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ARGENTINA / CHILE / PERU



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MARTA, ANTHONY & ZOE LACOUR



Upon our arrival in Buenos Aires, we were blessed with a guide that was both proud and knowledgeable about Argentina and Buenos Aires in particular. Ariana was urbane and very accommodating to our needs as weary travelers. She managed to bring Buenos Aires alive to us through her words and passion. Upon our arrival at The Park Hyatt located on the famous Avenida Alvear in Recoleta, the staff were extremely attentive and saw to it that we were well taken care of from the moment we arrived.

The hotel is actually made-up of two buildings---one being the main high-rise property---The Park Hyatt where we stayed and the other being the *upscale palace*---Palacio Duhau where the band Queen & Paul Rodgers (the elite) were staying while on their South America Tour when we arrived. Our Park Suite overlooking the beautiful landscaped gardens and view of the palace was very chic and modern with an abundance of shimmering hardwood throughout.

Before heading out for our afternoon tour, we took a short scenic walk over to the Four Seasons for lunch at Le Mistral. Le Mistral offering contemporary Mediterranean cuisine, tapas and a desirable antipasto buffet is a great place to get your feet wet in Buenos Aires before touring the city!



After lunch, we made our way to La Recoleta Cemetary, located in the exclusive Recoleta neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Designed by a French engineer, the cemetery was remodeled in 1881 by a renowned Italian architect. **While Eva Peron is the best known person buried in this cemetery it includes graves of some of the most influential and important persons of Argentina's past, including several presidents, scientists, and the very well-heeled.** The cemetery is not your typical North American cemetery with grave sites, mausoleums and grass. **It contains mausoleums exclusively** housing very elaborate marble mausoleums, decorated with statues, in a wide variety of architectural styles.

The entire cemetery is laid out in sections like city blocks, with wide tree-lined main walkways branching into sidewalk off-shoots housing even more mausoleums. Strangely, the facades bear only the date of death and no birth date on them. Another interesting aspect of La Recoleta is the colony of feral cats that reside within the cemetery. Although they can be spotted anytime, they tend to gather in groups of dozens near closing-time, when some locals feed them.

After our tour of La Recoleta, we began a driving tour through the north side of the city. We first witnessed Palermo, the oldest neighborhood in Buenos Aires and came away envious of those privileged enough to live there. Very colonial architecturally and in outward appearance, Palermo oozed a Latin vibe and did not disappoint any of the senses.



Upon leaving Palermo, we were driven to the SoHo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. An absolute people-watching paradise! Here you will find souls from every social status abound. As is typical of any SoHo district worldwide, there is a little bit of everything in SoHo including a taste for life on the fringe. As Argentina is a “coffee culture”, Buenos Aires is lurid with cafes and ideal for taking in the scene at a leisurely pace.



This evening we made our way to Lola’s for dinner---just a short 10 minute walk from the Park Hyatt, located in an exceptional area for gastronomic edification. Although, we found Lola’s food to be average, the staff is eager and courteous to please and locals seem to be plentiful here. This being said, we strongly urge steak & potatoes for dinner your first night in Argentina followed by gelato (ice cream) which you can find just about on any corner and definitely a must!!!

The next morning took us to the southern part of the city. Once we arrived in the city center, we toured by foot, the executive building, the congressional edifice and a monument to Los Desaparecidos (The Disappeared). It is thought that in Argentina, between 1976 and 1983, up to 30,000 people were subjected to forced disappearance under the military junta that was in power.



In an effort to lift our spirits, we walked to Buenos Aires oldest and most renowned Café Tortoni founded in 1858. A tourist destination in and of itself, the line for admittance was exceptionally speedy. The café was quite receptive to those who simply wanted to enter and look around. The café resembles more a museum than a café---the past, in its walls; the present, sitting at its tables looking dignified and scholarly.





