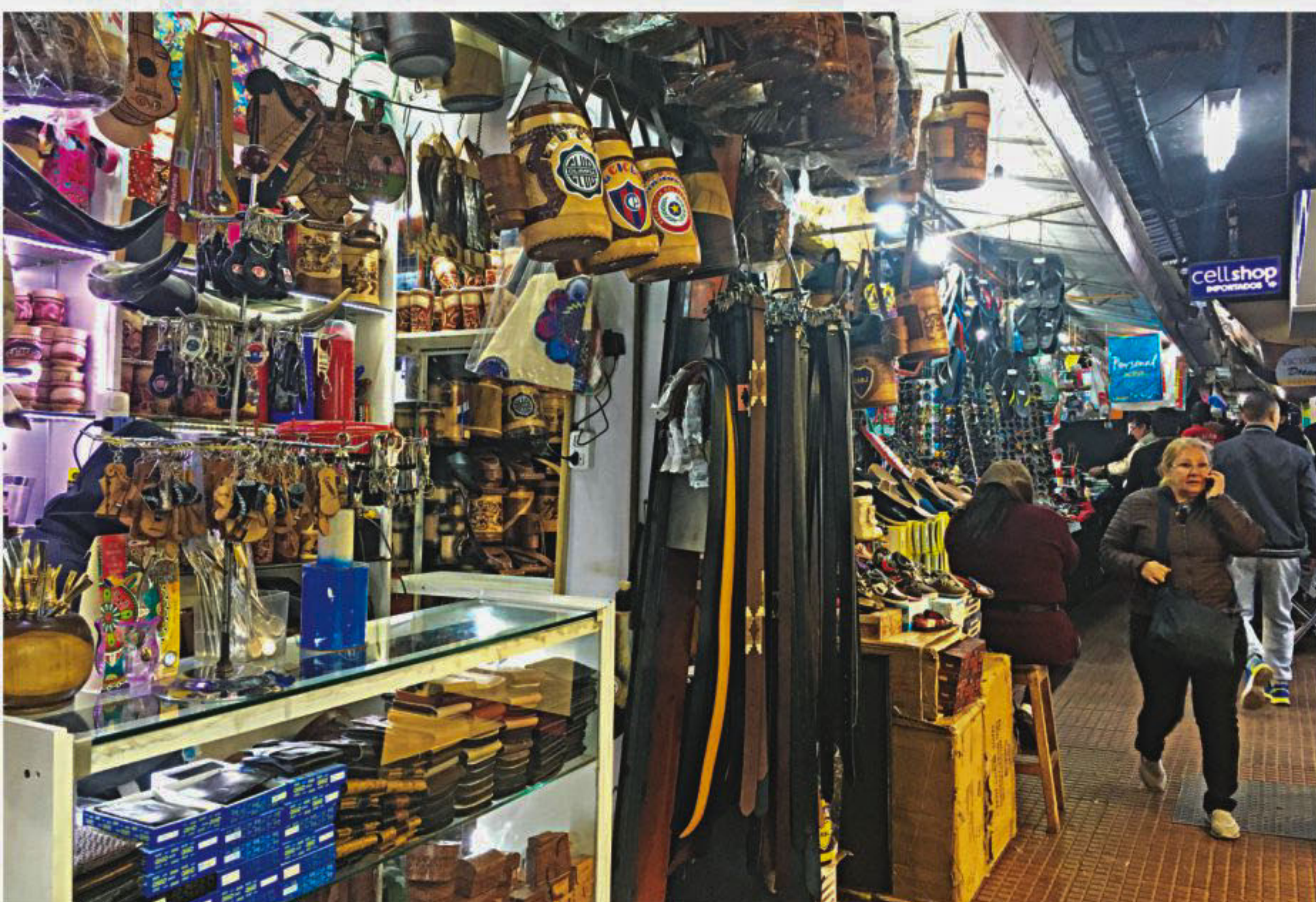


TRAVEL



Stalls line the streets of Ciudad del Este.

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The actual immigration offices were further down. They seemed more taken aback by our willingness to go through the trouble of getting the stamps and informed us that most people just walk through the border. One of the officers escorted us to the door, pausing to regale us with tales from his time as a student in Australia. As smoke-belching cars and frenzied pedestrians passed us by, chattering away in Spanish/Portuguese, it seemed an unlikely place to be discussing rugby and TimTams.

Border crossing

Passports stamped, we walked onto the pedestrian ramp leading towards the bridge. Dirt-caked rails lined the length of the bridge, obscuring our view of river below. Internet forums were rife with warnings about this bridge which is touted to be a hive of criminal activity. However, it seemed anything but as locals, many with families, walked gaily across, stopping to take photos or buy snacks from the numerous vendors lining the bridge. There was definitely a significant police presence, but they were more intent on taking selfies with giggling throngs of young girls than busting drug cartels.

Half-way down the bridge, we came to a crudely painted sign that said "Brazil" on one side, and "Paraguay" on the other, indicating we were actually on the border, straddling two countries over the river.

We had our eyes peeled for border control as we encroached deeper into Paraguay. There were no discernible signs of one. The few border security officers we encountered completely ignored our

presence and tended to their *tereré* (a cold drink made of yerba mate, popular in the region). We were still within the bounds of the open border I suppose, so they weren't very fussed.

Shopper's paradise

Ciudad del Este may have made it onto the map for its more notorious roots; however, it is the shopping that draws in the crowds. A few hundred metres from the Friendship Bridge sprawled plush duty-free complexes that offered luxurious shopping tours, complete with personal chauffeured taxis. Beyond, a veritable concrete jungle stretched out over the hillside. Every building appeared to be a shopping mall. Gaudy signs were emblazoned across each building as chaotic jumbles of wires wound down to the warren-like streets below. Dingy stalls lined the grimy streets, selling everything from fresh produce and souvenirs to fake watches, clothes, DVDs and handbags. Think Bangkok night-markets, but on steroids.

Anyone who has visited the likes of Gausia and Eastern Plaza in Dhaka will be familiar with the scene. Absolute bedlam. Shoppers dodged frenzied shopkeepers as they tried to coerce people into their stalls while others haggled unabashedly over prices. Men with more unscrupulous intentions lurked in side streets, offering great deals on everything from exchanging dollars to jewellery.

Despite dingy outward appearances, many of the malls, such as Monalisa and SAX Department Store, specifically sell luxury items. And it's not just electronics and accessories on offer. When they touted

Ciudad del Este as a shopper's paradise, a place where you can buy literally anything under the sun, they weren't far off the mark. Large Lebanese and Indian communities, mostly involved in the textile trade, as well as Korean and Chinese immigrants, ensure the city truly contributes to a global palate. Billboards advertising sari and jewellery shops aren't uncommon, and neither, as it appears with names such as S.A. Shop Mina India and Casa China, are malls that supply to specific demographics.

It also appeared to be standard practice to have guards stationed in front of every mall, shopfront and money exchange, completely kitted out in bullet-proof vests and with large assault rifles in hand. As we queued up to exchange our dollars (fantastic rates compared to its neighbouring countries), the guard lounging by the door sprang into action and juggled his rifle to entertain my angsty toddler.



The local bus that runs between Foz do Iguacu and Ciudad del Este.

A taste of Paraguay

Hungry from haggling over a souvenir for our travel collection, we followed the local sales girls as they streamed into a restaurant. Although calling it a restaurant would perhaps be a far stretch of the word. Tables covered in colourful plastic sheets were crammed into a structure built in the middle of the city's busiest thoroughfare—Avenida San Blás.

There were no menus, and no one spoke a word of English. However, there was a buffet of hot food, none of which looked particularly appealing. Our limited Spanish didn't get us very far in deciphering the menu, nor what was quintessentially Paraguayan. So we

resorted to pointing at whatever the other customers appeared to be thoroughly enjoying. Despite the disappointing appearance, we were thoroughly rewarded with some of the most delicious food we'd had that week. One of our favourites was a rich, meat stew, topped with a fried egg on top, the *bife korygua*. No wonder almost every patron at the restaurant was digging into a plateful of this with a side of boiled cassava, or *mandioca*, a local staple. Another favourite was a spiced, fried fish, *surubi*, a large catfish from the rivers in the region.

We reflected upon our brief exposure to Paraguay. Grungy and congested, it was, indeed, far less developed than its wealthier neighbours. But there was something about its vibrancy, its people, that made us rue not exploring further. As for the rampant fearmongering we faced online, we felt that while much of it was valid, it really was not too different from many of the larger cities in the developing



world. I was glad we'd decided to take a chance on this city, albeit while exercising extreme caution (which would be the sensible thing to do). Our bellies full and valuables still intact, we slowly made our way back towards Brazil.

Next stop: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil!

*Samai Haider is a writer, traveller, artist and... economist. If her rather odd amalgamation of interests isn't dotty enough, she is currently travelling around South America - with her pack and toddler strapped to her back. Read about the fables of her foibles here at The Daily Star. You can see more of her work at: <http://samaihaider.com/>*

BURN THE WATCHTOWER

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We don't live in a country where someone can sit in a box in California and kill a family in the Swat Valley, while little children are shot to death inside schools.

We certainly don't live a country that could close down most of its government while still successfully enacting regime change in Venezuelain the name of Freedom™. I wonder how it feels to be American and to know that this is considered an essential government function while food safety and tax collection are not. If I imagine myself

American, I get doubly annoyed when I remember that the only reason 'my' government closed down was because of a political belief that America should look inwards and take care of its own

problems, and not have to deal with all the hassle that involves taking care of the displaced and destitute from Central and South America. It would feel odd to me, if I were American, that my government still found time and money to spread Freedom™ and create more destitute and displaced in South America. I'm not American, so instead of being angry I just

find it very funny.

(Though, if I were American, I probably wouldn't actually think about it, or about anything other than football and bad beer.)

I imagine we would be very confused and upset to live in a country like the USA. Not so confused and upset that we would imagine that we got the better end of the deal, but at least we can sleep well at night—provided the power doesn't go out or the building next door doesn't start construction at 3 am. Or until we get with an Amazon delivery of Freedom™ in the

form of a Hellfire missile fired from a CIA-run Predator drone subcontracted to Jeff Bezos and coordinated through a Skype call between a Monster Energy-fueled 19-year-old gamer in damp shorts and a harassed single mother of four who's only doing this as her third job so that she can afford bottled water for her family and a bulletproof vest for her youngest.

*The writer is an artist and an MA candidate in International Migration at the University of Kent. Read more of this sort of thing in Disconnect: Collected Short Fiction.*