he would do 10 cold calls, he was very systematic. The way he teaches advertising is to put 25 boxes on the page and to fill every box with an idea and not stop till you've done it; and then do another; and then do another; and when you're just exhausted, take a break and look at what you've done. Which is really quite the opposite to the way you're bought up if you're in a left-brain field where everything is procedural and documented. Creativity can be a thankless task, but if you hit it right on the nail you'll be an Elton John or the Beatles and you'll make a ton of money. That right-brain area isn't necessarily

a different way of looking at things, more about seeking your lucrative for most, but

## we're all attracted to it in some form; that's why we make macramé lampshades.

So, basically, that's how

I got into advertising. Once I'd worked for Siimon I did a bit of freelancing here and there. I don't know if it's changed, but in those days you worked for free to build credibility. It's a field that will certainly put your ego in place because you live and die on your ideas. I remember sitting opposite one customer who had a jewellery shop and I quickly realised that, after spending years being fanciful with visual puns, what I was writing was going to be their mortgage money and I'd be literally tossing it in the bin if I didn't get it right. But creativity is very subjective, so what's 'right'? Then I got a job at Chai Day Mojo with art director Max Landrak. We mounted a massive campaign to get in to see the creative director Sean Cummins. We made a mobile to hang above his desk which had a picture of us on it and said, "We'll keep hanging around until you call us." We had some fun, fun ideas. I think advertising definitely gives you humility, but it also tends to develop massive egos at the same time ... yin and yang again. Then we did a bit of freelancing and we won a Cannes Bronze Lion for print; it was one of only two given to Australians that year. Then I got a job at Saatchi & Saatchi Melbourne... You work your way up. I got to the point where, like anything,

## *I just wanted to break* out and do something truly self-directed.

It wasn't running my own business at that time, although, in my 40's, that's now more interesting to me. Something made me think, I can't do this any more, I have to go out and make myself uncomfortable.

- *Df* What were you breaking out of?
- *Lynette* Up until the age of 30 I was completely scared of travelling. I was fearful of going outside my own postcode. My father was fairly restrictive it's a very Chinese thing. He came to Australia when he was 15 and worked on the wharves by day, studying by night ... But, like I said, I don't think I was that good a student because my creative side conflicts with my procedural side. I'm not super left-brained or super right-brained. I would never call myself a truly creative person. I don't even call myself a writer; I call myself a documenter because things have to happen to me. I can be pragmatic and I can be creative, but there are people obviously who can be way better at both. I don't know what's better in life, quite frankly. I think there's space for all of us. Even though I haven't got children I've learnt a lot about what I would teach my kids if I had kids and that would be to guide them but not force them. Let their intuition come out with subtle nudging and prodding. I see so many people trying to shape their kids but they'll end up bent out of shape and that could go many ways: doing great or doing drugs, becoming neurotic, ADD, taking antidepressants, being hyper-creative ... or being indecisive. Indecisiveness is something that I battle with even today as a result of my upbringing. When you're young and you're not allowed to think for yourself, if you're damned if you do, damned if you don't that's a recipe for indecisiveness.
- **Df** Is your father still around?
- *Lynette* He's still alive. My Dad's my dad you know. He absolutely means well and he admits he's got a bad temper, but I know he just meant the best. Except the ones that truly, truly need help, most parents are doing the best they can.
- *Df* So let's just go back, how did you break out of that track you were on in Sydney?





## \* Wings to fly By Samatha Proudley

Taking flight is a commitment to self-discovery and growth. Change your view and the world is new again. The horizon is larger. Comfort zones and habits dissolve. There is space to dream, experiment, create. People, places and opportunities you would never meet at home. It's pretty hard to invite the infinite world of possibility over for afternoon tea: you must go out and meet it.

Journeys of self-discovery and reinvention are universal, but for antipodeans, the need to go has always been great. For nations so remote, so fledgling, we literally go to great lengths to become part of 'all that is fair and good' in the world. We're still doing it.

We – by which I mean an affluent, educated minority - are experiencing an unparalleled, superabundance of choice. Societal expectations about the role of the individual have relaxed, but our expectations of life as individuals have plumed skyward. We have the resources and freedoms to be whatever we want, wherever we want, since 'career' is more portable and autonomous than ever. But in a world where specialisation reigns, what is it - that one thing - that we want to be? The question is made more difficult by our increasing consciousness of the ethics involved in this choice. 'What shall I do?' has become, 'What should I do?' At

the very least, we should recognise that this surplus of choice and expectation might confound our fulfillment. Spend any time where people from the affluent, educated minority are free to travel and you soon realise how pervasive this quandary of purpose is and how, instinctively, it propels us to roam. Because roam, it seems, is what we do, when we are unsure what to do. Travel is an acceptable 'out' when the largesse of our dreams is hemmed by expectation, circumstance or fear. The gap year - that culturally enshrined post-adolescent rite of travel and personal exploration – is no longer confined to early adulthood ... or to a year.

