

DISCOVER

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DISCOVER ARGENTINA

Buenos Aires, the birthplace of the new pope, is a fascinating city of reinvention, says a former resident, **Chris Moss**

Ask any Buenos Aires psychoanalyst – and if you stop five people at random you will probably meet one – to name the two poles of the Argentine character and they'll tell you: hysteria and nostalgia. The former is the need to impress, to be liked: it's deep and it's weird and all *porteños*, the residents of Buenos Aires, have it to some degree; the latter is a kind of tango-era thing, born of having a million immigrants missing home, missing mum, missing the Old World.

I recently took a tour of Buenos Aires's Belle Époque *barrio*, Recoleta, led by Eduardo Masllorens, an architect and historian from the University of Buenos Aires. We walked along Calle Posadas and then Avenida Alvear, taking in the mansions with their mansard roofs, the plazas and statues, the Jockey Club, the French embassy.

"This was not the Paris of South America," said Eduardo, neatly demolishing a myth. "Buenos Aires between 1910 and 1925 was the 'Dubai of South America'. It was a theme park built by the super-rich for the super-rich. It looked like Paris, yes, but only for a few blocks.

"Some of the millionaires brought in the best French and Italian architects and interior designers and they got it right. But years later, conservative developers in thrall to an idea about Europe continued to build vulgar versions of the so-called Belle Époque. And they got it so wrong – the streets of Buenos Aires are full of terrible buildings."

He pointed to some modern towers and smooth Art Deco-style blocks. "Some of the buildings in the so-called rationalistic style capture the essence of Buenos Aires more than all the filigree and fuss."

I was reminded of Jorge Luis Borges's writings on the plain façades of Buenos Aires. The author disliked the fussy, Frenchified airs of the richer central *barrios*, preferring the "literary possibilities of the disreputable or more humble suburbs".

Shortly after I left Buenos Aires in 2001 the economy

virtiginous devaluation of the peso, foreign investment poured into the city and Buenos Aires, ironically, "arrived" as a global city. It got flash hotels, celebrity visitors, ethnic restaurants and cocktail bars.

The epicentre of the gentrification – the latest Belle Époque project if you like – was Palermo. This once-quiet, residential neighbourhood was flooded with fashion boutiques and stores trading on a pseudo-vintage Argentininess, expensive *bijou* hotels and enough new bars and restaurants to service the whole city. Estate agents, cashing in, gave old areas silly new names – Palermo Soho, Palermo Hollywood – and another theme park came into being. The tourist trade fell for it.

I do still quite like Palermo. It has some cobbled streets and low buildings, and now boasts bike lanes too – but it is also one of the least representative of the 48 *barrios* of Buenos Aires. So, while I didn't mind sleeping at the nice hotels there, I made it my mission to find a more enduring, evocative and – that tricky word – authentic Buenos Aires.

One morning after breakfast, I walked up Calle Thames towards the south-west. On crossing Avenida Córdoba I entered Villa Crespo. It's a middle-class *barrio* with a few shops and restaurants – Palermo's trendy tentacles spread far and wide – but it still has the feel of a residential area.

At the corner with Calle Loyola an itinerant knife-sharpener played his pampas. On the next street along, a woman pushed a trolley loaded with Thermos flasks and plastic cups, dispensing sweet black coffee. On the corner were not overpriced delis or fusion restaurants but old-



WHERE HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

Street life: clockwise from left, former *porteños*, Pope Francis, a couple dance the tango in San Telmo; a boutique in the gentrified *barrio* of Palermo; Plaza Francia in Recoleta; and a mural on San Telmo's streets

open doors from which came deliciously aromatic wafts of peach and nectarine, cherry and plum.

Now, away from the gaudy pastels and plastics of Palermo, I could refocus on Buenos Aires's background beauty: plane trees along the

wedding-cake buildings and tenements; old Taunus and Falcon cars parked and covered in a dust that suggested they would never be driven again. I wandered around the neighbourhood for a good hour – Buenos Aires remains my favourite walking city – and then found an old billiards-and-draughts bar on Avenida Corrientes that served ham-and-cheese toasts on thin, crustless *miga* bread, ice-cold beers for under a pound and good, strong coffee.

There are dozens of these places – you just have to know where to find them.

I know, this is a nostalgia trip, a former expat's lament. But I am not alone in my longing. "Hard to believe

beginning," wrote Borges. "I feel it to be as eternal as air." This strange, almost metaphysical line somehow rings true, or rather, it's poetically satisfying to believe there is a Buenos Aires behind the one you see.

Last year, Buenos Aires's greatest photographer Horacio Coppola, died, aged 105. His black-and-white images from the Twenties and Thirties capture a city that was gloomily atmospheric but still harmonious and coherent. Even back then, the city was under pressure from developers, modernisers and bad builders, and Coppola sought to record what was being lost.

