

6-weeks in Buenos Aires, or “How I learned to love Brazilians” « Hoehn’s Musings

<http://charliehoehn.com/2010/11/23/6-weeks-in-buenos-aires-or-how-i-learned-to-love-brazilians/>

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[Note: This post is a monster. If you'd rather print it out, you can [download the PDF.](#)]

Two months ago, I relocated to Buenos Aires. I'd been wanting to take a break from the States for a long time, had met my travel budgetary goal months prior, and all of my work could be done remotely. The stage was set. I bought a RT ticket to depart on September 15th, with a December 12th return date. But... I actually ended up writing this post from Denver and San Francisco, as I had to come back six weeks early for the upcoming book launch. Some of this stuff just needs to be done from within the U.S.

While I came back quite a bit earlier than anticipated, I still returned with six weeks-worth of cultural observations and fun stories. This post contains the experiences that I think you all will find to be the most entertaining. There are no marketing musings to be found here; just a self-indulgent post with some fun travel tales.

And Brazilian girls. Lots of Brazilian girls.

Enjoy.

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10 Random Observations from B.A.

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(1) If you're trying to practice Spanish, a lot of Argentines will notice your accent / poor pronunciation and start speaking back to you in their broken English. They think they're doing you a favor by speaking in your native language, but they're actually handicapping your ability to learn. Ironically, it's your English that actually gets worse as a result of these interactions, as you're constantly having to dumb it down so it makes sense to them. The best way to counter this, which I discovered way too late, is to reply back in rapid, slang-riddled English. Kind of like [the jive conversation in Airplane!](#) Basically, you need to confuse them so they revert back to Spanish out of necessity. Then you can proceed.

(2) You can order delivery from damn near every restaurant in BA (aside from the high end ones). Even Burger King delivers. A cool site you can use to get food delivered to your door is [Buenos Aires Delivery](#). It's a truly fantastic service for English and Spanish speakers, and is run by its creators out of San Francisco.

(3) Need to get around the city but don't want to keep paying for cab rides? Use [this map](#), which will tell you all the different public transportation routes you can take to get from A to B. This map is actually better than Google Maps, for Buenos Aires anyways.

(4) I checked out a bunch of backpacker hostels around the city, and only a couple are worth mentioning: (a) If you're young, single, and wanting to meet fun people your age, go to [Milhouse on Hipolito Yrigoyen](#). Constant partying (literally every night), plenty of good people, and lots of cute girls. There's another Milhouse on Avenida de Mayo but it's not as good. (b) If you need a nice hostel that's quiet and will help you relax, check out [Portal del Sur](#) just down the street. Gorgeous place that feels like a home. (Thanks to [Maneesh](#) for the recommendation).

(5) If you're looking to rent an apartment, get one in Palermo Hollywood or Palermo Soho. Lots of awesome restaurants nearby and really fun nightlife. I do not recommend getting a place in Congreso, as you will get very bored very quickly. Recoleta is pretty nice, but it's for an older crowd with more money. There are other parts of the city that are legit, but I think Palermo is the best bang for your buck. Use [this site](#) to find flats with roommates, or [this site](#) to find apartments if you want to live alone. [This site](#) also has great prices, but appears to only work when you're in Argentina.

(6) Two touristy restaurants that are worth it: [La Cabrera](#) in Palermo, and [El Desnivel](#) in San Telmo. Order any of the enormous steaks at the former, and get bife de lomo pimienta at the latter. Great steaks for \$12 to \$20.

(7) On a related note: if you're a vegetarian, do not go to Buenos Aires. You will fail. There's fantastic beef everywhere you go – literally some of the best cuts in the world – and very few restaurants have decent vegetables. A Peruvian girl friend of mine was a vegan before going to BA, and she quit after a week and a half of eating house salads. I'm not a vegetarian, but having access to quality vegetables was one of the things I was looking most forward to upon returning to the States. There was one week where I went to four different restaurants and ordered a side of espinaca (spinach) from each of their menus. On all four occasions, the waiter would return to the table minutes later, and say they didn't have spinach. This was not a coincidence. Vegetables just aren't as commonly served. Expect to eat plenty of bread and meat.

