



About ten years ago, my husband, Michael, bought a car from an Argentine woman who was moving back to her homeland. Before he drove away in his new vehicle, the woman handed him a CD she often listened to while driving. "It's the soul of the car," she said. The CD is of Juanjo Domingo, a classical guitarist from Buenos Aires. His music has a Latin flair, and is definitely very soulful. I didn't quite understand what the woman meant when she gave him that CD, and little did I know I would travel to her country where I would learn the true meaning of Latin soul.

Twenty years of marriage deserves a big celebration, and we had always expected to travel back to Paris (where we spent our honeymoon), to commemorate our two decades of wedded bliss. But as the year '08 approached, and with the state of the economy and the US dollar, we began rethinking that plan. A few ideas floated around – Cabo San Lucas, the Virgin Islands, maybe Hawaii. While these are all beautiful destinations, we wanted something more exciting, some place with an edge. That's when Michael came up with Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I have to admit I was a little apprehensive at first, mostly because I knew very little about South America, and other than "Evita", even less about Buenos Aires. Through books, travel magazines and Internet research, we discovered the city is very cosmopolitan, and rich with history and culture. It was decided – we would take an adventure to Buenos Aires! Next, we had to find the best way to get there.

We chose LAN Airlines, one of the leading airlines in Latin America. In June 2008, LAN was selected the "Best Airline in Central and South America, and the Caribbean" by the Official Airline Guide. While other US carriers also fly to Buenos Aires, via Miami and Houston, we wanted the full South American experience. LAN Airlines flies from Los Angeles to Peru, then on to Buenos Aires. The fares are pretty similar among the carriers traveling to Argentina, but the service we received aboard LAN was impeccable. Traveling on long international flights can be very tiring, yet the flight attendants were so accommodating and friendly, they made every passenger feel relaxed and pampered. I also noticed how professional all of the attendants were. Perfectly coiffed and wearing flattering uniforms, they made every effort to ensure our comfort. Not only is the service outstanding, the food and other amenities are as well. We had a delicious 3 course meal with wines – fabulous Argentine wines – and were entertained by a personal video screen where we could select from 140 different movies. We traveled Business Class for the eight-hour leg to Peru, and then changed planes for the four-hour leg to Buenos Aires. The movies, comfortable seats, and cozy down blankets made the time fly by. If you can manage to upgrade to Business Class it is THE way to go. We were actually able to recline to a near prone position and sleep very comfortably.

Once we arrived in Buenos Aires, we took a taxi to our hotel in the Recoleta area of the city, about a 45-minute ride. The city is divided into districts and is easily navigable. The outskirts of the city resemble driving into Manhattan, through Queens, for example. Once in the city proper, the landscape is high rise buildings, and wide boulevards with loads of pedestrians. Driving in the city can be somewhat daunting, so I am glad we opted for taxis – which are plentiful. There may be four lanes of pavement, but easily six to eight lanes of cars, all jockeying for position.



photo by Peter Vitale

The lobby of the Four Seasons hotel sets an elegant mood for this five star, luxury property in the exclusive Recoleta district of Buenos Aires.

Beautiful, Soulful

Buenos Aires

BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

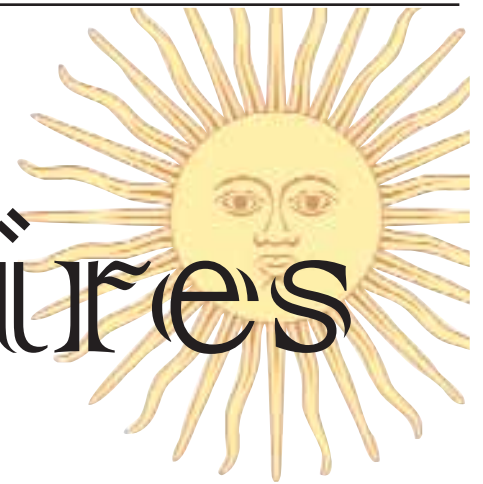


photo by Michael Villalpando

The mausoleums at the Recoleta Cemetery are huge in size and numbers. Hundreds if not thousands of Buenos Aires dignitaries are laid to rest here, including Eva Peron. Above, left, is the iconic Obelisk at the Plaza de Mayo, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the city's founding.

photo courtesy of travel.webshots.com

The Recoleta district is an affluent neighborhood, with five star hotels, upscale shopping and dining, and high-end condos with doormen guarding the lobbies. It's a beautiful area with beautiful people living, working and enjoying their lives. Portenos, as residents of Buenos Aires are called, are urbane, well dressed and friendly. We couldn't wait to be out among them.

Our taxi pulled up to the Four Seasons Buenos Aires, a magnificent property annexed to an early 20th century mansion. The mansion was a private home up until a few years ago, when Four Seasons took ownership. In 2007, the Belle Epoque mansion underwent a complete restoration, bringing the property back to its resplendency. The main part of the hotel is a contemporary tower with 8 floors and 158 rooms, with an additional seven suites in the mansion. Our premier room was large with flat screen TV that swiveled to separate the bedroom from the sitting area. The huge bathroom had a shower, and a stand-alone Jacuzzi tub. Whether you stay in a premier room or a standard room, the hotel accommodations are first class, with the highest quality linens and perfect service.

The Le Mistral restaurant at the Four Seasons offers fine dining, with exquisite tapas and Mediterranean cuisine. A wonderful breakfast buffet is offered daily, and in the evenings, Manager Roberto Marino will gladly slice you a plate of "pata negra" from the tapas bar. Pata Negra is a cured ham, sort of like prosciutto, but closer to the Spanish jamon Serrano. It's sliced thicker and is more dense than prosciutto, with a strong, smoky flavor. The restaurant serves delicious fresh fish, like Chilean sea bass, and of course beef, raised on the pampas of Argentina. The servings are plentiful here, with most steaks about 10 ounces or more.

Argentina is very proud of their wines, and they should be. The national grape, Malbec, is a red grape producing wines with a cabernet quality to them, yet more robust and complex. The wine list at the Four Seasons boasts some of the finest Argentine wines. Enjoy a glass and some tapas at Le Mistral's tapas bar, where servers Barbara and Gonzalo will take very good care of you, and keep you entertained. We spent quite a few nights sipping Malbec with Roberto and our new friends, and they added special memories to our vacation. Perhaps they will visit us someday in Los Angeles!

One of our first ventures in Buenos Aires was a short walk to the Recoleta cemetery, where Evita, among thousands of other Argentines, are buried. It's not a cemetery with green grassland dotted with headstones. It is aisles of mausoleums, one more ornate than the next, housing entire families. While a few of the gravesites have fallen into disrepair, most are well-maintained, with flowers adorning the front. Evita's burial site is the most visited, yet there are many other dignitaries and national heroes laid to rest here.

Just outside of the cemetery is the Recoleta shopping district where you will find all the well-known designer shops, like Polo and Christian Dior, plus many local Buenos Aires designers. The Patio Bullrich shopping mall is a popular destination, with nearly 100 stores and small eateries. As shopping malls go in Buenos Aires, I would consider it small! The seasons are opposite Los Angeles, since Buenos Aires is on the other side of the equator. The climate, however, is very similar to LA. We were there in mid-April, yet the weather was like a pleasant autumn day, as the city was preparing to go into its winter months. Many of the shops featured furs and leather boots – they love their leather! My mindset was for spring and summer, and cute sundresses – so I didn't splurge as much as I should have. Can you imagine the sales, how-

ever, if you traveled there in October or November, when they're preparing for spring and summer, and we're heading into fall! Maybe I should go back just for some new boots!