Many *porteños* believe the only place to see something of this mood-

– the southern half of Buenos Aires. The subject of tangos, poetry and film, the "Sur" is imagined to be a less commercial, less fake-liminal zone between the city centre and the outer slums and poor quarters.

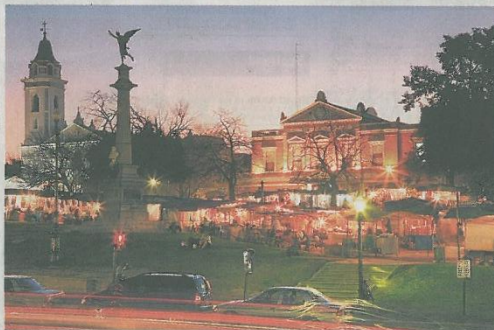
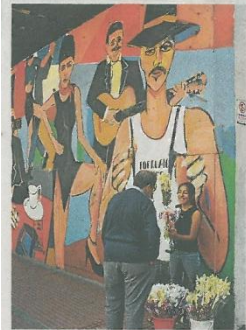
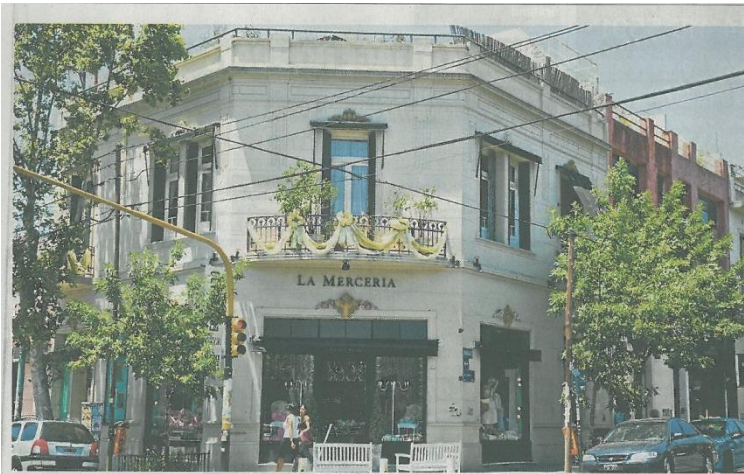
I took a taxi to Los Laureles on Avenida Iriarte in the Barracas neighbourhood to have lunch with my old boss, Andrew Graham-Yooll, the former editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald*. The restaurant he chose – his local – was an unpretentious corner joint, even though it has been placed on the city's official list of *bares notables* (akin to Britain's listed-buildings system).

Drinking plain red wine (diluted with soda as is the custom here) from a

chicken *milanesas* (breaded cutlets), we chatted about the beautiful old El Británico bar in San Telmo (which was almost closed down but preserved after residents protested), the Café Richmond (which did close down), the Hotel Lancaster

– "which Graham Greene liked because the sheets were linen, not synthetic" – and about the Anglo-Argentines, a colony of the so-called "informal Empire" that played no small part in the history of Buenos Aires.

Andrew said he loved the old café at Retiro station, or at least the idea of it. "The fun recollection is that when I began as a reporter on the *Herald* in 1966, the Boer War veterans still had their monthly lunch there.



terminal of the great north-western railway. For the best view of Buenos Aires, people should get to the top of the Sheraton hotel opposite and look at those lines fanning out – they used to go to Bolivia, across the Andes, to the tropics, all over, the biggest network the English had a hand in outside India.”

After dinner I had a stroll around. El Sur remains ungentrified, untainted by chains or boutiques. If it's scruffy, then that's only honest; during my two weeks in the city, there were strikes, marches, looting, a skirmish between Boca Juniors fans and the police, and several floods following storms. That's the real Buenos Aires, far from the cosmetic fantasies of Palermo and Puerto Madero.



YOUR SAY
Have you been to Buenos Aires? Send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.co.uk or post them on our website at telegraph.co.uk/travel

I took a bus and then jumped on the Linea A to ride west. This is the oldest underground railway in South America – it will celebrate its centenary this December – and what is most remarkable is that it uses the 1913 La Brugeoise Belgian rolling stock. It still works, just.

