

Travel



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Buenos Aires: splendid S. American surprise

By Richard and Mary Magruder
special writers

The face of Buenos Aires is astonishing. It sprouts hundreds more high-rise buildings than any other city in South America except Sao Paulo, Brazil, yet it has no clustered skyscraping city center in the accepted sense.

Its tall office structures, hotels, condos and other high-rises are scattered for miles and miles in almost every direction except riverward, and it gives the impression from a high vantage point of stretching almost into infinity, about as far as you can see.

These lusty, diligent, often-perplexing Portenos drink twice as much wine, per capita, as even the most vintage Parisian (and the Argentine wines are wonderful), and are said to consume three times as much beef per year, per capita, as the devout steak-eaters of Dallas or Des Moines or Denver.

Their subway system is one of the best in the world . . . and the cleanest, yet their streets and boulevards are clogged every rush hour with some of the most impenetrable traffic jams on earth.

THE STATELY Avenida 9 de Julio is the broadest boulevard in the world (two full city blocks across) yet, due to an accident of city planning, is just 16 blocks long, end to end.

The Rio de la Plata is not really a river at all, but an enormous arm of the Atlantic that is so wide here that only on the clearest of days may one catch a glimpse of the other (Uruguayan) side.

Only in the last couple of years have the Argentines been able (for the first time since Juan Peron rose to power) to throw off the bonds of military rule and, entirely through democratic processes, begin to set for themselves a course determined by their own will.

ONE UNATTRACTIVE legacy of the nation's newly won democracy is political and social graffiti. It defaces many of the city's most glorious monuments, and almost every other available surface throughout the city-center.

Otherwise, the greater part of the city of Buenos Aires remains as dignified and elegant as we remember it from the 60s, and has somehow managed to keep the "artists of the walls" off the surfaces and monuments of Palermo, Belgrano and the opulent center suburbs.

One of the Americas' most-fashionable shopping ways is a narrow high-rise-enclosed pedestrian street called Florida, bisected by a similarly restricted street called LaValle, the main artery of the city's best cinemas and fine restaurants are arrayed.

IN THIS SECTOR of the city, a third of the world removed from the boot of Italy, the accents of that faraway and lyrical land are commingled to the hearts of every Argentine, throughout the city and all over the country.

Spanish, as spoken down here, and particularly in Buenos Aires, recalls more of Milano than Mexico, and "Cielito Lindo" is heard much less often than "O Sole Mio."

Three out of every four Argentines had one or more Italian grandparents, they say.

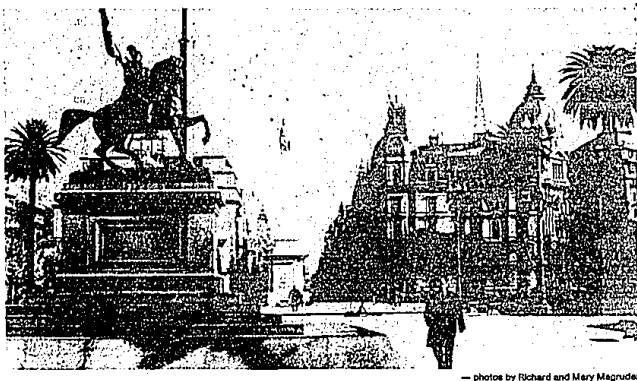
The pulsating La Boca sector, facing the harbor, is the core around which revolves one of the largest Italian populations in the world (more than a million in this area alone, we were told).

There are still dozens of delightful Italian-Bohemian restaurants-cum-clubs (our longtime favorite is Spadavecchia) renowned for their flowing Argentine wines (usually the reds), copious servings of Italian pastries and South American seafoods.

CAMINITO the Little Street of sun and tango fame, is the heart of La Boca, and a delight with its red, green, yellow and blue houses and shops.

The true heart of the greater city is the handsome Plaza Mayo, principal governmental, religious and civic site in Buenos Aires. At one end is the lovely Pink House, La Casa Rosada, or Presidential Palace, and arrayed around and at the other end of the stately plaza are the National Cathedral of Argentina, the Municipal Palace of Buenos Aires, Banco Nacional and the pristine, white, colonial Cabildo, where the country's independence was secured.

Avenida Mayo runs due west from May Square, crossing the remarkable Avenida 9 de Julio and ending



The Simon Bolivar Monument greets people entering the Plaza Mayo, the true heart of the greater city of Buenos Aires.

at Plaza Congreso, at the entrance to the beautiful, soaring, green-domed National Congress Building, a taller, slimmer adaptation of our own Capitol.

Nine de Julio is the site of important commercial, governmental and cultural edifices, none more imposing or significant than the enormous Teatro Colon, the city's extraordinary philharmonic hall and opera house.

