

BUENOS AIRES

STEPS

LIVELY

ARGENTINA'S LEGENDARY CAPITAL ISN'T JUST BETTER THAN
BEFORE—IT'S BETTER THAN *EVER*. BY CAROLYN WHELAN

When the lights come on, Buenos Aires—seen here from the Bencich Tower, where the well-regarded Sofitel hotel is located—comes to life. **OPPOSITE:** Sucre, with its unconventional cement and wood interior, is a favorite of local scene makers and international visitors alike.



"Crises are painful, but you emerge stronger," says Alan Faena, a fashion designer who partnered with designer Philippe Starck and a group of American investors (including Austin Hearst, whose family's Hearst Corporation publishes *T&C Travel*) to open the Faena Hotel & Universe. Located in Puerto Madero, a long-neglected waterfront-and-warehouse neighborhood akin to London's Docklands, the hotel has become a symbol of the city's renaissance. "We never lost our spirit," says Faena. "We know the art of life."

To understand the national obsession with boom and bust, depression and euphoria, and the love of all things extreme (provided they are beautiful and imply psychic pain), you need only look to the founding of the city, by Spanish conquistadores in 1536, and B.A.'s subsequent struggle to trade its European roots for raw South American energy. Mix in an addiction to brooding

gauchos and willowy damsels in distress (there are, after all, said to be more therapists, plastic surgeons and cases of eating disorders per capita in Buenos Aires than anywhere else in the world) and you can begin to perceive why the nation's history is a complex one of crashes and meteoric rises.

In the early 20th century, Argentina was among the world's ten richest countries, and B.A. was the second-biggest metropolis in the Americas, after New York. Brits financed Argentine railroads and Patagonian ranches, and Welshmen and eastern Europeans followed in their wake, adding to an urban population that had recently swelled sevenfold from the 1860s, when Italian immigrants had begun arriving in droves, to more than 670,000 by 1895. With the accordionlike *bandoneón* as its centerpiece, melancholy tango music was born in Buenos Aires in the 1880s as a ballad addressed to mothers and *novias* (girlfriends)



FROM LEFT: A mural enlivening the passing parade in San Telmo; curator Inés Katzenstein at the MALBA museum, home to an impressive collection of Latin American art. **OPPOSITE:** Artist Marta Minujin in her studio.



A bathroom at the Philippe Starck-designed Faena Hotel & Universe, in Puerto Madero. **OPPOSITE:** From some perspectives, MALBA's exterior is as striking as the work displayed inside.



left behind. Poor dockworkers strutted in the then vulgar dance that accompanied it—a mix of Latin, African and Indian rhythms—in brothels and bars before Parisians made it all the rage, in café hot spots, in the years leading up to World War I.

