

Eco tour for Seniors, Leda, Paraguay

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Puerto Leda – between Fuerte Olimpo and Bahia Negra

Fuerte Olimpo is an unremarkable town in the north-east of Paraguay, about 800 km from the capital, Asuncion. It was here in 1999 that True Father called the Japanese National Messiahs together and gave them the mission of building a model community in land which had been bought around Puerto Leda, thirty-seven kilometers upstream on the Paraguay River, at the southern tip of the Pantanal, the world's largest wetlands.

The story of the Leda project, fuelled by the intense loyalty and determination of a handful of not-so-young Japanese men to fulfill Rev. Moon's dream that this would be a future 'famous tourist attraction', is one that is fascinating and mind-boggling. There is a wealth of information available, and not only from

a Unificationist perspective. Leda was the subject of a Belgium television

documentary in 2015 and has been featured on Korean television. What is remarkable is that so few members of the movement founded by Rev Moon are aware of what is happening here. Perhaps to increase awareness, as well as to realize TFs vision of eco tourism, the Leda project, (Foundation for Sustainable Development of North and South America) offered an 'eco tour for seniors' this summer. For several years already, groups of young volunteers have been visiting Leda and helping in local projects, but senior eco tourism is a pioneer venture.

I was one of the five Unificationist women – indisputably seniors since we ranged in age from sixty-one to seventy three – who responded to the invitation. But this was more than a visit to Leda; this was a meticulously planned and orchestrated taste of many aspects of Paraguay. From the time we were met at the airport in Asuncion, until the time of the departure of our inhospitably timed early morning flight, our every need and wish seemed to be anticipated and met!

After introductions and an initial briefing in Asuncion, we set off on the first leg our trip to Leda. The initially fairly reasonable standard of the main highway north soon deteriorated as we made our way through the Chaco region of Paraguay. We took a detour to visit Loma Plata, settled in 1927 by Mennonites from Europe and Manitoba, Canada, seeking a refuge to follow their religious convictions and way of life. We visited the museum which documents the history of how the first settlers overcame a brutal environment and many adversities to develop fertile farmland, and were proudly shown round the dairy produce plant which is the largest in Paraguay. It felt quite comforting

to hear (albeit quaint) German – the Mennonites actively cultivate and encourage connections to their European roots.

From Villeda, a small port further up river, we embarked on the final stage of our journey to Leda. I was somewhat dismayed to see the small open boat in which we were to spend the following five hours, and I felt my apprehensions justified when the weather became less hospitable and the final kilometers spent battling high winds and a choppy river. My comment that at least the water was warm and we would not perish from hypothermia should we capsize, was countered with the reply that an encounter with crocodiles might just be worse than being a bit chilly. But we survived and it was even fun – truly!

What a startling and intriguing experience it is to find, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, the high standard settlement that Leda is today!



Back in 1999, the Japanese were divided into two groups; one to support financially and the other to go immediately to this inhospitable, deserted farmland, whose borders measure 20 by 40 kilometers. One of those 14 original heroes, Mr. Nakata, national messiah assigned to Hungary and one of our hosts, said: 'I really didn't want to go to South America.... especially the Pantanal, because it has everything that I hate... hot weather, mosquitoes, poison insects, reptiles.... we went there

simply because Father told us to.' ¹ Father had told them bluntly that he was sending them to hell. Of the original pioneers, some have returned to Japan, and some are no longer alive. There are about ten Japanese men regularly in residence today lovingly maintaining a house for True Parents, first class guest accommodation, a conference and international training center, dining room, dormitories and even a swimming pool. The guesthouse to which we were allocated had high-standard furnishings and fittings, air conditioning and a kitchen with a well stocked fridge.

Our group spent an intense five days in Leda. We learned about the background and goals of TPs work in South America, were introduced to the various projects, and had opportunities for sport and recreation. The scope and variety of the projects is remarkable. There have been setbacks and disappointments; attempts to grow rice, maringa (a multi-purpose crop) and jatropha (used for bio-fuel) have met with limited success partly due to the relatively infertile clay-salty soil, the paucity of rainfall and plaguing insects. Taro, a root where one potato can yield 20 kg, grown in flooded fields and with perennial harvesting has yielded good crops. But relative isolation and distance from markets remain a challenge. We were shown the cattle ranch with 400 cows, a turkey farm, horse corral and 'pig school' which has grown from eight swine in 2009, to 700 today. Mr. Nakata showed us with great pride how the free-range pigs have been trained to return to the pens, some even swimming across the river, at the sound of a bell!

¹ M. Nakata: Speaking tour in USA, 2015



Are those large lovable furry creatures running around in an enclosure, eating from our hand, really members of the same family as my detested rats and mice? Yes, the capybara is the world's largest rodent. There are plans to display even more animals-preparations are already underway for a 'natural animals zoo'. Shrimp farming has just been initiated in the submerged taro fields. Ideas and creativity are certainly not lacking!

Arguably the most successful project has been that of fish farming. The pacu is an omnivore and a popular fish in Paraguay, but has been over-fished. Since 2010, the Leda staff, in conjunction with the University of Asuncion has been attempting to harvest,

fertilize and hatch fish eggs before releasing them back to the river. After a few false starts, success finally came resulting in the first 'Fish Releasing Ceremony' in May 2013, where praise and acknowledgement of the 'quiet dedication' of the pioneers was bestowed by the then head of state, President Franco. The many trees on the property have flourished from saplings planted by visitors to Leda, and there are now five new young *neem* trees, marked with our names, which hopefully will in time contribute to the conservation and development of the eco-system.



