ACCESS: VÉLO CUBA: MAKING THE IMPOSIBLE POSIBLE

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We should have brought a bike stand.

You know those little wooden stools we had in our bathrooms as kids, the ones we needed to climb up on to be able to spit the toothpaste into the sink? When we walked into Vélo Cuba, a customer was standing beside his bike, holding it upright, while two mechanics sat on those same tiny stools, examining his drivetrain. In a corner, someone cleaned a chain in a stockpot full of dirty solvent. Ten bikes of varying age, size, brand and quality hung from a rack rigged to the ceiling.

We'd come to Cuba to bike tour for a week and, anticipating that bike-related things would be hard to come by on the island, had brought a few things for the shop as a token of appreciation. Needless to say, handing over some bungee cords and random 26-inch tires felt a little bit like bringing a Cuban car mechanic a few seat belts and a wiper blade. Good effort, but next time can you bring a couple of quarts of oil?

"Unfortunately," says Nayvis Díaz Labout, co-founder of Vélo Cuba, "in Cuba we don't have the presence of worldwide brands like Shimano, Trek, Specialized, Cannondale, Cube and others, so every day we have to engineer things both to keep our bikes up and running and to be able to service the bikes that people bring us."

For exactly four years now, Havana's Vélo Cuba has been keeping bikes more than up and running; Díaz Labout and her team have shown that investing in the business of bicycles is investing in the betterment of people and society.

Many people associate Cuba's economic woes with the trade embargo imposed by the U.S. (first on all exports to Cuba, by President Eisenhower in 1960, and later expanded by President Kennedy in 1962 to include imports as well). Devastation came more recently, however, with the fall of the Soviet Union — Cuba's stalwart trade partner — in 1991. On the island, the unstable '90s became known as the "período especial," a decade characterized by economic depression that led to radical reforms in industry, agriculture, health and rationing. Extreme shortages of oil meant that Cubans needed to find alternate methods of transportation; according to Díaz Labout, some 90 percent of Cubans used bikes for mobility during the Special Period.

She did too, on a "28-inch Russian frame" that her mom had to rig because, at 4 feet 9 inches, she couldn't reach the pedals.

"During my university years, which were during the Special Period, the only way to get around was to ride almost 40 kilometers [25 miles] a day on that bike," she says.

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After she got her degree in industrial engineering, Díaz Labout spent nearly 20 years working in Cuba and abroad as head of human resources for both Cuban and foreign companies. Then, like so many of us, she was struck with a desire to put what she had learned as a professional into a project of her own.

"I conducted a market study," she said, "and proved that, with an appropriate business strategy, working with bicycles could have a positive impact on Cuban society."

In the U.S., in 2018, we've seen how bicycling contributes to healthy economies, people and places. But in Cuba, in the 2010s? Many people thought there were bigger fish to fry.

"Friends and family told me, 'But nobody rides bikes!'" recalls Díaz Labout.

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The severe economic crisis that forced hundreds of thousands of people onto two wheels during the '90s did not leave them wanting to pedal into the 2000s. In fact, says Díaz Labout, many Cubans had abandoned bikes entirely, haunted by the shortages and forced physical mobility of the Special Period. Furthermore, she says, the lack of bike lanes and safety accessories also made bicycles less acceptable. However, in order to promote economic recovery around the turn of the century, the Cuban government began to enact policy changes, one of which was to encourage the growth of the private sector. This meant that Díaz Labout's idea to bring bicycles back into Cuban quotidian life could gain traction in a legitimate way.

Although Cuba is governed by the Communist Party, and most industries are still owned and operated by the state, in the early 2000s then-president Raúl Castro realized that the old way of doing things was no longer sustainable. In 2013, says Díaz Labout, the Cuban government delisted almost 200 jobs that had previously been under state control. Fortunately for her, the world of bikes fell under this newly opened umbrella of potential private ownership, and she was poised to apply for a license to open Vélo Cuba. The tricky bit, she said, was coming up with the initial capital required to launch the business. Ironically, it was the fact that she owned a car that allowed her to open the bike shop.

"I worked for a Spanish cruise line for three years and was able to buy a car," said Díaz Labout. "So I sold it and hence my initial capital. The apparent madness of selling my own method of transportation — something nearly impossible for most Cubans — turned out to be a great idea."

And Vélo Cuba is more than just a great idea. Although her formal business plan detailed how the shop would provide high-quality repair work and tourist services, it was important to Díaz Labout that Vélo Cuba's sense of corporate responsibility have a social obligation as well: "To be led and operated mostly by women."

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Cuba’s policies of inclusion and labor equality have created a workforce where both sexes are represented almost equally in the state sector, but the burgeoning private sector is dominated by men. Vélo Cuba is bucking the trend. Of her team of 15, says Díaz Labout, 10 are women. (“We let the men volunteer,” she told me slyly as she showed us around her shop in Old Havana.) Come November, her staff will grow by 50 percent in order to get Havana’s first-ever public bicycle share up and running. Vélo Cuba was selected to be the operating manager of the pilot project, which is no surprise considering its extensive portfolio of bike-related services and its community-minded way of doing business.

In addition to repair, restoration (this is Cuba, remember) and maintenance of all types of bikes, Díaz Labout and the folks at Vélo Cuba are hyperfocused on the “community concept” of the business. Through a variety of educational and promotional activities, such as free group rides, bike maintenance classes and kids’ programming, Vélo Cuba is bringing biking back.

“After four years of operation, we have witnessed an increase in the use of bicycles in the capital,” says Díaz Labout. “Many Cubans are taking up the idea of using it as a means of transport for their daily activities of going to work, school [and] shopping, but a large number are seeing it as an excellent form of social interaction and pleasure.”

For us, two Coloradans traveling to Cuba under the auspices of “support for the Cuban people,” Díaz Labout’s bicycles served as just that: social interaction and pleasure. Traveling by bicycle allowed us to explore the countryside at a leisurely pace, stop for strong coffee and sweet fruit at roadside stands and pedal up alongside farmers walking their pigs or kids selling homemade ice-cream sandwiches. The families we stayed with asked us questions about the bikes — Did we bring them from home or rent them? — and they painstakingly cleaned them when we arrived, soaked and sodden, from a day of downpour.

Díaz Labout’s rental fleet represents yet another way that Vélo Cuba is bringing bikes back to the country, despite odds most of us would find insurmountable. She has 40 bikes for rent, each one of them purchased from or donated by foreign visitors to Cuba. The bikes that we rented, she told us, were donated by a pair of German tourists. They were also quite possibly the most immaculately serviced bikes we’d ever ridden.

“Every day, we restore and recycle every piece of the bikes,” said Díaz Labout. “So much so,” she added, “that we even find artisanal ways to reproduce specialized tools that we’ve used so much that they’ve worn out.”

With Vélo Cuba, Díaz Labout has taken the impossible and made it possible: She founded a privately owned business that employs mostly women, she’s resurrected the idea of bikes as a method of transportation and she’s introduced the concept that they can be used for fun and fitness. And she’s done it all against a backdrop of staggering scarcity and with an attitude of overwhelming positivity.

“Despite the daily challenge of finding solutions that anywhere in the world would be not only unnecessary, but sometimes unthinkable,” she said, “I feel a great passion for this project.”

And she’s doing it all without a bike stand. DR