

Argentina 2007

Buenos Aires is much busier than Santiago. Most of the people are very well dressed, although there are still some beggars in the streets. Many of the men are dressed in camel coloured knee length coats and look very smart. Some of the homeless and very poor make money by sorting rubbish for recycling. They do this late at night on the streets of the city centre, where businesses leave out bags of rubbish. During the day, these same streets are selling a magnificent range of leather goods; expensive clothes and other bits and pieces. The elegant coats we saw on the streets were appropriate for the weather that was cold and windy, but sunny. A good thing was that the wind blew the pollution away.

The first day that we walked around a wet-land at the edge of the city and saw some brilliantly coloured birds. There was also a large bird on the water which looked like a white swan with a black neck; it may have been a type of duck, but not sure. After a sausage in bread from a road side stand (where I was able to successfully use my very limited Spanish), we continued our walk, amazed by the magnificent old buildings dotted around the city.

The next day we walked through the city, admiring more old buildings. We saw some lovely parrots in a park, lots of overpriced 'antiques', a fruit and veg market (with some unfamiliar items) and ended up in an area called Caminito. This is an area where many artists live and sell their wares. Some of the buildings are stone, but many are iron; they are all painted bright primary colours and look fantastic.





Before leaving for this trip I had read that South America has some of the worst footpaths in the world. We saw some in Chile, one where someone had actually left a shoe behind, but I don't know how the elegantly shod Argentines coped with areas such as this in their main streets. It was a common observation through South America that many civic structures have been built, but not maintained.

We made contact here with Elba, a friend who would be at the conference Graham attended later in Brazil. She showed us around in the evenings after finishing work at the university. We had lovely dinners of local steak and red wine. The picture is taken in the restaurant. Just don't expect to dine before 9pm. Argentine portions of meat can only be described as more than adequate.



One night we went to a tango show. This consists of a tango lesson followed by dinner and a show. It was a great night but we were not very good at following the complicated steps of the tango.

We had a brief trip out of the big city, catching a local bus to a small town called San Antonio de Areco which is two hours inland. It is the home of the gaucho (cowboy) and has lots of artists, mainly silversmiths. We arrived early afternoon and the town seemed deserted, we later realised that it was siesta time. By 5pm, the streets were alive with people on bicycles, plus a few cars and motor scooters. The restaurants do not open until 8.30 pm which did not suit us as we often skip lunch. We adapted by buying a snack to have in our room while we relaxed before dinner. The TV has an amazing range of very old American programs dubbed in Spanish, plus a few modern ones which are subtitled, so we could usually find something to watch.

In San Antonio de Areco, we met an interesting local artist who has decorated the town with much of his art work. Much of it depicts the gauchos with the typical cropped horses' tails.



Another unusual feature of Argentina is the number of unfinished buildings there are all over the city and country. Apparently this is due to the crash of the economy in 2001. Any building being erected at the time just stopped and has been left incomplete ever since, despite the fact that the economy was improving in 2007. Most of these constructions were surrounded by weeds, although we did see one that was being used as a car port and a place to hang washing.

* * * * *

Heading further north, the next stop on our South American adventure was Iguazu Falls.



Iguazu is the native word for big water – and boy is it big. There is not just one waterfall; there are so many different falls you cannot see them all at once. The number varies depending on the amount of rain there has been. The amount of water rushing over them is amazing, if only we could send some of it back to Australia! There had been a fair bit of rain there recently and apparently the levels were higher than normal; that means that there is a lot more spray and some of the photos are not as good as when there is less water and less spray. We went on a small boat trip at the bottom of the falls and managed to get very wet!

The extra rain also meant that the water on the falls and the river is very brown as there had been a fair bit of erosion up stream. The country side is lush (it's about the same latitude as Brisbane) and the weather is great, warm but not uncomfortable. The falls are on the border of Brazil and Argentina, on the river Iguazu, near the border with Paraguay. Most of the falls are in Argentina, but we also went to the Brazilian side which gives an amazing panorama of all the falls.



The town of Puerto Iguazu (in Argentina) relies heavily on tourism to the waterfall and has 2,000 hotel beds and 80% of the work is related to tourism. They have a TAFE which teaches only hospitality, tourism and languages. The Brazilian town next to the falls has another 20,000 beds for tourists and is much more diverse in its commerce. One of the tour guides that we spoke to said that she does two tours each day and then goes to school from 7pm to 12, 5 nights a week. I don't think that would go down very well in Australia. In Argentina, the children go to school for 4 hours a day, either in the morning or the afternoon. Teachers can work just for 4 hours but many of them do both sessions so they can earn a reasonable wage.

There were still lots of familiar plants that we encountered around Iguazu; monstera, lantana, impatiens, wandering jew are all indigenous to the area, but there are also bottle brushes and gum trees. We saw two local animals (a racoon and a rodent of some kind), several nice birds and lots and lots of beautiful butterflies. The birds include eagles soaring above and swifts which dart through the waterfall to the nests on the cliffs behind the falls.



Argentina 2007

We moved from city hotels where the 'window' looks out onto a brick wall or the like, to having a balcony overlooking the forest, the river Iguazu and Brazil across the river. Breakfast in Buenos Aires was coffee and croissants. Here it is platters of fresh tropical fruit and an array of pastries, cereals and other bits and pieces. We gradually adapted to the time zone and the later dinner time.

We were fascinated by seeing people walking around with a thermos and groups of people sitting around sharing a drink with a metal straw in a small gourd or metal cup. All drinking from the same straw; we found out later that it is rude not to join if you are invited.

What they are drinking is called mate or maté (pronounced MAT-ay), a traditional South American caffeine-rich infused drink. It is made by soaking dried leaves of the yerba mate plant in hot water and always served with a metal straw with a strainer on the bottom. Bags of the herb are sold in shops everywhere, including those catering to tourists. We were happy to leave them in their native environment as it is unlikely they would pass our customs.



I had managed to learn to say our room number and order different sorts of coffee in Spanish, now we had to stop saying *mucho gracias* and start saying *obligado / obligada*, (thanks) as we headed north to Portuguese speaking Brazil.

* * * * *

Argentina 2007

And here are two more photos of the magnificent falls.