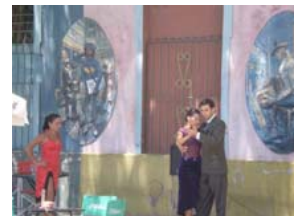
With so much yet to see we were then spirited away to a local flea market in San Telmo_ in order to experience street-level culture and what the local artisans had to offer. Crowded and frenetic, the flea market could easily overwhelm the lone tourist; however, in the hands of a skilled guide, the experience is one that must not be skipped. Here you will find a wide variety of paintings and a chance to speak to many local artists.

Not far from San Telmo, we were taken to a seedier, earthier part of town known as La Boca (The Mouth) and walked along the main street “El Caminito” (little path). It is here that a true sense of Buenos Aires comes alive. Though, not a typical stop on most itineraries, our guide trusted our ability to see beyond outward appearances and the apparent poverty and blight. In her mind, it would be dishonest and less than a full and forthright experience of Buenos Aires. One must take the good with the bad and our opinion of the city was only enhanced by this otherwise, out of bounds experience.



A feast for the eyes many of the buildings in La Boca were a different color than the building adjoining it. More striking still, they were very bright hues of orange, yellow, green or blue. Ariana explained this was so because many of those fortunate to have regular jobs found work in the port and much of the paint they used was excess paint used to paint various parts the ships in the wharves.

It was in La Boca that we encountered our first couple performing the Tango. Ariana took the time to educate us, as she must have done countless times before as to the origins of the Tango. Originating in lower-class districts of Buenos Aires the music is derived from the fusion of various forms of music from Europe. The word Tango seems to have first been used in connection with the dance in the 1890s. Initially, it was just one of the many dances, but it soon became popular throughout society, as theaters and street performers spread it from the suburbs to the working-class slums, which were packed with hundreds of thousands of European immigrants, primarily Italian, Spanish and French.





Sadly, the time had come for us to leave Buenos Aires. Luckily, our next destination was Iguazu, Argentina. No trip to Argentina can be considered complete without a stop by Iguazu Falls, along the border of Brazil. After a brief flight from Buenos Aires we landed in Iguazu and were met by our guide almost immediately. Mary Elise was another contentious guide. Once again, we were struck by her attention to detail and professionalism. We were taken for a brief ride to our hotel, The Sheraton Iguazu Resort & Spa which is the only hotel located within the park itself. The falls are shared by the Iguazu National Park (Argentina) and Iguazu National Park (Brazil). These parks were designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1984 and 1986, respectively. Iguazu, affords wonderful panoramic views via lengthy pedestrian walkways and its shape allows for spectacular vistas. At one point one can stand and be surrounded by 260 degrees of waterfalls. One of the falls (The Garganta del Diabo) has water pouring into it from three sides. Likewise, because Iguazu is split into many relatively small falls, one can view each one a portion at a time. The trails are also wheel-chair friendly.

As one should not forego a trip to Iguazu when in Argentina, likewise one cannot travel to Iguazu Falls without taking in the boat ride. Before we boarded we were assured that we would have ample opportunities for picture taking. At the same time, we were warned of the thorough drenching to come. As promised, after being given the opportunity to take our pictures, our group was driven sideways, ever so slowly to the point where the falling water meets the water below. Not surprisingly, we came away soaked, several times over. Thankfully, the boat crew provided everyone with waterproof bags so as to preserve our valuables.



After a brief saturated slog to our hotel, we readied for an evening in town. Our concierge gladly set us up with a taxi to be at our disposal exclusively for the duration of the evening. It worked wonderfully. We enjoyed a wonderful meal in town, went sight-seeing, did a bit of obligatory shopping and called it a night with the satisfaction that only comes with the knowledge that one has earned a good night's rest. Sheraton was easily up to that task.



Our next stop took us to Santiago, Chile. Our guide met us almost immediately after we got off of the plane and saw us through a seamless transition through immigration and customs and then took us to the Ritz Carlton, Santiago. At first blush, the hotel was misleading. Its exterior was misleading that is. Absolutely fine in every way, its appearance from the outside masked a regal, old-world, almost colonial feeling that absolutely took us in once we entered. Plenty of deep, dark, rich-colored wood with warm, cushy chairs and sofas made for the weary traveler. The staff was exceedingly courteous and welcoming and the room was as comfortable and lush as can be imagined. No to mention, the famous Mexican singer, Luis Miguel, was on tour in South America and yes, staying at the Ritz Carlton!!!



