

The Washington Post (Travel Section)

Sunday, December 28, 2003; Page P01

Buenos Aires: Looking Good, Paying Less

By Brian Byrnes
Special to The Washington Post

When my friends in the United States ask me what it's like to live in Buenos Aires, I often quote Billy Crystal's "Saturday Night Live" character, Fernando: "It is better to look good than to feel good, dahling . . . and you look mahvelous!"

The decades-old line still captures the essence of Argentina and, more pointedly, its lavish and luxurious capital.

For Buenos Aires locals, known as *Porteños*, looking good -- regardless of if they are feeling good -- really is a way of life. In order to fully appreciate this complex and cosmopolitan city, you must come prepared to revel in style over substance.

Before we continue, allow me to address some of your lingering concerns:

Yes, the Argentine economy collapsed in December 2001. Yes, there were riots in the streets. Yes, there were five different presidents in two weeks. Yes, there have been dramatic rises in crime, poverty and unemployment. Yes, you absolutely should still come here. Why? Because the economy is on the rebound, a popular new president is working to put things in order, and thanks to the devaluation of the peso, it is now one of the cheapest cities in the world.

The economic crisis has caused a surge in street crime, but even so, this sprawling metropolis of 12 million is still one of the safest cities anywhere. You might witness some sporadic street protests, and it is best to steer clear of them, as they can be dangerous. Earlier this month, 26 people were injured after a homemade bomb exploded in the Plaza de Mayo during a protest commemorating the second anniversary of the 2001 uprising. But this type of violence is rare in Buenos Aires, so there is no need to feel threatened here. As in any large city, keep your eyes open and use your head.

When I first arrived in Buenos Aires on a steamy summer morning, I experienced total sensory overload. Soaring skyscrapers next to 19th-century cathedrals. Green gardens and chic corner cafes choked by diesel fumes from racing taxis. Spacious plazas dotted with graffiti-strewn monuments. It was like a triple-caFFEinated mix of New York, Paris and Rome. I was completely overwhelmed, and immediately enchanted.

In the three years I've been living in Buenos Aires, I've shown my share of guests around the city. My mom and dad liked the antiques shopping and great wines. My brother liked the racetrack. My sister enjoyed the trendy clothing shops. And my buddy Klug, well, Klug liked the women.

I like to bring my visitors downtown during the week, so they can get a taste of chaotic El Centro, where the city's financial and political sectors are located. The Plaza de Mayo, the city's main square and the site of countless demonstrations and protests, is a good first stop. At the height of Argentina's economic crisis in 2002, I spent many hours here conducting interviews and listening to angry Argentines speak out against the government. You too can witness a protest if you come to the plaza on a Thursday. The kerchief-wearing relatives of those

who "disappeared" during the country's "dirty war" march every week to demand justice for their lost loved ones.

Last year, part of the plaza was temporarily shut down for the filming of "Imagining Argentina," a film starring Antonio Banderas and Emma Thompson scheduled for release next year. The movie takes place during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship and many of the victims' relatives will appear as extras in the film. Since taking office six months ago, President Nestor Kirchner has taken steps to hold the former military leaders accountable for the thousands of Dirty War deaths, but it remains to be seen if the country is ready to confront its violent past.

The Plaza de Mayo is also home to the Casa Rosada, or Pink House, the famed presidential palace where leaders address the masses from the second-floor balcony. The Catedral Metropolitana (Metropolitan Cathedral) and the Cabildo (Town Hall) also flank the plaza and are worth a visit. The European-inspired Avenida de Mayo begins here, and a stroll down the tree-shaded avenue is a must for any architecture buff.

You'll eventually end up at the Palacio del Congreso, which is modeled after the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Along the way, stop at the legendary Cafe Tortoni to sip an espresso and get a sense of what life was like here at the turn of the 20th century.

About halfway down, the street intersects with Avenida 9 de Julio, said to be the widest avenue in the world, and the city's most recognizable landmark, the towering 221-foot Obelisco. The day after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, there was a moving memorial service here, where scores of strangers offered American expats condolences.

At night, Avenida 9 de Julio comes alive. Surrounding buildings are plastered with a dizzying display of neon billboards, and you can feel Buenos Aires buzzing as you speed down the avenue.

The magnificent Teatro Colon is here, a world-class opera house opened in 1908 that has played host to Anna Pavlova, Igor Stravinsky, Luciano Pavarotti, Julio Bocca, Yo-Yo Ma and more. I'm still hoping to see the Rolling Stones rock the house. You can take a guided tour and catch shows here year-round. If you're a shopper, join the frenzy on Calle Florida, the pedestrian-only street where you can pick up fine leather goods and a variety of other authentic Argentine offerings.

