

Departamento de Rocha, Uruguay – All Cards Cancelled

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It's been a long time since I wandered around Uruguay. The former Switzerland of the region was then a poor nation ruled by corruption and isolated from the world. It was the time when the crowds were silently protesting against serving French croissants and Bang&Olufsen classical music to the Peiranos in jail – the bankers that took cash out of almost every bank account in the country, dismantling any possible trust among depositors. Still, people in the streets weren't angry. I have never seen such a patriotic and patient people as the Uruguayans, unlocking creative ways to survive, while listening to the realistic melancholy of Sabina songs in the decadent pearl of Montevideo, where doctors and engineers were selling hand made handicrafts in the main streets – seldom seen small cases made out of dry oranges in the sun.

If my life was a balance sheet my year of travels in South America would be an asset that hopefully my memory won't take of me. I roamed around and ultimately started a relationship for life with Argentina. I was learning how to become a traveller and each new spot was starting to seem more immense. But by the time I was an 18 year old kid, with lesser resources than I have today, and sometimes kids do a lot of mess.

I was leaving Lagoa dos Patos in Rio Grande do Sul, crossing Pelotas easy going, and parking into Chui, Uruguay, without knowing that I was about to become a real Pato (in Portuguese meaning an individual that should subscribe an insurance plan just before waking up each morning). Chui is a border small town that encompasses a bit of Brazil and Uruguay. The bus arrived to the Brazilian side of Chui and I walked into Uruguay with no border or anyone to stop me. (In the picture Brazil to the left of the median, Uruguay to the right) It was 5 in the morning and the local office where I should register my passport was far from opening. As Chui was both boring and meaning cop in idiomatic Portuguese, I thought I would be better off by taking the 6 o'clock bus to the capital of the region: Rocha. I recall it was winter and the weather was cold. In the bus stop every men and women, kids and ancients, all of them had a warm keeper bottle and a cup that from time to time was filled with mate – a cool bitter local drink mimicking the excitement of coffee, drank by almost everyone from the farmer in green fields of South Brazil until the students in late hours in Buenos Aires universities. Before leaving I spent a few of the last dollars I had left to buy me a cup of mate. After all, Rocha was the capital of the region: a place where I would easily spend a week to eventually flirt with a girl working in the local grocery or bar, besides being able to take money from every bank and enjoying a cool breakfast.

__ It's been a month since I've seen an outsider coming from Brazil – the driver laughed loudly – and I do this route every fucking day of my life.

__ You know I look like an Uruguayan: dark hair... dark teeth... mate drinker.

Maybe I slept a while but I didn't need to be a visionary to understand it was a go and return every day trip to most of the people in the bus. Meaning 3 hours to go and 3 hours to return. The pendulum trip – as defined by Camus – is totally against human nature whether it is from Chui towards Rocha or Lausanne towards Genève: life tends to nihilism although it rarely turns to be a conscious awareness. People were sleepy in the early morning. Some of the workers had their eyes half closed, albeit taking a few sips in the mate from time to time. The road didn't help to fall asleep. I was crossing Laguna Negra, but I wanted to be one more in that bus. That's why I only take pictures with my eyes...

__ You are Portuguese, right? See that fortress «se llama Fortaleza de Santa Teresa» it was built by the Portuguese. All our country was then under the Portuguese crown, but you decided to fool the Spanish by trading Uruguay territory for a huge land several times bigger in the west coast of Brazil. You know Montevideo?

__ The capital…

__ One of the first Portuguese explorers saw the mountain (Monte) and claimed it for himself after his companions by saying «I saw it» (Vide Eu).

Around 9 am the bus reached the town outskirts. Every house was very similar: no investment at all. When the bus finally reached Rocha central square, I grabbed my stuff and as I moving out, the bus driver warned:

__ You think you arrived to Disneyland, boludo? In 15 minutes I continue my route to Garzón.

In the central plaza of Rocha there was an arid garden with no bushes at all. Naked trees surrounded the garden pointing to the sky. An ancient church was asking for renewal and was looking too old and too locked. There was just one bank. I walked towards my money. It was an old building, with no computers, ATM's or automatic doors. There were no clients and I could see just one employee almost sleeping in its desk. I woke him up.

