

A WORLD CUP JOURNEY VIA MESSI'S BIRTHPLACE TO DISTANT FAN HUBS

From Rosario's streets to both sides of Bangla border

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Calcutta: It was during the Qatar World Cup four years ago that Santiago Aufranc stumbled upon social media videos of people in Bangladesh celebrating Argentina's triumph with wild enthusiasm.

"I couldn't believe they weren't in Argentina. Ever since, watching a World Cup in Bangladesh has been on my bucket list," said the 45-year-old Argentinian from Rosario — Lionel Messi's hometown — whose brother was present at Messi's wedding.

True to his wish, Santiago arrived in Dhaka a week before the tournament kicked off. "I needed some time to figure out the best places to watch the matches." Once he had his itinerary sorted, he flew in his girlfriend, Rita Larranaga. Though not as passionate a football fan as Santiago, Rita agreed to join him for Argentina's match against Egypt. The couple spent the next month cheering on La Albiceleste alongside football-crazy Bangladeshis.

They watched matches at three university campuses. "Daffodil University had the craziest fans. Every time we scored, they would run around and do chest bumps. It was as if their own country had scored!"

They also travelled to villages where residents had set up makeshift screens and projectors. "I was sceptical about how many people would turn up for matches that



Santiago Aufranc clicks a selfie with a sea of fans gathered for a World Cup screening at Daffodil University in Dhaka; (right) Santiago beats a drum on the campus

kicked off at dawn. But even in tiny villages, 40 to 50 people showed up, which was a huge turnout."

They watched the final at Mohsin Hall, a student hostel in Dhaka, where they encountered their biggest crowd. "We didn't score, so I can't tell you how they would have reacted if we had. It would have been real fun."

Speaking about the reaction back home, Santiago admitted that Spain had been the better side in the final. "Losing the final didn't make Argentinians angry because this squad has given us so much. There wasn't a single bad comment on social media."

During their month-long stay in Bangladesh, Santiago unexpectedly became "a bit of a celebrity". He was interviewed by a television channel, a leading newspaper and

several YouTube channels.

"After that, people started recognising us. They invited us to watch matches with them and even introduced us to their families and friends. I received scores of friend requests on social media. It was nice, but also overwhelming."

A week after Argentina's defeat in the final, the couple arrived in south Calcutta, a stop on their journey to explore India after the World Cup. Rita, a psychologist, works for a mental health institute that has a branch in Thakurpukur, where they spent a day.

"We spotted Argentina flags in some lanes, and our host, Sourabh Datta Gupta, told us about the football craze here too. Maybe we need to come back during the next World Cup," Santiago said.

Before arriving, they had heard about the recent remov-

al of Messi's statue in Calcutta and watched videos of the chaos at Salt Lake Stadium during the star's visit last winter. "People were throwing chairs," Santiago recalled, as Sourabh explained the circumstances behind the scenes.

The conversation eventually drifted to Rosario. Santiago said the modest house in Santa Fe province where Messi was born and raised remains with the family. "But Messi has a palatial home on the outskirts of Rosario. That's where he stays whenever he comes back."

His own family, he revealed, has more than one Messi connection. "My sister has a photograph with him at a neighbourhood café from before he became super famous. And my brother attended his wedding — on duty," he said with a smile.



Santiago and his partner Rita Larranaga taste rasogolla in Calcutta. Picture by Sudeshna Banerjee



The Argentinian atop a train in Bangladesh

Santiago explained that his brother worked at the marriage registry office, which was why he was present at the ceremony but could not take a single photograph. "Shakira was there too, because she was dating Gerard Piqué,

Messi's Barcelona teammate, at the time," he recalled.

Asked how Argentinians view the country's two greatest football icons, Santiago offered a succinct comparison: "Messi is an idol. Maradona is God."