

# Paraguay

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **National Parks in the Chaco** (p760) Watch a jaguar race through the scrub, sleep underneath billions of stars, experience the absence of humanity.
- **Itaipú Dam** (p755) Visit what is now the second-biggest dam in the world (but it's still damned big!).
- **Carnaval Encarnación** (see boxed text, p751) Get set to party at this Carnaval, which is smaller than Rio's but much more fun.
- **Trinidad** (p752) Explore the picturesque remnants of the Jesuit settlement at one of the world's least-visited Unesco World Heritage Sites.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p758) Forget the rest of the world exists as you relax on the beach at tranquil Laguna Blanca.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 406,752 sq km (about the size of California)
- **Budget:** US\$25 to US\$40 a day
- **Capital:** Asunción
- **Costs:** *residencial* room in Asunción US\$10, bus ride per hour US\$2, *chipa* US\$0.25
- **Country code:** ☎ 595
- **Languages:** Spanish and Guaraní (official), Plattdeutsch, Hochdeutsch
- **Money:** US\$1 = 5100G (guaraní)
- **Population:** 6.5 million
- **Seasons:** hottest (December to February), coldest (June to August), rainy (October to November)
- **Time:** GMT minus four hours



## TRAVEL HINTS

Don't refuse an invitation to sip *tereré* (iced herbal tea), and try fresh warm *chipa* (a type of bread made with manioc flour, eggs and cheese) – those in southern Paraguay are by far the best.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Popular entry points via bus include Foz de Iguazú, Brazil; Posadas, Argentina; or via the Ruta Trans-Chaco from Bolivia.

Little-visited, little-known Paraguay is much misunderstood. Despite its location at the heart of the continent, it is all too often passed over by backpackers who wrongly assume that there is nothing to see. True, tourism in Paraguay is underdeveloped and lacks the mega-attractions of some of its neighbors, but those who make it here are invariably glad they do.

Paraguay is a country of remarkable contrasts. It's rustic and sophisticated, extremely poor and obscenely wealthy. It boasts exotic natural reserves and massive artificial dams. Here, horses and carts pull up by Mercedes Benz cars, artisans' workshops about glitzy shopping centers and Jesuit ruins are just a few kilometers from sophisticated colonial towns. The steamy subtropical Atlantic rainforest of the east is in stark contrast to the dry, spiny wilderness of the Chaco, home to isolated Mennonite colonies.

While Paraguayans are more used to visits from their neighbors, they are relaxed and welcoming – share a *tereré* and they will impart their country's alluring and frequently bizarre secrets.

The residual effects of dictators, corruption and contraband contribute to a sense that, for many years, much of Paraguayan life has taken place behind closed doors, while the cultural influence of the Guaraní remains as strong as ever. Paraguay is a place for those keen to have a truly authentic South American experience.

## CURRENT EVENTS

The eyes of the world turned to Paraguay during the April 2008 general elections. Following a bizarre but historic turn of events, former bishop Fernando Lugo, a man with no prior political experience, was elected president of the republic. This momentous decision ended six decades of rule by the Colorado Party (the party of former dictator Alfredo Stroessner), the longest unbroken term in power by any one party in the world, ever. The strange events that led to Lugo's election involved intrigue, back-stabbing and corruption allegations of the sort that has littered Paraguayan history and ended ultimately with a new era of hope as Lugo promised to represent the masses.

The ball started rolling with outgoing President Nicanor Duarte Frutos' desperate attempts to stand for a second term in office, requiring a change in the constitution, which had been in place since the end of the dictatorship. When he found himself rebuffed by his own party he tried the next best thing, announcing his sister-in-law Blanca Ovelar as an official candidate and opting to campaign for her rather than his vice president, the young, popular and gifted orator Luis Castiglioni.

With opinion polls showing Castiglioni to be well ahead in the Colorado internals, it was to everybody's surprise when it was announced that Blanca had won by the tightest of margins. In welcoming the results Nicanor committed an important and damaging gaffe, stating that 'he' had still never lost an election, and confirming what many people had thought all along – that Blanca was merely a puppet for more 'Nicanorismo.' Castiglioni

cried 'corruption' and urged his supporters, dubbed the 'Vanguardistas,' not to vote for Blanca in the general elections. The resultant political wrangling split the Colorado Party right down the middle and for the first time opened the door for the possible election of a non-Colorado candidate.

Cue the emergence of Lino Oviedo as an independent candidate. Former head of the Paraguayan military under Stroessner, he had attempted to lead a coup d'état in 1996 (and possibly a second earlier one) and had been accused of genocide during the dictatorship. Eventually he was jailed and then acquitted for the murder of former vice president Argaña. He had an axe to grind with certain prominent Colorados whom he felt had set him up for Argaña's murder, yet he retained widespread support among the membership of the party. Of miniature stature, he was seen in some quarters as a strong, traditional leader who could whip the country back into shape. His candidature was the final nail in the Colorado coffin. As the Colorados fought amongst themselves and with Oviedo representing a return to Stroessnerism in the minds of many, support for the outsider Fernando Lugo grew exponentially.

The results were announced to much celebration in the Plaza de los Héroes. Lugo had won a historic victory with 42.3% of the vote, convincingly beating Blanca (31.8%) and Oviedo (22.8%) into second and third place. He declared that the victory showed a 'great will for change' among Paraguayans and symbolically renounced his presidential salary. Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez