

The Many Worlds of the Monumental Buenos Aires

With fresh oil in Taco Libre and Paraguay behind us, we were excited to make our way toward Buenos Aires, a city often referred to as the "Paris of South America." The comparisons had certainly piqued our curiosity. After months of traveling through remote deserts, mountains, and small towns, we were about to arrive in the third-largest city in Latin America, after São Paulo and Mexico City. Admittedly, one of us was more excited than the other.

Before reaching the Argentine capital, we made an unexpected stop.



As we drove through the Argentine countryside, we noticed what appeared to be a roadside market called Gauchito Gil. Curious, we pulled over to see what it was all about. What we found was not a market at all, but a sanctuary dedicated to one of Argentina's most beloved folk saint figures. According to local legend, Gauchito Gil was a gaucho who was killed at a young age in the late nineteenth century. Today, many Argentines believe he performs miracles and grants favors to those who pray to him. The sanctuary was filled with red flags, candles, photographs, handwritten messages, and flowers left by those who believe their prayers have been answered, the same way Catholics pay promises to their saints.

When we asked a local woman about Gauchito Gil, she became visibly emotional. She explained how important he is to many Argentines and spoke passionately about the miracles attributed to him. She suggested we light a candle for him to protect us on the trip. Whether one believes in miracles or not, it was impossible not to be touched by the sincerity of the faith we witnessed... and we lit a candle for good measure.

After our unexpected religious detour, we continued on toward Buenos Aires.

As soon as we arrived, the scale of the city was immediately apparent. Buenos Aires is enormous. One of the main avenues, 9 de Julio, has twelve lanes of traffic... IN THE CITY!!! Given its size and population, we expected congestion and chaos. Instead, we found the opposite. In fact, one of the things that surprised us most about Buenos Aires was how orderly it was. Many Porteños, as residents of Buenos Aires are known, disagree and insist that their traffic is terrible. Having driven through cities such as Lima and Bogotá, however, we couldn't help but laugh and tell them to drive in Peru or Colombia.

Upon arriving, we could easily understand why people compare Buenos Aires to Europe. Grand boulevards, ornate architecture, and monumental public buildings dominate the city. We quickly decided that Buenos Aires is a monumental city in every sense of the word. Its immense size and cultural influence are impossible to miss, but so too are the countless monuments that fill its plazas, avenues, and neighborhoods.



And speaking of plazas, the city is filled with them. We first visited Plaza de Mayo, the historic heart of Buenos Aires and the country's most important public square, where some of the nation's most significant landmarks stand, including the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace (truly pink in color, like Pepto-Bismol), and the Metropolitan Cathedral, where Pope Francis once served as Archbishop of Buenos Aires.



Beyond Plaza de Mayo, we discovered that Buenos Aires seems to have a plaza for just about every country. We wandered through Plaza Italia, Plaza España, Plaza Paraguay, Plaza Francia, and even Plaza Colombia. The list seemed almost endless. Together, they give this monumental city a welcome touch of green where people gather to drink yerba mate. Complementing these green spaces is the Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur, a 350-hectare nature reserve along the Río de la Plata filled with walking trails, wetlands, and different types of birds. While exploring the reserve, we forgot that we were in the middle of one of South America's largest and busiest cities until we exited and, a short distance later, found ourselves at Plaza General San Martín beside a Monument to the Fallen in Malvinas. Just in case you forgot, las Malvinas son Argentinas! (*the Malvinas are Argentine.*) It reinforced our growing belief that Argentina wears its history on its sleeve.



Part of that history is the coup d'état of 1976, which lasted until 1983, but whose shadow has continued to stretch across Argentina's recent past and present. We saw references to this horrific period in Córdoba's murals, and in Buenos Aires we found it being actively remembered and reckoned with. We visited the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, a powerful museum and memorial located in what was once one of the most infamous detention centers of the dictatorship. The preserved site now stands as a place dedicated to the victims and the atrocities committed during that period. To our surprise, trials are still ongoing today in an effort to hold people accountable for the thousands of people who were kidnapped and disappeared during those years.