After we freshened up, we met our guide and were driven to the downtown area. The downtown area has many government buildings, both federal and local and the streets were busy, yet not overly crowded, with people going about their day. As opposed to Buenos Aires, Santiago did not have a very colonial appearance or exude such an influence in any measurable fashion. The architecture was markedly cosmopolitan and the people were noticeably European looking. We felt as though we could have been walking in any large city in Spain. We mentioned as much to our guide. She explained to us that Chile is generally more homogenous than Argentina. The people in either capital city for example are decidedly European; however, in Argentina, as one enters less populated areas, indigenous people prevail. In Chile, there is a more contiguous European influence. As it was explained to us, this is so because the Spanish conquest took much longer to complete because the indigenous opposition was fiercer.



Interestingly, Chile is not a coffee-culture, as is Argentina. They are much more tea-centric. However, there is one chain of coffee shops that does prevail above all others. Known unofficially as “café con piernas” or coffee with legs, the wait staff is all female and dressed in almost scandalously high and taut skirts.





We continued our tour and were taken through the shopping district with its modern stores and also through several residential areas for the well-to-do. After this, we were driven to a mountain-top retreat/church. Interesting in that it was both a church for the masses, an open-air, coliseum-styled place of worship and also a place where one could just go and hang out with friends and escape the hustle and bustle of city life below while listening to “Ave Maria”. [\(138/141\)](#)



Little did we know once we departed our retreat in the clouds one of the biggest highlights of our trip was about to begin. Our guide recommended the restaurant [Apero \(152-153\)](#) as a great dinner destination. Once we freshened up and changed, we made our way there via taxi and had perhaps our most memorable evening in South America. The restaurant is particularly note-worthy because it was pleasing to all of the senses. We dined there on what we assumed would be a rather slow Monday night. We appeared to be the only Americans there. The restaurant gradually swelled to capacity and was alive with the energy that comes about only when good company is combined with wonderful staff and extraordinary food. We were waited on by no fewer than six different wait-staff members. As soon as one of them had the slightest inkling we were in need of something, they were there. When they wanted to put a smile on our faces, they were there. They took pictures with us, and made food and wine recommendations that were right on the mark. We laughed together during the live music and dance performances and were thankful we were not one of the unlucky diners chosen to get up and dance. We enjoyed ourselves thoroughly including our bashful nine year-old!



The next morning found us bound for Valparaiso and Vina del Mar. Along the way, were to stop at Veramonte to sample some Chilean wine. It was along the way that our guide explained to us the particulars of Chilean wine. She told us of the Carmenere grape. It is a grape peculiar to Chile and very few other locations but formerly found in France. Carmenère is considered part of the original six red grapes of Bordeaux, France. Today, Chile produces the vast majority of Carmenère wines available today and in smaller quantities in California.



It is near to find Carmenère in France today, as a plague in 1867 nearly destroyed all the vineyards of Europe, such that for many years the grape was presumed extinct. When the vineyards were replanted, growers could not replant Carmenère as it was extremely hard to find and more difficult to grow than other grape varieties common to Bordeaux. Consequently wine growers chose more versatile grapes when re-planting and Carmenère planting was progressively abandoned. Far from being extinct, in recent years the Carmenère grape has thrived in several areas outside of France. Our guide was full of pride as she explained that Chilean growers almost inadvertently preserved the grape variety during the last 150 years. Cuttings of Carmenère were imported by Chilean growers from Bordeaux during the 19th century, where they were frequently confused with Merlot vines. They modeled their wineries after those in France and in the 1850s cuttings from Bordeaux, which included Carmenère grape, were planted in the valleys around Santiago. Thanks to Chile's minimal rainfall during the growing season and the protection of the country's natural boundaries, growers produced healthier crops of Carmenère. Finally, in 1998 The Chilean Department of Agriculture officially recognized Carmenere as a distinct variety.

Not long after our tutorial was finished we arrived in Veramonte where we indulged ourselves in a sampling of some of the finest wines Chile has to offer. We could not; however, manage to fend off indulgent purchases of some local food items--including a superb avocado oil native to Chile.



