

The Best of Buenos Aires

A country's tragedy has become a tourist's opportunity, and in between the two is hope for an improved economy for all of Buenos Aires, the glamorous capital of Argentina. Up until the peso crisis of December 2001, Buenos Aires was regarded as Latin America's most expensive city, if not one of the world's, with prices for some hotels and restaurants rivaling those of New York and Paris. Many on the South American tourist crawl avoided this sophisticated and beautiful city altogether, staying in the cheaper capitals of the countries that surrounded it. But now that the peso, once on par with the U.S. dollar, has fallen to a third of its former value and stabilized there, tourists from all over the world are flocking to this city, often called the Paris of South America.

Stroll through the neighborhoods of Recoleta or Palermo, full of buildings with marble neoclassical facades on broad tree-lined boulevards, and you know exactly why it got that moniker. European immigrants to Buenos Aires, mostly from Spain and Italy, brought with them the warm ways of Mediterranean culture, wherein friends, family, and conversation were the most important things in life. Whiling away the night over a long meal was the norm, and locals had always packed into cafes, restaurants, and bars until the early morning hours. The peso crisis hit the locals all the harder because of this, making the lifestyle and good times that they cherished almost unattainable for a period of time.

But don't think that the new Buenos Aires is a depressing shell of its former glorious self. Instead, when you get to Buenos Aires, you'll find a city quickly recovering from its former problems, with old cafes and restaurants not only full of patrons but competing with all of the new restaurants and cafes opening up at a breakneck pace all over town.

The crisis also had a remarkable effect on the country's soul. Argentines as a whole are becoming more self-reflective, looking at themselves and the reasons why their country fell into so much trouble and trying to find answers. This has led, ironically, to an incredible flourishing of all things Porteño, the word Buenos Aires locals use to describe both themselves and the culture of their city. Unable to import expensive foods from overseas anymore, Buenos Aires's restaurants are concentrating instead on cooking with Argentine staples like Pampas grass-fed beef and using locally produced, organic ingredients as seasonings. What has developed is a spectacular array of Argentine-nouvelle cuisine of incredible quality and originality. Chefs can't seem to produce it fast enough in the ever-expanding array of Buenos Aires's restaurants, particularly in the trendy Palermo district on the city's north side.

This new Argentine self-reliance and pride is not just limited to its restaurants. The same thing has happened with the country's fashion. In the go-go 1990s, when the peso was pegged to the U.S. dollar, Argentines loaded up on European labels and made shopping trips to the malls of Miami for their clothing. Now, however, even the middle class cannot afford to do this anymore. Instead, with necessity as the mother of invention, young Argentine designers are opening up

their own shops and boutiques in the Palermo Soho neighborhood, putting other Argentines to work sewing, selling, and modeling their designs. Women, especially, will find fantastic and utterly unique fashions in Buenos Aires that you won't find anywhere else in the world, at prices that are unbelievable. And if you're looking for leather goods, say no more. The greatest variety and quality in the world are available all over town.

Importantly, the most Porteño thing of all, the tango, has also witnessed an explosive growth. Up until the peso crisis, Argentines worried that the dance would die out as young people bopped instead to American hip-hop and European techno. But the peso crisis and the self-reflection it created helped bolster the art form's popularity: New varieties of shows for tourists mean you can now see a different form of tango every night of your stay. And, more importantly to residents, the traditional, 1930s-style *milongas* (tango salons), have opened in spaces all over town. These are drawing not only the typical tango dancers but young Argentines, who have rediscovered their grandparents' favorite dance, as well as young ex-pats from all over the world who are making Buenos Aires the world's new hot city, the way Prague was at the end of the Cold War.

The city is also home to an incomparable array of theaters and other traditional venues. Buenos Aires's vast arrays of museums, many in beautiful neo-classical structures along broad tree-lined Avenida Libertador, are as exquisite as the treasures they hold inside.

