

The Patagonian Express

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by Peter Porton

Although Buenos Aires is only an hour ahead of DC, it seems longer. Aside from the 10-hour flight, which was long enough, and the additional, if unintended, day we spent there (this is called foreshadowing), when we left the US I was in my 50's; when we returned, I was in my 60's. That's a long trip.

Buenos Aires, like much of Argentina, is bifurcated. It's a modern city built on the backbone of a copy of 19th century Paris. The old city is crisscrossed with wide boulevards, each going in opposite directions, as well as being divided by numerous and differing neighborhoods. To ensure that totally Parisienne feeling, the Portenos (inhabitants of the inner, old city) walk their dogs everywhere to ensure that their poop is within reach of anyone's sole. Dogwalkers are ubiquitous, often with eight or more even-sized mutts on leashes. They are often dropped off in parks and enjoy barking and pooping to their heart's content. Cats are also everywhere, the feral kind. In the parks, one often sees five or six cats lazing under a bush; it's because of the rat population in BA, plus they are fed by visitors.

Portenos speak a dialect that is spreading out over the rest of the country (to the chagrin of all the US high school and college kids spending a semester there to learn Spanish). One good example is the double "ll" that in Spanish is pronounced as a "y." In Porteno dialect it comes out as a "zj." Thus chicken is pronounced "pozjo" not "poyo," and llama comes out as "zjama" instead of "yama." But they understand each other, and that's the main thing. Of the eighteen of us who made the trip (Pat McGinty had to pull out the last day; get better Pat!), only Nina Collins, Rob Marinelli and Jerry Anderson spoke even a smidgen of Spanish, good enough, though, for directions and menus. My own Spanish runs the vast gamut from uno to dos.

So it was a good thing that we connected fairly quickly with our guide, Carlos, at the BA airport after the direct flight. There was no lost luggage and only two people strayed off for a while. He gave us a quick overview as we bussed to the Hotel Monumental, a small enclave in a business class neighborhood. The rooms were small but clean, the staff was great, and the

location was central to a lot of shopping. It was reminiscent of our neighborhood in Milan last year. Since we were wide awake and it wasn't yet noon, Carlos suggested either a walking tour to the arts fair to the north in the Recoletta neighborhood or the flea market to the east in San Telmo. Most of us opted for the latter, but people went in many different directions in short order. I think Carlos went home. The flea market was perhaps a mile long, had everything you could ever think of, and we spent an amusing afternoon going over Argentine second-hand goods. Prices were great, especially lunch, but who needs all the junk?

One reason everything is so cheap is that Argentina underwent a fiscal crisis early this century. Until then, their peso (which uses the dollar sign) was pegged to the US dollar. Their banking system went south and inflation increased. Until then, the Argentines were allowed to bank US dollars. The government changed that and the US dollar was changed to the inflated peso. Families lost fortunes overnight. Their economy has recovered, but the peso is now about three to one against the dollar; so, anything made or produced in Argentina is cheap. Tourism is also on the increase; good for both sides right now, I'd think.

As we headed off to our rooms late that night, I had a note that Eric Ohmsted had arrived from Miami; his original flight had been cancelled until that morning, but he arrived safe and sound. Our breakfasts at the Monumental were more continental than we might have wanted, but I don't much do breakfast myself. The breakfast room was a great place to meet as it doubled as the bar and had English newspapers. Hannah Mann, Jim Dow's 12-year old granddaughter (Jim brought his almost 12-year old granddaughter Sarah four years ago on my trip to Portillo; there's a third granddaughter three years younger) started the Purple Gang (you have to wear a purple wristband). I'm not sure what the intent of the PG's was, but since I was the first accepted new member, I figure it was a good thing. We did a lot of fist bumps and Hannah kept us all smiling.