Once we set off for Valparaiso our guide prefaced our arrival by explaining its uniqueness, mixing it with a little history. She told us of Valparaiso's golden age from the middle of the 19th century until the early 20th century during which time the city received large numbers of immigrants, primarily from Europe. The largest immigrant communities came from England, Germany, and Italy, each cultivating their own little neighborhood within the hillside. During the second half of the twentieth century however; Valparaíso, experienced a great decline, as wealthy families de-gentrified the historic quarter and relocated to Santiago or nearby Viña del Mar. Afterward, much of the city's unique heritage had been lost and many Chileans had given up on the city. Luckily, a grass roots preservation movement blossomed in Valparaíso taking advantage of the fact that the city continues to be one of that country's most





important seaports and an increasingly vital cultural center for the entire Pacific Southwest. Valparaiso continues to re-emerge.

As our lesson neared its close and we approached the city one could hardly mistake it for its brilliance from afar. The hillsides before us were awash in a sea of multi-colored homes. It must be mentioned; however, that upon entering the city proper, that charm we saw at a distance did not prepare us for the gritty hustle-bustle we witnessed as we made our way toward the hillside. Far from being dirty or depressed, the city had a very urban, raw, less gentele aspect to it that the sun-splashed hillside prepared us for. Nevertheless, it was a city with inhabitants going about their business. That, in and of itself, is charming.



As we made our way toward the hills we drove through a labyrinth of streets and past cobblestone alleyways. Upon cresting one of the larger hills we left our van and walked the streets and alleyways, up and down, to and fro, stopping at brief intervals along the way long enough to take in the street side artisans and their wares. The visual image of all of this was reminiscent of John Steinbeck's classic "Cannery Row" in which the location was a character in the book.

As we tired of walking we decided to take a "funicular" (small cable car) to the bottom of the hill and back to sea level. With so much to consume, it is easy to see why Valparaiso is homed to some nine universities. Indeed, Valparaíso was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO based upon its improvised urban design and unique architecture. The official UNESCO declaration also places exceptional emphasis on Valparaíso's unique "intangible heritage," which includes the city's ethnic heritage as seen through the traditions and life styles of Valparaíso's immigrant community.

Next, we drove a short distance to Vina del Mar [\(195/196/199\)](#)(Vineyard of the Sea). This is a popular tourist (esp. for the Spanish rich & famous) spot and beach destination. One of its key attractions is the yearly Spanish music festival, Festival Internacional del la Cancion de Vina del Mar (Vina del Mar International Song Festival) which is televised all over the world and is considered the most important musical event in Latin America.



*We enjoyed lunch along the water at the excellent 'Delicias del Mar' seafood restaurant in Reñaca. The restaurant is one of the best bets in town for fresh fish and a recent visit by **Leonardo Di Caprio** had them baptize a dish in honor of him -- sea bass steamed with crab, mussels, shrimp, and white wine -- but what the restaurant is really known for is its paella. This is definitely a wonderful restaurant with superb food and an ever pleasing staff!*



As much as we detested the idea of leaving Chile, we were equally excited to be on our way to Peru. Once again, our guide saw to it that our transition



through the Lima airport went seamlessly. As had become the norm, our guide was superlative barely able to contain her enthusiasm she was a fountain of learning and very appreciative of questions. She dropped us off at the JW Marriott in the Miraflores district of Lima. An ideal location, the JW Marriott rests in front of sky-high cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We were told by the hotel staff that the rooms featured new bedding from Marriott with designer duvets and fluffier pillows. The Five Star gourmet restaurant at the Marriott offers a wide variety of options including an amazing buffet to satisfy any American craving!



Upon beginning our first excursion in Lima, our guide thought it necessary (and we soon found out why) to explain the frenetic driving of the locals. Hair-raising---perhaps the most apt description. There was scant attention paid to even the most basic of driving rules or courtesies. That said, one has to realize that if all of the drivers understand to expect the unexpected certain logic emerges. In a city where the taxi drivers are all self-employed, I suppose this makes sense.