(8) **Nightclubs:** I'm a firm believer that you can always have fun, even if a place is terrible, if you're with good company. You can also have a terrible time, even at the best place in the world, if you're with a lame group of people. You shouldn't worry as much about where you're going, but rather who you're with and whether they're on the same energy plane as you. Having said that, the nightlife in Buenos Aires is pretty sweet. Even though I never go to clubs in the States, there are a couple clubs that are worth checking out (and a few you should avoid):

- Crobar = Recommended. I had a blast every time I went there. It's a huge place, the music is fun, there are tons of people, and it's an overall good vibe.

- Asia de Cuba = Worth seeing once. A really nice club set on a river, but it's pretty small and they charge crack prices for drinks. More of an upscale crowd, which isn't really my

thing, meng.

- Pacha = NOT recommended. This is apparently a very famous club all around the world. Well, the one in BA sucks. The music is intolerably trance-y, there are tons of guys wearing sunglasses, and it's a dude-fest. Skip.

- Jet = I heard so many great things that I have to mention it. Right down the street from Pacha, Jet is supposedly awesome. I didn't get a chance to check it out, but all of my friends gave it the unanimous thumbs up.

- Servino = Imagine only listening to bass music – not drums, just bass – for two hours straight. Pretty awful, right? Now surround yourself with 80 people who are dancing to it on acid.

(9) This next observation is worth mentioning because it's a hilariously accurate stereotype: Every young Australian guy I met who was traveling through South America either knew where to get cocaine, was currently holding, or was doing it on the reg. All of them raved about the book "[Marching Powder](#)" and planned on visiting the infamous prison in Bolivia, where guards give you a tour of the jail and allow you to purchase cocaine from one of the prisoners. Now, I'm not saying that all Aussie guys are rabid cokeheads. In fact, the majority of them were a lot of fun to drink with and very cool people. But it was clear that doing coke was a big priority for them while they were in South America.

(10) My favorite thing about Argentina, and I suppose South America in general, is how affectionate people are towards each other. You don't shake hands – you embrace and give a quick peck on the cheek. You don't hide Public Displays of Affection – they're completely acceptable. I dig this, and feel that it's a much healthier vibe. Generally speaking, I think the US is a pretty sexually repressed country. South Americans do not hesitate to touch or kiss each other, and they lack any feeling of awkwardness about it.

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Ah, Brazilian girls

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You know how your money goes further in some countries? Well, so does your ability to attract the opposite sex. I knew this intuitively, but had never actually experienced it. Prior to Argentina, my only true international experience had been four months studying abroad in New Zealand. While I'd had a great time there, I never met a Kiwi girl that I'd want to bring home to introduce to my family and friends.

The dynamic was completely different in Buenos Aires, where I met tons of girls from all over South America: Peru, Colombia, Paraguay, Argentina, and my personal favorite... Brazil. I'm only going to talk about the latter, as I spent significantly more time with them than all the others.

The first thing you should know about Brazilian girls is that they are very quick to jump down your throat. I've seen guys walk up to them and be passionately making out within 30 seconds of meeting, to the extent that it looks like they're going to rip each other's clothes off right in front of you. This is not an exaggeration.

I say this wearily now, almost jaded by the fact. But there was a brief period when I could barely comprehend it. Here's how I first made the discovery:

About a week after arriving in Buenos Aires, I went to Crobar with two Brazilian girls I'd met earlier that night. We were walking through the crowd towards the bar, when I noticed a random Argentine girl making eye contact with me from about 10 feet away. Because I'm a weirdo, I always have to lock eye contact with people who do this to me until they look down (submission, baby!) But as I walked past, this girl did not break. She just kept staring. Filled with shame for having been bested by a Porteña, I broke eye contact and continued to walk with my Brazilian amigas (normally I would have stopped and talked to the girl, but my Spanish was nonexistent). One of the Brazilian girls turned back to me:

Her: "She liked you."