The following morning we embarked on a bus tour of the city. We stopped at the artistic neighborhood of La Boca, the oldest neighborhood of BA and known for its bright colored houses: these old shanties were painted with whatever paint the ships had left and now they must maintain the colors. We also paid homage at Evita's mausoleum in the Recoletta Cemetery, saw the Pink House (their white house), the Obelisk, and the Plaza de Mayo. We had

a nice lunch at a Sheraton restaurant that included some 63 types of steaks, endless empanadas (meat in pastry) and lots of wine. Many of us did dinner at that time. I toasted my twin sister's birthday and Ginny Lester gave me the Gucci edition of Zilch, complete with the rules as best as we all could remember them. After lunch, many of us went to a leather factory which smelled like the inside of a very expensive car. Many products were acquired: jackets, purses, belts, maybe even some shoes; they didn't charge the national VAT, something about the country helping the leather goods industry. Later in the week, some of the women (with men in tow) hit the leather goods stores and bought even more. Argentina, where no part of the cow goes unused.

One peculiar habit in Argentina is the drinking custom of mate. It's a type of herbal tea made from some awful tasting bush that I'm convinced is related to creosote. Everyone has mate, a mate cup and thermos with hot water; metal straws are often shared. The water is poured into the cup and the results drunk several times (until the taste is gone) and one must slurp the remainder in the cup. It's definitely an acquired taste and won't replace Earl Grey. Another peculiarity is that most cars in Argentina are either French or Italian, not Japanese. They also seem to have the world's remaining number of Citroen 2 CV ("Deux Cheveaux"), France's original answer to Germany's V-Dub; I like cars whose seats come out to use on the beach and have canvas tops. That their engines produce maybe 40 HP makes them much more exciting to drive.

On Tuesday, we opted for a day at an estancia (ranch), riding horses (though not at speed), enjoying a barbeque, visiting the museum, watching a gaucho show, and stepping in horse pucks (which I did not declare on my return to the US—they could have smelled it on their own). The burrowing owls that populated the area gave all of us that "why did you wake me up" look as their heads swiveled like Linda Blair's while following our slow progress. Cute little critters; don't know what they taste like, though. I hadn't ridden in 25 years and gaucho saddles lack pommels, useful for hanging onto when mounting. I claimed I could ride, so they gave me a 17-hander. The stirrups were two inches below the horse's back, which is akin to putting my feet near my ears and trying to mount. Needless to say, I needed a lot of help mounting and I'm sure my nickname amongst the gauchos was Spanish for lardass. Other than that, it was fun.

We had Wednesday on our own: museums, parks, zoos, alfresco lunches (Nina and I had lunch in a Ferrari dealership restaurant) or just hanging. That night we ended our stay by going to the new, expensive neighborhood of Puerto Madero, where the old docks used to be, to see Tangorama: a dinner, all you could drink, and tango. Just like Vegas. It was a more modern version of the dance; Rob and Doris Mariani and Nanette Paris, who had earlier seen old school tango, preferred the latter, but we all enjoyed the show. Tango is more than a dance; to the Argentines it's life. Born in brothels, songs of sadness, dance moves of great complexity, it's not something you go out and fake. Sort of like the blues.

Another peculiarity in Argentina was how ATM machines worked or, more often, didn't. Many of us went to three or four machines before getting one that would accept our cards. Then it might give your requested amount or not; if not, we might have to ask it several times for the same amount. Nina was the only one with a magic card—it worked everywhere for any amount. She became a valuable friend.

The following morning we left at 7:45 AM for BA's local airport for a thousand-mile, two-hour flight southeast across the endless pampas to northern Patagonia and the Andes Mountains. There awaiting us was the lakefront town of Bariloche and its ski resort, Cerro Cathedral. As we got closer we could see snow on the Andes; as we landed, we could see snow on the ground. That augured well for the rest of the week. What wasn't great was that in the US (and our United flight to Argentina), we are allowed three bags and 100 pounds for skiers). In Argentina, internally, we were allowed 30 kilos: 66 pounds. As a group, that cost us \$400. We then found out that there was an airport exit tax; only \$20 or so, but it kept adding up. It was almost as if they didn't want us to buy souvenirs: you also have to pay for the weight. It wasn't the cost, it was the unknown we didn't care for.

Aside from spending a long time going through their agricultural immigration line, we met our guide and reached town within a half hour. Even the town had snow and as we got into its central area, we could see the vastness of Lago Nuahuel Haupi, part of a vast system of lakes, valley and rivers that reach to the Pacific Ocean in Chile and was a trade route for pre-Columbian Indians. Nowadays, you can boat, bus, hike, bike and canoe the same routes.