Consistent with its history, much of Buenos Aires retains a distinctly colonial feel despite its enormous size. Narrow cobblestone streets, historic facades, and centuries-old buildings give many neighborhoods a timeless character. We stayed in Palermo, one of the city's trendiest neighborhoods, filled with restaurants, cafés, and bars that made it an enjoyable base from which to explore and watch soccer matches as the World Cup unfolds at the time of this writing. Although trendy and modern, our favorite walks in Palermo Soho were through its narrower, older streets, where the neighborhood's historic character still shines through even through the colorful murals.



The best way to get to know a city is by walking it, and that is exactly what we did. Fortunately, Buenos Aires is easy to navigate thanks to its subway system, which allowed us to move easily between neighborhoods, plazas, and markets, because there are local markets everywhere!

One of these markets is Mercado de San Telmo. The market reminded us somewhat of La Boqueria in Barcelona, with its lively atmosphere and endless food options. We visited first on a Sunday, when it was packed with visitors. The energy was incredible, but so were the crowds. Later, we returned on a weekday and found ourselves enjoying the market even more.



Without the chaos of the weekend crowds, we could take our time exploring the vendors, tasting food, appreciating the character of the market itself, and seeing all of the Mafalda paraphernalia at every turn. Created by Argentine cartoonist Quino, who passed away in 2020, Mafalda is a beloved comic-strip character whose popularity extends far beyond the pages of the newspaper where she first appeared. A witty and endlessly curious little girl known for her sharp observations about society, politics, and everyday life, Mafalda has become a cultural icon throughout Argentina and much of Latin America... and, as you may have guessed, she has her own plaza!

Mafalda is also present at Recoleta, one of the most elegant and well-known areas of the city. Recoleta is home to the famous cemetery where many of Argentina's most important historical and wealthy figures are buried, including Eva Perón. Adjacent to the cemetery is the Basilica of Our Lady of Pilar, built in 1732 and one of the oldest churches in South America.

Of course, no visit to Buenos Aires would be complete without a stop in La Boca. La Boca is one of the city's most recognizable neighborhoods, famous for its brightly painted buildings and the colorful pedestrian street known as Caminito, filled with street performers. Some parts of the area can feel like a tourist trap, but there is no denying that the colors and energy make it one of the city's must-see locations.

La Boca is also synonymous with soccer. The neighborhood is the birthplace of the legendary Boca Juniors soccer club, one of the most successful and passionately supported teams in Argentina and the world. Even for those who do not follow the sport, it is impossible to miss the influence of Boca Juniors throughout the neighborhood. Team colors cover walls, murals celebrate club legends, and jerseys appear in shop windows. Although we were visiting during the World Cup, the murals, statues, and decorations clearly appeared to be permanent fixtures.



Not far from La Boca, we found one of the city's most recognizable modern landmarks, el Puente de la Mujer, the Women's Bridge. Located in Puerto Madero, the bridge's white structure is said to represent a couple dancing tango.

Another iconic modern landmark is Floralis Genérica, an enormous steel flower whose petals open during the day and close at night, mimicking the natural rhythm of a living flower. On weekends, the surrounding area in Recoleta is filled with local crafts, artwork, and food vendors. The flower sits across the street from a 226-year-old Gran Gomero tree (let that sink in for a minute).



We spent some time wandering through the stalls, but rather than dedicating the entire day to the market, we decided to head toward Feria de Mataderos, literally the Slaughterhouse Market, anticipating a very different side of Buenos Aires. (Check out our YouTube Video Feria de Mataderos)



Every Sunday, the area transforms into a celebration of Argentina's gaucho heritage. Traditional folk music fills the air, musicians perform in the streets, artisans sell handcrafted goods, and vendors offer empanadas, choripán, and other traditional foods. This market felt like a place where locals gather not for tourists, but to celebrate and preserve their culture.