If the Recoleta district is like Beverly Hills, then Palermo Soho is comparable to Melrose! This area was once somewhat run-down and has seen a renaissance of new construction, new retail stores and restaurants, and definitely nightlife. It was West Hollywood meets Los Feliz. There was a younger crowd walking the streets, and even sidewalk vendors selling their wares. I bought a beautiful pair of solid silver earrings for 70 pesos, or about \$25. The exchange rate is about \$1 American to 3.2 pesos. Dining was certainly a bargain here, and some great deals could be had on retail shopping.

is the national drink here – made from an herb, like green tea with an added kick. The yerba (pronounced cherba) is put into a hollowed-out gourd and then brewed with water; a metal straw, called a bombilla, is used to draw the tea from the gourd. It is a very strong drink that gives you energy, naturally. It's good after a night of partying—or dancing the tango. Portenos definitely enjoy their lives – working from 9am-6pm, then perhaps a quick nap before dining out – usually around 10 or 11pm. Then they hit the nightclubs, usually at 1-2am, and stay up till 4 or 5. Then repeat the next day. We rarely made it past 2am. While many Portenos are hard at work, just as many are hard at play. For example, on a Monday afternoon, around 2:30pm, we were in a shopping mall on Calle Florida – an unbelievable shopping

It appears most Argentines are in fantastic shape, yet they enjoy ice cream on a regular basis and eat dinner late at night. Perhaps it's the walking, or better yet, the seductive tango dancing!

Calle Florida is a pedestrian-only street lined with hundreds of stores. Many of them sell leather goods, and items made from an animal called a carpincho. It is similar to a porcupine without the spines. The leather produced from the animal is soft and suede-like with a spotted pattern. Wallets, purses and shoes are popular carpincho items, and we came home with some nice pieces.

Just west of Calle Florida is one of the most recognizable icons in Buenos Aires, the Obelisk, a monument at the intersection of 9 de Julio and Corrientes Avenue. The Obelisk stretches 220 feet tall, and was built in 1936 in only 31 days to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city. Located at the Plaza de la Republica, the monument is one of the city's main venues for cultural activities, where Portenos come to celebrate.

Not far from here is the Plaza de Mayo, the city's center, where the Casa Rosada is located. The dusky, pink Presidential Palace with the world-famous balcony has seen General Galtieri, Diego Maradona, Evita and Juan Perón address the crowds at various stages in Argentina's history. Even Madonna was allowed to pose on the balcony in the film "Evita" where she played Eva Perón. It continues to house the government of Buenos Aires today. It is said the building was painted pink to reflect the two political parties (red and white) to ease tensions. Another explanation is that the paint contained cow's blood to protect the building from humidity. We couldn't help singing "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" while video taping in front of the building.

Dining in Buenos Aires was an enjoyable adventure every night. Every meal was outstanding and the prices couldn't be beat. In every part of the city we traveled, we found trendy night spots, established restaurants, and delicious food. Here are some of our favorites:

Mancini Restaurant: Just a few blocks from our hotel is a popular Italian restaurant frequented by portenos. We selected our wine from their cellar, a beautiful bottle of Rutini Malbec and Cabernet blend, and had the best sardine and arugula salad. Pastas are their specialty, with friendly waiters and charming owner, Mancini at the helm.

Piegari Vitello e Dolce: Right across the street from the Four Seasons is a casual neighborhood restaurant, with a more formal Ristorante on the other side of the street. We discovered this place around 4:00 in the afternoon after a full day of walking and we were starved. We ordered a bottle of Argentine chardonnay, three empanadas and an endive and smoked salmon salad, and we were completely satisfied. The empanadas were the best I've ever tasted. Instead of ground beef, it



photo by Michael Villalpando

Pata Negra is a delicious, cured ham with a strong, smoky flavor. Le Mistral Restaurant Manager Roberto Marino proudly slices from the leg in dramatic fashion at the tapas bar.



The wine cellar at Mancini added a colorful element to our dining experience at this Italian restaurant, popular with the portenos.

