

Episode 112: Paraguay

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about spending a few days in Paraguay. They discuss Paraguay's attractions such as the Jesuit missions in the south and the capital Asunción.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Paraguay as we continue travelling in South America. And we're only here for a few days as we travel between Brazil and Bolivia. But what are your impressions of Paraguay?

Wendy: Well, I knew very little about Paraguay before coming here, and now I know a lot more. So I'm glad that we came, I'm glad that I have a better understanding of this country, uhh, because it's not very well understood, it's not very well known. Most foreigners who are travelling around South America don't come to Paraguay. Uhh, it doesn't really have a lot of obvious tourist attractions. Umm, it does have a waterfall which would probably be a much more famous attraction if it didn't have the bad luck of being right next to the Iguazu Falls, which are the best waterfalls in the world, as we discussed in a previous episode. Umm, so we didn't even go to those waterfalls because we had just seen Iguazu, and it didn't seem to make much sense to go. Umm, the main site that we did visit was the Jesuit missions, umm, so we can talk a little bit more about that, and then Asunción, the capital, and, uhh, we did see several different things, several different museums and places of interest in the capital. So, yeah, my impressions are that it's kind of a quiet, sleepy country where not a lot happens. Umm, it seems very peaceful, very chilled out, uhh, we don't get hassled¹ here at all. I was walking around Asunción on my own for a few hours this afternoon and was pleasantly surprised to see that even as a woman, you know, on her own, I really didn't get unwanted attention, umm, which does happen a lot of times in other places. So, umm, overall I have a favourable impression of Paraguay and I'm glad that I spent some time here, even if it was just a few days.

Nick: Yeah, like you said, almost nobody else seems to come here. We've only seen a couple of other international tourists. And on our previous two major trips in South America, we didn't consider coming to Paraguay, umm, but it's been nice that we've been able to fit it in this time. We had an interesting first impression of it, I think, because we crossed over from Brazil, and it's basically a triple border between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Brazil and Argentina share the Iguazu

¹ hassled: bothered or harassed by people on the streets

Falls. Paraguay missed out on the Iguacu Falls but it's also really close to both those countries. And even when we came to Foz do Iguacu, which is the town on the Brazilian side that you use as the base for the falls, even coming into that town from Curitiba, about five or six hours before we reached it, we were already seeing billboards² on the side of the highway for shopping in Paraguay.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And so it's obviously something that affluent³ Brazilians do - who live in the Paraná, which is the area of Brazil that's closest to Paraguay - is that they come over on weekends or other times to go shopping in Paraguay because it's cheap and because there's a lot of, umm, options there. And so it's just this one particular city that's right across the border. And it's called Ciudad del Este, so it's the Eastern City or the City of the East. And we literally walked over a bridge from the Brazilian side to the Paraguayan side, and then that was it, that was our entry into Paraguay. And we were in this unusual town that's just this crazy shopping town.

Wendy: It's a very unusual town, and like you said it attracts a lot of Brazilian shoppers, and I'm sure a lot of Argentinian shoppers as well, because, uhh, there are low taxes, low import taxes in Paraguay, so you can get things like electronic goods, uhh, much more cheaply in Paraguay than you can in Brazil or Argentina. And apparently there's a lot of, umm, contraband⁴ - I don't know if that's really the right word, that's the word that they use in Spanish. Umm, but a lot of, you know, fake goods, that are sold there. Or perhaps even stolen goods that are sold there. So it's, uhh, it has kind of a bad reputation. And, yeah, it wasn't a very positive first impression, I must say.

Nick: But that's probably what Paraguay is known for among Brazilians and Argentinians, is that you can go there and go shopping. Umm, and so anyway, we walked across into the city and then we got out of there pretty quickly because we weren't really interested in the shopping or in anything else that was in that area. And as you mentioned, we went down to the south of Paraguay to see some of these Jesuit missions. Umm, and so there are 30 Jesuit missions, or ruins of former Jesuit missions, that are in Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, all, you know, in this similar area where it's close to the borders of all the countries. And we've actually been to one of them in Argentina before, umm, and so this time we went to a couple of them in Paraguay. There are, I think, eight in Paraguay, or seven.

Wendy: I think eight in Paraguay. There were 30 in total.

Nick: Right. Fifteen in Argentina and seven in Brazil. And so that was really the thing that we knew before we came about Paraguay, is that there were these Jesuit

² billboards: large advertising signs on the side of roads

³ affluent: wealthy, rich. See also: Episode 73.

⁴ contraband: goods that are imported or exported illegally

missions. Umm, and so we decided to go and see those and they were quite interesting.

Wendy: They were and, uhh, I first saw ... the first time that I saw the first mission in Paraguay was actually at night. Uhh, we arrived in the evening and they had what they called a sound and light show, umm, which you decided to skip⁵ because we'd had a long day of travelling and you didn't really want to do any more tourism at that point. But I was intrigued by the sound and light show, which is not really what it was. It was really a guided tour of the ruins at night when they're all lit up with spotlights. And it was really beautiful. That is definitely going to be, you know, my fondest memory and the memory that really sticks with me the most of Paraguay, I expect, will be the image of the ruins of that mission when it's lit up at night, because it was just really atmospheric, really beautiful. I found it very calming and peaceful and meditative.

Nick: And I did go the following night.

Wendy: You did.