Me: "I think so. That was kind of intense."

Her: "You should have walked up and kissed her."

Me: "... Uhh, I think you're forgetting that I don't speak Spanish."

Her: "That does not matter."

Me: "... As much as I enjoy the taste of pepper spray, I'm pretty sure I'd need to lead up a bit before kissing a complete stranger."

Her: [Confused look, shrug]

We stepped up to the bar, got in line, and another random Brazilian girl walked up to us a minute later. What followed was our EXACT interaction, verbatim:

Random: "Hola! De donde eres?"

Me: "Soy de Colorado."

Random: "Ah, Colorado!" [Smile, lunge to make out]

Apparently, that's all the lead up you need.

It was the first time I had experienced this social norm of making-out-before-talking. I was so taken aback by it that I couldn't help but start laughing after a few seconds. Naturally, the girl swiftly ran off, as she thought I was laughing at her.

When I asked my Brazilian guy friend the next day what the deal was, he explained it as such: “Why would they want to make small talk in a club? There’s plenty of time for that later on... It’s not uncommon in Brazil to kiss five girls in one night.”

Brilliant. The Brazilian girls operated with the American guys’ mentality! I remember thinking that if Neil Strauss had grown up in Brazil, his best-selling book “[The Game](#)” would have never been written. This theory crystallized in my brain as “fact” later that week...

I had just met two very cute Brazilian girls in a loud bar. When presented with similar situations in the States, I’d often speak with the less attractive of the two first, while making the other girl wait. It’s a strange counter-intuitive step in the dance, but it helps more often than not. So after a minute or so of this, I went to talk to the other Brazilian. She politely introduced herself, then said, “You like my friend?” I shrugged, and said “Sure,” thinking she was just making polite conversation. Her response: “You need to kiss her then.” I leaned back with a confused look. She nodded assuredly and gestured for me to make the move. Lesson: There’s not as much need for strategically sequenced conversations or all the other mind-gaming nonsense with Brazilian girls. If you see a girl you like, be direct and go for it.

This “Cut to the chase” mentality was not reserved to the girls; Brazilian guys were just as bad, if not worse, in many instances. This one time, I’d been sitting in the hostel lobby working on my computer, when a Brazilian guy approached a couple of blond Aussie girls. Immediately after introducing himself, he pleaded them to kiss each other. I found this amusing, as he made no segue into the request. He also said it with a fairly serious delivery, clearly expecting them to comply. When they resisted, he purposefully moved in to kiss the taller one. She turned him down as he was reaching to grab her face. He tried and failed two more times, then finally accepted defeat. I looked down at my cell phone. It was 1:00pm. Good lord.

Witnessing this aggressive behavior from Brazilians was pretty great, but what made it so much fun were three other ingredients, the first being a well-known stereotype. (1) Brazilian girls are, in many cases, extremely good-looking. My attraction to nearly all of them ranged between “Aww she’s adorable” to “Stunning... gorgeous... most attractive girl I’ve ever seen.” (2) They’re really sweet and friendly. This was what made it lethal for me; a beautiful girl who’s also genuinely sweet is my Achilles’ heel. In the six weeks I was down there, I never had an interaction with a Brazilian girl where I thought, “Man, she’s kind of a bitch” (comparatively speaking, there were plenty of Argentine, Aussie, American and English girls who repeatedly triggered that judgment). Perhaps I was wearing rose-colored lenses around Brazilians, but they were all (even the guys) very warm, happy, and fun to be around. (3) Brazilian girls REALLY like guys with non-brown eyes and non-black hair. Having green eyes has never helped me in the States. Ever. It’s just not a big deal – they’re common. But for Brazilians, green and blue eyes are very rare, and therefore remarkable.

