



## Accidental Tourist

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**A**FTER the Amazon, the Rio Paraguay is the most navigable river in South America. Finding a boat to take us to Asunción should have been easy.

"We're in..." Paul read aloud, "Ba-su-re-ro. Puerto Suárez must be the next stop."

It had, admittedly, been a long day and night on the Death Train — so known not for any hair-raising bends but for its monotonous chugging through an endless, mosquitoed Bolivian morass. Still, we could not control our laughter.

"Basurero," we screamed in unison, "means 'rubbish bin'. Maybe that's why it was painted on a rubbish bin. This is Puerto Suárez."

We cleared customs and made for Corumbá, over the border in Brazil. It proved to be a pleasant, albeit sweltering, settlement. The streets were tarred and the buildings were painted — both significant improvements on Bolivia.

From here, we wanted to catch a boat all the way to Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. If you look at a map, it makes sense. The Rio Paraguay cuts a swathe through half of South America before emptying itself into the Atlantic in Argentina. But in practice, it's not as simple. Some craft do the route but they're all cargo vessels, not licensed to carry passengers. We spent a week begging, bribing and grovelling but no boat in Corumbá was prepared to risk going through immigration with *gringos* aboard.

But we were young and foolish and determined. A portly black-market money-changer told us about a possible loophole, so we got our passports stamped and caught a taxi to a smattering of shanties an hour downriver, still inside Brazil but beyond the official border post.

Now to find a boat, and where better to start looking than at the pub? In this corrugated-iron shack with a freezer full of beer, the barman was positive about our



PIET GROBLER

# South American shortcuts

The best way to find help here is to head to a bar

chances: some farmers were rumoured to be passing through later that evening, taking building supplies to their *fazenda* on the Paraguayan border.

As dusk fell, the locals began to trickle in — real *gauchos* who tucked their knives into the backs of their jeans and wore cowboy boots, big-buckled belts and big hats.

A chap who looked a bit like Hemingway after a three-week bender pulled out a guitar and sang. The *gauchos* joined in. The beer flowed. It wasn't a cash bar, and there didn't seem to be anyone keeping track.

I went outside to escape the heat but the gentle breeze from the river did nothing to cool me. We were in the hottest region of a hot country, in summer. The mosquitoes were like Russian cargo helicopters — big, sluggish and noisy. Over their buzzing I heard the bass grumble of a diesel engine. Our boat!

Its crew were more of the same: *gauchos* who could only be distinguished by their hats. One wore a dark felt, ten-gallon hat; another a flat-brimmed tan number; a third,

younger one, wore a brown, suede baseball cap. The fourth was in a beret, of all things. Everyone knew everyone and the singing and drinking continued, no matter that we were supposed to sail at dawn.

At 3am, we decided to call it a night. We hadn't noticed but our table had accumulated a very large collection of empty bottles, while all the other tables were suspiciously uncluttered. Apparently, the drinks were on us, but if it would get us to Paraguay, we weren't complaining.

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Breakfast happened before the sun was up. Biltong, onions and rice, washed down with a shot of throat-singeing cachaça.

The *gauchos* didn't have bags; they had bundles, each one containing a saddle, hammock, mosquito

net and toothbrush. And a flagon of cachaça.

I sat on the prow, taking in the surrounds. The Pantanal is the world's largest wetland. I had expected birds and alligators and capybaras, but the river was so wide that both banks were 1km away.

At some point on the voyage it rained. It was as if the world had been turned upside down and the river was falling on our heads. The awning above us caved in. The canoe we were towing filled with water and sank. We didn't moor for the night and the movement meant fewer mozzies and better sleep.

Suddenly, we were at the *gauchos'* farm. Some women arrived and examined the bricks and timber and then, as an afterthought, greeted their men.

After a breakfast of fresh eggs and rice washed down with cachaça, one of the *gauchos* sped us across the river in a skiff and into Paraguay. We were dropped off at the Bahia Negra navy base. The admiral himself came out to greet us. Talk about a heroes' welcome. — © Nick Dall