A short walk from El Centro is Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires's equivalent of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, where an array of shops and restaurants make up the waterfront promenade. Many of the restaurants here focus on traditional Argentine cuisine, which essentially means one thing: beef. The livestock that graze in the southern Pampas region are strictly grain-fed, producing some of the tastiest meat in the world. For a thick, juicy filet mignon, order the *bife de lomo*. For a bigger version of a New York Strip, try the *bife de chorizo*. Argentines leave nothing to waste, and nearly every part of the cow is served, from the kidneys (*riñones*) to the glands (*mollejas*). It's just better not to ask.

The excellence of Argentine beef is exceeded only by Argentine *vino*. My favorite is the local specialty, the Malbec red.

For a day of culture and crowd gazing, I always end up in Plaza Francia in the neighborhood of La Recoleta. On weekends, you can check out crafts by local artists, sample homemade treats and watch the many surgically enhanced Porteños strut their stuff. The famous Recoleta Cemetery is also here, where generations of Argentina's elite are buried in aboveground

mausoleums, like those found in New Orleans. The first time I wandered through the endless rows of creepy crypts, I kept looking over my shoulder for Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda. The place is creepy for sure, but it is a must-do, if for nothing else just to see the final resting place of Evita Peron, the beloved Argentine first lady famously portrayed by that feisty, multitalented Italian American actress and singer . . . Patti LuPone. Oh yeah, and what's that other blonde's name? Madonna, right.

Buenos Aires has fantastic museums, shopping and nightlife, and much of it is within walking distance of Plaza Francia. The Centro Cultural La Recoleta (Recoleta Cultural Center) features rotating photography and art exhibitions. The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Fine Arts Museum) houses a distinguished collection of 19th- and 20th-century Argentine art and works by Picasso, Monet and Pollock. But the most impressive museum in the city is the new Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (Malba, the Buenos Aires Museum of Latin American Art) in Palermo, which has the most extensive collection of Latin American art on the continent.

A stroll down the elegant Avenida Alvear, next to the Plaza Francia, will reveal how Argentina's upper crust lives. This is also where my girlfriend likes to feed her shopping jones. It seems every time we're here, Louis Vuitton, Giorgio Armani and Ralph Lauren manage to make a dent in my wallet.

When I'm looking to hang out with the tragically hip Porteños, I head to either Palermo Viejo or Las Cañitas, both about a 10-minute taxi ride from downtown. Palermo Viejo is currently undergoing a renaissance, and scores of formerly rundown houses have been transformed into cool restaurants, clubs and shops that cater to the young, bohemian crowd. The epicenter of

the barrio is Plaza Cortazar, on the corner of Jorge Luis Borges and Honduras streets. From here you can wander for blocks in any direction and find a smorgasbord of culinary options -- Arabian, vegetarian, Nordic, Moroccan, Vietnamese, Mexican, vegetarian and more.

The cool Las Cañitas neighborhood is home to many good restaurants and bars and they are always packed. Nearby, at the national polo fields, wildly popular polo dudes grunt it out in front of supermodels like Gisele Bundchen. Across the street is the behemoth Hipodromo Argentino, where you won't ever mingle with models, but where my brother once hit a trifecta and walked out with several hundred pesos in his pocket.

Nearby is the spacious Palermo Park, where I like to ride my bike and make fun of all the Porteños who jog with a Walkman in one hand and a cigarette in another.

The city of Buenos Aires consists of 48 neighborhoods, but perhaps the most vibrant and historic ones are La Boca and San Telmo, just south of El Centro. The neighborhoods really come alive on the weekends, and Sunday is the best day to visit.

The blue-collar community of La Boca is where waves of mostly Italian immigrants settled during the late 1800s; brightly colored houses line the pedestrian walkway known as El Caminito. La Boca also is home to the country's most popular soccer team, Boca Juniors, where soccer god Diego Maradona got his start. If you want a near-religious sporting experience, attend a home game at La Bombonera Stadium. To avoid any of the violence that often occurs between opposing fans, go with a local or book a trip with Go Football, whose English-speaking staffers specialize in bringing foreigners to *futbol* matches.

From La Boca, it's a short taxi ride to Plaza Dorrego in San Telmo, where the cobblestone streets reek of Old World charm and where you can find antiques shops and art galleries galore. The area is home to many of the city's tango halls, and you might be treated to a spontaneous display of sensuality, as couples often start dancing tango in the streets.

Whatever mystery unfolds for you in this magical city, your visit to Buenos Aires will leave you exhilarated, enamored and aching for more of the passion that Porteños hold for family, food, futbol, fashion and fun. After three years, I'm feeling good and looking good, and the city has more of a hold on me now than ever before. Trust me, dahling, you're gonna love it here.