Once we left the hotel it didn't take long before our guide drew our attention to Huaca Pucllana. Also located in the Miraflores district, Huaca Pucllana was an ancient ceremonial and administrative center run by the Lima culture (400 AD), which controlled the Lima Valley. They are pre-Inca pyramids of small handmade, sun-dried adobe bricks approximately 60 feet high. Sometimes, events or musical shows take place there. You can also find a site museum that exhibits pieces found in the excavations. The Pucllana Historical Park featured an on-site museum and areas for scientists to perform their research, conservation and restoration.



What I found hard to grasp was the fact that there, in the middle of a city of over 8 million, was a living breathing open air artifact, with digging and excavation still ongoing. In the midst of this, scores of Peruvians go about their existence around this amazing ancient site. The site is a relatively new find and opened to the public in 1984. The site was hidden for centuries beneath a cemetery dedicated to the wealthy of the Wari Empire and discovered by accident. At one point, it stretched for almost eight miles. Today pyramids are still being found.

In a city of such ancient origins, our time was filled tours of several of its museums. Our favorite was the National Archaeology Museum which is a must see for history aficionados. It provided an



overview of the history of the region, mostly before the arrival of the Spanish and oversees one of the largest collections of pre-Hispanic art and relics in the world. While we were there we were able to observe exceptionally well-preserved mummies, an enormous carved stone that once resided at Chavín de Huántar, a major pre-Columbian site. It is carved with snakes, animals and gods. The building that houses the museum is also beautiful and historic and was included in the tour. As not all of the exhibits are labeled in English, our guide was helpful in translating.

Our guide also made time for us to visit the Lima Cathedral in the heart of the city. The first stone of the cathedral was laid by Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador who defeated the Inca. Ironically, Pizarro would be laid to rest in the same cathedral less than ten years later. There are 15 smaller chapels within the larger cathedral structure, each of which is dedicated to a different saint or religious figure. The cathedral is famous for the ornately carved choir stalls and several impressive paintings. There is a museum which contains sacred items and relics as well as a collection of religious paintings, mostly from the colonial era.

As brief as it was, we had to prepare ourselves for what we considered the pearl of our trip-Cusco and Machu Picchu. We first flew into the tiny Cusco airport and upon arrival you immediately sensed this was going to be the most memorable part of the trip! Yes!!! Shangri-La! No more big cities!!! We luxuriated at Hotel Monasterio, voted best Hotel in South America by Conde Naste Traveler. Hotel Monasterio is an Orient-Express Luxury Hotel, and makes for the perfect jumping off point from which to discover Cusco and the ancient ruins at Machu Picchu. We were at approximately 6,000 feet above sea level. The hotel, originally a monastery, was originally built in 1595 and upon restoration in 1692, the beautiful Chapel was added. It is decorated in the indigenous Baroque style with gold-plated picture frames and truly outstanding paintings by the best artists of the Cusquenian Art School. First remodeled into a hotel in 1965, in 1999, Orient-Express Hotels, Trains & Cruises took over the management of the renamed Hotel Monasterio. The Hotel remains a national historical landmark, protected by the National Institute of Culture and has retained its characteristics and charm. It is a splendid model of the colonial Renaissance style, consisting of three sections in different levels. The heart of the Hotel is the central courtyard with its soft fountain and 300-year old Cedar tree surrounded by gardens and the famous stone cloisters. As an added touch for those rendered weak in the knees by altitude, the hotel offers to have oxygen pumped into your room for a more satisfying transition from sea-level.





Unfortunately, after check-in, we made haste and readied for our first tour in Cusco. Wisely, our guide chose for us the ruins walled Inca complex of Sacsayhuamán or Saksaq Waman and an additional 3,000 feet above sea level. Some believe the magnificent stone walls were a form of fortification, while others disagree. There is still mystery surrounding how the massive stone walls were constructed. The structure is built in such a way that a single piece of paper will not fit between many of the stones. This precision, combined with the rounded corners of the limestone blocks, the variety of their interlocking shapes, and the way the walls lean inward, is thought to have helped the ruins survive devastating earthquakes in Cusco. Sacsayhuamán is also noted for an extensive system of underground passages which connect the fortress to other Inca ruins within Cusco.