All of this means there is no time like now to come visit Buenos Aires, a city rich in cultural excitement all at a bargain price unheard of just a few short years ago.

1 Frommer's Favorite Buenos Aires Experiences

• **Best Tango Shows for Tourists:**

Tango, a beautiful dance that tells the pained history of its immigrant poor from the beginning of the 20th century, is the ultimate Buenos Aires-defining experience. For an authentic historical look, see the tango show **El Querandí**, Perú 302 (☎ 11/4345-0331), which traces the dance's roots from brothel slums, when only men danced it, to its current leggy sexiness. See p. 227. **Señor Tango**, Vieytes 1653 (☎ 11/4303-0212), adds Hollywood glamour and Fosse-esque dance moves, as well as horses trampling the stage, in the city's most popular show. See p. 230. You'll find a more gracious experience at **Esquina Carlos Gardel**, Carlos Gardel 3200 (☎ 11/4876-6363), in the Abasto neighborhood where Carlos Gardel, the city's most famous tango crooner, actually lived and worked.

A classical symphony accompanies the more traditional instruments in this show. See p. 228.

- **Best Tango Hall for the Experienced or Those Who Want to Watch the Experienced:** If you're an expert tango dancer, or want to at least watch the people who are, head to a *milonga* (tango salon). **El Niño Bien**, Humberto I no. 1462 (☎ 11/4483-2588), is like taking a step back in time as you watch patrons dance in an enormous, smoke-filled, Belle Époque-era hall under ceiling fans. The best dancers come here to show off, though you'll also find instructors looking to mingle with shy potential students who watch from the sidelines. See p. 231. **Salón Canning**, Scalabrini Ortiz 1331 (☎ 11/4832-6753), in Palermo Hollywood has what many local dancers call the best tango floor in all of Buenos Aires, a

hard, smooth, parquet surface perfect for this dance. The tight space, however, is not big enough for the tango-challenged. See p. 233.

- **Best Architecture Walks:** Buenos Aires abounds in beautiful architecture, especially after its very self-conscious and ambitious rebuilding project before Argentina's 1910 centennial celebration of its independence from Spain. The plan was put into action in the 1880s, and by the turn of the 20th century, entire neighborhoods had been rebuilt. The French Beaux Arts movement was at its worldwide height at that point, meaning much of the city looks more like Paris than any other Latin American city.

Avenida de Mayo, the city's official processional route linking the Presidential Palace (Casa Rosada) to the National Congress Building, is the longest and best-preserved example of this (see p. 186 for a walking tour of this area). The corner buildings along the wide **Diagonal Norte**, also known as **Avenida Sáenz Peña**, are all topped with fantastic neo-classical domes from the street's beginning at the Plaza de Mayo until it hits the **Obelisco**, Buenos Aires's defining monument, at Avenida 9 de Julio, the world's widest boulevard. Don't miss the neighborhoods of San Telmo and Monserrat either, with their balconied late-19th- and early-20th-century structures, most of which are gracefully decaying as they await gentrification when the economy improves.

- **Best Park Walks:** The Palermo Park system runs along Avenida Libertador and is one of the world's most beautiful. You could spend more than a day here, wandering this tree- and monument-lined part of the city, and still not see it

all. Within the system are numerous small parks such as the Rose Garden and the Japanese Gardens, as well as museums such as the **Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA)**, Av. Figueroa Alcorta 3415 (☎ 11/4808-6500; p. 158), and the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**, Av. del Libertador 1473 (☎ 11/4803-0802; p. 156). In the Argentine spring—late September and early October—the weather is at its best, and the jacaranda trees here are in their purple-bloomed glory, making this the best time to stroll. In summer months locals who can't escape the city come to jog, sunbathe, and while away the day in this area. See chapter 6.

