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Paraguay River Cargo Boat

Late afternoon in Paraguay and our ship, it seemed, had finally come in.

The 120-foot cargo vessel Aquidaban was docking and the dusty river town of Concepcion, Paraguay's second-largest city, was shuffling to life. Men with donkey carts jockeyed alongside beaten pickup trucks to collect the diverse cargo pouring out of the long wooden river boat. Huge man-sized fish, dripping blood and oozing slime and nearly covering the backs of the workers who carried them, arose from the hold below. Meanwhile, rough wooden furniture, sacks of flour and rice, produce, and a few wooden-spoke wagon wheels were jumbled nearby, awaiting loading onto the deck.

We had been kicking around in languid Concepcion for two days already, waiting for a boat--any boat, really--that would take us up the Paraguay River to Brazil. Rumors and half truths were circulated to the two gringos, my travel buddy Mark and myself, about when the next boat would come and where it would go. Our information in Asuncion, the capital, had been that a cargo boat would arrive from there to Concepcion on the day we would, but, this being Paraguay, no boat was the reality. And that was fine. Paraguay is about as far back in time as you can go in this hemisphere, and boats may or may not arrive. We set up our tent, had some beers, frightened or amused the town's children with our mere presence as we explored, and waited.

We did not anticipate the Aquidaban's arrival, coming from upriver, but it was welcome. Better still, it was going to Brazil the next morning. The voyage would take a day or two, depending on docking time along the way, the weather, the mood of the crew. We loaded up with water, canned edibles and other needs, and, the next morning, piled on board. And indeed, the boat lumbered out, less than an hour behind the

announced departure schedule.

The broad, flat, slow-moving river was topped with glass, then sliced into a rippling V as the laden boat heaved forth into the current. There was nothing along the banks and beyond but broad wilderness, with occasional cattle ranches and farmland. Large gray herons were the only animals not frightened away by our chugging vessel, and the only things besides ourselves to break the stillness and emptiness of the open land.

The locals accepted us without notice and shoehorned themselves into all the available niches. Everyone carried sacks and bags and boxes. Small children were piled on top of the baggage and families staked out various sections of benches along the sides. On the first deck, women selling fruit, vegetables and bread were doing a steady business. One look at the fetid galley revealed the women's popularity. The fly-covered plates of smelly slop being served up there were healthy for only the river's catfish. The walls appeared to be decorated with the uneaten offerings of voyages past.

Had we been going south we could have gone as far as Buenos Aires in Argentina. Mark and I had rendezvoused there a week earlier, and my grade school friend was now getting his first real taste of mixing with the local folks. Ever the gregarious one, he excelled with the deck hands and kept them laughing. They shared some whiskey and a lot of the local matte, an herb beverage drunk constantly by pouring cold water into a small, herb-filled cup, then slurping in one gulp through a strainer straw.

Mark shot miles of tape with his camcorder, and entertained the passengers with the playback. The ringleader of the deck crew, or maybe the whole river, was a nicely dressed guy who issued lots of orders, but he did not want to be taped. Everyone laughed and someone says the "jacaré" ("crocodile") does not like being filmed. Things can get a bit shady in Paraguay and you have to know when to stop asking

questions.

We videotaped ourselves on the deck, taking in the broad river and wading birds, and dodging watermelon rinds that sailed out of the upstairs windows and plopped loudly in the water. I had been battling a stomach bug for weeks, but I did not look as bad as I felt. Mark, hale and hearty as ever, chatted through the lens with the folks back home about our adventure.

At day's end, even the sun took its time setting, a glowing, lazy orange orb casting pastel spears of color across the murky water as it hung late in the twilight. Night fell with a gorgeous sunset on the wide river, the sky full of stratified layers of blues and oranges, reds and yellows. There were more stars than you could count in a lifetime. Trying to find sleep, I fared a bit better than Mark. I curled up on the upper deck, bouncing between a partial place on the bench among boxes, bags and bodies, and a section of hard, dirty floor. Mark made his stand outdoors on the deck, at first on a plank, then on an open deck space, and finally within the huge, coiled deck rope. He kept getting bumped around as the crew went about their preparations for the next stop, or maybe just went about.

At times during the next day, boats from the shore pulled up alongside as we chugged along. Goods were tossed down to them, and then they pushed off and their outboards roared them back to their creaky wooden docks. The Aquidaban made four or five stops. The boat slowed to a stop against the shore, ropes were thrown and secured, and a long plank or two thumped down between boat and ground. A symphony of disorganized unloading ensued, but somehow everyone seemed satisfied when the dust settled. The ports of call were sometimes just a sandy beach area with a stone shack of sorts, with sheds and houses imitating a village drifting away behind. Mercifully, more goods and people were loaded off than come aboard, and there was finally a bit of room to stretch.

There is abundant mixed ethnicity in this country of over 6 million. The main indigenous group is the Guaran Indians, and most of the people are of mixed Spanish-Guaran heritage, with the vast majority able to understand some Guarani language. As we got farther into the interior, the ethnic mix became more fully Guarani. Their gentle babbly language did not lack emphasis, and the mostly older crowd was still but chatty. Lots of youngsters and perishables remained onboard, but at least there was no livestock. At one remote stop, the natives were fully original, and even the mixed-blood passengers crowded to the windows to see the raggedy pure bloods. Women piled onboard to buy bread, sausage and batteries, using a mix of Spanish, Guarani and hand signals to bargain a price. Dirty children splashed in the river and raced along the shore in between bony dogs and breastfeeding mothers.

I walked the plank to land and tried to engage the shy Guarani, who seemed quite uninterested in a gangly gringo and stared blankly away. Finally, someone pointed at Mark, with his headband, sunglasses, vest and stocky build, and said “Rambo!” There was muted laughter. Still, the ice was broken, and a few young men and I attempted a conversation in Spanish and the few words of Guarani I picked up before the sailing. But the horn blew impatiently and we had to trundle back on board. The Aquidaban may have been slow, but it kept moving on.

Towards the end of the long summer day, civilization loomed incongruously around a bend. We had reached Brazil. A thriving town, Puerto Martinho, bustled on the eastern shore. We pulled up on the western shore port to the Paraguayan destination of Isla Margarita, which consisted of a rickety dock and a few dilapidated wooden buildings. There was no one to stamp our exit visa, so we bargained for an expensive, quick ride on a small boat to get us across. We plowed quickly across the water, churning a rapid wake as Puerto Martinho drew yet larger ahead. Behind us, little Paraguay, calm and dusty, was quite uninterested, and the broad river flowed smoothly along.

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