But taking flight is, ultimately, freeing, not escapist. Who hasn't felt the spiritual cleanse of the long weekend away? It gives us distance from our individual reality. Distance from the heave of life, which steamrolls well-etched plans (and slays fluffy ideas and loose intentions). It adds to our experience of other realities and gives us the dreaming space to imagine other paths for ourselves. If we aren't on a path that reflects our individual desires and ethics, and demands our unique talents - and many of us aren't - we need to be able to imagine one. Without this, there's no point having wings.

Lynette I got on a bicycle. I hadn't had very much experience on bikes but someone gave me a little map he'd printed off the internet. The internet was quite new at the time. The page had a small picture of Britain and there was a dotted line right up through the middle - it was a riding track. I looked at that and I had the first decisive thought of my life: I can do that.

## It was not, Wow, that'd be cool. It was, I can do that; I'm going to do that!

I'd never thought of England as being an interesting place because I thought, Oh they just look like Australians. Then all of a sudden the idea of England became interesting to me, but I was scared I'd get lost in the Underground - part of my hyper-sensitivity at that young age to being on my own. I should add that my partner at the time was an extremely supportive person so I could take refuge under him. I don't know what's wrong with that frankly; someone with money who treats you well with a fantastic outlook on life ... What was wrong with that, I ask myself now and then when things look tough? I don't know, Timing, probably. So I did that ride from the bottom of the UK to the top. I then thought: what do I do now? Oh, there's Ireland. So I went to Ireland and rode around there. Then I met a woman and her husband on Windsor platform who said, "You should come to Costa Rica, my family are there." I thought, ok I'll do that and bought a Lonely Planet on Costa Rica to see where it was. One thing, one key thing, I've worked out is that if you want to change your life, there's one simple thing you can do. Just say "yes" more often than "no". That's all you have to do because

## will change.

No is a very confining thing; it's about containing rather than expanding (see page 106 \*Say

YES). So I said, "Oh yes," and I went to Costa Rica. I ended up working for Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising (now Tribu) in Costa Rica. I believe that whatever you've experienced in the past can be useful in the present. I walked in there and said, "I worked for Saatchi & Saatchi ..." Like any giant conglomerate, Saatchi has corporate and affiliated offices all over the world. The owner of the agency, Jorge Oller, welcomed me in, calls me 'Chinita'. One of my conditions of employment was that I could go off and explore, because that's why I'm here, on this journey. People always ask me, "How did you get by? Did you have money or something?" No, you just have to be very smart about it. I said to Jorge, "I will give you total value for three months, then I'll go away for three months. Then I'll come back and give you total value again." This notion of relentless nine-to-five burns people out and studies have shown they're not operating optimally anyway. So Jorge reluctantly let me do my thing and that's when I took a side-trip to Cuba. It's just a two hour flight from Costa Rica. If anyone wants to visit Cuba it's one of the better ways to do it.

Did you know you were going to write a book about it when you went?

Df

- only just exploded in the past few years.
- And if it was kind of like a blog, then their popularity is even more recent. Df

### opportunities come up every day. Just say yes and believe me your life

Lynette Not really, although I'd already started a little website. A colleague of mine from way back, David Fricker, set up this rudimentary portal for me. That was back in 1997, only 10 years ago, but the internet wasn't widely used ... it's really

That's right, although it wasn't really a blog - just a rudimentary html page on YAH00/geocities, one of those



cheap free sites. He put up this thing saying, "Where in the world is Lynette?" I wasn't able to upload content; I'd have to write to him and he would upload it, but suddenly it opened up a window of communication with total strangers. I thought, wow, I can put my stories up there. I was also already writing a little bit for A2B magazine, an alternative transport magazine in the UK. I would send little stories across to them about my travels and they would illustrate them. The interesting thing is that even as far back as when I was a computer programmer working for the Department of Defence in Canberra. I have this distinct memory of sitting down and writing a memo. It was just a paragraph, but I couldn't write to save myself. I just couldn't get the words together. Even in advertising, I'd struggle over a paragraph or a copy line for days and wonder why I was even in the field. At school I wrote a certain amount of what I would call 'fraudulent' writing. I remember sitting down and writing six poems in half an hour. I just made them sound deep and meaningful.