One day was allocated to driving up the borders of the property to a neighboring village where the Leda group, assisted by young international volunteers, have built and supported a school. In the town of Bahia Negra, we participated in a 'sister-hood' ceremony with the mayor and local teachers in attendance. My doctor 'sister' was dealing with an asthmatic child, and so we exchanged plaques and gifts in the local hospital. She crotchets as a between-patients stress reliever, and quite spontaneously and unexpectedly, presented me with a jacket which she had just completed. A perfect fit!

The impeccably maintained swimming pool invited me daily to test its waters, but July is winter in the Southern Hemisphere, and although sunny, sometimes a little chilly. When we three 'Westerners' finally took the plunge, it was indeed refreshingly cold, but we enjoyed a few laps nonetheless! Other leisure activities offered were horseback riding and fishing. I have never understood the attraction of Rev. Moon's best loved pastime, and was not initially enthusiastic about the fishing trip on our agenda. Although

I did not manage to hook much, let alone land anything, I began to 'catch the spirit' and understand the allure of this sport. I was even mildly disappointed when lunchtime heralded the discontinuation of our venture, having half-hoped that in true Japanese style, we might have had to stay out until each person had fulfilled her quota. But food plays a very important role here, mealtimes are served punctually and our polite hosts never served themselves from the buffet until we had had our turn. We were treated to mouth-watering delights such as rice cakes with taro filling or sushi with local fish, and were fortunate that our stay coincided with that of Mrs. Sato from New Jersey, a first-class cook!



Although on the day of our departure the weather was very clement, and I might even have enjoyed another trip on our speed boat, the journey back to Asuncion was to be by plane. Did I mention that Leda has its own air-field? The two hour journey in the five-seater plane afforded a magnificently clear bird's eye perspective of the river below us with Paraguay on the west and Brazil on the east, and we were able to identify landmarks of our upstream journey five days previously. With breathtaking efficiency, we were met

on landing in Asuncion, taken to the bus station and within one hour were sitting on the comfortable air conditioned vehicle that would take us to Ciudad del Este ('city of the east'). We spent the night in a hotel just across the border in Brazil, and the following day visited the magnificent 'Foz de Iguassu'- Iguassu Falls- the largest waterfall system in the world. A visit to a bird park, and an evening 'churasso' show ('all you can eat' buffet and performances of traditional dancing from South and Central American countries) were also on the agenda of this action-packed day.

The final official day of the tour included a visit to the Congress building where we were met and guided by two Parliament representatives, and a visit to the Unification Center in Asuncion followed by lunch and moving testimonies from two of the local members. Shopping was the last, unofficial but obligatory (especially for senior ladies) task on the agenda, before the participants from the USA returned home. We two from Europe were to continue our travels to Brazil.

How can I conclude? As I reflect on my stay in Paraguay, I have unanswered questions and mixed feelings. To say I was impressed by the loyalty, stamina, and sheer guts of these Japanese pioneers, is a complete understatement. Their hospitality was magnificent. Tears come to my eyes as I remember the overwhelming kindness and thoughtfulness.

Perhaps we did not need to be chauffeur-driven the few hundred meters from our guesthouse to the main house, but it did give us a certain feeling of what it must be like to be royalty or VIPs! And so many little 'extras' won my heart. Each of us was issued with a woolly hat in anticipation of the five hours to be spent in the open speedboat; we were able to chose from a large selection of rubber boots to combat the mud after a few hours rain; we were provided with insect repellent on an evening river trip in case we had forgotten our own supply; and there were many other perhaps small but considerate gestures. These same men who unfailingly adhere to a rigid schedule of

prayer and devotional readings every day at 04.30 am, have such fun-loving spirits as evidenced by the enthusiasm which post-dinner karaoke sessions were held. But it was a challenge to sing 'Danny Boy' with a Japanese karaoke machine!

Is the Leda project a vision and dream whose time is about to come? Or is it all hopeless idealism, a remarkable, but none the less completely unfeasible 'folly' without a sustainable infrastructure or means to develop and become self-sufficient? And above all, without new blood?

The Japanese see the Mennonites community as an example of what Leda can become. But I feel that this comparison is not quite reasonable: the Mennonites had no other options and came with their families, The Unificationists in Leda are a group of ageing Japanese men whose wives and children may have visited, but have not chosen to settle. The men are fully aware that if young people, and above all families, cannot be enticed and inspired to live here and invest in this project, the future is very questionable.

In 1995, TF proclaimed a second 40 year course centering on South America. So much has been invested. What will remain?

It is healthy and necessary to express and tackle such issues.

There are plans to continue the senior eco tour. Whether or not the experience can best be called an eco tour, it is certainly a pilgrimage, awakening a deep sense of awe and appreciation, tinged with a certain sadness, for Rev. Moon's legacy in South America. I unhesitatingly recommend such an experience to any older member who has no major health issues, and a sense of adventure.

Links for further background information:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JnY7Wz_C7g

[2015 - 150315 - Belgium TV - Moonies in the Jungle on Vimeo](#)

or simply browse under: www.ledaproject.com

