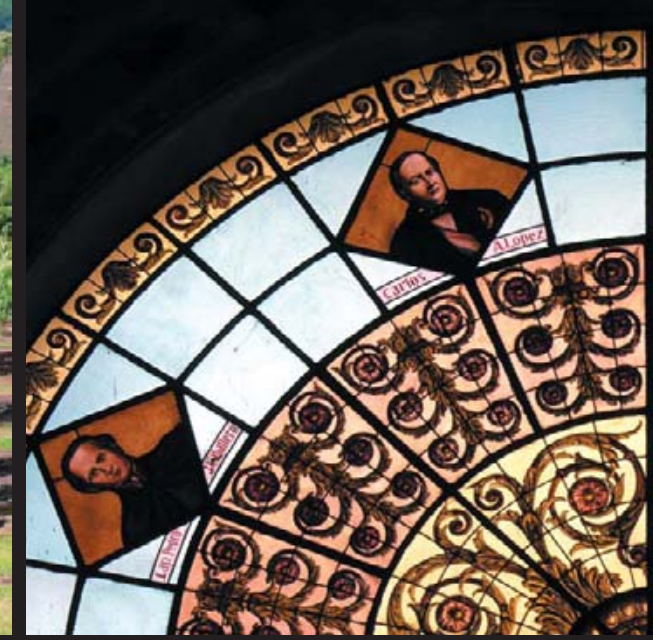
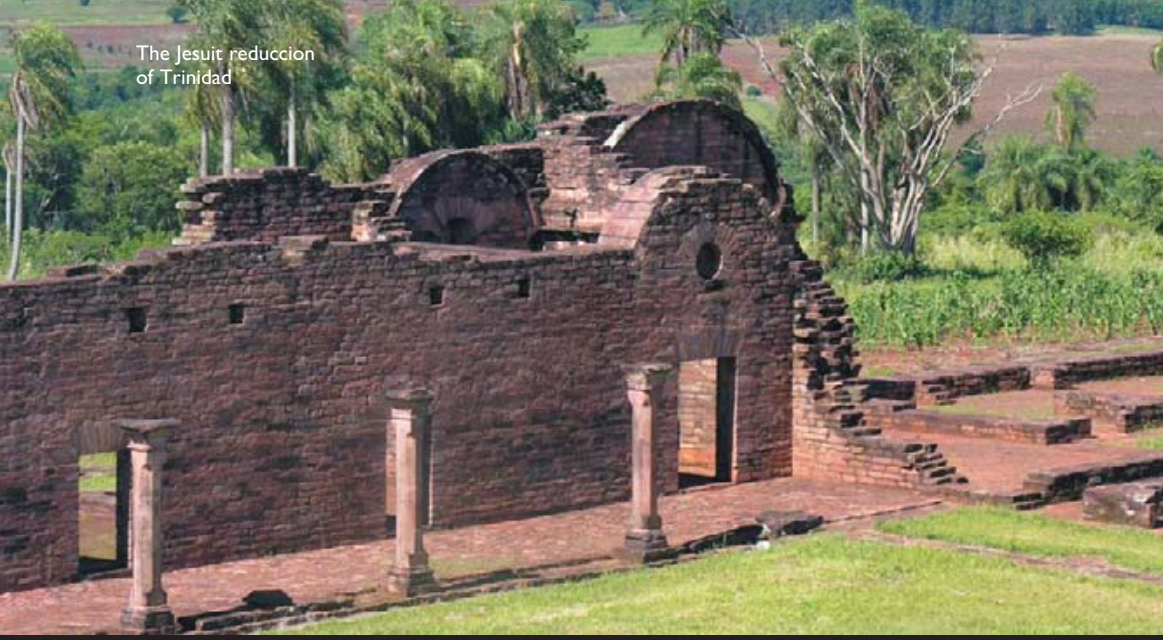


The Jesuit reduction of Trinidad



Why Paraguay?



Presidential palace, Asunción



Chacoan horned toad



Wood-fired steam train, Asunción

“Why Paraguay?” Whenever anyone asked me to explain my choice of destination, I’d struggle to give a cool and restrained response. A note of evangelical fervour might creep in, or a sniff of indignation. Surely it’s obvious? Paraguay has unspoilt countryside, abundant wildlife, a fascinating history, constant warm weather and the friendliest people you could want to meet. And if you really need another reason, it’s because no one else goes there. Paraguay is Latin America’s best-kept secret...

But why would such a beautiful and diverse country be so neglected? It might seem that little Paraguay is eclipsed by its near neighbours Argentina and Brazil, but the blame really lies with a series of devastating dictatorships and wars.

Paraguay’s history couldn’t be more colourful or more brutal. In the mid-nineteenth century it was to have been the blueprint for all modern South American republics. This great potential was undone in fairly short order with the accession of dictator Francisco Solano Lopez. Alongside his Irish mistress Madame Lynch, a glamorous courtesan Lopez had brought from Paris to add sophistication to his tropical backwaters, he waged war against the combined might of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. Paraguay was decimated.

