

Discovering Cuba

Diana Nyad began previewing her Mom-On-The Beach Cuba-swim origin story around 2012. Before that, she said she discovered the Cuba swim while looking at maps and charts. Before 1976, she never mentioned Cuba at all.

Nyad likely stole the Cuba-Florida idea from Walter Poenisch (rhymes with “Danish”), whose reputation and swimming career [Nyad destroyed](#). Poenisch had begun planning a crossing [by 1967](#).

1976

Keys-To-Cuba Has “Imaginative Possibilities”

“[Nyad] plans to swim each of the Great Lakes this summer and has been challenged by Benson Huggard, another U.S. marathon swimmer, to a “Battle of the Sexes” race from the Florida Keys to the Bahamas. After ‘running it through the computer,’ Diana figures it would cover 197 miles and take 60-70 hours, not the longest swim ever attempted (that was in 1940, a 292-mile swim down the Mississippi taking 90 hours), but perhaps the most difficult.

“Privately, she is considering a solo swim from the Keys to Cuba, an event which she says “has more imaginative possibilities.”*

[womenSports](#), March 1976, p. 39

*As in, “Imagine the money and fame a Keys-to-Cuba swim could bring.”

1977

“A Publicist’s Dream”

“[Nyad] says she wants to do it for the thrill of having done it, of course, and the pride the feat will give her. But there are other reasons, too. Her manager has told her the event is a publicist’s dream.”

[Family Weekly](#), March 27, 1977

1977

Nyad Comes Up With The Swim Herself

““I thought of the [Cuba–Florida] idea myself,”* said Nyad, who will be paid handsomely, but not in Knievelian terms. ‘It’s one of the most difficult swims imaginable. It will be 99 miles and I’ll be in the water for around 50 hours.’”

[*The Minneapolis Star*](#), May 19, 1977

*Walter Poenisch and Nyad shared the same manager, [Chuck Jones](#). On the eve of Poenisch’s attempt, Jones betrayed Poenisch and threw his support behind Nyad. See Lori Gum’s [“Lost at Sea.”](#)

1978

Nyad Discovers Cuba On A Chart

“In April 1977, I spread all the nautical charts of the world across my living-room rug. I spent three weeks making lists, checking mileage and water temperatures, eliminating some projects, reassessing others. I finally came up with the ideal swim. A swim in the Hellenic concept of sport — impossible yet somehow possible. Come July 1978, I am going to start off on the longest open-water swim in history. I will swim nonstop from Cuba to Florida. Nonstop from Havana to Marathon Key. One hundred and thirty miles in the open ocean; sixty hours of continuous swimming.”

Nyad’s first memoir, [Other Shores](#), p. 154

Jan 1978

The Swim Will Make Nyad “Rich And Famous — Mostly Rich”

““ABC wants it because it’s new, but they don’t know how to cover it. They’re thinking of keeping my picture in one-quarter of the screen the entire 60 hours. Through the soaps, the Fonz, there I’ll be. If I make it, I’ll be rich and famous — mostly rich.””

[“Swimmer joins women’s battle.”](#) January 10, 1978

Jun 1978

The Swim Will Also Make Nyad Immortal

“If she reaches the other shore, establishing a record that will be exceedingly hard to break, she expects to become rich and famous. Neither condition would be unwelcome. But most important of all, she would be immortal.”

[“Because It’s There.”](#) Helen Dudar, June 26, 1978

Aug 1978

And Everybody Will Watch Her

“[Nyad] is counting on this swim to set her up for life financially.”

...

“Nyad chose the Cuba-Florida swim mainly because she felt it would garner her the most publicity.

‘There are a lot of 100-mile swims, this is the one I decided I wanted to make, this is the one everyone will be watching.’”

[“Nyad Vows To Begin Swim Today.”](#) Pensacola News Journal, August 13, 1978

1980

She Just Wants To Swim 100 Miles. The Location Doesn’t Matter.

“‘If I make a 100-mile open water swim across ocean water,’ Nyad said, ‘then I’ll quit. I don’t care if it’s the Aegean Sea or another Cuba to Florida run or what it is. It’s got be 100 miles of open ocean water, from land to land.’”

[Minneapolis Tribune](#), February 2, 1980

Jul 2012

The Revolution Begins: 10-year-old Diana Wonders If Anyone Can Swim to Cuba

“In 1959, when Nyad was 10, her mother, by then divorced, moved them to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where a little island that would bring America to its knees was just across the horizon.

“‘It was just when the Cubans were coming to Miami,’ Nyad says. ‘I’d say, “You mean it’s right over there? And we can’t go there, and they can’t come here? I wonder if anyone could ever swim over there.” The earth is four-fifths water. You can swim 100 miles anywhere.’

But whereas many long-distance swimmers in the early 20th century focused on the English Channel, Nyad was already a warm-water creature. ‘To me, Cuba — I just can’t think of a stretch of water that has so much mystique to it.’”

