

Tabacco producers turned artisans

In the south of the province of Corrientes, Argentina, in Punta Batel, which is the municipality of Yatay Ti Calle, a group of families found an alternative to the traditional cultivation of tobacco. Making use of what nature generously provides they found a balance which does not disturb the environment.

By Gladys Acevedo and Carlos Pérez



Two hundred and twenty kilometres from the provincial capital, this rural area is the epicentre of artisans who are dedicated to the manufacture of hats, handbags, and cases made with the leaf of a tree called *carandai*, which in *Guarani* means 'water palm'. There are eight families who dedicate themselves to this work and at the end of February they organize, and have done so every year for the past seven years, the *Festival Regional del Sombrero de Palma* (Regional Festival of the Palm Hat).

Visiting this place means walking through paths full of natural beauty; extraordinary birds of bright colours, alligators in some lagoons, capybaras and huge boas, regional fauna of the Mesopotamian estuaries. One may also see other animals introduced by man, the most striking is the buffalo, which soon adapted to this region.

Getting to destination also means finding people happy to welcome visitors. Hospitality is a way of living among *correntinos* from the land. We are in the home of Carlos Ocampo and his wife Elda Ayala, artisans who make hats and other crafts. Don Carlos is the president of the association of craftsmen who are dedicated to this line of work. He tells us that the whole process begins with the harvesting of the leaves from the tree, which is of great height and the reason they help themselves with a *tacuara* (native bamboo species) that has a knife attached to the end. This cuts only the central leaves. After drying in the sun for several days they are ironed ready to start the manufacturing process. First they make the *trensita* (braid), the top of the hat.

Another group of people takes care of the body of the hat and the wings. Finally, they apply a product that waterproofs the material and prevents it from deterioration. This way a high quality piece is produced and it may be worn for several years. It combines flexibility, lightness and great resistance due to its double stitch.

For generations this region was characterized by the cultivation of tobacco. However, the decrease in consumption of cigarettes worldwide, consequence of the campaigns for good health, made it unprofitable to continue cultivating it. This is the reason



why these people, who have since childhood adapted their lives to the cycle of plantations, had to reinvent themselves and explore other profitable activities. Elda and Carlos explain that their elders had always made hats for family use. Now, this tradition of many families has become a way of finding sustenance.



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visitor experience the local culture in the company of its kind people but also learn about the work of a group of families who with effort and joy have found a way out of a looming labour crisis without forgetting their own traditions. The palm hat, a refreshing way to protect yourself from the sun.

In the future they intend to develop new markets and continue to promote what they do. One way of doing this is organizing the Palm Hat, already in its VII edition. At the end more than a thousand people get together at dance. Proceeds from the event go towards the new machines which are loaned to the families work.

invite readers to schedule this festival to take the last weekend of February. Not only will the