

Perspectives on Paraguay

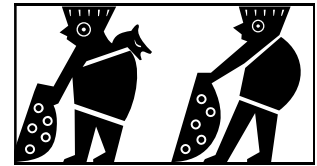
Question (Q): Describe the people in Paraguay.

Answer (A): OK. They're very open, they're very friendly. No matter how poor they are, they'll invite you to the house and give you the best portion of what they have. They're also very honest. For example, in the United States people are so conscious about their weight. In Paraguay, if someone is overweight, they'll say, "Oh, you know you're fat," but it's not something that's considered negative. It's just how you are. They're very honest about that, and I think that it takes a little bit of adjusting, especially coming from a culture where physical appearance is so important. It takes a little adjusting to realize that they're just being honest, but at the same time, it's not necessarily seen in a negative way.

The people of Paraguay are very friendly. They're shy at first. They feel you out to see who you are, especially if you're a foreigner. But once they get to know you, they are very protective of you. They make sure that nothing happens to you. They're just really open, really loving.

I think they value the family; the family's very close. Daughters, even though they get married, they still come back and they visit their mothers, their fathers. They live fairly close to each other. On weekends and Sundays, they always come back if they don't live very close to visit and have lunch. They're just a very open and loving people.

Q: How is life in Paraguay different from life in the U.S.?



A: Well, there's a term that they use here a lot in Paraguay—it's called *tranquillo*. I think life is a lot calmer, more low key, down to earth in Paraguay than in the U.S. In the U.S. everybody's rushing to get somewhere, rushing to do something. There's never enough time to do the things they want to do, and I think in Paraguay there is. There isn't so much emphasis on job as there is on family, and I think that's something that really differentiates the people in Paraguay.

Q: Describe the differences between men and women in the rural areas and then, if it's different, in the urban areas.

A: Well, there's a great division of the sexes. The men are considered the heads of the families and the women are to stay home and have babies and take care of the kids. That is the way it is. It's to a greater degree in the more rural areas, of course, and there's more freedom for women in the more urban areas. Like, for example, in this town, Carapegua, the women have jobs, they're teachers. They have their own businesses. In the rural areas that's not the case at all. So there are very distinct lines between males and females. And, for example, for a woman to



reach a certain age and not be married is not considered socially acceptable. There are women who have remained single most of their lives, but it is not socially acceptable. Also, it is unheard of for a woman to live alone. They're always living with their families. For me to come into this community, which is a fairly large town, and live by myself was something that they just could not understand. The women have been trained . . . to find a husband and get married and have a family. And that's the way it is right now. Just recently they have started to change that mentality, but it's a very long process, and it's not going to change overnight.

Q: Describe some of the dating customs.

A: Women are not allowed to [go to] dances until they're 15. When they turn 15, there's a huge party and then they're considered eligible. They can get married at 15, and they can go out to parties with a chaperone, either their mother or their older sisters. They cannot go to parties, especially in the more rural areas, without a chaperone or a date. They have certain visiting days when the men go over to the women's houses. They sit with the family and they talk to the dad, and they have very little time alone, and they get to know the family. On the non-visiting days they can do what they want. But when a man comes on those certain days, then that means he's interested and they're dating.

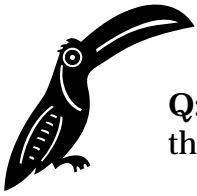
Q: Talk a little bit about some of the friendships you've made here in this area.

A: Well, let's see, I've made really good friends here. I think that's a feat in itself in that [I had] to learn the language. I wouldn't consider the friends I've made here superficial friends. I think it took a lot of work and a lot of trying on both our parts, but I think I've made friends that I hope to maintain when I return to the States. And the thing that is so important to me is that I've made them in a different language. We did not speak the same language when I first came here, and now we've passed that and it's a deeper friendship, and I value it. I value it more because of the work to form the friendships here.

Q: Do you feel that you've become part of the community?

A: Yeah! I felt I became part of the community . . . but you're always a foreigner, you're always the North American. I felt that people accepted me, and they were comfortable around me, but I don't think that I could, at least in two years, ever be completely integrated into the community. I'm still considered a novelty in a lot of ways. Their perception of Americans is blond hair, blue eyes—because that's the majority of what they see on TV and of Volunteers coming down here. I think I was a novelty because they'd never seen a black woman. So it was an awakening for them, and I think a good thing that they got to see an American who was not representative of the white Americans that they see on television.





Q: Do you have any special experiences or moments that you can share with us that come to mind, stand out?

A: I think one of the most rewarding experiences for me, workwise, was visiting a school and seeing them using something that we'd talked about in a workshop. That was really rewarding. For example, seeing a little kid wearing shoes and talking to his little brother or sister and saying, "You've got to put on your shoes," after I talked about not running around without shoes so you don't get parasites—I think that was rewarding. On another level, working with the kids, even though I didn't work with them a lot, was something I had a good feeling about.

On a personal level, I'd say the moment I got past the superficial barrier with my friends was very special to me, the moment we got to the point in our friendship where they started to come to me and ask my advice about things and talk to me. Then I knew we had reached a new level where I could talk to them and get advice from them—just like in the States when you're hanging out with your girlfriends and you're gossiping and going over your problems and getting different opinions. I thought that was one of the more rewarding experiences—when they started to come to me and when I started to do that with them.

Q: So what do you think people in the U.S. can learn from the Paraguayans?

A: I think one of the things we're losing in the U.S. is the importance of family. I've learned that personally being here. Just to value the family, also the importance of the community as a whole and working together for the community. It is not always the case in all communities, but in comparison to the United States, there's still a strong sense of community here in Paraguay. I think in the United States people tend to focus on consuming and having things, and I don't know whether it's to replace something they're lacking emotionally, but I think here people are more concerned with living. They buy things they need, but there is not so much emphasis on work and earning money. There's more emphasis on family. Work is to get the things you need in the house and the things you need to survive. But family is important.

Q: What makes Paraguay special for you?

A: There are a lot of things that make Paraguay special for me. I can't pinpoint one thing. I will say my experience has been enriched by the people I've met. . . . I really enjoy the culture, the language, listening to Guarinese even though I don't understand it. Spanish, learning Spanish, and just learning about a different culture, and communicating when three years ago I couldn't. I think that's part of the reason I really enjoy it, that I now have an understanding of people that I didn't have before.

Nichola Minott served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Paraguay from 1991 to 1994.