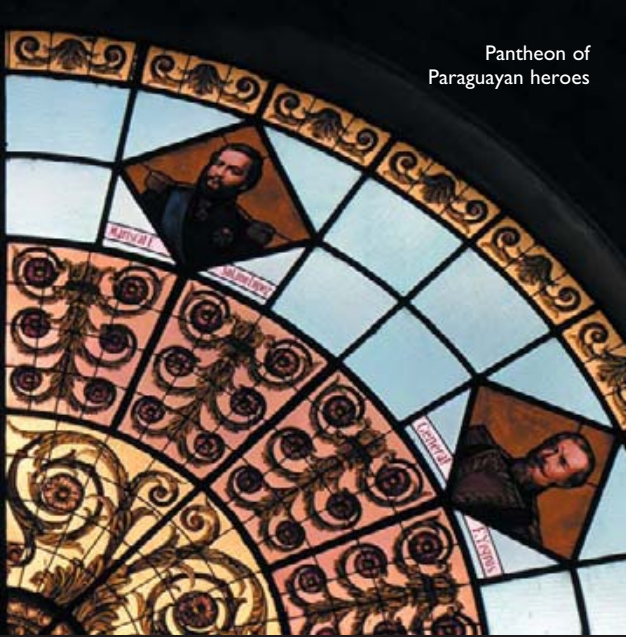
In the 1930s a dispute with Bolivia over possible oil reserves in the Chaco led to another war, one of the most bloody and pointless in modern history. Then from 1954 to 1989 Paraguay endured the infamously repressive regime of General Alfredo Stroessner, who comes second only to Fidel Castro in longevity among

20th century Latin American leaders. These days Paraguay is a much more relaxed place, though the legacy of its turbulent past is before you wherever you go.

Geographically, the Rio Paraguay divides the country into two very distinct regions. On the south-eastern side the rich red earth is fertile enough to yield three or four harvests a year. This is where the Jesuit missionaries established their reducciones to protect and educate the indigenous Guaraní. There are extensive wetlands too, more widely known on the Brazilian side of the border as the Pantanal, where opportunities for birdwatching are without equal.

Crossing the river outside Asunción, the road leads northwest towards Bolivia, and the landscape changes starkly as you enter the Chaco. This is one of the planet’s most unusual and unforgiving landscapes, a desert full of spines and strange creatures, and the unlikely site for some of Paraguay’s most successful colonists, the Mennonites.

A Mennonite tour of the Paraguayan Chaco is an especially illuminating way to experience the country. My guide Hans was a farmer and tracker. At four in the morning I’m awoken and we’re bumping through the darkness in a pickup truck towards one of the most spectacular sunrises I’ve yet seen. Hans’ status as an elder in the Mennonite community makes him a living link to the pioneers of the 1920s, and his tour draws together history, botany, zoology, theology and some great fishing stories.



Pantheon of Paraguayan heroes



Cowboys at Estancia Santa Clara, Caapucú

Malachy O'Neill gets off the beaten track in the heart of Latin America.

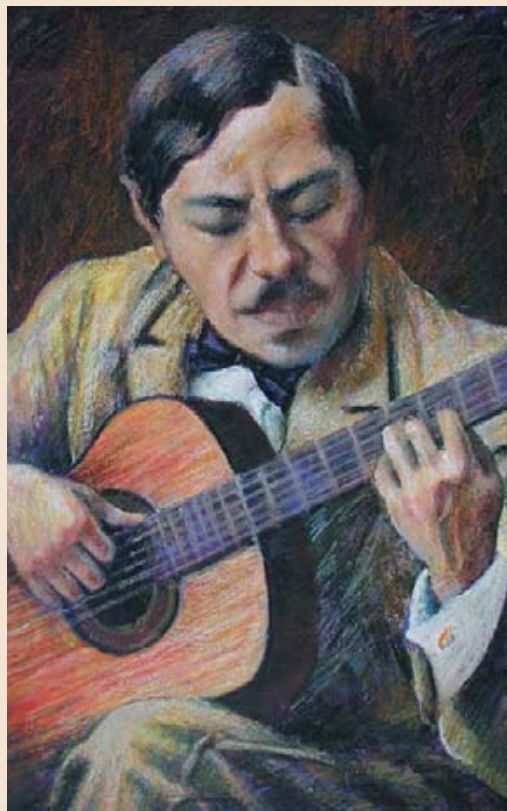
You'd be forgiven for thinking that a country with comparatively few visitors would have only a fledgling tourist infrastructure and some pretty unprepossessing hotel accommodation. On a recent Audley research trip however, I was pleased to find that our associates in Asunción are experts, and fully aware of Paraguay's potential as an emerging destination. I wasn't surprised to find experienced guides and comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles, but I confess I wasn't expecting to come across quite such charming hotels.

Take the Gran Hotel de Paraguay for example. There are palm fringed courtyards, spacious bedrooms and a ballroom whose vaulted ceiling was exquisitely painted by Madame Lynch's artisans some 150 years ago. Asunceños still meet here in the afternoons for their tea dances. Or on the only paved road to the Chaco, Buffalo Bill Lodge. What looks like a quaint roadside diner at first glance turns out to be an oasis of wildlife, with a memorable welcome from host Angel and his pet Jabiru stork.

But of all Paraguay's attractions the Jesuit missions are perhaps the most inspiring. During the 150 years or so that the missions flourished, Guaraní Indians were given refuge from avaricious slave traders in communities where arts, music and agriculture flourished. The Spanish monarchy, fearing the Jesuits' influence and economic power, drove them out in the late nineteenth century. The remains of the reducciones are sufficiently well-preserved to let you imagine how life might have been, and they're perhaps the only UNESCO World Heritage Sites where you may well be the only visitor.

Given its position at the heart of the continent, it's no surprise that Paraguay can conveniently be included in itineraries to Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Bolivia. From the moment you cross the border you'll see what makes Paraguay such a unique place. From overheard conversations in melodic Guaraní, to the incessant drinking of the cold green tea known as *té reré*, you'll instantly appreciate why Paraguay is Latin America's best-kept secret.

Malachy O'Neill
Paraguay Specialist



Agustín Barrios Mangoré, Paraguayan guitarist and composer



Christmas shopping

FACT FILE

Trips to Paraguay of between a single day and a week in duration can be incorporated into itineraries to Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Bolivia. For the more curious traveller, a two week itinerary taking in the highlights of Paraguay will cost from £3,000 per person including return flights. For details please contact Malachy on 01993 838 608.

