

Rhythm of life

First world opulence, European sensibilities and third world poverty – Buenos Aires has all this, and more. We know about the tango but the food vibe is spectacular, too

Story **Christine Manfield**

A city of distinctive *barrios* (or neighbourhoods) that have grown organically during its 200 years of independence, Buenos Aires is a place of immigrants, with more than five million *porteos* (residents), nearly half of whom live below the poverty line. It's a city that has lurched between dictatorship and democracy, a culture that thrives on soccer, polo and horseriding. The *porteos* are a friendly, gregarious bunch and pretty goddam sexy to boot. Eye-candy is everywhere, whatever your persuasion.

On the flipside, taxes are high and there appears to be little money invested in public health, education or roadworks. Counterfeit notes do the rounds. I was stung by a taxi driver giving me a fake \$50 in change. We were also advised to check change at bars late at night and try not to use large notes. Rule of thumb: carry lots of small notes for taxi fares and change bigger notes at reputable shops or hotels. Don't bother with the banks unless you want to wait with the locals as they queue patiently for up to two hours at a time to swap notes for coins, needed for buses and trains. A strong distrust and dislike of banks and the financial system pervades after the economic crash a decade ago.

The Argentine capital is an intriguing mix of first world opulence, European sensibilities and third world poverty smeared with a veneer of anarchy. Businessmen, urban *gauchos* (the word is South American approximation of cowboy) and transsexuals mingle comfortably and effortlessly together. The contrasts are everywhere, from the grand mansions with their art deco architecture to the brightly painted houses of the El Caminito alley in La Boca district and the crumbling facades of San Telmo.

Dog poop litters the streets and parks, it's everywhere and it's a dangerous sport to not look down when walking. Pooper-scoopers have not made it to this part of the world. In contrast, the streets of Recoleta, the well-heeled aristocratic part of town are surprisingly clean. We see loads of guys employed as dog-walkers, with anything from 10 to 30 dogs of all shapes and sizes being led along the streets. They invariably end up in the parks where the dog-minders hang out with each other

and the dogs have a free-for-all away from the roads.

We rented an apartment overlooking the Hipodromo (racecourse), the local airport, the dome of the Planetario Galileo Galilei and the Rio de la Plata at the northern end of Palermo, the city's largest *barrio* to the north of the centre that is divided into four parts: Palermo, Palermo Soho, Palermo Hollywood (sometimes linked together and called Palermo Viejo) and Palermo Chico (or Barrio Parque), a tiny pocket that is home to grandiose mansions, embassies, the super rich and media stars.

Palermo Viejo has soul. There are small, interesting boutique hotel properties opening up in renovated buildings. There's a palpable energy on the streets and it's the green centre of the city, with acres of parks and gardens. It's vibrant, funky, diverse. There's a sense of connection with the world, reflected in its fabulous shops, boutiques, cafes, bars and restaurants, many with outdoor spaces and courtyard gardens. Specialty shops and boutiques are often well-designed spaces that make brilliant use of natural light, creating terrific and engaging architectural chemistry.

The food choices in this district are fabulous and staggeringly diverse. I am completely enamoured, the list so long I have to return to explore further. Menus are a mix of modern, traditional and futurist; beef from the *parrillas* (steak houses) has never tasted better, the seafood is sensational, ceviche is as popular as sushi, designer pizza reigns supreme, while *dulce de leche* (the most delicious caramel) is one of the most defining tastes of the city. *Alfajores* – little sweet biscuits, always with *dulce de leche* in some form or other – are served with coffee any time of the day. There are even cafes that have entire menus featuring *dulche de leche*; it's wicked in its goodness. It's served for breakfast to spread on toast or for dipping your croissant or sweet pastry.

The cocktail culture is among the finest in the world and many of the bars are intimate and seductive. The cool factor is extremely high. I find myself on a taste journey, sampling deliciously smooth and elegant Malbec wines from Mendoza, the premier wine region of Argentina, and working my way through the different drop-dead, gorgeous Torrontes, a local white grape, crisp and spicy that sings on the palate. What's not to like?

Buenos Aires is best known for its tango, which brings

the city alive late at night. Cruise the streets of San Telmo on the weekends and you will see the locals dancing tango in the streets in or around Plaza Dorrego, where the small, intimate tango clubs are plentiful. The streets are cobblestoned and small local bars appear on every corner. Antique traders have made this *barrio* their home, yet it has elements of being rundown: a few tatty edges, some crumbling houses and a different energy to other parts of the city. Potentially alternative with a slightly bohemian edge, it's a place where you sense change occurring.

The city is also renowned for its leather, handcrafted shoes and boots. Glassware, lighting and design are also prominent features. I have never seen more lighting shops in one place in my life, the choice is staggering.

We move to the Park Hyatt Hotel in Recoleta to experience a different side of Buenos Aires. The extravagance here is astonishing compared to elsewhere. We pay homage to Evita, laid to rest at the Recoleta cemetery with its rows of cement and marble family mausoleums and crypts. The MALBA museum, organised around a private collection of one of the city's biggest art connoisseurs and dedicated to preserve and promote Latin American art, is housed in one of the best examples of modern design in Palermo Chico. We walk along nearby Avenida Libertador and Avenida Figueroa Alcorta to ogle at French classicism architecture and staggering wealth.

As a juxtaposition, right across the railway track, sandwiched between the Autopista Ilia – the main thoroughfare for traffic to San Isidro and the glamorous northern suburbs – lies an enormous shanty town, Villa 31 (it's even listed on the map). Tens of thousands of people live in this poverty-stricken slum, having erected makeshift houses from anything they can scavenge. Some dwellings are three or four storeys high. Villa 31 is run like a mini city, controlled by the mafia and police have no access. It's a perverse sight as we glide past on the freeway.