- **Best Bird-Watching:** Proof that nature is stronger than whatever humankind throws at it is just a brisk walk away from Buenos Aires's tallest office structures at the **Ecological Reserve** (along the Costanera near Puerto Madero; ☎ 11/4893-1588). In the 1960s and 1970s, demolished buildings and construction debris were dumped into the Río de La Plata. Nature responded by wrapping it with sediment and then grass and small plants, creating a home for a myriad of birds. Wander on your own with caution, as there are still rough areas, or ask a tour company about bird-watching tours. See p. 153.

- **Best (& Most Heartbreaking) Political Experience:** Argentina's political history is a long series of ups and downs, some more tragic than others. Perhaps the worst occurred between 1976 and 1982, when a military government, bent on destroying what it considered political enemies, ruled the country. During that time, up to 30,000 people, mostly college-age, were secretly murdered, their bodies

never found, giving them the name *los desaparecidos*, meaning “the disappeared ones.” The **Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo** is an organization that aims for justice for their murdered children and marches on the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday at 3:30pm, giving speeches and handing out flyers. They also run a university with a store and library full of books on this painful period of history that has yet to come to an end. See p. 143.

- **Best Evita Experiences:** Visit the Plaza de Mayo, the political heart of Argentina, and look to the facade of the **Casa Rosada (Presidential Palace;** p. 136). The northern balcony, with its three French doors, is where Evita addressed her adoring fans. Just as many people come to see her now at the **Recoleta Cemetery** (p. 146), where she was laid to rest in a tomb belonging to the family of her wealthy father. To understand why it took Argentina more than 50 years to come to terms with this controversial woman, visit the **Museo Evita**, Calle Lafinur 2988 (☎ 11/4807-9433), in Palermo, where the story of her life is told through personal objects. See p. 156.

- **Best Museums:** The **MALBA** (Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires), Av. Figueroa Alcorta 3415 (☎ 11/4808-6500), houses an extensive and interesting modern art collection. The building itself, though, is as unique as the art, and nothing is more impressive than the giant sculpture of a man doing pushups suspended over the escalator bay in the central atrium. See p. 158. The **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**, Av. del Libertador 1473 (☎ 11/4803-0802), was built into a former water-pump station

and houses an impressive art collection, including many Picasso drawings. See p. 156.

- **Best Ethnic Neighborhoods:** With a population that is nearly all white and either of Spanish or Italian descent, Buenos Aires does not on the surface seem to be a very ethnically diverse city despite its cosmopolitan nature. However, head to the neighborhood of **Once**, around Calle Tucumán in particular, for a still-thriving Jewish community. You'll find numerous kosher restaurants, stores, and other businesses owned by or catering to this community. See p. 52. Then head to **Belgrano**, to the city's north, for the very little known Chinatown. Even most people in Buenos Aires know nothing of this community, a flourishing, busy area of restaurants, shops, and other businesses. If you're in town for the Chinese New Year, the area's Dragon Parade is a fun affair to check out. See p. 52.
- **Best Outdoor Markets:** There's no market like the **San Telmo Antiques Fair**, held every Sunday in Plaza Dorrego, the old colonial heart of the San Telmo district. You'll find lots of small antiques and collectibles dealers here along with some kitschy souvenirs, local crafts, and lots of free live tango dancing as good as anything you might pay \$50 to see onstage. The **Feria de Plaza Francia**, in front of the Recoleta Cemetery, is another don't-miss market, with great crafts, live music, and a beautiful setting on a grassy hill. See p. 199 and 200, respectively.
- **Best Shopping Experiences:** There's no shortage of **top designer shops** along Calle Alvear, with the same high quality and high style you find throughout North America and Europe, at slightly lower prices befitting the

Argentine economy. **Leather** shops abound on Calle Florida, near Galerías Pacífico, and you can even have items custom-made while you're here. For the best quality high-design items for fashion and home, my favorite shop is **Tienda Puro Diseño Argentino**, Av. Peuyrredón 2501 (☎ 11/5777-6104; p. 211). For little **boutiques** specializing in the sexy styles Argentine women favor wearing, wander the cobblestone streets of **Palermo Soho**. See chapter 8.

