

Passion and Compassion

Looking down at my watch after a night out, it was time to go home. It was two o'clock and I was getting tired. Not two o'clock in the morning but two o'clock in the afternoon. I had gone out at midnight to a club until eight in the morning and then an after-club party from eight until two. That's life in Buenos Aires, Argentina; the citizens are passionate about life.

Returning to my hostel at two in the afternoon, groggy and desperately needing sleep I instead talked to some people at my hostel. I knew that night I would not be getting much sleep as I was taking an overnight bus to the north of Argentina. I needed to sleep in the afternoon but that didn't happen.

The overnight bus trip to the north was typical of most South American bus trips – cold and loud. On the television in the bus, the driver played a country music concert followed by the horror flick, *The Boogey Man*, a story about a mass murderer that killed people at night. This wasn't a good movie to show people before they attempted to go to sleep including the numerous wide-eyed children. After the movie, the bus driver had the radio and air conditioning on high. These two forces made sleeping only a dream.

I departed the bus, having not slept for over 50 hours, and literally crashed. I bought a soda to try to get reenergized, took a sip, took my front backpack off and fell face first onto the area just outside the bus station. My head fell on my front backpack, my big backpack was still strapped to my back, my left arm was wedged underneath my chest and my right arm, extended away from my body, loosely holding the cup which had had soda in it before I fell to the ground. When I awoke some time later, I noticed that there were some Argentinean coins in the cup. Some people felt sorry for me and gave me their spare change. This is also life in Argentina; the people are compassionate and will help when they can.

There are many places in Argentina to sample this passionate and compassionate lifestyle. South of the city center of Buenos Aires are the areas of San Telmo and La Boca. San Telmo is known as the center for tango, that spicy, seductive dance of Argentina. There are several restaurants that have tango performances and provide lessons as well. On the way to the tango area is Plaza Dorrego which holds antique fairs on Sundays. Further south is La Boca, which has the Caminito, a pedestrian walkway with many vibrant paintings.

In the city center there are numerous places of interest related to the government, religion or shopping. The Plaza de Mayo has political rallies seemingly daily. The rallies I saw were just a bunch of old ladies banging their pots and pans for lower petrol prices, lower tariffs or groups celebrating their soccer team's victory. This is a form of political participation but seems to be used more as a social event as the people were joking and smiling. These are fun events to join if one wishes. On the east side of the plaza is Casa Rosada, which is the pink presidential palace where beloved Eva Peron used to give speeches. The Cathedral



Metropolitana houses the tomb of the revolutionary San Martin and near the plaza is Buenos Aires' oldest church, Iglesia San Ignacio. Nearby, there are numerous shops on the Avenue 9 de Julio. The street also contains two famous sites: the Oberlisco, which is a well-known meeting place and the massive Teatro Colon, a theater that seats 2,500. Even better for shopping is Florida Avenue which is a pedestrian walkway that has street performers and many shopping malls.

To the north is the greener and more affluent Palermo district. There are several nice gardens and parks including a Japanese garden, botanical garden and rose garden. A museum dedicated to Eva Peron does an adequate job of describing her life through pictures, video and some of her speeches. This appears to be more of a ritzy area as there are member's only polo grounds and racetracks. Palermo also is a place to go to upscale bars and restaurants.

In the northeast of Argentina is the beautiful Iguazu Falls. There is a seemingly endless amount of rainfalls to visit and photographs to take. Bring a raincoat as onlookers get drenched, with the loudest and wettest area around the "el Diablo" waterfall which can be reached by a catwalk. The city near the falls, Puerto Iguazu, is a nice enough place but the attraction is the falls. Most of the city seems to be hotels or travel agencies related to tourism but the falls can easily be visited independently. Within walking distance of the city there is a place that the indigenous people build large wooden structures without the use of nails.

To the east of Argentina, is the underrated and almost unknown country of Uruguay. The standard of living here is similar to Argentina. One of the border towns is Salto which is a fine city but doesn't have a lot of attractions. More appealing are the hot springs, Termas de Dayman, located a few miles away but easily accessible. There is a wide variety of temperatures to soak in and many people stay in the motels surrounding the springs.

The capital of Montevideo is a typical capital; it is a base for government and culture with both upscale and impoverished neighborhoods. Most of the attractions are within or near the Plaza Independencia. Within the plaza square is a statue of hero Artigas, a couple of museums and the country's leading theater, Teatro Solis. Near the square is Casa Garibaldi, which was the house where Garibaldi, who unified southern Italy in the 1800's, once lived. The Italian and Spanish influence can be seen in both Uruguay and Argentina. There are also a couple art museums in the area including one dedicated to Torres Garcia, who did many famous portraits. The Mercado del Puerto is a *parrilla* (steakhouse) that has numerous restaurants with massive hunks of meat including steaks and sub particles. Tourists can herd cattle in one of the several ranches in Uruguay which is known for its fading, yet viable *gaucho* (cowboy) lifestyle.



Colonia del Sacramento is a beautiful colonial town with cobblestone streets and several museums. Most of the attractions are around Plaza Mayor 25 de Mayo. The Municipal Museum,

Convento de San Francisco, lighthouse and former residence of General Lavalleja are all located on the square. Nearby is a small, but interesting tile museum. However, this is a place best designed to take strolls in the old city.

To the north of Argentina and Uruguay is the poorer country of Paraguay. The border town of Ciudad del Este is a place where both Argentines and Brazilians come to buy relatively cheap electronics and clothing. They head back over the bridge with tires and televisions under their arms. The city is pretty rough, especially the hectic main road (Ruta 7) leading to the border bridge which has most of the markets. I heard a couple gun shots that sounded close to my hotel which was just off the main road. Walking away from Ruta 7, the conditions improve – slightly. Nearby is the Itaipu Dam, which is responsible for a large amount of the electricity for Paraguay, nearly 80%, and provides much of the electricity to southern Brazil. The dam is the world's largest exporter of hydroelectric power. Comprehensive tours explain why the dam was built in this area (a set of waterfalls) and how the generators and dam functions.



In the south of Paraguay, are the Jesuit missionaries of Trinidad and Jesus. The missionary in Trinidad has several buildings that are still intact. The cathedral and accompanying crypt are basically undamaged as are some of the religious statues. There are several Romanesque columns and horses grazing on the grounds along with a couple orange trees for nourishment. A few miles by bus, horse taxi or through hitchhiking is Jesus. The complex isn't as big here, but the buildings are higher and the views over the countryside are better.

Whether staying out until two in the afternoon or eating a side of steak the size of your head or dodging bullets at the border, southeast South America has much to do. Paraguay may seem out of place in comparison to Argentina and Uruguay which has higher standards of living, but all three countries are entertaining. No matter which country you visit, you will find passion and compassion.