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Expatriate community grows in Buenos Aires

The attraction of culture and cheap rent



Buenos Aires' dazzling nightlife, with its seemingly endless offer of bars and restaurants scattered from Palermo Viejo to San Telmo, adds to the allure that brings thousands of foreigners to live beside the River Plate.

Meghan Curry starts her day with a walk to the river. The former real estate agent from Denver, who is 26, holds hands with her fiancé, Patricio de Vasconcellos, 31, a wavy-haired Argentine with dark eyes, as they gaze over the coffee-colored waters of the Río de la Plata. Around midday, when De Vasconcellos heads to work at the wine shop where the two met a year ago, Curry settles into her two-bedroom apartment to work on her travel memoir and a collection of poetry. Then she might nap or head downtown for *café con leche* with friends at one of the city's thousands of outdoor cafes. Later, much later, it's time for a slow dinner on Buenos Aires time, where many restaurants don't open until 10pm.

"This," said Curry, "I could never do if I had to earn more than 6,000 dollars a year."

Her apartment rents for 250 dollars a month. An espresso costs about 65 cents. A restaurant dinner — appetizers, thick steaks and wine — costs about 25 for two. Stylish leather handbags from designer boutiques go for 20 dollars. Tickets for first-run US movies are about 3.50 dollars.

Sound good? It did to Curry, who came to the city known as BA in February 2005, intending to stay for a few months and learn Spanish. Once in Argentina, she fell in love with the low-stress lifestyle and with De Vasconcellos, and now plans to stay indefinitely.

Curry is one of thousands of US citizens and others who have given up lives in places like Washington, Los Angeles and London in the last three years — some permanently, some temporarily. Lured by BA's high culture at low prices, this new crop of expatriates aims to pursue dream versions of themselves in the Argentine capital.

"Prague was the place in the early 1990s," said Margaret Malewski, author of the 2005 guide *GenXpat: The Young Professional's Guide to Making a Successful Life Abroad*. "BA is the hot spot now."

US retirees who choose to settle outside the US are still heading to established locales like Costa Rica and San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, and there's a solid crop of baby boomers retreating to former Eastern Bloc countries like Bulgaria and Slovakia. But right now, the under-50 set is flocking to BA, said Roger Gallo, publisher of the expatriate Web site Escapeartist.com.

"It's a fairly sophisticated city

in which people from New York, San Francisco and other large cities can find a culture with which they can identify," Gallo said. "It's got one of the great opera houses in the world, acceptable jazz, tango. It has some good restaurants and good wine."

The rush started after January 2002 with the collapse of the Argentine peso, which in 2001 was one to one with the US dollar and is now roughly three to one. The once-expensive city became one of the world's great bargains for visitors. Add to that BA's other basic attractions: pleasant weather, an

efficient mass transit system, relatively low crime and a daily English-language newspaper, the *Buenos Aires Herald*, that lists everything from AA meetings to tryouts for the choir of the Danish Church.

According to the US Embassy, 23,000 US citizens with addresses in BA are currently registered with the embassy. But not all are finding what they came for. Some expats are thriving despite challenges, but others looking to leave their troubles back home have found new ones here.

NEW BOHEMIA

In Prague, the typical expat, circa 1991, might have been a 23-year-old chain smoker trying to write the next *The Sun Also Rises*. But there is no typical BA expat in 2006. The scene is too diverse.

First, there are writers of all ages. Brie Austin, 49, of Raritan, New Jersey, arrived in 2002 to help ghostwrite a book. Within three days, he decided BA was his new home.

"The architecture struck me first," he said. "It was like Europe." Then, he said, it was easy to succumb to the rhythm of the city, the sounds, dinner at 10pm,

the music, "the affectionate way of the people."

He moved here in April 2004. Now he spends his evenings socializing in Plaza Cortázar, the cafe-dotted epicentre of the international scene in the Palermo Viejo neighbourhood, and his days maintaining a Web site and writing a novel.

Some expats are using the low cost of living to break into the cultural scene at a distance from their home countries, where life as an artist is less affordable. Hank Wechgelaar, 64, moved here in December after a career as a sub-

stance abuse counsellor in London. Now he spends his days painting small canvases with rural Latin American scenes and exhibits them in a London gallery. "The blue sky, the brightness, the spontaneity of the people," said Wechgelaar. "It all translates into colours for me."

