

A Brief Encounter with Uruguay

It was time to say goodbye to Buenos Aires, not because there wasn't anything left to explore or because we were ready to leave, but because our journey had to continue. After two weeks in the Argentine capital, we felt we had gained a genuine appreciation for what this monumental city has to offer. Our visit was never rushed – yes, we checked off many of the iconic landmarks and attractions, but we also had time to wander its neighborhoods, enjoy incredible meals, and spend time talking with locals.

Still, we couldn't help but wonder what we had missed. We attended a tango show, strolled through plazas and markets, explored museums, and admired the city's grand architecture. Yet the intimate connections we had experienced elsewhere in Argentina, sharing wine with a small family-owned winery in Mendoza or receiving an unforgettable history lesson about the Malvinas in Treful, were harder to find in a city of more than fifteen million people. Perhaps that is simply the nature of a great cosmopolitan capital. Even so, we left Buenos Aires with a deeper understanding of Argentina, its history, and its people.



Our next destination was just across the Río de la Plata. We boarded the ferry in Puerto Madero and crossed to Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay. Unlike the scenic ferry crossings through Patagonia, where the journey itself became part of the adventure, this crossing was simply transportation from point A to point B. Yet the contrast between the two points could not have been greater. We left behind one of South America's largest colonial capitals and arrived in one of its smallest colonial towns. Colonia del Sacramentos' nickname, "Colonia," feels entirely appropriate.

Colonia became one of the most disputed settlements in South America. Sitting on the northern shore of the Río de la Plata, it occupied a strategic location that both Portugal and Spain wanted to control. Over a period of about 100 years, the town changed hands numerous times leaving behind a fascinating blend of architectural styles that still defines the historic district today.

Walking through its cobblestone streets, you can almost tell which empire left its mark. The Portuguese favored irregular, winding streets that followed the natural contours of the land, such in Calle de los Suspiros. But when the Spanish took control, they introduced their characteristic urban planning, with straighter streets, orderly blocks, and open plazas designed around a central square, like Plaza Mayor. The result is a town where two colonial worlds coexist within just a few blocks.



Along the waterfront stands the fortified wall, a reminder of the centuries-long struggle for control of this strategic port. Another charming detail throughout Colonia was the collection of old cars. Many weren't driven at all, but instead served as decoration outside cafés, restaurants, and shops, adding to the town's charm.

Colonia is not a place of grand monuments or towering skylines. Its appeal lies in its cobblestone streets, colorful colonial buildings, plazas, and inviting cafés and restaurants that encourage you to slow down, linger, and simply enjoy the moment.

As we wandered through the town towards sunset, the sound of drums could be heard from just about every street. At first, we assumed Uruguay must have won a World Cup match and that the city had erupted into celebration. Curious, we followed the beat of the drums until we found a group of drummers and dancers on the main street. We asked if it was a national holiday or a soccer celebration and a local simply smiled and said, "this is Uruguay's tango."



What we were witnessing was Candombe, one of Uruguay's most treasured cultural traditions. Born within the Afro-Uruguayan communities of Montevideo during the colonial era, Candombe traces its roots to enslaved Africans who preserved elements of their heritage through rhythm and dance. The heartbeat of Candombe comes from three different drums, while dancers move gracefully through the streets as the neighborhood gathers around the musicians. More than just a performance, Candombe is a living expression of identity and community.

The Candombe procession we witnessed began with a red and white flag. Curious, we asked what it represented, since those were neither the colors of Uruguay nor of Colonia. We learned that each Candombe group has its own colors and its own identity. While every group has its own style and personality, they all follow a similar tradition: the procession begins with the group's flag, followed by dancers, then a few people carrying canes, followed by more dancers and, finally, the musicians whose drums provide the unmistakable heartbeat of the parade.

It was the perfect welcome to a new country in our overland adventure. As we questioned the red and white colors of the Candombe flag, we realized the Uruguayan flag looked very similar to Argentina's. Both feature alternating light blue and white stripes, and both with the same sun. The sun, known as "The Sun of May," commemorates the May Revolution of 1810, the movement that marked the beginning of the struggle for independence in this region of South America. The face on the sun represents Inti, the Incan sun god, while its alternating straight and wavy rays symbolize both light and warmth.



After wandering Colonia's colonial streets and discovering "Uruguay's tango," it was time to continue to Montevideo, the country's capital.

The drive from Colonia to Montevideo was unexpectedly lush. Palm trees lined long stretches of the highway before giving way to broad green pastures that stretched to the horizon. Along the way we passed large “estancias” or ranches, many with fancy homes, neatly maintained grounds, and expansive fields that suggested prosperous ranching and farming. It painted the picture of a quiet countryside where agriculture plays an important role. Maybe it is true there are more cows than people in Uruguay!



As we approached Montevideo, however, the scenery began to change. The outskirts revealed neighborhoods marked by poverty, aging buildings, and walls covered in graffiti. It was a striking contrast to the peaceful and lush countryside we had just driven through.

That sense of contrast continued within the city itself. Parts of downtown felt worn by time, where historic buildings stood beside neglected blocks and graffiti was impossible to ignore. Yet among these historic landmarks stands the iconic Palacio Salvo, Montevideo's architectural counterpart to Buenos Aires' Barolo Palace. Both buildings were designed by the same Italian architect, making them architectural siblings across the Río de la Plata. Only a short drive away were neighborhoods that seemed to belong to a different city altogether. Modern high-rise apartment buildings overlooked the Río de la Plata, streets impeccably maintained, and upscale restaurants, boutiques, and cafés reflected a level of prosperity that contrasted sharply with what we had seen just minutes earlier.



Montevideo is a city of contrasts, where signs of economic hardship and affluence exist side by side, each revealing a different side of Uruguay.

While in Montevideo, we stumbled upon Mercado del Puerto, one of the city's most popular gathering places. It reminded us of Buenos Aires' Mercado San Telmo, with a variety of restaurants, artisan shops, and souvenir stalls, but on a much smaller and more relaxed scale. There were no crowds or long lines.



Naturally, we couldn't leave without trying a classic Uruguayan asado with molleja, or sweetbreads, a delicacy made from the thymus gland of a young calf. We had tried molleja in Buenos Aires, but that was molleja de corazón, which, as explained to us, is a gland located near the heart. When grilled over a wood fire, the outside of molleja becomes crisp while the inside remains tender and buttery, almost fatty. It may not sound appetizing to everyone, but for those willing to venture beyond familiar cuts of meat, it is a delicious part of the traditional parrilla experience in both Argentina and Uruguay.

Unfortunately, our time in Uruguay would be shorter than we had originally planned. It wasn't because we had run out of curiosity about the country. Quite the opposite – we would have loved to spend more time discovering the country's countryside, coastline, and small towns, but the deciding factor was far more practical: fuel prices. At nearly nine dollars a gallon in Uruguay, continuing our road trip simply wasn't possible.

And so, after a brief but memorable introduction to a country that welcomed us with colonial charm, drumbeats, and tasty food, we cross back into Argentina, eager to see some new friends we had met along the way in the Uco Valley.

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