

Buenos Aires Diario

Dec. 25 - Jan. 7

12/25/09 6:30 pm "Buenos Aires"

Land of the Living Dead – in view of the Recoleta cemetery, BA's grand mausoleum, we share Christmas with the spirits of Christmas past. Came down, and down, to this state on a falling star from California only to find a bum's dream of December summer solstice in a broken down potboiling urban manger.

Two lucky caballeros from Long Beach, now sleeping off the awful lag of LAX-Delta, in a king size bed on the chic shabby Las Heras Avenue.

12/28/09 8 am "Withdrawal"

Finished with BA after three days but with 10 days to go, we emerge from the dire first stages of the dreaded cannabonoid withdrawal cheered by our survival. I lost my ATM card to the maw of a bank machine on Xmas day, while hubby twisted his back out reaching for toilet paper in the bathroom. Serax and Ativan mix poorly with Argentine chardonnay. There is a pervasive air of penury, the pavements cracked and decorated with fresh dog shit. The summer is heavy, wet, steamy.

"Everything" has been closed for the holiday weekend and although the city returns to normal this Monday morning, there's not much of it left to capture our hopes. We're bent on getting out of town.

Met with “Raphael Palermo,” talented young street artist who is the son of an old college friend’s old college friend from Boston, and promised to bring us some herbs. I offered \$100.

12/29/09 8 am “Money Problems”

Get this, some tourist guide book directed us to a shopping center where the locals allegedly go for “inexpensive” clothes, and it turned out to be an enclosed four story mall identical to any American one, down to the familiar brand name stores. The Sony Style shop recharged our camera battery, gratis, but the camera is still broken. We don’t care any more.

Forced to wait two hours for the battery charge, we ducked out of the oppressive steam into a chain restaurant called Pertutti where a savvy elderly waiter let us while away the time over salmon and steak plates and a bottle of (basic) white wine, then, sensing a tip, produced a gift of fruitcake and champagne for dessert. He earned seven US Obama bucks for his gratuity and proudly showed them off to his fellow wait staff. In Argentina, money is always an object.

12/29/09 cont. “On the Delta”

Went to Tigre Delta via taxi, train, and boat, all three fraught with anxious uncertainties. First taxi took us to the Retiro bus station instead of the train one. First train, BA to Mitre, very crappy, i.e. urine smell and rocky ride, but govt. train and free. Second train, Tren de la Costa, privately run and very “costa” 24 pesos/persona, standing room only. Tigre station, rife with scam tour boat deals, but Hub had figured out best deal on simple boat to Tres Bocas where the premium resto is called the

Riviera, because it was on the river, complete with mosquitos and tropical thunderstorms. Raced back to BA and to bed with pinkie antihistamines. Hope for Rapha dope tomorrow fading with no plan in sight. Suicide optional.

12/31/09 7:30 am “Big Guns”

New Year’s Eve morning in BA. Yesterday the kid came through with a bud of Argentina home grown and proudly returned our hundred bucks. It’s a gift. He was explaining that the only thing portenos (BA citizens) have remaining is their pride. “But I don’t know what we’re supposed to be proud of.” Hub said, “Let’s change the terms of our agreement,” and gave him the hundred back as an art purchase.

Had a pizza at El Cuartito, oldest pizza in joint in BA, mobbed from the moment the doors opened.

Booming guns shattered the midnight last night although it was only Dec.30 turning to the 31st, the eve of new year’s eve. Now we race around la Recoleta to gather food and drink before everything closes down early and tomorrow nothing at all will open. A toast to 2010.

1/1/10 8 am “High at Last”

Just back from “kitty korner” vacant lot of feral pussies where we enjoyed St. Raphael’s sacrament as drunks reeled past returning from their all night reveries – revels – on new year’s day, a new decade too, and new level of altitude, what euphoria abstinence can foster when broken!

Sorry, got carried away.

Yesterday new year's eve a winner, got tix first class on the boat to Colonia, Uruguay for Monday am with St. Raph along. Then a serene lunch around the corner in cozy 'hood parilla (grill), where they lock the door to all but the anointed patrons. Felt good, saved some steak for the cat pack.

Guns started before midnight and never stopped 'til dawn, hugely at 4 am, and streets jammed with loaded screaming drunks at 7 and broken glass carpeting the sidewalks. Step lightly and lively.

1/2/10 9 am "Don't Cry"

First day of the new decade (yesterday) started with too much altitude and crash-landed later. Yin and yang: high and low, darkness and light, pole and hole (you wish), it's exactly as if you must pay the piper for his tune.

This is a scary trip, you're not entirely sure you will survive, emotionally as well as physically. With nothing better to do than review and analyze one's own life, love, and goals, the traveler is able to step out of his usual routines and patterns and see himself as the other, the foreigner. Even our language is strange.

Went over to the cemetery, delightfully quiet on the holiday early a.m., and I shot H with the new disposable Kodak which replaced the fancy but ruined Sony Cyber Shot, gracefully posed outside Eva Peron's beflowered crypt. Don't cry for she.

Now to formulate the five year plan from '10 to '15. Hubby to phase out his retirement, I to pick up swimming for the shore of health and practice the writing although no one will pay for it. Maybe free is better.

1/3/10 9 am "Las Pulgas"

Yesterday found us on the avenue of broken dreams where BA goes to score cheap clothes and other goods. You ride the subte all the way out to the end of the A train (quickest way to get to Harlem), then plod ten long sweaty blocks to the Flores basilica, beyond which the quality of merchandise, mercy, and human trash plunges precipitously. We had FTP syndrome (Failure to Purchase) because it was all crap. A couple on the sidewalk took their violent domestic quarrel public.

