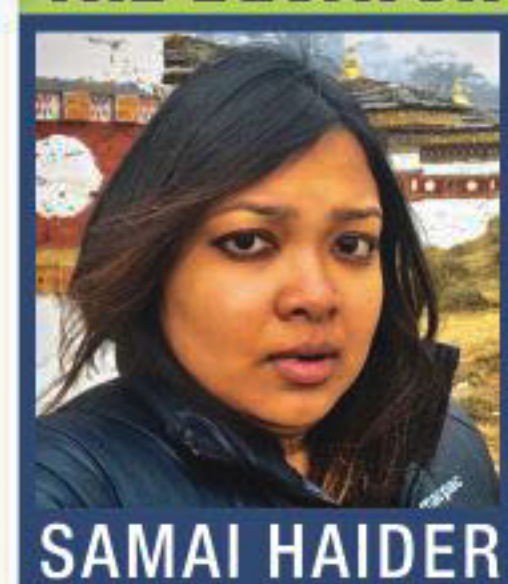


CIUDAD DEL ESTE

A window into Paraguay

SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR



SAMAI HAIDER

Ciudad del Este, Paraguay's second largest city, is famous. But perhaps not for the more conventional reasons. Set on the tri-border with Brazil's Foz do Iguaçu and Argentina's Puerto Iguazú, the city isn't quite on the tourist trail like its neighbours. Instead, it seems to have gained notoriety as one of the region's busiest hotbeds for counterfeit goods. With rumours that the city had harboured the likes of Osama bin Laden, it has long held the imagination of screenwriters, featuring on popular crime shows like *NCIS* and *Miami Vice*. For our family of three, however, the lure lay in the prospect of experiencing a new culture within close proximity to our base in Foz do Iguaçu—a 15-minute bus ride to the border.

Once we realised that the border area between Paraguay and Brazil was open to everyone up to 30 km around the Friendship Bridge connecting the cities of Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguaçu, we decided to visit. Flipping through guidebooks and scouring the internet revealed little information, save for an alarming list of warnings against all manner of crimes, scams and health hazards that one was projected to encounter upon crossing the border. However, after careful consideration, we

realised that the thrill of experiencing a new country, its people and food, outweighed any potential threats to our security.

Nevertheless, we decided to play it safe and only visit during the busiest part of the day and called upon every ounce of street-smarts we'd learnt growing up in Dhaka. Constant vigilance—our motto for the day!

BUSTLING BUSRIDE

We'd decided to take the bus to the Friendship Bridge that spanned the River Parana, connecting Brazil and Paraguay. While it is possible to get a taxi across, we wanted to cross the border on foot to soak up the frenzied atmosphere as people went about their daily lives.

Boarding the packed bus in Foz do Iguaçu, I found myself being ushered down the narrow aisle to a rusty turnstile. A large, uniformed lady sat by it, collecting bus fares before allowing passengers to pass through. As she conducted her business, the driver focused solely on his, continuing to drive on as soon as all the people had boarded, but not necessarily been seated. Toddler on hip, I frantically wedged myself through the deceptively tight turnstile as the bus shot off. As I did, I realised in panic that I'd managed to get

us stuck. My husband, stroller hoisted on his shoulder, simultaneously paid the fare and shoved us through. I clumsily pirouetted into a melee of passengers as they milled about with shopping bags of all manner of size and disrepair. A plump lady with a giant bag of guavas tucked under her arm, gabbled at my son before kindly giving up her seat for us.

In circumstances not unfamiliar to us, what was meant to be a 10-minute bus ride took closer to 30. I delighted in the scenes unfolding before me. Horns tooted as traffic crawled at a snail's pace towards the border. Street vendors weaved in between cars, deftly balancing large baskets of the doughy, bagel-like *chipás*—a popular snack in the region. Others rapped on the windows to attract attention to their wares, selling everything from chilled cans of drinks to neon coloured phone cases. The air too was clogged with exhaust fumes, making the muggy surrounds even more oppressive. I took a deep breath and practically bopped in my seat in glee. A bizarre reaction to what would be considered an unpleasant experience by most, but it reminded me of home—Dhaka.

PASSPORT CONTROL

We wanted to be extra cautious and stop at immigration control to get entry and exit stamps on our passports—just in case. Paraguayan law enforcement appeared to have gained internet infamy, with forums rife with stories of corrupt officials harassing tourists for a quick buck. So, we disembarked at the Brazilian check-post and staggered through three lanes of traffic and a crush of people into what we thought was the immigration office.

A group of security officers were standing around chatting and looked rather perturbed to see us there. We were in the wrong place.

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Despite dingy outward appearances, many of the malls sell luxury goods.

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