Out Magazine, [“The Swimmer.”](#) Print version appeared Aug 1, 2012 ([archived](#)).

Oct 2012

Mom's Finally On The Beach & Diana's Finally Nine (To Sync With The Revolution)

“I do remember standing on the beach when I was 9 years old and I looked across at the horizon and I said to my mom “I wonder if anyone could swim over to Cuba.”

“Voice of America” post on Nyad’s blog ([archived](#))

May 2013

Nyad Goes Back To The Atlas

“Well, when I was a kid in my 20s and looking at the maps of the world, because I wanted to do one last swim before I retired. I was getting to be 30 years old, and I thought, one, one — something that will strike me, and I looked, and my eyes kept coming back. And my eyes kept gravitating. I was looking over at the Mediterranean and Africa and looking here and there, and then I saw it. And it just leapt off, you know, the world atlas to me, and that was Cuba.”

“Positively Speaking” podcast with Bill Poett, 27:17 ([clip](#) / [complete interview](#))

Sep 2013

The First Time Nyad's Mom Brings Up A Potential Swim

“Nyad could have chosen a different part of the world for her epic swim. She considered the drowning Maldives. Guam or the Gulf of Thailand. But the fascination — the obsession — with a Cuba-to-Florida swim never left her. She was a young swimmer growing up in Fort Lauderdale when Fidel Castro’s revolution sent waves of Cubans to South Florida. Some became her friends. She recalled afternoons at the Lago Mar beach club with her mother, who had visited Cuba as a tourist.

“‘It’s a beautiful island, 100 miles away,’ her mother told Nyad, pointing across the ocean to a ‘forbidden, magical place.’

‘You mean it’s right over the horizon?’ Diana asked.

“Yes,” her mother replied. “You could practically swim from there to here.”

Miami Herald, [“‘We Did It Squeaky Clean’”](#)

Feb 2014

Mom AND Maps

“She first had the idea of swimming from Cuba to Florida, in the seventies, when she was living on the Upper West Side. . . . ‘I went out and got all the nautical charts of the earth’s surface, and I put them out on a big swath of the rug and got rid of the Antarctic Circle,’ she said. When her eyes reached Cuba, ‘I literally had a palpitation about it. I thought, It’s *Cuba*. It’s magic. It’s that forbidden land we’re not allowed to go to, and they’re not allowed to come here. I thought of all the stories of the hundreds of Cubans who have tried to swim out on their own and not made it—they call it the Havana graveyard.’ When Nyad was growing up, in Fort Lauderdale, her mother used to take her to the Lago Mar beach club and, pointing off the shore toward Cuba, say, It’s so close you could actually swim there. ‘She meant it figuratively,’ Nyad said. ‘But I think somewhere, bubbling in my imagination, I was, like, It’s right there.’”

Ariel Levy, [“Breaking the Waves.”](#) *The New Yorker*

Aug 2014

Nyad Introduces Another Anachronism: Jack Nelson

“And it wasn’t that much longer after that [[the dictionary episode](#), another of Nyad’s fictions — DS] — elementary school — I had a geography teacher who was an ex-Olympic swimmer. [*Jack Nelson, who she didn’t meet until [middle school, age 12](#) — DS*]. And after my father, he was the most charismatic person you’ve ever met in your life. And he said that any kid that came out for the swim team would get an A in geography. I was at the pool the next day. He had all of us swimming up and down. And after about 15 minutes, he just wanted to see what he had. I stopped in this lane over here, and he was standing over the lane, and he yelled down and he said, “Hey, kid, what’s your name again? And I said, “Nyad.” And he said, “Nyad, you’re going to be the best swimmer in the world.

“Wasn’t too long after that, I was a swimmer: 4:30 in the morning, every morning. I thrived on the discipline. And the Cuban Revolution broke out. I was nine years old. And overnight, 1000s of Cubans came flooding into my town, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We were doing the salsa in their living rooms. We were eating Cuban food. The Cuban flags were flying from our flag poles. And I had a mystique about that island . . . And one day, I was standing on the beach with my mother. And my mom, you know, I was asking her, ‘Where is Cuba?’ I said, ‘I

know it's out there somewhere, we just can't see it. Where is it, Mom? Where's Cuba?'

"And she said, 'Okay, come here. I'm going to show you' — always with the mouth, the French, you have to go like this. 'Come here. No, you lift up your arm. And you're going to look — pointing. No, there, over this way more right there. Cuba is right there. As a matter of fact, it's so close, you could almost swim there.'"

[Idea World keynote](#) (13:59)

2015

"Mom On The Beach" story — and charts too — in *Find a Way*

"I remember standing on that Fort Lauderdale beach at age nine with my mother. 'Where is Cuba, Mom?' . . . [She] raised her arm to point toward the horizon. 'There. It's right over there. You can't see it but it's so close, you could almost swim there'" (p. 15).

