

## WHEN NOWHERE ELSE WILL HAVE YOU

Paraguay

*Nick Dall*

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The nation of Paraguay doesn't seem to have much going for it. It's land-locked, often confused with Uruguay, and over the centuries it has lost hundreds of thousands of square miles of territory from fighting wars with its bigger neighbors, Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia. Add this to the fact that Paraguay's most noteworthy tourist attraction—the Jesuit mission ruins of Trinidad and Jesús—can be visited in a day trip from Argentina, and you have a black hole on the map.

I've come to think of Paraguay as a landlocked Sargasso Sea. A place where people who have been abandoned by the rest of the world, wash up. The group known as The Moonies has bought huge tracts of land there. Similarly, the Mennonites own half of Paraguay's Chaco region, personally given to them by a former president. Even Nazis, on the run after World War II, were welcomed into Paraguay.

The Paraguayan government asks few questions of potential immigrants, and it gets few answers in return. This makes it a fascinating place to visit. It's so far off the tourist map that I went two weeks in the Chaco without seeing a single traveler. Locals were fascinated by me and I by them. Everywhere I went I spoke to people – in buses, on ferries and even on the back of a donkey cart taxi – and they spoke to me. I met lots of people who had lived in Paraguay all their lives, but I also met some who had ended up there, victims of fate.

### *La Gringa*

The rainy season makes Bahía Negra, Paraguay, inaccessible by land for half the year. Most people, clearly, take the hint. I was one of the first outsiders to visit in months, arriving as I did after a few days of travel on a cargo boat from Brazil.

Bahía Negra sits strung out over a few hundred yards along the banks of the Rio Paraguay, the watery spine of the nation. The town may only go two or three streets back but its houses are neither outlandish nor overly rustic. Every house seems to serve double-duty as a shop, each one stocking a small selection of items bought from the *Aquidabán*, the region's weekly passenger boat (which itself doubles as an incredible floating market).

The main street of Bahía Negra consists of compacted mud. When it rains, this mud comes back to life—so much so that I actually lost a shoe in the magma one afternoon. When the sun shines, the ground hardens again; becoming tacky after three hours of Paraguayan heat, and rock-hard after six. This road maintains, in serrated cameo, all the footprints and tire tracks, and peaks and troughs, inflicted on it during a downpour.

*"La Gringa! La Gringa!"* Everyone I met in Bahía Negra talked about La Gringa. I was directed to her house, and introduced to this small, dark-haired Afrikaner, who spoke better Spanish than English. Her family had lived as sharecroppers in the Highveld of South Africa. Always short of money, even when privileged by apartheid, they left in 1994 when democracy came into that country, my country. Paraguay was willing to give residency to the family, as well as the promise that in three years they could be full citizens.

La Gringa had not started out in Bahía Negra, but she'd moved to this town from the regional capital of Concepción after her husband took a Paraguayan lover. She might not have had much, but La Gringa certainly knew how to move on in life.

In Bahía Negra she'd invested in a freezer, something which most of the other shops did not have. This was her family's livelihood. While I drank *tereré* with La Gringa in her once-white living room, her ten- and twelve-year-old sons sold bags of ice and frozen chicken to the neighbors who waited outside. She told me that the boys spoke, in order of fluency, Afrikaans, Guarani, Spanish, and English.

As a South African myself, I knew that whites had left in '94, but I'd imagined that they'd gone to places like Canada and Australia. That they had gotten jobs as accountants or construction managers. La Gringa, the disenfranchised Afrikaner, was not really a stereotype that existed in my homeland. I had to go all the way to Bahía Negra to find her.

### **The Moonies**

Days later, I did finally board the *Aquidabán*, jostling amongst livestock, carburetors, and motorbikes, to find a place to rest on the deck. The ship chugged dutifully down the river, stopping every few hours at some or other settlement which was even smaller than, and not as appealing as, Bahía Negra.

Local people poured onto the boat to buy provisions – week-old lettuces and slightly funky sausage. Local gas stations siphoned directly from the *Aquidabán's* tank to buy their fuel.

And then we stopped somewhere different. A place called Puerto Leda. We did not supply them with fuel, instead we refueled from the town's supply. In Puerto Leda, the buildings—all prefabricated shells—were hospital-white and shimmering. There was a row of gleaming new equipment: ploughs and tractors, dinghies and boats, even a combine harvester. The community had come out to greet us. All of them, to a man, wore pastel colors and floppy hats. That's when the penny dropped. "They're Asian," I said to myself.

I asked a fellow passenger (a guy whose chickens had shat on my bag during the night) about this place. He didn't have many details, but he was able to get the basics across: "*Japonés. Reverendo Moon.*"

I wanted more, but chicken man didn't have it.

Later I found a manifesto on the Internet: Japanese Moonies had settled in Puerto Leda more than a decade ago. The site had been chosen for its remoteness and the hardships it would bear upon the missionaries. I read about jaguars and mosquitoes, thick brush and rudimentary toilets, and floods and undrinkable well-water. This was all as it should be: Reverend Moon had charged the people with "protecting the nature that God created, and cultivating the land so that humans can live, without repeating the past developmental mistakes of destroying creation."