The beauty of this equation can't be fully appreciated until you compare it with home.

Now, Colorado girls are very down-to-earth and genuinely good people, and I say this with 100% sincerity. I don't dislike them at all. It's just very rare to come across a girl in my home state whom I have a strong primal attraction towards. There aren't a whole lot of them, and the scarcity can be exhausting.

Compared with Brazilians: high concentration of stunning girls with warm/friendly personalities, and when there was a mutual attraction, they were frequently the aggressors. To top it off, they never once held it against me for showing affection early, as they often did it themselves without batting an eye. This was an immensely refreshing change.

So, America or Brazil... Tough choice, but for now, my vote lies with Brazil.

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Leaving the candy store

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If it's not painfully obvious by now, I fell in lust with a lot of the girls I met in Buenos Aires. Yet there were two in particular that stood out, with whom I felt a stronger connection with. I don't say this very often, but I could have pictured myself dating either one.

The first is worth mentioning because she was so gorgeous that other guys in the hostel, whom she'd never met, were approaching her with her flowers and gifts. She was a lethal combo: beautiful, really affectionate, and not clingy. She also taught me that Brazilian girls flip the hell out if you give them a playful slap on their ass in public. It's a big no-no if you put a hand on that area, even briefly, when you're around other people. Strange, but consider yourself warned.

The second girl was a very intelligent, sweet, and passionate architecture student, who was obsessed with Jack Kerouac and raved about the quality of American literature. She was easily in my top 3 favorite people I met. I still talk with her regularly, and she recently sent me what's probably one of the best messages I'll ever receive: "Num deserto de almas também desertas, uma alma especial reconhece de imediato a outra" ("In a desert of empty souls, a special soul immediately recognizes another.")

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DISCLAIMER

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I would be remiss if I didn't mention what you're getting into with Brazil. Almost every American I spoke with about Brazil, including people who grew up there, said something to this effect: "Brazil is f-ing dangerous. If you look the way you do (light hair, green eyes) and clearly don't speak Portuguese, you are a sitting duck." A friend of mine told me he

had 3-4 near death experiences while he was there. Another said his family was robbed a minimum of six times per year growing up, a la gun to the face. But then again, I've heard several others say things like "I backpacked there for 12 weeks and didn't have any problems." Obviously, people have varying degrees of luck during their travels, but based on everything I've heard, planning a trip to Rio is not something to take lightly.

I've never been to Brazil, of course, but I'd imagine there's a lot of truth to this statement: "You can either have safe and expensive, or cheap and dangerous."

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Tran-spotting

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Argentina was not all rainbows and kittens for me. I had countless failures with females, including a disastrous 3-hour blind date with a psychotic Porteña, among others. But one particular incident is burned into my memory...

One day, a New Yorker checked in to the hostel I was staying in. He was a good guy who wanted to experience the infamous nightlife and cut loose from the drudgery of his Wall Street job. When we went to the club, he brought along a Brazilian girl whom he'd met earlier that night. As he was dancing with her, I looked across the room and saw an incomprehensibly stunning Argentine girl, dressed in very provocative clothing. The most beautiful girl I'd seen in months was a mere 40 feet away, talking and drinking with her girl friend. I walked over, took note of her fake breasts, said 'hola' to them (the girls, not the breasts), and the three of us started dancing together. I danced close to her, we exchanged seductive looks with one another, and I quickly became intoxicated by her beauty.

Ten minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see ol' New York, grinning from ear-to-ear, with the Brazilian under his arm. "She's got something to tell you, bud." I looked to the Brazilian, who leaned towards me and nervously mumbled a line I'll never forget:

"I don't know how to say... *Not all girls are girls.*"

It took about 10 seconds for me to register what she was implying. New York cracked up as the look on my face shifted from confusion to pure terror.