What made this especially apparent was the atmosphere surrounding the music and dancing. As we wandered through the market, we watched folkloric performances on stage while people dressed in traditional gaucho attire danced nearby, not as paid performers seeking tips, but simply because they were enjoying themselves. Before long, spectators joined in. At one point, we watched a woman step into the crowd of dancers with a man dressed in a bright red traditional outfit. Neither seemed to know the other, yet within thirty minutes they were laughing, dancing, and chatting like old friends. It was a small moment, but one that perfectly captured the sense of community in the market.

Adding to the festive atmosphere, the community was celebrating the market's 40th anniversary during our visit, making the day feel even more special. At first, we assumed the large crowds were there because of the anniversary celebration, but several locals assured us that the market is always this lively, provided the weather cooperates.



The market also brought us full circle to our earlier encounter with Gauchito Gil and the reminder that las Malvinas son Argentinas. While browsing the stalls, we stopped to look at handmade knives crafted by a local artisan. Hanging above his stall were several red Gauchito Gil flags, which sparked a conversation. The vendor explained that he was a veteran of the Malvinas War and that after returning home, he prayed to Gauchito Gil for help finding a way to support himself and his family. He believed those prayers were answered when he and his son began making handcrafted knives together. We bought some handmade gaucho knives with decorative wood and bone handles, and he gave us a Gauchito Gil flag.

The combination of music, dancing, tradition, and genuine local participation made Feria de Mataderos one of the most authentic cultural experiences in Buenos Aires.

That is not to say that Argentina's more formal cultural traditions are any less authentic. During our stay, we attended a tango dinner show at El Querandí and an evening of classical music at Teatro Colón, two experiences that showed a different side of Argentine culture.

Our visit to El Querandí was particularly memorable because we were with our friend and Florida neighbor, Gina, and because of the meaning of the performance. Through music, dance, and costumes, it traced the evolution of tango from its humble origins in the working-class neighborhoods to its rise as one of Argentina's most recognizable cultural identities.

Equally impressive was Teatro Colón, widely regarded as one of the world's great opera houses. Opened in 1908, the theater is renowned for its extraordinary acoustics and lavish architecture, featuring ornate balconies, high ceilings, and a magnificent central auditorium. The classical music concert we attended served as a reminder of the strong European influences that helped shape Buenos Aires and contributed to its reputation as the "Paris of South America."



The tango show and Teatro Colón were a clear demonstration of Argentina's celebrated cultural institutions, polished and refined. Mataderos, on the other hand, offered a glimpse into something different: ordinary people gathering to dance, sing, and preserve traditions simply because they love them. Both experiences were authentically Argentine, but one unfolded on a stage while the other unfolded in the streets with the common folk.

Another fascinating glimpse into the city's cultural identity came during our visit to Palacio Barolo. Completed in 1923, the building was inspired by Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy and was designed as an architectural representation of the poem itself. The structure is divided symbolically into Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, with countless references to Dante woven throughout its design. Our visit

followed that symbolic journey. We began in Hell, took the elevator through Purgatory, and climbed a series of narrow spiral stairs to reach Paradise at the top of the tower, where a beacon once shone brightly enough to be seen across the Río de la Plata. From Paradise, the reward was extraordinary. Stretching out before us was the vast city of Buenos Aires, a city so immense that it seemed to extend beyond the horizon. The view offered a new appreciation for just how monumental the city truly is.



From Purgatory we had an incredible view of the magnificent National Congress building, one of the most impressive structures in Buenos Aires (admittedly, making such a claim almost feels unfair in a city filled with remarkable architecture).

By the end of our time in Buenos Aires, we realized that understanding the city requires moving between many worlds: the grandeur of Teatro Colón, the elegance of tango, the symbolism of Palacio Barolo, the community spirit of Mataderos, the passion for soccer, Mafalda's enduring presence, the history that reveals itself at every turn, and the unmistakable pride Argentines have in their country.

We say goodbye to this monumental city as we cross to Colonia del Sacramento in Uruguay. But rest assured that we are not finished with Argentina. We will return soon!

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