Like most large and overcrowded cities around the world, Buenos Aires offers both sides of the coin in equal measure. But, whatever your fancy, it has everything a cultured city needs to shine, to appeal and seduce. It beckons – it is after all, only a direct flight away. Let a little Latino magic wash over you and before you know it, you will be able to tango like the *porteos*. It's a place that gets under your skin, it touches your soul.



PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTINE MANFIELD / CORBIS / GETTY IMAGES

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- 01 Tango dancers at Plaza Dorrego.
- 02 A close-up of the Santiago Calatrava-designed Punta de la Mujer (or Woman's Bridge) in Puerto Madero.
- 03 Architect Eduardo Catalano's giant metal sculpture, *Floralis Generica*, located in Recoleta's United Nations Park.
- 04 Brightly painted houses are a feature of El Caminito.
- 05 Gone but not forgotten. Artwork in tribute to "The King of Tango", singer, songwriter and actor Carlos Gardel.
- 06 Walking the dogs, Buenos Aires-style.

Eat + drink

Bar 6

Armenia 1676 (between El Salvador and Honduras) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4833 6807
A favourite breakfast spot with decent espresso, fresh orange juice, the best pastries and croissants, perfectly cooked eggs and toasted sandwiches. The blackboard menu changes as snacks morph into lunch and dinner. The space has a cool warehouse design. Locals come to work on their laptops, lounge around, have meetings etc.

La Cupertina

Cabrera 5296 (at Godoy Cruz) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4777 3711
This corner shop makes the best *empanadas* and *chivitos*.

La Vineria de Gualterio Bolivar

Bolivar 865 (between Independencia and Estados Unidos) San Telmo
T: +54 (0)11 4361 4709
A small culinary gem, the food inspired by Spain's El Bulli, yet not mimicked. Has a sense

of its own style; choice of seven or 11-course tasting menus.

Sucre

Sucre 676 (between Figueroa and Castaneda) Belgrano
T: +54(0) 11 4782 9082
Modern Argentinean food, fab post-industrial warehouse space, best wine list – tres chic.

Minga

Costa Rica 4528 (between Armenia and Malabia) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4833 5775
Hip space, outdoor and indoor seating, funky crowd. Menu is modern; fresh ingredients star; the beef with *chimichurri* (herb and chilli sauce) is a fave.

Cluny

El Salvador 4618 (between Malabia and Armenia) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4831 7176
Laidback space, smart food – clean, pure flavours.

Bar Uriarte

Uriarte 1572 (between Honduras and Gorriti) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4834 6004

Another great space, kitchen at front street window, courtyard garden at back. Menu is perfect for lunch – salads, sandwiches and more. Main courses come with salad/veg, a glass of water, beer or wine.

Ceviche

Costa Rica 5644 (between Bonpland and Fitz Roy) Palermo Hollywood
T: +54 (0)11 4776 7373
Peruvian restaurant that specialises in ceviche.

Osaka

Soler 5608 (at Fitz Roy) Palermo Hollywood
T: +54 (0)11 4775 6964
Spunky Japanese food fuses effortlessly with Latino Peruvian flavours.

I Fresh Market

Azucena Villaflor (at Olga Cossettini) Puerto Madero
T: +54 (0)11 5775 0330
Worth a visit for lunch if you're wandering around these parts. Fresh organic food, salads and sandwiches are the way to go when ordering. The space also houses a rather expensive gourmet food store.

Olsen

Gorriti 5870 (between Carranza and Ravnani) Palermo Hollywood
T: +54 (0)11 47767677
An excellent vodka bar – think Marimekko meets BA.

Casa Cruz

Uriarte 1658 (between El Salvador and Honduras) Palermo Soho
T: +54 (0)11 4833 1112
Lush, velvety lounge, ideal for cocktails. Opens at 8pm.

Milion

Parana 1048 (between Marcelo T de Alvear and Sante Fe) Barrio Norte
T: +54 (0)11 4815 9925
Stylish glamour, art deco colonial mansion. Among the great cocktails, the pisco sour creates a new benchmark. Have lunch on the terrace.

Gran Bar Danzon

Libertad 1161 (between Arenales and Sante Fe) Recoleta
T: +54 (0)11 4811 1108
One of the city's best wine and cocktail bars; many Torrontes and Malbec wines from Mendoza. Try the ceviche tacos.

Stay

Park Hyatt Duchau Palace

Avenida Alvear 1661, Recoleta buenosaires.park.hyatt.com
A beautiful renovation of a former aristocratic Belle Epoque mansion in the heart of the most well-heeled district. The place to stay to soak up some of the area's sophisticated elegance. The suites have outdoor terraces and generous space.


Five (Cool Rooms)

Honduras 4742 (between Armenia and Malabia) Palermo Soho
fivebuenosaires.com
Cool minimalism; small intimate property in the heart of the action.

Mine Hotel

Gorriti 4770, Palermo Soho minehotel.com
Hip boutique hotel; great location, easy walk to many of the better restaurants, cafes and bars.

www.apartmentsbBA.com

Ideal when staying for a week or longer; much more affordable option than hotels. Modern apartments in security buildings; various locations. Easy to deal with; great concierge service. 



lose the glasses and give your life wings

Sometimes wearing glasses or contacts can hold you back from doing the things you really want to. Like enjoying the great outdoors or playing active sports. Even everyday things like looking for lost items or putting on make up are simply much easier without the inconvenience of lenses. Laser vision correction can change your experience of life. The Lasik procedure has helped over 20 million people worldwide see with naturally clear vision. And with our easy payment plans you can enjoy freedom today and pay later.

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