There are also business and entertainment world burnouts from stress centres all over the Northern Hemisphere. Terry Walshe, 37, was toiling in London as a music video director when a friend invited him along on a vacation to BA for two weeks. He loved the climate ("It's not tropical hot like Brazil. More like Los Angeles") and the affordability. "I went back to London for a week, rented my flat and came back here." Now he and another Brit plan to open a restaurant and nightclub in the historic San Telmo district.

Then there are all the tango-mad women, like Laura Chummers, 30, a professional dancer from San Diego who arrived in 2002 intending to study the dance for three months. She liked the place so much she came back a month later to stay. In 2003 she started a company, Tanguera Tours, that offers itineraries for women from the US who want to spend their vacations swirling around romantically lit milongas, or tango halls.

While some expats in BA are the traditional types working for multinational corporations, the artsy types usually arrive with money to

live on. Others work freelance jobs for US companies as writers or salespeople. And some look for work once here, which can be a cumbersome process. People from the US who want to work legally must first secure a job offer. Then the company must obtain a work permit. The potential employee must then visit a consulate office in the US for a work visa.

Chummers, who said she paid 30,000 dollars for a prewar, two-bedroom apartment with high ceilings and five balconies in the downtown district of Balvanera, doesn't know how long she will

stay. She said she has noticed a big increase in the number of expats in the last two years. "It has doubled," she said.

DINNER AT 11PM

Buenos Aires has one of the world's most thriving late-night scenes. An evening out usually starts around 11pm with steaks, sausages and wine at a local *parilla* (grill). Then a group will hop in a taxi (which costs less than four dollar to pretty much anywhere) and head to a spot like Opera Bay, a huge waterfront dance club where things get going around 2am or 3am. At five or six o'clock, the group will be wide-eyed and ready for a snack of *medialunas* (sweet croissants) and coffee before heading home.

It can be thrilling for newcomers to get swept up in the social whirl, but it can also leave them wondering when the heck everyone actually sleeps.

One answer: most apartments have roll-down, black-out shutters. On weekend mornings, when locals catch up on their sleep, the city is dead quiet. There is no traditional after-lunch siesta, but residents generally take naps in the early evening before going out. And they drink a lot of espresso.

Indeed, *Porteños* make some interesting lifestyle choices. The city has huge parks, but busy roads run through them, polluting the air. Many charming prewar buildings are being torn down because the

locals prefer the new square towers. City streets are narrow, buses thunderous. Soccer matches are broadcast virtually 24 hours a day, and phalanxes of police in body armour sometimes close major roads to escort rowdy fans from stadiums.

Gallo, of *Escapeartist.com*, predicts that most people from the US testing out BA will find the culture too "abbreviated" to stay forever. "It's a fun place to get away, but there's just not enough there."

Curry, for instance, has found it difficult to relate to girlfriends in a city that singlemindedly worships a tall, thin ideal of beauty. "It's hard to meet local women who share your interest in things that aren't fashion-or bulimia-related," she said.

There are other frustrations, like unorthodox business practices. Robert Shive, 60, who left a career as a money manager in Philadelphia in 2004, helps English-speaking foreigners buy real estate. They need help, he said, because real estate transactions in BA require the buyer to appear at the closing with the full purchase price in US cash. It is not easy, he said, to get fifty or a hundred thousand dollars in 100-dollar bills to a conference table in a foreign country.

Still, "apartment sales to foreigners are way up," he said. Most of his buyers are baby boomer retirees looking to spend the US winter here, and some are younger expats like Chummers, he said.

EXPAT SOCIAL SCENE

On a recent Friday, the Young Expatriates Society of Buenos Aires held its monthly gathering at an art gallery in Palermo Viejo. The society, which was founded in 2004, has about 3,000 members, roughly 2,000 of them from the US. The Estudio Rich gallery was filled with young and youngish foreigners enjoying a smooth, deep-tasting Argentine *Tempranillo* wine.

