

13 january 2008

SUMMER

## **Botnia attracts wave of tourists**

The Gualeguaychu blockade sunk Las Cañas but it now comes back to life with local and international visitors that want to observe the pulp mill and enjoy the beach in the “hot zone”.

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Located in the epicentre of the conflict with Argentina, the Las Cañas beach resort is recovering from the knock out that the Gualeguaychu blockade delivered and that deprived the resort, for a second consecutive season, of the arrival of the summer vacationists from Entre Rios, Argentina that of yore accounted for 70% of its patrons.

Due to this cold shoulder received, the current situation of the beach resort has sad streaks on one hand, but surprising on the other hand. “We are with about 300 permanent beach-sunshades and both motels and houses for rent are fully booked and we have a neighbouring population that is renewed almost on a daily basis”, said Julio Martinez, the municipal officer responsible of the beach resort located 8 kilometres away from Fray Bentos. It is estimated that in Las Cañas some 2,000 people are on vacation, a figure that duplicates on weekends. Some relief for the tourist centre, even though we are still far away from the 10,000 tourists figure that arrived in the resort before the conflict started.

For the recovery, the Municipality of Rio Negro launched an arduous campaign focused on domestic tourism. Moreover, the authorities point out a larger presence of Argentine citizens, in spite of the fact that they have to cross through the bridges at Paysandu or Salto. In 2006, the presence of residents from Entre Rios, Argentina dropped from 70% of the summer vacationists to 12%, a loss of more than half of the tourists in a single blow.

But what is most surprising is that the same conflict is generating a very out of the ordinary arrival of tourists. The installation of Botnia and the rebuff of Gualeguaychu placed Fray Bentos and Las Cañas (8 kilometres away) in a privileged spot in the international news portals, something that derived into a promotion “for free”.

Several artisans of Las Cañas have had as shoppers tourists coming from Norway, Denmark or Sweden. Those that spoke to them, relate that they arrived in here attracted with the idea of visiting “the conflict’s hot zone” that the construction of a cellulose plant unleashed, something that for them, at first glance, appears to be incredible.

But visiting the enclave is also attractive for the own Uruguayans because many of them are interested in knowing and trying to understand what is going on. To look at (of course, from a distance) Botnia’s colossal plant, the General San Martin International Bridge and, on its causeway, the activists that maintain the blockade, visiting the beach resort, the town, and requesting the opinion and feelings of the neighbours, is something

that will not bring about a tourist flow similar to that of past years, but can nevertheless start to be benefited from.

Every cloud has a silver lining, they say, and the authorities seek to “use” Botnia’s showcase as a tourist industry capital. For instance, and as Marcelo Linale, tourism director of the Municipality quotes, “several documentary films are being shot of how Fray Bentos was before and after Botnia. This was a very important turning point, the town will change, and it will grow into a very large town”.

The industrial park, then, would end up opening new tourist industry doors. “We do not have another alternative than to move onto a different type of tourism. We will not only be ‘sun and beach’ but we will have a historical, of museums study, cultural and also entrepreneurial, businesslike sightseeing tour”.

Moreover, they plan to go another step ahead. Several trans-national companies dedicated to agriculture are installed in the Department and aspire to build a new platform of visitors. “We can generate a tourism industry for businessmen, provide venue for conferences, machinery fairs, technology exhibitions, etc., if we generate an infrastructure for it”.

FREE! For this summer, attracting the youth is one of the main objectives. The Municipality signed an agreement with the Ministries of Tourism and Social Development for those that have the ‘young card’ can enjoy five days free of charge at the Las Cañas holiday camp.

In parallel, the Municipality improved several services because the uncertainty raised determined that no one showed up at the call for bids, something that was considered an historical downfall.

Some businessmen from Las Cañas, however, are of the opinion that the Municipality did not rise to the occasion, and are pessimistic. “The season looks bad, the administration should be better organised”, said the owner of the restaurant “La Churrasquera”. “Few Argentines have showed up, you can see a few that have a house, and they have to travel a long way and add several kilometres because of the blockade”.

Pablo Alvarez has gone camping at Las Cañas for decades and considers that this year there is a lack of services, places to dine, some entertainment for the children, because the parents come but the children want to leave, because other than the beach they have no other attraction. This place during the night looks like a cemetery” he said.

Carlos Sosa is one of the hopeful artisans. It’s been fifteen years that he dedicates to selling clothes and beach wear and he thinks that in the last two years “we hit rock bottom”, but now the situation “has stabilized with the local tourism”.

Mayor Omar Lafluf said he expects to reap what he sowed, talking about what the Municipality carried out in the community in matters having to do with promotion. “In 2007 we worked indefatigably generating many activities: golf championships, sports cars rallies, bicycle competitions, meetings of magistrates and museum directors. This allows us to think that many of those that saw what we have will now be willing to come back”.

Lafluf himself goes every day to Las Cañas and chats with the tourists, especially with the Argentines, many of them fearful of being mistreated, something that has not occurred.

#### The Piece of Information

300 Camping parcels were occupied on the first week of January. It has capacity for 1,200, which were fully taken before the conflict.

#### The Municipality goes for certifying the beaches

The “bad” propaganda generated in Argentina on the air and water conditions, could be refuted by the Technological Laboratory of Uruguay, and in that way turning into one of the first five beach resorts in Uruguay in receiving a natural beach certificate.

The Director of Tourism of the Municipality, Marcelo Linale, informed: “for that sort of shadow that the Argentine press and the people of Gualeguaychu spread about, the certification by an internationally recognized agency will be important”. The application for such certificate is being carried through and the studies on the water quality of the River Uruguay are expected any time now.

At the same time, the Municipality seeks to re-launch other zones in the Department such as Esteros de Ferrapos or Potrero del Burro, some 5 kilometres downstream of Las Cañas. There, the Municipality works in unison with the Institute of Colonization, to develop one of the largest flora reserves known thus far, and an ecological and environmental centre.

#### Infrastructure is recovering

The conflict on the installation of Botnia generated the disinterestedness of private capitals on investment for tourism in the beach resort. Many shops, stores such as those with slot machines, recreational areas, restaurants or other entertainment services abandoned the beach resort. At the same time, nobody showed up at the call for bids to operate services at Las Cañas.

In spite of this negative scenario, the Municipality of Rio Negro succeeded for this season in reopening the “La Churrasquera”, one of the restaurants at the beach resort. Moreover, and according to the Director of Tourism of the Municipality, Marcelo Linale, they are about to conclude the transfer to the private sector of the Municipal Motels Compound, Hostelry, swimming pools, and Convention Hall. The private management will extend until November, and that would ensure that the services will be open year round. “This has cost us a lot of work, but we are about to sign”, said Linale.

Moreover, this year, the Municipality of Rio Negro installed showers, baths, telephones and waste sorters in beach areas, as well as the presence of life-guards with their beach-huts and medical assistance. The beach resort also displays a careful trimming of trees and landscaping and its accesses were also refurbished.

In the compound, the Municipality has a total of 180 beds, half the figure the private sector has in motels. But the rental of houses is also important, where there is “an increased availability” because many technicians that arrived for the construction of Botnia’s plant have already gone back.

In Las Cañas there are around 400 chalets, half of which belong to Argentine citizens. The average rental price for a house is of around 20 US\$ dollars per day.

The municipal holiday camp has a capacity for 1,200 tents. It has an area for young people, where the discotheque is located and another area for lovers of a more rustic type of tourism.