I didn't have the sense of humor or presence of mind to calmly turn around and give her [the Dundee test](#). So in a drunken haze, I made a mad dash for the exit. If I couldn't tell guys from girls – nay, if I was actively trying to seduce transsexuals – it was time to call it a night. I went back to the hostel, took a cold shower, then lay awake for an hour, wondering how "This chick might be a dude" never once crossed my mind. What an amazingly convincing surgery.

Thankfully, I did not kiss her/him, but I got close enough to do psychological damage.

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The open-mic

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I stayed in Milhouse hostel for a while, which typically had about 150-200 residents, ages 18 to 27, on any given night. Every Sunday, they'd have a "jam session" where a local band would come in and play from 11pm to 1am. Everyone would sit around, drink a few beers, and listen to the band before going out to the clubs. It was pretty fun, and they allowed anyone to get up and play.

I've been playing guitar for about four years now, but I'd never played in front of strangers. Guitar has always been something I did by myself, for my own amusement. So on jam night, I had no intention of performing... until I heard the Indian.

He ran up and grabbed the guitar, sat down with a smile, then looked around and realized how big the group actually was. You could see his confidence drain within seconds. He was so nervous and awkward when he started playing that people had to restrain their laughter. I felt kind of bad for the guy, but even more than that, I felt a need to destroy him. No matter how poorly I played, I would sound ten times better than I actually was if I immediately followed his embarrassing performance. So, courtesy of impulsivity, alcohol, and a sweaty Indian kid, I found myself playing and singing Tom Petty's "Running Down a Dream" in front of 60 drunken travelers.

When the song was over, I barely had a chance to blink before the band's lead singer ran up to me: "Keep playing man, but you have to sing into the mic. You're too far away. Sing right into it." Ah. No wonder I couldn't hear my own voice. "You're also strumming WAY too hard. The guitar is amp'd, so everyone can hear you fine. Strum quieter, sing louder." Got it.

The next song I played was an abridged version of Don McLean's "American Pie." The abridgement was to spare the crowd's ears: I needed to cut 8-minutes of singing time down to 4-minutes.

Now, I know I'm not a good singer. Nor am I a very good guitar player. And I'm not saying this with a false sense of modesty; I am very mediocre by American standards. But there I was in Argentina, completely taken aback by the response I was receiving. The crowd clapped and sang along, and then applauded in such a way that made me think, "Wow, maybe I could pursue this down here." Of course, I have no plans to pursue music seriously at any point, but the experience I had was a blast (and a fantastic adrenaline rush). It would not surprise me at all if I found myself at another open-mic in the near future.

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What I'd do differently

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I did very little in the way of preparing myself for those six weeks in Buenos Aires. I also didn't really make plans for anything that was more than 48 hours away once I was down there. This was a fun experiment, but it also led to some problems. Here's what I'm going to do differently for the next time I go down to South America:

(1) **Clear my work schedule.** I knew going down that it wasn't going to be a vacation, where I could take days off to explore the countryside. I had plenty of work to do. But after a few weeks, it was tough to hear about all these multi-day adventures other travelers were going on. Granted, if I hadn't been hanging out with people who were traveling around, it wouldn't have seemed like such a big issue. But next time, I definitely want to explore. I'll be sure to clear the slate and take a brief hiatus from computers.