"My life here is completely different than in the US," said former Washingtonian Antoinette Ford, who declined to reveal her age. "I take art classes, ride horses." She said she had left a 100-hour-a-week job as an architect to move here two years ago. Now she rents out her house in Washington and works as a freelance writer. But while she hopes to stay here permanently and support herself with her writing, she has had to face the reality that even BA's low prices can be too steep for a budding freelancer: She recently interviewed for a job at an architecture firm to fill out her income.

Also at the gallery was Grant Dull, 29, a San Antonio native who had become entranced by Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges in college and moved to BA for a few months after graduation. Later, after a few years outside Argentina, he came back and, with a friend, launched *Whats Up Buenos Aires* (<http://www.whatsupba.com/>) in 2004. The Web site, with 15,000 to 20,000 visitors a month, lists nightly events and has a rotating cast of a dozen expat contributors writing about life and culture in BA. Dull also works with two local bands, showing videos during performances.

Expats and the charm of Buenos Aires

Continued from Page 4

In the US, his last job was in a turn-out-the-vote campaign. In BA, he said, life is more fulfilling. "I've been able to become active in the cultural scene on an artistic level."

Some Argentines resent the influx of the sort of foreigners who care only about the inexpensiveness of the country and not its culture.

"They are living here because it's cheap," said Andrea Roiter, an accountant who was at the gallery event trying to recruit foreigners to join a weekly English-language conversation group with Argentines. "They are not making business investments that can help the economy grow." The devaluation of the peso caused many middle-class Argentines to struggle, with imports such as computers and cars becoming three times more expensive.

But recent signs show the economy picking up speed. In 2005, it grew at 9.1 percent, the government reported, beating projections to reach the highest rate of growth in 13 years. Most economists believe that the government will continue to intervene to keep the

exchange rate at three to one with the dollar. However, recent rises in the prices of beef and other commodities mean that inflation could be taking hold. An unwavering exchange rate combined with a peso that buys less would make the country less of a bargain for expats.

But for now, the expats are rolling in. ByT Argentina, a real estate agency specializing in renting BA apartments to foreigners over the Internet, offered 200 apartments in 2001, according to co-owner Mariana Travacio. This month the company, which now has dozens of competitors, lists 900 apartments, and almost all of them are occupied — many for months, Travacio said.

LATIN LOVE

"I had two visitors in my first three years here. Now I have two a week," said Marina Palmer, 36, the unofficial godmother of the BA expat scene, thanks to her 2005 memoir, *Kiss & Tango: Looking for Love in Buenos Aires*. The book chronicles how Palmer, a former advertising executive at Young & Rubicam, left her soul-sapping career in New York in 1999 to pursue a career as a

tango dancer — and engage in steamy romances.

Love is in the air here. Nowhere in the world do people make out in public more. Kissing couples are everywhere.

Kimberly Daniels, 37, a freelance director of television commercials who moved recently from Venice Beach, Calif., said that when she told friends she was relocating to Buenos Aires, they joked that she would end up with "an Argentine polo player."

At a rooftop barbecue at an expat's home in Palermo Viejo, the slender blonde said she was having some luck on the singles scene. "It's nice to be a foreigner as a female," she said. "Suddenly you're exotic."

But she said there have been some logistical nightmares — getting a landlord to fix her air conditioning, and dealing with a cell phone company. No matter how wonderful life is in BA, there are drawbacks.

Common complaints are noisy traffic, a lack of screens on windows despite plenty of mosquitoes, a lack of respect for business deadlines and a dearth of good breakfast joints. (Argentines prefer

sweet pastries and espresso to bacon, eggs and toast.) It's enough to make some expats yearn for home. Curry became so homesick for her parents and for "a good bloody mary and a nice omelet" that she went back to Colorado in September to figure out a way to bring her fiancé to the States. After three months, she found that she had slipped into her old work patterns of long hours and no writing time.

Curry decided BA was for her and went back, planning to stay at least another year and a half. She figured she could earn the \$6,000 a year she needs to live here by collecting referral fees for sending former clients to other real estate agents in Colorado.

Having learned fluent Spanish by avoiding English speakers during her first eight-month stint, she's living differently this time, courting expat friends and bringing a little bit of the US to South America.

"Now I cook a lot of things I didn't eat much in the US," Curry said, standing in her apartment in BA's outlying Núñez neighborhood. "Like meat loaf and mashed potatoes and apple pie."