"Candace and I gathered the charts of the Earth's oceans on the floor of our Upper West Side apartment. We had lived among boxes there for a year when to our delight, we discovered a half bath off the kitchen we never knew about.

. . .

"I remember it as if it were yesterday.* My eyes swept the charts and, zowie, there it was. Cuba" (p. 69)

*When Nyad says, "I remember it as if it were yesterday," she means, "whatever I say next didn't happen."

See also: "I remember it like it was yesterday. . . . I looked up at the electronic scoreboard and I was sixth. I didn't go to Mexico City after all that" ("[Olympic Trials](#)"). And Diana wants us to believe she lived in an apartment for a year before discovering a bathroom? Nobody's that unobservant.

July 2023

Nyad settles on this version

"And at age nine, I was already a little competitive swimmer. [*Nyad didn't begin competitive swimming [until she was 12](#) — Ed.] I was on the beach one day. And I said to my mother, 'Mom, where's Cuba? I know it's out there. It's right out there, but I can't see it.' And she said, 'It's right there. It's just across the horizon. It's just there. You cannot see it, but you, you little champion swimmer you, you could almost swim there.' So honestly, not in a concrete way — but in a floating*

imaginative way — Cuba and swimming between these two forbidden lands was in my soul from the time I was nine years old.”

“How She Does It” podcast, [10:14 \(archived\)](#)

May 2024

Preparing For The Big Reveal: “I don’t want to, you know, bring up awards and stuff like that.”

“I was a little swimmer at age nine, yeah, little champion swimmer, nine-year-old. And I was standing with my French mother on the shore at age nine, and I said, ‘Mom, I know Cuba is out there, but it’s supposed to be very close. Where is it? I can’t see it.’

“She said, ‘Well, it’s just this way. No, it’s this way already. As a matter of fact, it’s so close, you little champion swimmer, you could actually swim there.’ And that phrase, at age nine, went locked in the back of my imagination. . .

“I don’t want to, you know, bring up awards and stuff like that. But because we’re talking about **that beach — on that very beach**, which is the most prominent beach in Fort Lauderdale, this November, they’re going to put a state historic marker up to my swim. **So the whole team will come, you know, the Cuban-American community.** Um, you know, it’s gonna be a big deal. And I get to tell that story in front of people on the beach. “I was standing right here where we’re standing, literally, right here, and looked across, and said — my mom said — I could actually swim there.”

“What’s the Rusch” podcast, [34:14](#)

Nov 2025

The Unveiling

“We lived right, right over the bridge and came to this very beach as our playground often. So I was a little competitive swimmer. **We used to train here in this pool.** And one day I was on the beach here at nine years old with mom. And I said, ‘Mom’ You know, the Cuban Revolution had just happened. Thousands of Cubans, of course, more into Miami, but all over South Florida, immigrating in 24 hours. We were suddenly dancing salsa. And I was fascinated. A lot of us were here with the mystique of that all-of-a-sudden forbidden island right off our shores.

“And I was on the beach with Lucy our mom one day, I said, ‘Mom, everybody says Cuba is so close, but I can't see it. Where is it?’ She pointed and she said, ‘It's right there. It's right across this horizon. As a matter of fact, it's so close — you little champion swimmer, you — you could actually swim there.’

“I said, ‘What? Swim there?’ And honestly, when I got in my 20s and became a, you know, one of the best open-water swimmers in the world, this was the one . . . This was the Holy Grail that started in the back of my mind at age nine.”

[Clip](#)

Problems with this story:

- As all of the above examples show, Nyad didn't begin assembling her Cuba-swim creation myth until at least 35 years after she began thinking about the crossing.
- Lucy Nyad may have called her 9-year-old daughter many things, but never “a champion swimmer.” Diana begin swimming competitively until she was 12. She didn't win anything resembling a championship until about five months before she turned 15. See Nyad's [early meet results here](#).
- When Nyad says “immigrating in 24 hours,” she implies what she explicitly states elsewhere: that Castro issued a 24-hour deadline for leaving Cuba. But Castro [never issued such a deadline](#).
- Nyad was never “one of the best open-water swimmers in the world.” According to James “Doc” Counsilman, one of swimming's most highly regarded authorities (including by Nyad), she was “mediocre”:

By taking on the Channel, Counsilman also hoped to help plot a truer course for a sport that he feels is being exploited by “phony-baloney promoters.” He cites the example of Diana Nyad, “a very mediocre swimmer with a very good publicist. Most of her swims have been failures. . . . Still, when she gets into the tide off the Bahamas and rides it to Florida, a swim that truly great marathoners like John Kinsella could do with one arm tied behind their backs, she gets all the attention.”

For details, see “Want a second opinion?” in [“The Best of the '70s.”](#)

compiled by Daniel Slosberg

daniel@nyadfactcheck.com

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