Nick: So I did get to see it after all. Uhh, so the Jesuits are known formally as the Society of Jesus. It's a, umm, order within the Catholic church, and so they were very active in, uhh, spreading their religious message during the colonial period here in South America and elsewhere, but especially here in South America. And so it's quite an interesting, you know, sub-history as well, umm, that they set up these missions and they had local people coming to live there and they had a maximum of 5000 people living in each mission and when, uhh, missions got full, they would just build a new one. Umm, and so, you know, in that way they would organise the local people in ways that they hadn't been organised before, and give them education and things like that, because the Jesuits are most famous for being educators among the other ... or compared with the other, uhh, Catholic orders. And so it's quite interesting. So you go and see ruins of these churches and then these other buildings, residential buildings and perhaps other secular⁶ buildings and schools. And like we said, there's 30 of them scattered around these three countries and so they're all in various states of repair or disrepair, but, umm, yeah, they're very atmospheric and it's quite interesting.

Wendy: Yeah, and I mean, you know, you could look at the issue from lots of different angles. Umm, you know, I mean there are a lot of negative aspects of a foreign culture coming in and, you know, imposing a foreign religion and things like that onto an indigenous people. Uhh, but I think the Jesuits did a better job or they did it in a better way than most of the other colonisers of the time. They were much more respectful of, uhh, the local culture and they, you know, lived with the Guaraní, with the indigenous people, in these missions, and like you said, there was a big focus on education. And, umm, yeah, they were treated much better

⁵ skip: pass on, avoid, miss

⁶ secular: non-religious

than they were by other Spanish colonisers. So, you know, it's a complicated history, and that's another thing that I was happy to learn more about while we were there.

Nick: So we spent a couple of days exploring these missions and then we've spent the last three days in the capital, Asunción, umm, which you described quite aptly⁷ I think as being a little bit rough around the edges⁸.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Umm, yeah, it's not a very well-kept city, so you have lots of, you know, broken sidewalks⁹ and broken streets with lots of potholes in them. Umm, but there's some beautiful street art, some beautiful murals on the sides of buildings. And definitely enough sites to keep you busy for a couple of days.

Nick: Yeah, you can certainly see that the level of development is lower than Brazil, which is where we've come from. Umm, but, yeah, it's kind of an interesting mix, especially here in downtown Asunción, because you've got some colonial buildings, you've also got some modern international chains, in terms of restaurants, like T.G.I. Fridays, and McDonalds and Burger King are here. Umm, but then that's all kind of mixed in with local businesses and local, very basic restaurants and things like that. So it's, yeah, it's an interesting place to walk around and see that contrast between the different elements of the city.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so after our short but sweet time in Paraguay, we are now heading to Bolivia.

Wendy: Yes, via¹⁰ Argentina, because that's apparently going to be the quickest and the most comfortable way, even though there is a border between Paraguay and Bolivia, but apparently the roads are not that good in Paraguay. And so we're going to take the long way around because we think that that's going to be a lot more comfortable, so we'll see.

Nick: Alright, we'll see you there!

⁷ aptly: appropriately, correctly

⁸ rough around the edges: not completely neat or clean or polished, in need of some work

⁹ sidewalks: pedestrian walkways next to roads (American English). Also known as pavements.

¹⁰ via: by way of. Wendy (and Americans in general) pronounce it with a short 'i' while Nick and other non-Americans pronounce it with a long 'i'.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why is Paraguay a shopping paradise for Brazilians and Argentinians?
2. What was Wendy's first impression of the Jesuit missions?
3. Why does Wendy describe Asunción as being 'rough around the edges'?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Even though her parents were devout Christians, they decided she should receive a _____ education rather than a Christian one.
2. To fly from an international destination to an Australian city like Brisbane or Adelaide, you often have to go _____ Sydney or Melbourne.
3. They spent a month in Brazil but decided to _____ the Amazon because it is so far from everywhere else and would have taken up too much time.
4. In fast-developing countries like China and Brazil, there are more and more _____ citizens who can now afford things like overseas holidays.
5. When they went to India, they got _____ a lot on the street by beggars and other people. They found it tiresome after a while.
6. They named their daughter Bonita which means beautiful in Spanish, and she's very _____ named because she is indeed very beautiful.
7. In Portugal, a lot of the _____ are made from black and white mosaics, so you can enjoy the artwork while walking down the street.
8. If you go to the sprawling street market on the outskirts of town, you can get a lot of cheap goods. But just be aware that a lot of the stuff being sold is _____.
9. The last rehearsal for the school play took place last night. It was mostly good but some of the performance is still a bit _____, so hopefully they'll improve for the real thing this weekend.
10. In Geneva, a lot of the _____ that you see on the roads are advertising expensive Swiss watches.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Paraguay? If so, what did you think of it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Which area of Paraguay that Nick and Wendy discussed would you be most interested in visiting and why? (Shopping in Ciudad del Este, Jesuit missions in the south, or the capital Asunción.)
3. What are your views on colonialism?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because electronics and other items are cheaper there due to lower import taxes.
2. She had a very positive first impression while seeing the ruins lit up at night.
3. Because the streets and sidewalks are not in great condition.

Exercises

1. secular
2. via
3. skip
4. affluent
5. hassled
6. aptly
7. sidewalks
8. contraband
9. rough around the edges
10. billboards