For most of the designer wear, prices were fairly comparable to LA. Michael did score a pair of crocodile (farm raised) shoes for about \$600. They would be nearly twice that in Los Angeles.

We discovered the outdoor San Telmo Market in the San Telmo district, held on Sundays. Street after street was lined with vendors selling jewelry, clothing, leather goods and mate cups. Yerba mate

mall – packed with people. If you think the Grove is crowded on a Saturday afternoon, you can't even imagine the thousands of people out and about mid-day – on a Monday! We asked if it was a national holiday. Intricately painted cathedral ceilings, and crystal chandeliers hung above the marble floors at this mall. The sheer number of people shopping and carrying bags by the armful was simply amazing. And they love ice cream!



photo by Michael Villalpando

Buenos Aires is a cosmopolitan city with high rise buildings, busy streets, and loads of shopping, dining and nightlife.

was sirloin tips in a rich gravy. The cheese and onion empanada melted in your mouth and the tomato and basil was delicioso. The interesting additions to the salad were the hearts of palm, capers and caviar atop the salmon. I have imitated this salad many times at home and it always pleas-

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es my guests! We went back a few nights for dinner and had giant steaks and delicious pastas. www.piegari.com.ar

Bar Uriarte: Located in Palermo, this slick, white cocina serves high-end cuisine. An exceptional grilled skirt steak and a zesty sopa de mariscos (fish soup) were memorable dishes here. We began our evening at their Gran Bar Danzon, a stylishly chic wine bar and cocktail lounge. These two establishments cater to a hip crowd with good taste. www.baruriarte.com.ar

Oviedo Restaurante: A bit pricier than others, Oviedo is an established restaurant in the Barrio Norte area of town. The menu is large, with a bit more Spanish influence. Fish is a specialty, but you won't go wrong with any of the carne or the pollo. The scallops were particularly satisfying. www.oviedorestor.com.ar

Chila: I wanted to take Michael to a very special place for his birthday, and the concierge recommended Chila in Puerto Madero. A fairly new restaurant, as are many in the newly revitalized Puerto Madero, the ambience is high fashion, sleek, with low lighting and very handsome waiters! We began with foie gras, moved on to sautéed black cod and then chateaubriand. We finished with a

very rich chocolate trio of desserts. Go to their website to appreciate the fabulous menu. www.chilaweb.com.ar

While there are many, many restaurants in Buenos Aires, I'm confident we had a good sampling of some of the finest. I have to say, we enjoyed coming home every night to the Four Seasons and having a nightcap with our friends at the tapas bar in Le Mistral. They wanted to hear about our day's travels and we were happy to oblige them. We had good stories to tell, and they always had a tip for the following day. These folks had plenty of good Argentine soul.

The hotel featured a tango show one night, from 11:30pm until 1am. The professional dancers were intriguing to watch and impeccably trained. After the show, they invited audience members to tango, and I accepted. However, my partner was easily six inches shorter, and I felt like an Amazon woman in his arms. He did compliment me however, on my tango skills, despite the fact that was my first time doing the step. It is a romantic dance, and definitely full of soul.

Buenos Aires is a busy city, and people there need to vacation, too. Where do they go for rest and relaxation? To the country, or Uruguay, that is. Read the continuation of this story on Carmello and Colonia, Uruguay, next week.

Our eight days had flown by, and we enjoyed every minute in Buenos Aires, soaking up all the local culture we could. But all good things must come to an end, and, we missed our kids! One bit of advice while traveling back to the airport: tell the taxi driver to slow down so you can savor every last moment.

Four Seasons Buenos Aires, Posadas 1086/88, C1011ABB, Buenos Aires, Argentina Tel. 54 (11) 4321-1200; www.fourseasons.com/buenosaires. Named the #1 Hotel in Argentina by Conde Nast Traveler 2008.

LAN Airlines, 1-866-I FLY LAN; www.LAN.com.

Michael Villalpando also contributed to this story.