Unlike the now-deceased reverend, those outside the church see Puerto Leda differently. Rumors of money laundering and drug manufacture at Leda are rife. Unfortunately I didn't get to stay and investigate—and I'm not sure I would have been allowed to if I'd tried.

### **The Mennonites**

Unlike my chance encounters with La Gringa and at Puerto Leda, I'd expected to meet Mennonites in Paraguay – in fact I'd actively sought them out. They are, after all, the poster boys for Paraguay's "ask no questions, tell no lies" immigration policy.

The Mennonites, a conservative Anabaptist Christian group, were forced out of various parts of Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Many of the early departures went to Canada, but the Canadian government insisted that English be spoken in the Mennonite schools and that they pay taxes. Neither of these caveats went down well with the more conservative Mennonites.

Later departures, notably those kicked out of Eastern Europe, headed toward South America. The story goes that a group of Mennonites headed for Argentina happened to be on the same ship as the Paraguayan president. They got to talking, and the president offered them citizenship and huge swathes of land in the country's Chaco region. He also gave them the right to speak their own language, Plautdietsch, instead of Spanish, and the power to administer their own finances and hospitals, and an exemption from military service.

This all suited the Mennonites just fine, but there was something in it for the Paraguayan government as well. The Chaco—one of the last remaining frontiers of the twentieth century—was largely unpopulated and utterly uncultivated. It was rumored to harbor oil reserves, which neighboring Bolivia and Argentina were keen to get their hands on. The Chaco War with Bolivia had left Paraguay with a very tenuous hold on this region which constituted over half of its entire territory.

The Chaco needed to be populated and tamed, preferably by hardworking farmers. The Mennonites were perfect.

When I visited Filadelfia, the center of the Fernheim Mennonite Colony, I was amazed by how exceptionally dull it seemed. Obviously I had expected the men to be dressed in checked shirts and jeans and the women to be in drab frocks, as they were. But I had also envisioned quaint architecture, picturesque churches, and character-filled stores.

What I found was a town constructed almost entirely of yellow-face brick; and a hotel (possibly the most boring place I have ever stayed) of boxy rooms and bedside Bibles.

The colony's cooperative supermarket was interesting, but only because of its location. It was an American-style supermarket in the middle of nowhere. Locally made cheeses and yogurts, and locally butchered cold meats were sold in vacuum-packed portions, while imported cereals and cookies lined the neatly stacked shelves. Blonde, blue-eyed cleaning staff mopped the aisles endlessly, and the cashier spoke to me in Plautdietsch, not Spanish.

The Jakob Unger Museum was one exception to the yellow-face brick rule. The museum, a two-story wooden building, housed a huge collection of taxidermy made by one of the founding fathers of the colony, as well as relics from the Chaco war, and antiquated farming equipment. The curator spoke English as his family had come to Fernheim from Canada.

This man told me about the early years of the colony. Hundreds were lost to typhoid, and that was not the only danger. The settlers had dealt with insects, scorpions, snakes, and pumas; a lack of water in the dry season, and a ridiculous overabundance in the wet; and a heat, which never let up. But the Mennonites had God on their side, the curator told me, and so the people did more than merely survive—they flourished. Today the Mennonite colonies play a major role in the Paraguayan economy, and their cheeses and meats can be bought throughout the country. Many Paraguayans have relocated to Mennonite colonies to find work. There are even some Mennonite members of government.

Interestingly, the museum curator did have concerns about his community and the future generation. His kids were teenagers, and when they finished school they would go to Paraguay's capital city of Asunción to study at university. There they would be exposed to twenty-first century vices and perhaps wouldn't come back to Filadelfia. He'd seen it happen to friends' children.

"Obviously I'd like them to remain Mennonites," he said, "and I think *my* kids will. But if they don't, it is their decision. And their loss."

After a few days in Filadelfia, I traveled to Asunción myself. Five hours in an air-conditioned minivan was all it took. An asphalt highway had recently been built, and there are future plans to extend the highway beyond Filadelfia to the Bolivian border. The Chaco is no longer in danger of being taken away from Paraguay. There are still no signs of the supposed oil deposits, but the government has found a far more valuable raw material in the Mennonites: perseverance.

**Goodbye Paraguay**

The last thing I did in Paraguay was visit the Jesuit ruins on the Argentine border. I saw a few tourists, but not nearly as many as I did at the ruins on the Argentine side. There were no curio shops and very few hotels. The gatekeeper there turned a blind eye to me pitching my tent inside the ruins.

Late at night, under a full moon, I climbed the ramparts of what was once the main church with a bottle of bootlegged whisky. As I drank from the bottle, wincing as the ethanol bored into my throat, I thought about how I would miss Paraguay—a place where anything is possible.