- By throwing in some really big words? Df
- Lynette Some metaphors and alliteration ... Df Lvnette
- without stressing. So basically, that's my faltering background in writing.

## Then all of a sudden when I got on a bicycle the words just flowed.

was because for the first time in my life I had something to write about. I soon found it effortless, having something to say and wanting to share it on that little old webpage. A webpage permits total self-indulgence, it's a cyber-soapbox. If people don't want to read it, they don't have to. People criticise blogs, "Oh all those people dumping," but so what, at least it's better than the alternatives, being on anti-depressants and binge-drinking because of no other outlet express themselves.

## If you want to write better, I'd say, put yourself in strange situations.

it, then I'm happy.

Df Have you been surprised that The Handsomest Man in Cuba has been as well received as it has? Lynette I am. I mean it wasn't a huge blockbuster or anything, but I get an email probably every other day from someone who's But it wasn't meant to be an objective look at the culture; it was your experience of it. Df

And psychological tricks. Of course it had to be about angst and depression with a few impressive analogies thrown in.

Peter Carey – that level of metaphor, the master of metaphor, I won first prize, but I always felt like a total fraud. The key to feeling successful is feeling comfortably challenged. Comfortably challenged is when you can produce the goods with a bit of thinking, but

I think it

I haven't done any formal writing courses, and my writing isn't perfect perfect, but I know what I want to say, and if you read it and you get

read it and really enjoyed it (see page 109 \* ... in Cuba). To the point where I wonder sometimes whether other authors get the same feedback. I imagine millions of people email Bill Bryson, but do other nobodies get emails saying, "You really forced me to think about myself today," or "You made me late for work." I also welcome it when people tear my writing to shreds or attack my views because then I've made them put their knife and fork down and expend energy on me. One quy wrote and said, "I think this is the most significant piece of rubbish I have ever read." He said, "If you're going to tell me about a country, tell me about the culture and what you experienced." I've actually posted it on my blog.

### \* in Cuba om 'The Handsomest Man in Cuba' By Lynette Chiang

Pluete Citing

2

Being the only guest I am the centre of attention. The conversation immediately swings around to how hard Cubans work for so little pay, and the lack of *comida* (food). This is graphically illustrated by the hand gestures Latinos are famous for: the forefinger wiped across the forehead (hard work), the thumb and forefingers rubbing together (money) and the fingers tapping the lips (food). I am shown a *libretta*, or ration book, issued to every Cuban man, woman and child at the start of each year. This little brown passport metes out the year's food, soap and cigarette allowances at extremely nominal prices. Each day of the year Cubans go to their local bodega a (warehouse) and collect their allowances. There's a page of 31 squares, each square representing a single bread roll: one

per person per day. Other pages mete out rice (four pounds a month) beans (four pounds), flour, sugar, margarine, cooking oil, milk (for infants only), meat, even cigarettes (strong or mild). I note that laundry soap is at least separate from personal soap, each person being allowed a small bar of each every six weeks.

"See these shoes?" says the barman. "Twenty dollars, but you can only buy them with dollars."

The dark stocky man dispensing refresco gaseosa, or soft drinks in cans, is comparatively well dressed. His shirt, belt, jeans, in fact everything higher than subsistence level, it seems, cannot be bought with pesos. He, like many people I will meet, has access to the magic dollar, either through having family in the States, or trabajo particular, that is, private,

usually illegal, work. Barbara invites me to go to her mother's house for a hot shower, since my hotel has only stone-cold water and tonight there is a chill in the air sweeping across that unviewable water view. I walk with her a couple of blocks to the house and we talk. She is around 40. divorced with two children and now living with her mother and aunt. A young man suddenly appears at her side, and they exchange words, but don't touch; a strange banter. He disappears just as quickly. She tells me he is her boyfriend, and rolls her eyes. A young man at play, appearing and disappearing on a woman in need of companionship.

Copies of the book are available from www.galfromdownunder.com/cuba

Lynette Thank you! I think there are enough books, a lot of very scholarly books, on Cuba. The book is simply my experience as someone who's sat on a skinny saddle, who gave and received hospitality and friendship. The most common comment I get is, "I really feel like I know you." They write directly to me like we're old friends. Because of the kind of person I've become in my job as a customer evangelist, I find it easy to interact on that level. Bike Friday is not a mainstream corporate entity.

### It survives and prospers by not being concerned about the mainstream.

people you want to talk to.

Df Absolutely. If you spread yourself too thin it becomes something other than what you want it to be.

- you can invigorate that of others.
- Are you full time working for Bike Friday? Df Yes, I'm a full time employee. Lynette

Df

And then you do other things on the side like the DVDs and writing for Fast Company's website? Lynette interact with your customers and total strangers to get a better result.

