

TRAVEL

Buenos Aires has charm

"In Buenos Aires we have two additions: coffee and psychoanalysis... We're stranded here at the end of the world. We don't know who we are or where we belong. We've been forgotten by everyone."

From *Bad Times in Buenos Aires* by Miranda French

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

Buenos Aires is a serious city.

Like Paris, it has wide boulevards and European architecture. Like London, people still sit up for business and fine dining. Like New York, people hire dog-walkers who carry out their job dutifully, holding on to as many as 12 leashes at a time.

Its dance — the samba — is serious rather than joyous. Its art tends to be created with the dark palette. Even the street performers in San Telmo during its heralded Sunday flea market are old and somber. The city has more psychoanalysts per person than any in the world.

I came to Buenos Aires having just read *Bad Times in Buenos Aires*. Published in 1998, it is a young British journalist's account of a year living in the Argentine capital — which she describes as a melancholy experience.

We ended up at two hotels through some fault of our own. Arriving several days ahead of the arrangements made through the cruise line we were taking, we started out at the Park Hyatt, which we confused with the Park Tower.

It turned out well, since when you stay in a neighborhood you get to know it more intimately than just by sightseeing. The Park Hyatt is on the edge of the elegant La Recoleta tree-lined residential and shopping district. There, Alvear Boulevard is Buenos Aires' Rodeo Drive, with its rows of designer boutiques, the Alvear Palace Hotel, where the city's elite gather, plus state-embassies and government buildings.

That a cemetery is on the

When to go: Our fall and winter are their spring and summer
Where to stay: Park Hyatt Buenos Aires, Calle Posadas 1086; Tel: phone (800) 233-1234
What to read: *Bad Times in Buenos Aires* by Miranda French



Bohemian district: The poor construction of the buildings in La Boca is covered up by the bright painting of its resident artists.

most-see list of most visitors is still another testament to the city's outer atmosphere. The Recoleta Cemetery is a virtual "who's who" of the city's rich and famous, a kind of subdivision for the dead.

Its elaborate mausoleums designed and adorned by mostly classical, but a few contemporary, architects and sculptors are lined up wall-to-wall, much like a condominium complex. The most notable gravestone is that of "Evita" — the country's either hated or loved Eva Peron.

Our Fodor's guidebook gave intricate directions to her burial site that we found adorned with flowers and the epitaph, in Spanish, "Don't cry for me."

Several museums lie within the Recoleta district. We chose to spend about an hour and a half at the National Museum of Fine Arts, housed in what used to be the city's waterworks. It has a nice collection of the European masters — including several major Impressionist works — as well as a wing dedicated to contemporary Argentine art.

Our move to the Park Tower put us in the more bustling part

of the city. For one thing, just across the Plaza San Martin from our hotel was the railway station, a hub for Buenos Aires formally-dressed business community. I made guesses as I watched them during my daily jogs in the park as to who was in analysis.

Buenos Aires' cultural heart is the Colon Theater, a 1908 Italian-style opera house modeled after Italy's La Scala. English language tours are at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. most days. Have the concierge at your hotel make a reservation.

If you can, go to a performance to experience the marvelous acoustics and the glow of the

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huge (21 foot in diameter) French chandelier. The theater has its own opera, ballet and symphony. The ballet we attended featured four works.

The most remarkable was a locally-choreographed production of *Anne Frank*. It was strange to watch this story danced out in a city to which a number of notorious Nazi war criminals escaped. However, Buenos Aires is also home to a sizable Jewish population; descendants of Eastern Europeans.

Our other evening of dance was devoted to the tango. In light of the authentic samba school we visited in Rio de Janeiro, this was tango spooned to tangoists. I would advise going to a dance hall instead. Most don't open until 11 p.m. and aren't open every night. Again, let your concierge do his job.

My husband, a non-beef eater for many years, actually changed his ways for the city. He read about the quality of Argentine beef and decided to try it.

I didn't think it was as good as the best-beef we got here — but it is way cheaper. A major steak in an Argentine steak house equivalent to Morton's is around \$12. As a dessert eater, I would rave about the confections made with dulce de leche — a sticky sweet sauce similar to caramel.

Buenos Aires has plenty of good restaurants. When you go antiquing in San Telmo, try to lunch at La Caba de Esteban de



Don't cry for me: Judy Berne poses near Eva Peron's grave, which is the most famous among the rich and famous people who are buried in this cemetery.

Luca. It has good food, a friendly atmosphere and historical significance as the home of the soldier/poet who wrote the Argentine national anthem. French fries seem to be an Argentine staple. They also make them from sweet potatoes.

La Boca is the city's deliberately bohemian sector, at the mouth of the River Plate. The pedestrian street of brightly painted grassed tin houses is designed to attract visitors who will take photos and/or buy paintings from the lineup of local artists.

Around the corner where the

houses are not painted you see a truer, darker picture of Buenos Aires. As our taxi driver had told us, the paint camouflages the poor construction. No dog walkers in La Boca. Rather mangy looking dogs run freely on the streets.

The huge gap between the few rich and the many poor is a frequent scenario throughout Buenos Aires. La Boca is just one area where Buenos Aires seems to be crying for itself.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is a former managing editor of the *Eccentric Newspapers*.

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