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Buenos Aires: walking tour of the historic barrios

Buenos Aires, birthplace of the new Pope, is a city where fads quickly take a grip. Chris Moss goes in search of its enduring side.



Buenos Aires remains my favourite walking city

By Chris Moss

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Los Galgos was putting me in a sepia mood. It was drizzling, again, so I had taken refuge in this old café off the tourist beat. I ordered a coffee, which was poured from two jugs – café con leche, the old way – and a glass of the rough local whiskey. The waiter walked at a mourner's pace, and was gentle, quietly spoken. The floor, furniture and half of the wall were made from wood. The ceiling was chocolate-coloured. The rest of the wall and the tablecloths were beige. As the storm passed, dusk arrived – it was orange at first, and then the sky turned sepia too.



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

I lived in Buenos Aires from 1991 to 2001, and though I go back now and again I guess I am now missing a bygone city. To explore the theme, I went on a tour of Buenos Aires's Belle Epoque barrio, Recoleta, led by Eduardo Masllorens, 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," he said, 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 Epoque. And they got it so wrong – the streets of Buenos Aires are full of bull---- 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' writings on the plain facades of Buenos Aires. The author disliked the fussy, Frenchified airs of the richer central barrios, preferring the "literary possibilities of the disreputable, humble suburbs".



The Palermo effect

Shortly after I left Buenos Aires the economy imploded. On the back of a vertiginous 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 Epoque project if you like – was Palermo. This once-quiet, residential neighbourhood was flooded with fashion boutiques and stores trading on a pseudo-vintage Argentineness, 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 like a peglegged gringo at a tango ball.

I do still quite like Palermo – it has some cobbled streets and low buildings, and now boasts bike lanes too – but it is one of the least representative of the 48 barrios of Buenos Aires. It is also expensive and prone to daft fads. Many of these are culinary, such as "puertas cerradas" (closed door) restaurants, without signage or obvious frontage.

Some of these have been so exclusive that no one visited at all, and they had to close down straight away. The latest fad, though, is eating wood from the subtropical north. "They add wood from Misiones province to syrups," Dante Liporace, a chef, told me. "Of course the only taste is... sugar. The wood is supposed to add native flavour."

Only in Palermo. 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 panpipes, summoning homeowners with a four-note trill like Papageno's in The Magic Flute. On the next street along, a woman pushed a trolley loaded with thermos flasks and plastic cups, dispensing tooth-cringingly sweet black coffee. On the corner were not overpriced delis or fusion restaurants but old-style grocer's shops with wide-open doors from which came 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 pavements, their bark pocked like old folks' hands; single-storey wedding-cake buildings and tenements (their halls driving deep into the city blocks); old Taunus and Falcon cars parked and covered in a dust that suggested they would never be driven again; those plain, bare frontages and squat houses.

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 toasties on thin, crustless miga bread, ice-cold beers for under a quid and good, strong coffee. I won't give the address listing; there are dozens of these places – you just have to find them



I know, this is a nostalgia trip, a former expat's lament as pathetic as the maudlin tangos of those deracinated Italians who came here a century ago. But I am not alone in my longing. "Hard to believe Buenos Aires had any 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.

British BA and El Sur

Last year, Buenos Aires's greatest photographer, Horacio Coppola, died. 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. Since his death, aged 105, his books have been appearing everywhere – I lost a morning in Avenida Corrientes' thriving bookshops flicking through them.

Many porteños believe the only place to see something of this moody, melancholy city is in El Sur – 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, former editor of the Buenos Aires Herald. The restaurant – 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

Drinking plain red wine (diluted with soda as is the custom) from a penguin-shaped carafe and tucking into 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 loves 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.

"Retiro was once the terminal of the great north-western railway. For the best view of BA, 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.

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 still uses the 1913 La Brugeoise Belgian rolling stock. It still works, just.



A Belle Epoque is perhaps best remembered when everything that comes after is pretty dire. In Argentina's case, from the 1930s onwards, fascism, then Peronism, then dictatorship were the main themes. Little wonder that the city harks back so often to its shirt-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 Carobobo station, I got off and got lost among the plain facades. I found a nondescript corner bar, ordered a cold beer and gazed through the window. While I don't mind making short, sharp excursions into the city's flings and fads to check what is being boomed and busted, I realise I am happiest doing the most genteel kind of nada. Even during the Belle Epoque, the bestselling book of the day was *The Man Who Sits Alone and Waits*. Along with nostalgia and hysteria, BA does esperanza very well too: waiting, hoping.

Essentials**When to go**

Oct-Nov and March-April are warm and pleasant. Jan and Feb are very hot and Buenos Aires empties as the locals head for the beach – some museums and theatres close too.

Flying time and time difference

12 hours direct; 15 via Madrid/S Paulo GMT - 3

Getting there

BA flies daily, direct from London Heathrow to Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires (13-14 hours). 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 (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.