(2) **Learn Spanish.** Being monolingual has been one of my single greatest sources of embarrassment over the last several years. This feeling is only magnified around my Dutch friends, who tend to speak a minimum of five languages. I met a 17-year old girl who spoke eight languages, and I quote: "But two of them really don't count because they're dead languages." Almost everyone speaks a bit of English, which was both convenient and frustrating. I wanted to practice my Spanish in BA, so before I left, I bought [Michel Thomas' 8-hour audio course](#). This helped TREMENDOUSLY when I first arrived, as I was able to communicate what I needed 95% of the time. But being able to speak Spanish was not as useful as *comprehending people's responses*, which I found to be very difficult, if not impossible. My lack of listening comprehension was, without a doubt, my biggest source of frustration/anxiety. It truly sucked. However, there were a couple things I found that helped a lot, and I would focus much more on practicing them next time. The first was watching movies and TV shows I loved, like Los Simpson (The Simpsons), in Spanish. Los Simpson in particular was great. It's always entertaining, the characters speak relatively slow, and you can usually figure out what they're saying. The second thing was staying the hell away from people who spoke English fluently. I remember having to buy a cell phone, and feeling like I was going to pass out from exhaustion. It was a half hour conversation in Español – not a single word of English – and I understood maybe 10% of what was being said to me. But I walked away having learned several new words and phrases, and felt more motivated than ever to learn the language. That motivation easily got buried again once I found myself among English speakers. Next time, I'm keeping my distance from Aussies, Brits, Dutch, etc. and sticking more with the locals.

(3) **Couchsurfing.** I'd planned on doing this, but didn't end up getting around to it. I decided to rent an apartment instead, which allowed me to regain focus on work. But I would have loved to meet a bunch more Argentines. I plan on hosting and going to meet ups when I move at the beginning of next year. Why not, right? You get to make friends with people from around the world, all for free!

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Lessons learned

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Short-term travel is both a tease and a fantasy. You meet amazing people, hope to reconnect at some point and go on more adventures together, but you both know deep down that you might never see each other again. In a way, that's heartbreaking. When I meet people I really enjoy, I want to keep them in my life and bring them closer. That's extremely difficult to do when you're traveling. You know that your return to the real world is inevitable, and that usually means saying goodbye for a long, long time. It's quite sad to meet someone, get emotionally attached, and have to part ways indefinitely after a few days. But it's mind-numbingly exhausting when you have to do it a half dozen times in a week.

Of course, that's not to say that it isn't worth it. Travel is the only time where you can meet tons of folks who are completely relaxed and open-minded, and you frequently come across individuals whose love for life and people just pours out of them. These are my favorite types of travelers, because they fill you with energy and happiness, and effortlessly bring out the best in others. I don't know why it's so rare to encounter this type of person back home. Perhaps it's because all travelers share a mutual thrill for experiencing something new together (everything around them is exciting!) They also seem less prone to being judgmental, simply because everyone around them is in a perpetual state of analysis and they're all learning about each other. If someone does something strange, you tend to dismiss it more readily: "Maybe that's normal where they're from."

Whatever the case, the random people you meet is what makes travel worthwhile. If you're anti-social, traveling will bring out the extrovert in you.

What you also notice after awhile is that travelers – whether they like it or not – are ambassadors for their cities, states, and countries. Your interactions with others almost always shape what they think of "your people." This became very clear to a friend of mine while he was traveling around Asia. He noticed that people in North Vietnam looked down on Americans for many reasons, but were particularly unforgiving because they had never had any American friends when they were growing up. Many of the people in South Vietnam, however, had developed close relationships with Americans more than 30 years prior. The memories of their old friends remained fresh, and their attitudes towards Americans were passed along to their children. This cycle, if strong enough, can facilitate an entire culture's hatred or adoration for foreigners. So do your duty as an American, and don't be a douchebag overseas.

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Final thought

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No matter how safe you think your city is, there are people in this world who are too scared to visit it. The media heavily colors our opinions of other countries, coupled with the extreme stories we hear from our friends and relatives. Of course, we usually only hear

about (and remember) the crazy bad stuff. It's not fair, but that's the way it works.

Remember to emphasize the positive and encourage people to travel, so they won't be [so damn paranoid](#).

To my handful of real life friends who read this whole post: let's start planning our Brazilian adventure.

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[The book](#) I've been helping with for nearly two years is available for [pre-order](#). It's already hit #1 on Amazon's Health and Fitness category and #1 overall on Barnes & Noble. You'll be hearing a lot more about it in the coming weeks.