

My professional Adventures

Semana Santa



By **Robi Auscher**

Even on my second mission to Paraguay I was still a rookie on the continent. In the hotel's lobby found a Chilean teammate. I was glad to find someone to chat with. He had a glass in front of him on the coffee table and a small bottle of Coke and was sipping diligently his drink. After some time I realized the guy's getting drunk slowly but safely. From a Coke? It was only then that I found out that he was savoring the most popular cocktail of Latin America-Cuba Libre. A blend of rum and Coca Cola. Tried it twice but got immediate headaches.

On this mission have travelled to the project area with a group of local project staff: government officials and employees of a private advisory firm. The latter was hired with Bank financing to assist project preparation. Celso, my English speaking counterpart was one of them. The interaction with the group provided lots of essential information and was most helpful interviewing producers, Ministry officials and purveyors of inputs. The project area, the Upper Parana, had a heterogeneous population. Steven Oliver the project leader, an English gentleman, wanted to save me anxiety and didn't tell me about the large German community that inhabited the area together with indigenous and Japanese settlers. So we reached this Bavarian style half-timbered guesthouse where we put up. German songs were played all day long on a loudspeaker.

First evening went out with Celso for dinner. He had ordered green salad. I liked the idea, forgetting the tabu on salads and tap water that gringos have to follow strictly. Next day we travelled the whole day and met leaders of the German cooperatives. In fact the German settlers came from adjacent Brazil where they lived in the forests since late 19th century. They cleared the forests and bush and tilled the land. Lived for generations in rudimentary conditions, detached from any Western culture. Have seen the women hand washing their laundry. Generators supplied power to the homesteads. Blond almost white-haired kids in the middle of the jungle were a common and weird show. Some fifteen years back they had the opportunity to buy cheap land over the border in Paraguay. For the price of 10 hectares in Brazil they could buy 100 hectares in neighboring Paraguay. Whole villages moved over.

This was not the notorious area where former Nazis, helped by Vatican to flee Germany after WWII, were living overtly or in concealment. Still, one can never know.

Next day Montezuma's revenge hit me. This was a week before Semana Santa, the holy week of Easter celebrated in all the pomp by the pious Catholics of the country. My team wanted to expedite the field work to reach their homes on time for the holiday. A medical doctor was called in to check up on me. He prescribed medication which was purchased by my colleagues. Began to take my pills regularly. Next day felt even worse. Began to throw up. Since by now have been losing liquids via two channels, the same doctor recommended that I better check in at the regional hospital. Said and done. The hospital's name was some sort of Santa Maria della Misericordia or so. Not exactly my natural environment. They didn't ask for documents. To play it safe have registered as American. All nurses spoke Spanish with suspicious German accents. Not exactly my cup of tea. By now attached to infusion, was glad to feel that dead cat bounce. One more day and they almost stabilized me. Semana Santa was just three days around the corner. In the wee hours of the morning my whole team rushed into my room requiring the nurse to take off the infusion needle. Snatched me out of the bed and off we were on our way to the van. Carried into the car where my luggage was already waiting. Got a bag of pills from the hospital and we hit the road. A seven hours drive to Asuncion. I was weak and felt bad. Not exactly in a moveable mood. Never skipped, however, medication times. On the way they provided me with their home phone numbers as well as that of the American Embassy's Clinic, open on holidays. Just in case. After the lengthy journey, checked again into the Excelsior, the best hotel in town. We broke up. They wished me quick recovery and I in turn, Happy Easter.

The hotel was almost empty during the holiday. Its only restaurant left open was the French one. However, my upset digestive system and overall feeling were not after sophisticated French cuisine. Popped into the posh restaurant the mornings for tea and toast, and at noon and in the evenings just for chicken soup. Felt my condition's worsening. So I gave up on the visits to the restaurant and asked the same austere menu to be delivered by room service.

Called first the Clinic of the American Embassy. No service over Easter. Called then the phone numbers provided by my team. They all left their homes in Asuncion and spent the holidays with relatives in the country.

Have approached reception to call a doctor. The MD on duty was a no-nonsense professional. After a few questions asked for the pills that I have been administered. "You throw them away, right away!", commanded clearly. The recommended rates seemed to be for veterinary purposes.

Apparently, the provincial MD who prescribed them was under my team's pressure or just wanted to put me quickest back on track. The dosages were three times higher than the licensed one. Once I stopped taking them, felt much better.

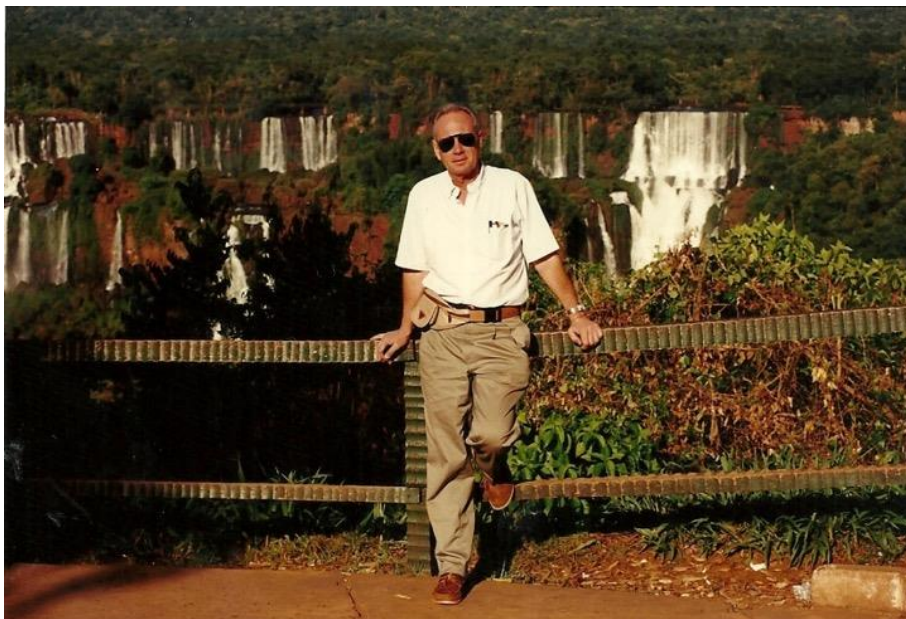
Same day Steven Oliver, the project leader called me from Washington. Just wanted to get an update on the project and on my whereabouts. Told him the story and he was struck with horror.

- Go to the best doctor in town. Don't mind the costs, we'll cover everything.

After half an hour, another call. A worried Mark Wilson, his supervisor, with the same insisting message.

I was doing better and in no need for another consultation. Steven was about to land in a couple of days and was relieved when he found me in shape ready to join him for a field trip. This time we went on our own leaving behind the local team. We reached The Triple Frontier, a tri-border area along the junction of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, where the Iguazú and Paraná rivers converge. This area is near Iguazú Falls and the Itaipú hydroelectric plant. We put up in Ciudad del Este on the Paraguay side, a haven for smugglers of all kind and a nest of Moslem terror. Steven wondered if I had ever visited the falls, one of the world's miracles and a must. Since I haven't, he insisted that I spend there a day and stay also overnight.

- So will I have to take the day off?
- Steven urging: No, it's on us.
- Thanks, Steven and Mark.



The Iguazu falls and the hydroelectric plant were indeed a one in a lifetime experience.

Rehovot, January 2020