• **Best High-Building Vista Points:**

Odd-looking as it might be, the **Palacio Barolo**, Av. de Mayo 1370 (☎ 11/4383-1065), designed by an architect who took Dante's *Inferno* a little too literally, is finally open to the public for tours so that anyone can see the interesting interior that only office workers were previously privy to. Its tower, which once made it the tallest building in all of South America, provides a sweeping view up and down Avenida de Mayo as well as of the entire city. See p. 143. The **Torre Monumental**, Av. Libertador 49 (☎ 11/4311-0186), better known by its old name, the British Clock Tower, has a fantastic view to the Río de la Plata and up and down Avenida Libertador. So what if the tower represents a country that Argentina has had some arguments with over the years? It's the view that counts now. See p. 149.

• **Best Oddball Museums:** Two modern-day necessities—taxes and toilets—are honored in two different small museums in Buenos Aires. The **Tax Museum**, Av. de Mayo 1317 (☎ 11/4384-0282), contains historical items relating to money, coins, and taxes throughout Argentine history. It is one of only three museums in all the world of this type. See p. 154.

The **Museo del Patrimonio**, Av. Córdoba 1750, museum entrance at Riobamba 750 (☎ 11/6319-1882), in the Aguas Argentinas building, is really about water-works, but it contains what surely must be the largest toilet collection in the world. Kids will have a blast here. See p. 157.

• **Best Museums for Kids:** Its name is **Museo de los Niños (Children's Museum)**, Av. Corrientes 3247 (☎ 11/4861-2325), and this is certainly a great place to bring the young ones. Full of displays on various careers, presented in a fun way, you'll wish you had such a place when you were young. See p. 154.

In the **Museo Participativo de Ciencias**, it's forbidden not to touch. This place (inside the Centro Cultural de Recoleta; ☎ 11/4807-3260) is full of science and other displays that make learning so fun, kids won't know it's good for them too! See p. 155.

• **Best People-Watching:** Pedestrianized **Calle Florida** is not the elegant shopping street it might have been a generation ago, but all kinds of Porteños find their way here, especially at lunchtime. Day and night, musicians, tango dancers, broken-glass walkers, comedians, and the like entertain the crowds along this street. At night **Avenida Santa Fe** offers another interesting array of people, popping into stores, gossiping at sidewalk cafes, and just checking each other out. See p. 163 and 199, respectively.

• **Best Nightlife Street:** Whether you want to eat at a *parrilla* (an Argentine steakhouse), try some nouvelle cuisine, have some drinks, or do some dancing, **Calle Báez** in Las Cañitas is the place to go. This busy street in Palermo has great restaurants like **Novecento**, Báez 199 (☎ 11/4778-1900), **El Estanciero**, Báez 202

(☎ 11/4899-0951), and numerous other choices. Savor the night afterwards over drinks at trendy **Soul Café**, Báez 352 (☎ 11/4776-3905), or dance to hot Latin tunes at **Mambo**, Báez 243 (☎ 11/

4778-0115), until the sun comes up over the Río de la Plata. This street has the most intensely packed nightlife on any 3 blocks of Buenos Aires.

2 The Best Hotel Bets

- **Most Luxurious Hotel Choices:**

The two hotels I've cited here don't just top my list of hotel choices, they top many travel magazine lists as well. The **Alvear Palace Hotel**, Av. Alvear 1891 (☎ 11/4808-2100), is a gilded confection of carved marble and French furniture. It's the ultimate grand hotel experience in Buenos Aires, complete with butler service. See p. 79. The **Four Seasons Hotel**, Posadas 1086–88 (☎ 800/819-5053 in the U.S. and Canada), offers a more subdued form of luxury (elegant without flash), with quiet pampering and a chance to hide away in the hotel's walled garden. See p. 80.