Long ride back on a wood paneled last Metro in BA, then a two hour lunch at the same 'hood parilla where we'd left Obama cash three days ago. When the manager saw us, he closed the window, turned on the air conditioning, dismissed the waitress from our table, and served us himself, culminating with ice cream and reserve cognac he rushed to refill. Left him an Obama fiver, more rare than the bloody filet mignon in BA. Got so loaded we forgot the doggy bag of chorizo and he chased us down the street with it. "Senores!"

Hubby realized too late that the itchy mosquito bites covering his body (but not mine) were in fact flea bites from the wild cats he's been hand-feeding scraps of the world's finest Argentine beef.

He's as scarletly spotted as any smallpox case. Instant karmic routing: man eats animal, man feeds animal, animal eats man.

1/3/10, cont. “Domingo”

Sunday we stayed home in bed all day and “nothing” happened. Bed is the best place for nothing to happen. It happens again and again there. We got plenty of nothing and nothing’s plenty for we. Vacancy is the better part of fertility. We get filled up on emptiness.

Meanwhile, outside our window, BA steams, man bites hot dog, hot dog bites man, keep on truckin’. But we’re just two guys in bed together. “Nothing wrong with that.”

1/5/10 9 am “Three Pepsis”

Yesterday dawned black and pouring rain, evil omens for sailors but we had passage in primera clase on the fast boat to Colonia in Uruguay. Rapha arrived and we tried to phone a cab but the line was busy and delays manifest as everyone in BA who could afford it wanted a taxi.

Finally flagged a gypsy down, got to the dock on time and had a “swell” sail to the tiny, touristy village, appreciating the Unesco “world heritage” cute architecture. Rain clouds gave way to blazing sunlight and sopping humidity.

Lunch in the old fashioned plaza cantina was charming enough despite the overpriced bad food, but when the cuenta came, we’d been charged for three Pepsis we never drank and had to complain. It was no innocent error, clearly a tacky ripoff attempt by the crone at the till, and it took away the charm.

Recalling the old SNL skit in the Greek diner, we chanted “Pepsi, Pepsi, Pepsi!” and laughed hysterically.

Hub got a yin yang pendant of wood and coconut to help him Tai Chi his way to calm. A friendly barista served us lukewarm sticky white wine on the sidewalk and the fleas danced on Hub’s arms.

On the return sail they served free champagne and cheesy crackers and we got to bed late and spent.

Travel not to see the world but to see your own heart in the sad-eyed “disappeared” generation.

1/6/10 7 am “Get Lost”

I’m no social scientist but consider the unique fabric of Argentina. People come here to get lost. There are many Jews but also fugitive Nazis. The perfect spot for a doomed tryst. Once you’re here, you can’t get out. There’s a serious money problem but not the straightforward poverty of, say, India. More like a dodgy pretension. There’s a notorious coin shortage due to hoarding, so merchants can’t make change. No one can change, apparently. BA has one of the world’s most celebrated opera houses, but it hasn’t staged a performance for ten years. It’s a wreck. It’s the land of the lost. The undisputed top tourist attraction is the cemetery. There, at least, some can rest.

Paranoia strikes deep. You always have the feeling of being spied on. Maybe it’s just that people have nothing else to do, so they watch each other. In less than two weeks we’ve become famous in

the 'hood. Los dos chicos who tip in US singles. Who smoke weed furtively in the alley and skate home clinging to the shadows.

Another ten cent observation is the evident differences between Argentinians and their neighbors. If you see someone whose complexion is way too clear, clothes too fashionable, coiffure too chic, chances are it's a Brazilian tourist on a cheap holiday. Don't even talk about Brazil to an Argentinian, the jealousy and resentment is too raw.

And the Uruguayans in Colonia, in a socialist country deemed the "safest in South America," seem for all the world carefree and smiling. The cars stop for pedestrians, and the pedestrians sort of shamble on.

I'm governor Mark Sanford reporting from BA, but don't tell any one.

1/7/10 7 am "Get Out"

Poised to fly home today, I'm reminded of people who were interested in Buenos Aires and wanted to know what it's like, so here are a few basic pointers for the would-be traveler.

"Buenos Aires is famous for tango, beef, under the counter money transactions and women," quote the voluble waiter in the El Sanjuanino ancient traditional restaurant.

- "Tango." It takes two. But contrary to expectation, you will not see people gaily tangoing all over the place. We saw only one couple, doing it for spare change at the sleazy "can't miss" Sunday flea market in San Telmo.

- “Beef.” It’s what’s for dinner. Also for breakfast and lunch. It’s pretty much the only thing they have to eat, and note they eat the whole cow, “nothing wasted.” Vegetarians beware. Fish lovers, try Japan instead.
- “Funny money.” We don’t have secret bank accounts or dubious transactions, but even ordinary people can get tripped up over this. The symbol for the peso is identical to the US dollar sign (\$) and some merchants notoriously confuse them to their benefit and your loss. Beware the fine print in the apartment rental contract. In our case, the price changed at least five times, always upward. Don’t show your stuffed wallet in public. The Bush twins, George and Laura’s girls, did that in some drunken nightclub and got mugged. And they were trying to be incognito.
- “Women.” I wouldn’t know much about this topic, but can extrapolate it to mean sex in general. It’s supposedly a national obsession but it must be going on behind closed doors because it’s not particularly obvious. There’s more porn in LA than BA, more gay and lesbian attractions in San Francisco than San Telmo, more prostitutes in Amsterdam than all of Argentina. Personally, I’m married and gay folks can now do that here, so chalk up one more for our side.

Patient gentle reader, thank you for your attention, we now must say goodbye. Take with you these simple lessons and philosophies. Don’t fly too high or you will certainly be shot down. Hold your tongue. Wear your rubbers. Be kind to your mother and small animals. Count your change. Change your count. Knock on wood.