

BUENOS AIRES & MENDOZA---TWO JEWELS IN THE SUN

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

From the northern borders of Bolivia and Paraguay to the southern tip of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina is a fascinating country that should be explored in small bites rather than a full meal.



Author at goat and chicken grill

The second largest country in South America after Brazil and the eighth largest country in the world, it stretches 3,700 kilometers from top to bottom, from the northern subtropical forests of Chaco and

Formosa, through Cordoba, the Pampas region famous for its gauchos and the world famous Patagonia area with its glaciers and national parks.

But for the purposes of this article, we will concentrate on two delicious bites on opposite sides of the country---Buenos Aires, the jewel, and Mendoza, the sun.

We checked into a new boutique hotel, the Fierro, in the Palermo district of Buenos Aires. Located on a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood

street, the Fierro was within easy walking distance of shops, restaurants and parks.

Our room was modern and spacious, more like a mini-suite, included a full breakfast, and best of all a special rate of less than \$100 a night was being offered at the time.

Palermo has two sections divided by a railroad track that runs through the center, Hollywood, where we stayed, and Soho, on the other side. Hollywood is home

Central Buenos Aires



Evita's palace



to most of the city's artists and headquarters for Argentina's movie and TV industry. Soho is for shoppers.

Simply put, when Soho goes to bed, Hollywood is wondering where to have dinner.

Before it got trendy and Bohemian, Palermo had its rough edges. There was a time when one didn't casually walk around alone at night. But it has since emerged as a vibrant after-dark area, safe, comfortable as an old

sweater and always interesting.

The district seems to pick itself up and dust itself off each morning, with the sound of small hammers tick-tacking and jackhammers roaring, either repairing or constructing something.

Huge trees emerge in the middle of sidewalks, uprooting the pavement regularly. Consequently, the sidewalks are repaired with whatever material is available that day and often resemble patchwork quilts. The look seems to fit in

with the surroundings.

As the name implies, Palermo has its own Little Italy on two streets near the Fierro Hotel, El Salvador and Honduras. Actually, more than 70 percent of Argentines can trace their heritage to Italy.

A milanesa (veal cutlet) with a side of pasta and beverage will often run less than \$10.

Among some of the other interesting districts in the city are:

MONSERRAT—The historic area. Walk along the Avenida de Mayo, enjoying its eclectic buildings containing hotels, theatres, bookstores etc.

SAN TELMO—The most ancient neighborhood in the city with cobblestone streets and century-old buildings. Stop at Plaza Dorrego—you just might see some couples doing the tango.

LA BOCA—One of the most picturesque areas of the city with multicolor housing. This is lively by day, but perhaps best to avoid after dark. While Buenos Aires is a relatively safe city, bad things do seem to happen here.

BARRIO NORTE—Perhaps the city's most elegant area where the rich and famous live. Stroll past the upscale hotels, restaurants and shops, but if you're on a budget, try another district.

CENTRO DISTRICT—Start at Plaza San Martin and walk the Florida shopping area. Have a traditional pizza on Corrientes Avenue and finish off at the Teatro Colon, one of the four most important opera houses in the world.

From Buenos Aires, we took a 90-minute flight west to Mendoza, the sun city, at the foot of the Andes. Mendoza is a much-smaller city, about 1.7-million compared to the 13-plus million in Buenos Aires.

Gaucha face





We checked into the elegant Park Hyatt Hotel in the center of the city with the shopping and restaurant area at our doorstep. There was an international food festival taking place at the Park Hyatt with guest chefs from all over the world.

So we attended one of the dinners and beef, Argentina style, was the centerpiece of the menu.

"That steak you're eating was walking around three days ago,"

one of our dinner companions, Brian McBride, executive chef of the Blue Duck Tavern in Washington D.C., told me. «Argentines don't believe in aging their beef.

"They also don't ask if you'd like it rare, medium or well done. It's done one way, cooked slow over a wood-burning grill, crispy on the outside, well done in the center... and real tasty." It certainly was

Mendoza is more traditional and laid back than Buenos Aires.

Rock formations in San Juan



Polo player in the vineyard



Siestas are near compulsory here, whereas some downtown sections in Buenos Aires have abandoned the afternoon break. But even after siesta ends and the city comes alive again, the pace is slow and easy.

Founded in 1561, the city was

destroyed by an earthquake in 1861 and reconstructed with a new center, Plaza Independencia. Four other plazas are nearby:

PLAZA ESPANA--A leafy plaza with a typically Spanish fountain, benches decorated with Spanish tiles and tree-lined paths.



Harvesting - Bodega Familia Zuccardi - Mendoza



Palermo antique shop

PLAZA ITALIA---The Italian community built two monuments here, in stone and bronze, representing the strong ties between Argentina and Italy.

PLAZACHILE---With a monument to the liberators O'Higgins and San Martín, this plaza symbolizes the historic links between Argentines and Chileans.

PLAZA SAN MARTÍN---Here you will find a dramatic statue of liberator San Martín with his right arm pointing to the path he took

his army across the Andes corridor.

On the outskirts of Mendoza are Aconcagua, the highest peak outside of the Himalayas; some of the best white water rafting in South America, thermal pools, skiing and snowboarding (Las Lenas has an international reputation for great snow).

And now it was time to return to Buenos Aires for our final day before heading home to North America.

We spent that day looking for the

legend of Eva Peron. We learned in conversations with people along the way that Evita isn't doing so good in Argentina these days. Aside from a tacky museum here and there, particularly in the La Boca area, she's no longer being considered for sainthood.

Even her grave in the Recoleta district is rarely visited, except by tourists. But La Recoleta Cemetery, final resting place for most of Buenos Aires' high and mighty, is also unique for something

else.

One can actually rent one of these above-ground tombs for a day at a price agreeable to the real surviving family members, replace the name on the tomb with the name of someone else newly departed, and pose by the tomb for photos.

Location...location...location.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn. and resides in



Palermo coffee corner

Pizza Argentina



Montreal).

IF YOU GO;

Dress is casual in both Buenos Aires and Mendoza. Early mornings and late evenings are cool enough for sweaters and light jackets in the mountainous regions.

Tipping is not necessary, but a small amount is appreciated for special services.

For further information on the Fierro boutique hotel, fierrohotel.com; for the Park Hyatt, mendoza.park.hyatt.com; for Buenos Aires and Mendoza, try www.turismo.gov.ar and follow the links.