Our tours of ruins, temples and several exquisite churches and mansions made Cuzco a memorable destination, full of history and culture with its winding, cobbled streets transport visitors through its rich and beautiful past. One does not feel rushed in Cusco. You feel as if you've travelled back in time---a sense of peace.

The very next day, after our arrival, we were treated to the wonders of travel by rail. For our ride to Machu Picchu we delighted in our time on the Vistadome. Undoubtedly the most spectacular way to tour and travel in Peru, the Vistadome takes you through scenery of outstanding beauty and to places almost inaccessible by any other means. Its glass-topped cars made for wonderful viewing of the surrounding countryside.

Once we arrived in Machu Picchu, our guide (who traveled with us for convenience sake) [295-6](tel:295-6) escorted us to our lodging destination-the boutique hotel Inkaterra. Described as an Andean Garden of Eden waterfalls and streams gently cascade through acres of orchids. Countless hummingbirds frolic in this private cloud forest (not rain forest) paradise. As unique as Hotel Monasterio was, no less unique was our casita at Inkaterra. With its whitewashed exterior, pueblo roof made of terra cotta tile, our stand-alone casita had a pleasant medieval feel to it with its stone floor and the fireplace crackling. Our casita offered a privileged space for retreat at the very foot of Machu Picchu, with thick alpaca blankets and handmade wool coverlets. The spa-style bathrooms made for an authentic Andean ambience of barefoot luxury. Accommodations ranged from the opulent Villas Inkaterra, with private terraces and plunge pools, plus round-the-clock butler service; to the more intimate lodges that provide a perfect sanctuary for simple relaxation. Had it not been for the ruins of Machu Picchu that awaited us, we might never have left.



As we knew we should, we dutifully struck out for the ruins of Machu Picchu which was a relatively short bus ride up the mountain adjoining our hotel. Built around 1460 AD, at the height of the Inca Empire, it was abandoned less than 100 years later. It is likely that most of its inhabitants were wiped out by small pox before the Spanish conquistadores arrived in the area and there is no record of the Spanish having known of the remote city. Research has convinced most archaeologists that Machu Picchu was an estate of an Inca emperor. Over the centuries, the surrounding jungle grew over much



of the site, and few knew of its existence until its discovery in 1911 by Hiram Bingham an American scholar. He was led there by local residents of Cusco who frequented the site, which was occupied by a small number of natives of a culture that succeeded that of the Incas. Interestingly, our guide told us these people were living in Machu Picchu, in the original Inca infrastructure. Although most of the original inhabitants had died within a century of the city's construction, a small number of families survived so by the time the site was 'discovered' in 1911, people still were living on the site and many mummies were discovered as well.



The site received significant publicity after the National Geographic devoted their entire April 1913 issue to Machu Picchu. An area of 325.92 square kilometers surrounding Machu Picchu was declared a "Historical Sanctuary" of Peru in 1981. Machu Picchu was also designated as a World Heritage Site in 1983 when it was described as "an absolute masterpiece of architecture and a unique testimony to the Inca civilization". Most recently, in 2007, Machu Picchu was voted as one of New Open World Corporation's New Seven Wonders of the World.

Our journey is nearing an end but in First Class Luxury. Today we travel back to Cusco via rail but this time on the luxurious Hiram Bingham! The Hiram Bingham train is the most luxurious way to journey between Cusco and Machu Picchu. The train consists of two Dining Cars, an Observation Bar Car and a Kitchen Car, and can carry up to 84 passengers. The moment we took-off....the festivities started in the Observation Bar Car with non-stop live entertainment (music). The white table cloth, fine china, 3 course-meals, fine wine choices and continuous service was superb! Simply indescribable!!!



Our journey has now come to an end but our hearts are full!!! We look forward to sharing our amazing journey with you and hope that one day too you may experience this incredible part of the world! We have truly grown spiritually from this trip of a lifetime to South America and are better for it!

~Marta, Tony & Zoe LaCour