- **Best Historic Hotels:** The **Marriott Plaza Hotel**, Calle Florida 1005 (☎ 888/236-2427 in the U.S.), is the oldest of the grand hotels still operating in Buenos Aires, and its location on Plaza San Martín can't be beat. See p. 67. The **Hotel Castelar** (☎ 11/4383-5000) sits on Avenida de Mayo, once the city's most glamorous street. This hotel, adorned with Italian marbles and bronzes, was once the favorite choice of Lorca and other Spanish writers in the 1930s when Buenos Aires was the intellectual and literary capital of the Spanish-speaking world. See p. 76.

- **Best See-and-Be-Seen Hotel:** The brand-new **Faena**, Martha Salotti 445 (☎ 11/4010-9000), located in the Puerto Madero district, is my see-and-be-seen choice. The hotel was designed

with lots of bars in the lobby and a pool in the front of the hotel so that anyone coming in would know exactly who else was around in the hotel. See p. 63.

- **Best Budget Hotel:** French miracle chain **Hotel Ibis**, Hipólito Yrigoyen 1592 (☎ 11/5300-5555), wins in this category hands down. With clean, efficient service, even though these places are the same the world over, its location overlooking Congreso makes an excellent accommodations choice. All the rooms look the same, to be sure, but with the low price here, you can easily ignore that. See p. 85.

- **Best Hotel Gyms:** The **Marriott Plaza Hotel**, Calle Florida 1005 (☎ 888/236-2427 in the U.S.), has an enormous gym, with more than enough equipment to make sure there's no waiting. See p. 67. The gym in the **Crowne Plaza Pan Americano**, Carlos Pellegrini 551 (☎ 800/227-6963 in the U.S.), has to be seen to be believed. Sitting in a three-story glass box on the building's roof, being here will make you feel like you are floating over Avenida 9 de Julio when at the pool, or especially on the treadmills. See p. 66.

- **Best Hotel Pools:** In the hot Southern Hemisphere summer months (Dec–Mar), any pool will be a welcome treat in Buenos Aires, but two of them really stand out. The pool at the **Crowne Plaza Pan Americano**, Carlos Pellegrini 551 (☎ 800/227-6963 in the U.S.), is a combination

indoor/outdoor pool, and its location on the roof of the hotel gives the impression of swimming over the city and floating on top of Avenida 9 de Julio. See p. 66. The **Four Seasons**, Posadas 1086–1088 (☎ 800/819-5053 in the U.S. and Canada), has the only garden swimming pool in all of Recoleta. Lounging poolside here in the walled garden complex gives the feeling of being in a resort, even in the heart of the city. See p. 80.

• **Best Business Hotel:** With its location away from the noise of the city in Puerto Madero, and having one of the largest convention centers in all of Buenos Aires, the **Hilton Buenos Aires**, Av. Macacha Güemes 351 (☎ 800/445-8667 in the U.S.), is a logical business choice. Their business center, complete with translation services, is also one of the largest you'll find anywhere in the city. See p. 66.

3 The Best Dining & Cafe Bets

• **Best Parrilla:** You probably heard of this place long before coming to Buenos Aires, and **Cabaña Las Lilas**, Alicia Moreau de Justo 516 (☎ 11/4313-1336), deserves every bit of its reputation. It's expensive for sure, running about \$35 for a complete meal, but it's worth it: The cuts of beef are so soft, they almost melt in your mouth. In spite of the price, it's casual too, so come in sneakers and shorts if you want. See p. 96.

• **Best Cafe Experiences:** **Café Tortoni**, Av. de Mayo 825 (☎ 11/4342-4328), might not have the best service in town, but the incredible history and beauty of this cafe more than make up for that. This was and remains Argentina's intellectual coffee spot of choice, and even the culture-seeking tourists don't overwhelm the space. See p. 104. Sit outside at **La Biela**, Av. Quintana 596 (☎ 11/4804-0449), in glamorous Recoleta overlooking the world-famous Recoleta Cemetery. From the view to Iglesia Pilar to the wonderful shade of the gum trees on its sidewalk, this is Buenos Aires at its best. See p. 112.