## work and home as separate. It's not

suit when you get home, but you're living in the same skin at work or at home. I don't believe in treating people outside work any different to people within. I believe in having a single way of dealing with people and making it a better or worse place depending on how you do it. I see the blog as helping people blur the line between work and life, that's what I've done. The Cuba book wouldn't have come about without my Bike Friday, which I might not have bought had I not become frustrated with being a cubicle dweller in advertising and computing ... Everything in life is connected and that's what I'm trying to get at here. Where do you want to take that?

In my job I have a feeling of how I want to talk to certain people, and only those people. That's all we need. You don't need to worry about anyone else but the

Lynette And people get that, they'll feel that; but if the feeling is authentic and intact, they will support you. That's the way a small business like Bike Friday has been able to stay in business. A lot of other companies have gone to the wall trying to run a small niche business. For Bike Friday it's about having rabid customer service and rabid customers. It becomes much more of a relationship. My job is all about relationship: creating it, maintaining it and nurturing it in every way. One of our customers for example was facing a hip replacement. He's one of these people whose physicality is intrinsic to his identity, and when that kind of person loses their ability to do things, they can become very depressed. He was very down and I was concerned. I got a bunch of people to email him from all over the world. Some of them even rang him up. He said, "What are you doing to me? You know I hate email, now I have to respond to everyone." Then he added, "It was a life-saver." You can create a difference like that just using communication. You create not only your your own life,

Fast Company is a little opportunity that was presented to me by Fred Ianotti, a cyclist and PR expert. Fast Company were looking for people to blog for them under the Work/Life category. It's not a paying gig and frankly it's a lot of work because I really try to create something worth reading and something relevant to business. I write about how you might

## People think of

- you can take off your three piece

Lynette Well ...

- Df Do you know or are you just taking it as it comes?
- *Lynette* I've been taking it as it comes, but now that I've reached the age of 45 I'm becoming more pragmatic. Apart from doing the book I've also done videos, shot with a simple digital camera. I call them 'handlebar movies'. I discovered this while fiddling with the movie switch on the camera one day. I don't do second takes and because the camera is so small people don't realize they're being filmed, so they don't freeze up. I edit in iMovie, create a bit of music in Garageband, and they're good enough to be shown on huge screens. I've shown these films all over the world, Apple Store theatres, travel and bicycling audiences ...
- *Df* Is this what you want to do more of?
- *Lynette* I'm already thinking of the next thing. I'm writing a book about the work that I've done. The title's going to be something like, *How I helped turn a tiny company into a slightly bigger company* ... or something. The premise would be how you can transform whatever pen-pushing job you're doing without necessarily having to change jobs. I started at Bike Friday in sales and I soon realised

## I just wasn't very good at saying, "And how would you like to pay for that?"

I was much more interested in

how people used the bikes, and communicating that in the most entertaining and informative way. I don't want to be a billionaire; I'm aiming to feel like I have all I need to do whatever I want to do including give some away to others. If I don't have that in figures

# at least I can help by communication, a currency I have in plentiful supply.

I'm also interested in one part of society

which I think is marginalised and that's seniors. Bike Friday's adventurous customers are mainly 55 and over.

### Df Is that because they've got the time and money on their hands?

*Lynette* Yes, it's a travel bike, and they have time and money to travel. I wrote a blog entry on *Fast Company* called "This is a senior moment, put me down now." Basically, my 65-year-young customer Adrian and I were standing in front of a Senior Week poster featuring a woman in a big floppy hat and big t-shirt, black bag and polyester pants. It was such an un-aspirational stereotype. Nothing against the woman herself, but that is how our society characterises seniors. In the Melbourne bicycle touring club there's a guy who's 92 and still leading trips. The thing is there's no off-ramp to being a senior. How do you want to spend your senior years? I've started thinking about what kind of life I want as a senior, especially being a person who's on my own. I'm 45 and I probably won't have kids. I may be single for the rest of my life. Right now there are fantastic women in their 40's and 50's, intelligent, doing stuff, out there, interesting, but they're just somehow on the fringes of society; society doesn't cater for them; they don't have any support. It's not like you want to live in a commune, but perhaps there needs to be a virtual commune. I just bought a domain name for a website called *The Old and the Restless*. It really came from exposure to these super seniors, and the need to connect them with like minds. I want to create an environment that people can aspire to, like my mother who does pole dancing at 70 and likes techno, and acid trance and jazz and Bing Crosby ... Forget me gallivanting all over the world on a folding bicycle – to me, that's an interesting person.











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