The meaning of the name is Lake Tiger (or Jaguar) Island; named after a famous, brave chief of the indigenous people. Incas conquered here in the 1400's, but the Amerindian culture never much developed beyond the hunter-gatherer stage and the Indian and mestizo culture were later basically wiped out by European settlers. Argentina also had slaves (mostly house servants) early in its western history, but the black population also disappeared in the 19th century. There are a variety of reasons for this: they served as soldiers in their endless wars and many were killed, there was yellow fever amongst the poor, and abolition of the slave trade as well as intermarriage affected their population. A 25% black population in BA in the early 19th century was reduced to under 2% by the end. European settlers, primarily from Spain and Italy, provide Argentina's ethnic makeup today. Its early inhabitants have mostly disappeared. It's said today that Argentines are Italians who speak terrible Spanish, hold themselves akin to the English, and believe they live in Paris.

It took two hours to get our rooms ready, so mostly we explored or enjoyed the wine and beer (Quilmes is the most popular and is especially good) and tried to figure out how to get to the mountain 19 clicks away. The town has two bus systems, a buck each way. We found out after three days that the hotel had a free shuttle and a lounge on the mountain for ski storage (the front desk wasn't much of a help), or, as about half of us opted for, a rented shuttle that picked us up at both ends for seven bucks a day. Jerry Andersen arranged that for the rest of us. Opting for a secure system saved us a half hour each way.

Both the town and the mountain have recovered from the '02 financial crisis. The mountain has new lifts, all reaching to the peaks. Bariloche is undergoing a construction boom the likes of which none of us have seen in North America since Whistler went bonkers in the early '90's. The base of the mountain has a lot of new clubs and other facilities and the road leading into town was jammed with new chalets for those with the pesos; seemingly, there are a lot of them. The prices were reasonable: \$100-\$200,000 for two-bedroom units. Considering that this area is more crowded in the summer (much like Tahoe), investments might be worth it if it wasn't 6,000 miles from home.

As we had been told and as the snow in town indicated, Cerro Cathedral had great snow (a storm while we were in BA helped). Known as a 3,000-vertical

foot blue mountain with a Whistlerish tendency for rain as well as warm weather, we saw the best the mountain offered. Aside from some mountain fog on the peaks early some AM's, we experienced clear days—except Tuesday when we had a combination of fog, snow, sleet, rain, and slush; that was the exception. But the snow on top was fantastic; the only thing one could wish for would be a wide, 2,000-foot vertical run that would make one's thighs scream. The mountain is too divided for that, but exploring its little niches was half the fun. Annette Foster proved to be our best skier: keeping up with her on a steep bump run was nigh on impossible.

Most fantastic was the view from the top. To the west, one saw the ascending Andes, with a valley between leading to a distant volcano, 100 miles away in Chile. To the north one could see Nahuel Huapi and to the east was Lago Gutierrez, once the site of a dam that supplied all Bariloche with its energy. Nowadays, dams to the east perform the same job and supply BA with power as well.

Many of us agreed that the view matched any we had seen from Lake Tahoe, Banff, or any of the Alps in Europe. The mountain itself was fairly crowded, as it was Jose de San Martin weekend (he's the GW of Argentina, Chile and Peru). In town we saw hundred of kids, mostly from BA or others on break from school in Brazil. Many of these kids had never seen snow (BA just had its first snowfall this winter since 1918; Brazil—hah!). Generally they came with package groups and rented everything; this was manifested with an enormous number of stores where they picked up their ski outfits. In turn, this led to groups of kids dressed all in orange or purple or, my favorite, dark blue with vertical yellow stripes—the colors of Italian municipal workers. As we arrived at the mountain, we would see them arranged in groups, often getting their skis. But once on the mountain, they disappeared. There was a little valley off one of the slow lifts where they were —by the hundreds or more—either learning how to ski or just walking around this strange white frozen stuff we call snow. Whenever we met them, we found them delightful: polite, often wanting to practice their English, proud of their beautiful country, and many of whom had been in the US. The Brazilians were generally crazier, but in a cheerful manner. There were Chileans, Venezuelans, Kiwis, some Europeans, and some Nord Americanos. Argentina proved to be a very polite country, people qued up well, said gracias and de nada in response, and were very cheerful. It was impossible not to be imbued with the same attitude.