A Belle Époque is perhaps best remembered when everything that comes after is pretty dire. In Argentina's case, from the Thirties onwards, fascism, then Peronism, then dictatorship were the main themes. Little wonder that the city harks back so often to its short-lived golden age, when Argentina was richer than Italy, Brazil and Japan, and democratic, and equitable, and peaceful. At the end of Linea A, at the

Carabobo station, I got off and got lost among the plain façades. I found a nondescript bar, ordered a cold beer and gazed through the window. While I don't mind making short excursions into the city's flings and fads, I realise I am happiest doing the most genteel kind of *nada*. Even during the Belle Époque, the bestselling book of the day was *The Man Who Sits Alone and Waits*. For along with nostalgia and hysteria, Buenos Aires does *esperanza* very well too: waiting, hoping. It's the perfect place to raise a pope.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many consider the 16-lane Avenida 9 de Julio the 'widest' street in the world.

Essentials

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies daily, direct from London Heathrow to Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires. All other flights stop in European cities or Brazil – see Opodo to compare Iberia, Lan, TAM and other operators.

PACKAGE

Chris Moss travelled with Wexas Travel (020 7590 0623; wexas.com). A seven-night package with four nights in Buenos Aires, split between the Legado Mítico and the new Hub Porteño, and three nights in Mendoza at the Club Tapiz, costs from £1,949 per person, including all flights, transfers and breakfasts.

THE INSIDE TRACK

- October–November and March–April are warm and pleasant; January and February are very hot and Buenos Aires empties as the locals head for the beach – some museums and theatres close too.
- Flying time is 13–14 hours direct; 15 or so via Madrid/São Paulo; the time difference is GMT –3.
- Foto Ruta (0054 911 6833 1030; foto-ruta.com). Join a tour led by keen – and technically expert – expat guides to capture the backstreets and hidden plazas of BA's less obvious *barrios*.
- Colección Fortabat, Olga Cossetini 141 (4310 6600; coleccionfortabat.org.ar). Opened in 2008, this gallery shows off the private collection of Arnaldo Lacrozo de Fortabat, the late cement magnate; the Argentine works are particularly impressive. Entry costs £4.40.

WHAT TO READ

Andrew Graham-Yooll's *Goodbye Buenos Aires* (Eland, 2011), a novel-cum-memoir about his father's arrival in the city in 1928 and subsequent flight; and try to pick up a copy of *Viejo Buenos Aires, Adiós* (1980), with photos by Horacio Coppola. Jorge Luis Borges's early poetry is quietly beautiful and far more accessible than his prose.

THE BEST HOTELS

Legado Mítico ££
A smart hotel with 11 individually decorated rooms, each celebrating an Argentine celebrity. Though it's right in the heart of Palermo Viejo – great for dining and shops – the hotel is quiet inside (0054 11 4833 1300; legadomitico.com; double b&b from £189).

Hub Porteño

£££
This new 11-room hotel in upmarket Recoleta has huge suites, huge beds and a fabulous concierge-type 'experience' service – the in-house restaurant,

Tarquino, has just been voted best restaurant (see below) in the city by a leading local gastronomy magazine. (4815 6100; hubporteno.com; double b&b £242).

THE BEST PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK

Los Galgos £
In business since 1930 and, on the



Laid to rest: a statue in La Recoleta Cemetery; and a room in the Hub Porteño hotel

WHAT TO AVOID

- Paying for water in your room – it's often about £5 a bottle, even though the kioskos sell it for almost a fifth of that price.
- Don't automatically take taxis, especially when travelling around by day – a bus ride costs two pesos (25p). Taxi rides cost many times that.
- Don't use ATMs at night; street crime is on the rise in Argentina.
- Protests, marches, riots are everyday occurrences. Stay clear, especially if you see banners with words such as "Ingleses" and "Muerte" and "Malvinas"...

the pastas; the place is good at night but better at lunchtime when the port workers descend (Caffarena 64; 4362 9912; bodeganelobrero.com.ar).

El Globo

££
A famous old-school Spanish restaurant established in 1908 that serves hearty stews and Iberian specialties such as suckling pig and Madrid-style tripe (Hipólito Yngoyen 1199; 4361 3926; restaurantelglobo.com.ar).

Los Laureles

££
In business since 1893 and far off the tourist map. Come here, to the city's Southside, to dine on *milanesas* – veal or chicken in breadcrumbs (Av Gral Urquiza 2290; 4303 3393; barloslaureles.com.ar).

Tarquino

£££
The in-house restaurant of Hub Porteño, where Dante Liporace (formerly of El Bulli) serves up modern – and even molecular – versions of Argentine classics, including pizza foam, braised beef cheek and sweetbreads. Stylish and intelligent (Rodríguez Peña 1967; 6091 2160; tarquinorestaurante.com.ar).

evidence, never even redecorated, this lovely bar-café is archetypal and, in its way, atmospheric (Avenida Callao 501; 4371 3561).

El Obrero

£
The best reason to visit La Boca, this evocative restaurant – opened in 1954 – serves huge portions. Try the calamari or