__ Mister, good morning, I would like to withdraw some money with my card.

__ Señor, we only take deposits.

That was when the problems began.

__ Listen, I need some money... I got cash in my account!

__ Señor, deposits... can't do nothing... You can only get money in Punta del Este. By the way, the beautiful American Express card you have is nowadays considered elitist in Uruguay, so it was banned from the financial system.

I had a cold sweat. Actually, my life was relaxed these days, after the initial stress of learning how to move short of money in South America never knowing whether I would stay one night or one month in the next town. In the beginning I was aware I should always have some hidden money, embassies contact details and a phone card. But as I moved away from the drug routes into the remote villages I was relying more and more in luck, in people and in God. But I should definitely get serious this time, because I had 3 dollars and the bus was leaving anytime soon. Fuck. So I remember I left the bank and though I walked fast towards the old bus I couldn't help noticing the only opened entity in the plaza: a coffee and travel agency fusion, with a huge black and white picture of the Maldives in the background. So there was the bus driver giving the talk to the girl in charge of the place. They were having breakfast together and I was starving. So I decided to approach them, explain my situation and I was given some food for free. I also changed the three one dollar bills for a more than fair deal, cause I was needing some local currency to make the phone call.

__ Pendejo, I told you this is not Disneyland. What are you doing here? You must get to Punta del Este. Anyway, I will take you for free to Garzón, which is where I end my route, and come back after some minutes. Because I live in Chui, you know…

In the trip to Garzón I was very awake. I talked to the bus driver most of the time and focused on my own shit... instead of digging deep into traveller thoughts. The bus arrived. I was said «Good luck» and I only had the money to try to get closer to Punta del Este. I knew my parents were in the States having their momentum and I could only reach Gina, an old lady that was working in my countryside house. So I tried a call to be paid in the receiver (a native gringo would rephrase this sentence). I would get to know that my Aunt Raquel picked the phone and denied the call to the operator. Maybe because she's a crazy bitch, who knows? The aftermath was that my only option was Gina, who knew all the time the exact location of my mum and dad. And I couldn't reach her. I had just enough money to the bus ticket which was leaving by 3 pm. I walked in the streets and felt the buzz of food being sold, the routine of the local restaurants, and some boozed men leaving the taverns. One looks at the sky in despair. And then looks at the ticket, kisses the ticket, and with empty pockets goes to a grocery store and steals the nice fruit standing outside. I ran away as fast as I could, then I ate and stayed hidden in a tree until almost the departing time of the bus to San Carlos.

When I arrived I was aware I still had to find a way to go from San Carlos to Maldonado and then from Maldonado to Punta del Este... That's when dogs turn aggressive / That's when men turn creative.

10 days after...

I was in the border of Colonia de Sacramento - one jewel in South America. There was Uruguay in the past and Rio de la Plata in my future. I was trying to take the ferry to Puerto Madero, a port in the heart of Buenos Aires. Still trying to legalize my entry in Chui so that the police could stamp my passport. Between the border agents and the ticket office there was open land, wind and rain, that I was about to run 2 or 3 times more.

The moment that followed will be remembered for ever in my life. One of the happiest moments I can recall. I had met no one that I knew for months. In the queue there were 3 people just in front of me: a old sir and two youngsters, a girl and a boy. When the older one looked behind, we started looking at each other as if we couldn't believe.

__ Diego?

__ Ah! __ speechless.

__ El portugués?

I was just looking to my great friends from Canarias Islands, the grandfather travelling with his grandchildren Gerardo and Romina, who were about my age. We met in Tunisia a couple of years before and been friends since then. Was this a coincidence? I believe not. We spent the following days together in Buenos Aires, until they returned to Spain.