Brian Byrnes has reported on Argentina for The Post, National Public Radio and CBS News. He plans to start a support group for Argentine beef addicts.

Details: Buenos Aires

GETTING THERE: United Airlines offers overnight direct flights from Washington, arriving nine to 11 hours later. But because there is only a one- or two-hour time difference (depending on the season), you won't have to worry about jet lag. Other carriers offer connecting service, often through New York. Round-trip fares cost around \$765.

GETTING AROUND: Buenos Aires is a great walking city. There are lots of taxis and great public transportation (subways, buses, trains), so there is no need to rent a car. If you do take a taxi, make sure it is Radio Taxi, which is affiliated with licensed companies and offers more security. A taxi from downtown to any of the surrounding neighborhoods shouldn't cost more than \$3.

WHEN TO GO: The seasons in South America are opposite of those in the United States. Summertime (December-February) can be hot and humid, but winter (June-August) is mild, with temperatures in the 40s and 50s. Spring (September-November) and fall (March-May) are the ideal times to visit, both for the climate and the cultural activities in the city.

WHERE TO STAY: Buenos Aires offers an array of accommodations, from five-star palaces to bare-bones hostels. On the high end, the Alvear **Palace Hotel** (Av. Alvear 1891, La Recoleta, telephone 011-54-11-4808-2100, www.alvearpalace.com; \$290 a night double), built in 1932, oozes with elegance, and the rates are probably the highest in the city. At the very least, enjoy the lunch buffet in the garden patio or have a drink in the swanky lobby bar.

A more modern choice is the Hilton **Hotel** in Puerto Madero (Av. Macacha Guemes 351, Puerto Madero, 011-54-11-4891-0000; \$185 a night double), a short walk from the nightlife area. The beautiful new Sofitel **Hotel Buenos Aires** (Arroyo 841, Retiro, 011-54-11-4131-0000, www.sofitel.com; \$170 a night double) is near some of the city's finest art galleries and has a charming cafe bar in the lobby. The Howard **Johnson Plaza Hotel** (Calle Florida 944, El Centro, 011-54-11-4891-9200; \$75 a night double) is a good choice, with spacious rooms and a central location.

For information on the city's many hostels: www.ba-h.com.ar.

WHERE TO EAT: Lunch is served from noon to 3 or 4 p.m., and dinner doesn't start until 9 p.m., even later on weekends. Prices below are for a dinner for two with appetizers, entrees, dessert and wine, without tax or tip.

Cabaña Las Lilas (Av. Alicia Moreau de Justo 516, Puerto Madero; \$50) raises its own cattle and has amazing beef dishes. **Bice** (Av. Alicia Moreau de Justo 192, Puerto Madero; \$45) serves high-quality Italian food in a classy waterfront setting. **Santino** (Baez 194, Las Cañitas; \$40) is the place to go for great pastas and a chance to hang out with soccer legend Diego Maradona, a frequent visitor. At the *parilla* (steakhouse) **El Portugues** (Baez 499, Las Cañitas; \$25), the waiters are rude and the place is always smoky and crowded, but the steaks and ribs are inexpensive and tasty.

WHERE TO PARTY: The waterfront club **Pacha** (Av. Rafael Obligado and Pampa, Costanera Norte, 011-54-11-4788-4280) is one of the best on the planet for electronic music. **Thelonious** (Salguero 1884, Palermo, 011-54-11-4829-1562) offers fantastic local jazz in an intimate setting. **Buenos Aires News** (Paseo de La Infanta Isabel, Palermo, 011-54-11-4778-1500) is a favorite of Argentine celebrities.

WHAT TO DO:

- **Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires**, or Malba (Buenos Aires Latin American Art Museum) (Av. Figueroa Alcorta 3415, Palermo, 011-54-11-4808-6500, www.malba.org.ar) has the most extensive collection of Latin American art in the world.
- **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (National Fine Arts Museum) (Av. Libertador 1473, La Recoleta, 011-54-11-4803-0802, www.mnba.org.ar -- Spanish only) has an extensive collection of Argentine and international art. Free admission.

- **Museo de Bellas Artes de La Boca de Artistas Argentinos** (La Boca Fine Arts Museum of Argentine Artists) (Av. Pedro de Mendoza 1835, La Boca, 011-54-11-4301-1080) houses a large collection of Argentine art. Admission is \$2.
- **Go Football** (011-54-11-4816-2681, www.gofootball.com.ar) has an English-speaking staff and can book tickets to some of the world's best soccer.

INFORMATION: City of Buenos Aires, www.bsas.gov.ar (click on "turismo" and then the British flag for English). Argentina Government Tourist Office, 212-603-0443, www.turismo.gov.ar. Buenos Aires Herald (English-language daily newspaper): www.buenosairesherald.com.

-- Brian Byrnes