Georgette Toews, no doubt with Robert Berney in tow, was one of our local experts. Like Bernie and Steffi Liebermann, she had read all the guide books beforehand. Mine was a reference tool somewhere in my backpack. On Sunday, she arranged an all-day boat tour that all but five of us participated in. The lake, of course, was beautiful, with mountains surrounding us the farther west we went, and soon we were surrounded with cliffs much like in New Zealand, but with less wildlife. We visited a waterfall, took a bus to another lake and finally ended up in Porto Blest where we had a great lunch. It seemed as if all the tourists ended up on our boat on the way back, but I was told I snored the last hour of the boat trip anyway. Someone should have elbowed me in the ribs. Great day—thanks Georgette!

Our days generally started with a great breakfast at the Panamericano, departure by shuttle (or bus) at 9 AM and return by 5:30 (add a half-hour for those who took the local bus). Afterwards, we would enjoy a beer or wine in the lobby (great service) or head up to the spa. Dinner was generally late and the choices were legion. The Irish pub Wilkenny's was very popular, but there were so many restaurants one couldn't keep track of them. I got ill the night we went to some fancy place; it turned out several of us had a 24-hour stomach flu, which cost us a day of skiing. But resourceful Georgette led three of us to Cerro Campanario, a lift-serviced peak whose view goes 360 degrees and served a delightful lunch. Eric was wiped out for a day and Brigitte Gregg suffered from the same chills and stomach upset I did; an 11-hour night's sleep helped. Counting the 18 people who went, I realized that eight of them had been on my trip to Portillo four years previously. Loyalty still means something, though perhaps the ability to take a summer vacation also helps. We had three SCWDCers: the Liebermanns and John McCarthy joined us for the fun. Jim Dow and his granddaughter are from the Fredericksburg Ski Club. Sanctioning summer trips and advertising for a year helps; unfortunately, we lost eight people when we had to change the date of the trip.

The one thing men didn't notice was that at certain women's johns on the mountain, TP was something you had to purchase before entrance; Nina's pleas for help must have been as embarrassing as heartbreaking (not). Speaking of humor with a twist, Rob Marinelli retrieved the Oakley's I had left in the lobby before departing for dinner. My upset the next day was obvious (they cost a wee bit more than I normally spend on anything); I was informed that Nanette Paris had obtained them but I could only ransom

them by telling a great joke on the way to the mountain. Pressure! I was 0-for-3 on the way up but got the glasses anyways; on the way back, I got guffaws from one I had finally recalled from all but Nanette—she's a tough grader!

After a delightful week of skiing, eating and touring, and a ballet (Jerry attended, of course), we headed back on Thursday. We made it to the airport by noonish for a 2 PM flight only to be told that fog in BA had delayed our incoming flight to the point where we would not get home on time. I rented the bus (with our luggage in it) for the rest of the day, dropped off the group back at the hotel for three hours and headed over to the tour guide's office to call Judy Miller, our tour operator. As I got hold of her, she was on another phone already talking with Chile Lan, our airline. After getting my info, she promptly arranged a switch of our bus in BA, got us the same hotel at great prices, and rebooked us on UA for the following day (with no penalty costs!). It's good to have a tour operator come through during an emergency. The rest of the trip went smooth as silk; we got to BA too late, as expected, to catch our flight (except for Eric, whose flight to Miami was two hours later). Thus we were forced to spend another day in BA (the flight wasn't until 9 PM); that was tough. Nina and I finally visited the most beautiful building in BA, the one-block sized Waterworks building, which looks like it belongs at Versailles. Now defunct, it contains offices and a toilet museum!

The 10-hour flight home, punctuated by a 35-minute long line going through immigration (two agents on duty), ended a great trip. As the last person in line, there was only my luggage and I didn't have a great chance to say goodbye to my fellow travelers.

Goodbye and thanks!

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