It is severe, gigantic (a block wide and two city blocks deep, five floors up and three basements down), and has its own symphony orchestra, opera, classical ballet and drama companies, one of the largest stages in

the world, and employs 1,800 people (exclusive of the performers) within its massive confines.

IN A METROPOLIS dotted with handsome parks and plazas, there is none more gracious or appealing than midtown Plaza San Martin, filled with giant, spreading shade trees, mosaic walkways and mini-plazas. San Martin centers on a glorious bronze and polished red granite monument to General San Martin, hero of much South American independence and beloved of Argentinians for he is entombed in the National Cathedral, on Plaza Mayo.

Some of the city's finest hotels,

condominiums, apartments and older office structures are arrayed around the upper Plaza, and downhill around the less dappled lower Plaza. Uphill are the towering, Art Deco Kavanaugh Building, very French Army Club, a few fine townhouses and the wonderful old Plaza Hotel, the Waldorf Astoria of Buenos Aires.

Immediately adjacent are Argentine Air Force Plaza, site of the regal, divinely proportioned English tower, whose works are identical to Big Ben's and which was a gift from the British people to the people of Argentina.

Cheap taxis, fine dining, live nightlife

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Taxis, especially since the recent currency conversion, are dirt cheap, with meters reflecting costs, which are then translated into distances, times and fares.

We hired a cruising yellow cab right off the street for four hours, photo stop and start, riding all over the central city, and ended owing a bill of \$9.12 U.S., with a two-buck tip, we felt like the last of the big spenders!

The Buenos Aires "Subte," or subway system, is excellent, clean, with fast, well-maintained trains, grids the city-center and spokes out in four lines to distant suburbs. It's so inexpensive, it's almost sinful.

Rental cars are readily available, at rates slightly higher than state-side equivalent (and few large cars for hire), but watch out for unreported dents and nicks, which they might try to charge to your account, on return.

WHERE TO STAY
Our favorite is (and has been for a quarter of a century) the Plaza Hotel, at the corner of San Martin Square, at the entrance to the high-fashion Florida shopping street. It's so old-fashioned it's downright stuffy.

But attendance and service are unsurpassed in the city, food is good to superb in the Plaza's five restaurants, room service is reasonable and fast, and the off-lobby fur, leather and jewelry shops are ranked as among the best in the city.

Two blocks down Florida is the Sheraton Hotel, biggest in the city, best of the newer places, with sumptuous lobbies and public rooms, excellent restaurants and cocktail lounges (including a rooftop rendezvous that is as good as such places can get, with breathtaking vistas out over the city and riverward).

Other fine hostilities include the Claridge, Republica, Presidente, Alvear Palace, Libertador, Pan-Am-Argentino and a dozen more three-star establishments and scores of one- and two-star hotels.

WHERE TO DINE

In this nation of vast cattle ranches (estancias), beef reigns supreme, and is available in every conceivable form throughout the city, which also boasts some of the finest steak houses on earth.

We've loved the Cabana as long as we've adored Buenos Aires, with its generous portions, especially the steaks, where a so-called "uncheon steakette" weighs in at 15 ounces, and a normal dinner steak can be two inches thick and hardly leave room for its platter.

Other superior dineries are the Plaza Grill and the one at the Claridge, El Repuesto de San Telmo, the London Grill and Oyster Bar, medieval El Caldero, the 60-year-old stalwart The Jockey Club on Avenida 9 de Julio, Hotel del Lago in Palermo Park, Au Bon Fin (the city's best French restaurant), the Bistrot and El Aljibe in the Sheraton.

Hereabouts are hundreds of other great dining spots, from true gourmet restaurants to such super places as El Palacio de La Papa Frita (The Palace of the Fried Potato), with an overwhelming menu, others offer Spadavecchia in La Boca and so many conchiterias (small cafes, more or less, though many are more than just) and sandwich and short order places beyond the counting.

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WHAT TO DO AFTER THE SUN GOES DOWN

Take a nap first, since the bar owls in this sophisticated metropolis don't even begin to shake their feathers until 11 p.m., then go out and don't expect to get in until dawn.

The Italian-Bohemian spots in La Boca are always worth a try, but be prepared to do some spot-hopping

as the appeal and quality may vary widely, spot to spot. Otherwise, Buenos Aires is easily as lively and hip, with as sophisticated a nightlife scene, as any other city (including Rio) in South America.

Best supper club hereabouts is the Golden Horn, on one end of the Sheraton roof, while Malena del Sur, L'Horizon and the great

discotheques, Rogantino, Mau-Mau and Bwana, are almost beyond description.

DOCUMENTATION
You'll need a valid passport from the United States, Canada, Western European nations (excepting Britain up to our last word) and Japan, with a tourist card and a visa which may be extended for up to four years to cover subsequent visits.

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