• **Best Authentic Old Buenos Aires Dining:** Buenos Aires is full of trendy places, but the surefire

bets are where Porteños have eaten for decades. Ham hangs from the rafters and steaks are as thick as the crowds at the Spanish eatery **Plaza Asturias**, Av. de Mayo 1199 (☎ 11/4382-7334), but the staff is so busy you can get hurt trying to find the restroom with all the running around they do bringing food from the kitchen to the tables. See p. 113. For more than 40 years, fish lovers have flocked to **Dora**, Leandro N. Alem 1016 (☎ 11/4311-2891), an unpretentious but high-quality and high-priced spot on Paseo Colón that's worth every penny. See p. 100.

• **Best Seafood:** Argentina has a long coastline, but it has always been the turf, not the surf, that gave its chefs culinary inspiration. There are two places that defy this trend, including, as above, **Dora**, Leandro N. Alem 1016 (☎ 11/4311-2891), the unpretentious seafood spot businesspeople and those in the know have eaten at for 40 years. See p. 100. The other, **Olsen**, in Palermo Viejo at Gorriti 5870 (☎ 11/4776-7677), serves up an interesting twist on seafood, Scandinavian-style, with flavors that are very different from anything on the menu elsewhere in Buenos Aires. See p. 120.

- **Best Cigar Bar:** Argentine culture might not be as macho as it's reputed to be, what with female presidential candidates and powerful first ladies, but that ultimate symbol of masculine domination, the cigar, persists at the **Plaza Bar**, Marriott Plaza Hotel, Calle Florida 1005 (☎ 11/4318-3000). Here, in a streamlined Art Deco setting reminiscent of Rockefeller Center, men and, more recently, women puff away over business talk. See p. 223.
- **Best Italian Restaurant:** With over half of Buenos Aires from Italian immigrant stock, it's hard to go wrong finding good Italian food in this city: Most *parrillas* offer an excellent array of pasta, usually homemade on the premises. The best formal Italian dining experience in the city, however, is **Piegari**, Posadas 1042 (☎ 11/4328-4104), in the Recoleta La Recova area, near the Four Seasons hotel. Their selection of food concentrating on northern Italian cuisine is superb, and they have a stunning array of risottos in particular. See p. 109.
- **Best French Restaurant:** **La Bourgogne**, Av. Alvear 1891 (☎ 11/4805-3857), in the Alvear Palace, is hands down the best French restaurant in Buenos Aires, and it has been the recipient of numerous awards. Yes, it's very formal and very expensive, but what else would you expect from such a place? See p. 110.
- **Best Restaurant for Kids:** **Garbis**, Scalabrini Ortiz at Cerviño (☎ 11/4511-6600), is an Armenian restaurant chain with what one British ex-pat friend of mine loves to call a "jumpee castle" she can bring her kids to. The best one is in Palermo Soho, and adults can eat in peace while the kids entertain themselves on the indoor playground. See p. 122.
- **Best Value Restaurants:** Little-known family-run **Juana M**, Carlos Pellegrini 1535 (☎ 11/4326-0462), a small *parrilla* on the very end of Avenida 9 de Julio in the Recoleta district, wins this distinction for sure, with great meat cuts and an unlimited salad bar, where most meals with drinks hit under the \$5 mark. See p. 112. If you're in Puerto Madero, head straight to **La Bisteca**, Av. Alicia Moreau de Justo 1890 (☎ 11/4514-4999), a chain restaurant with an all-you-can-eat menu offering high-quality cuts of meat along with a generous salad bar. It's a huge space, but the seating arrangements create a sense of intimacy, and at these prices, it can't be beat. See p. 97.