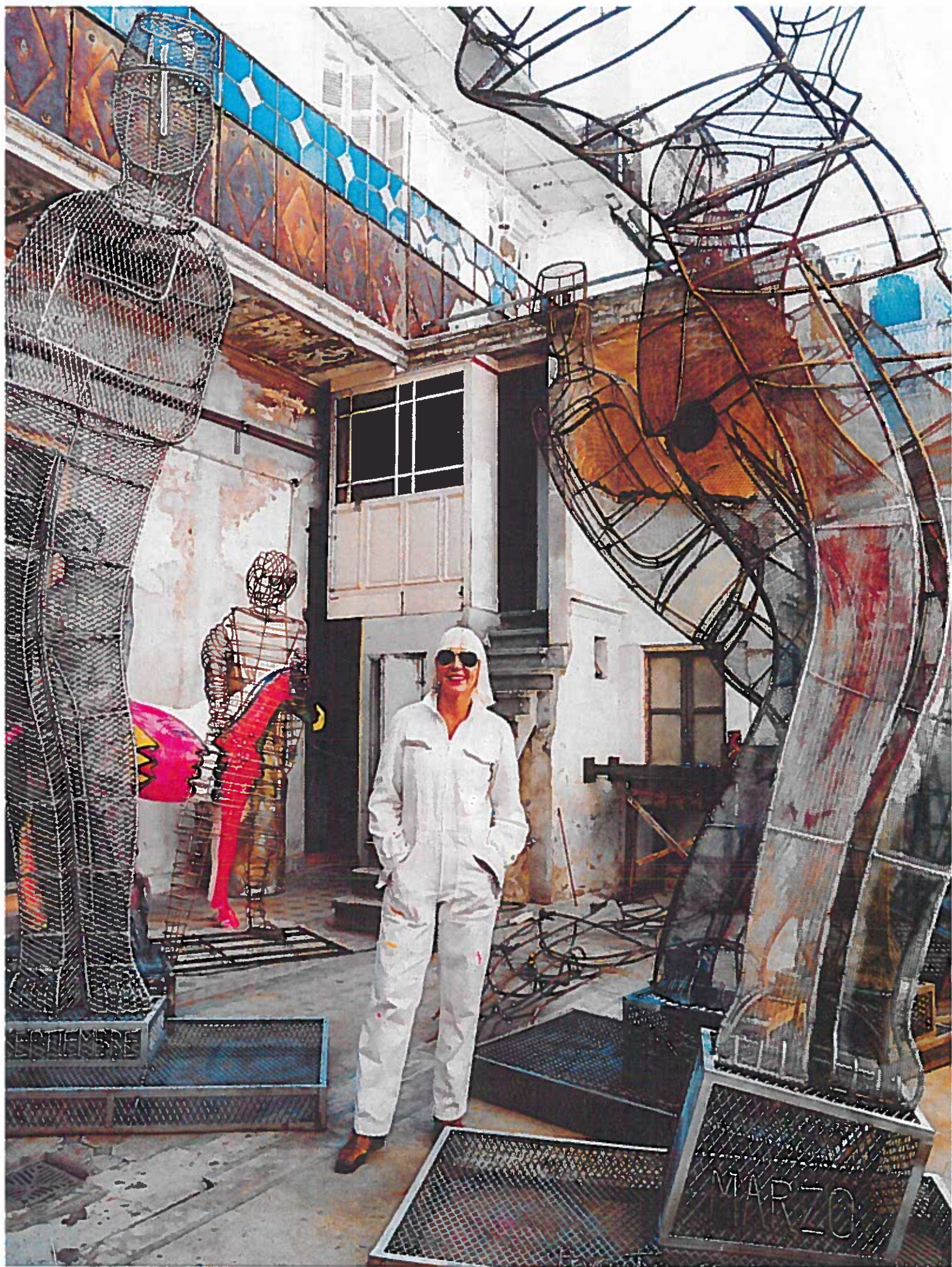
Over the next eighty years, the country oscillated between prosperity and poverty, and a string of governments responded to the upheavals. The most famous of these was led by the dictator Juan Perón and his wife, Eva, who was beloved by her countrymen, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Pro-capitalist Carlos Menem presided over the go-go 1990s and was the last full-term president before Argentina's 2001–2002 collapse.

Today Buenos Aires is a potent cocktail of the sophistication, madness and ambition of Rome, Paris and New York: it still bests Rome for pure style, Paris for routines and rituals (perhaps to counter so many cataclysmic events) and New York for the title “the city that never sleeps” (dancing often lasts until dawn). But

tourists expecting the efficiency of Europe may be disappointed. **raucous Rome** is a near match for Argentina's unpredictability. That said, **business** meetings begin on time, buses are punctual and customs lines at Ezeiza airport move faster than their equivalents in the United States.

But there's no mistaking it: this era *is* distinct. Possibly because this last collapse was so magnificent, the country has wrapped itself in a bear hug of all things Argentine, an embrace marked by its citizens' desire, even if economically motivated, to stay close to home and celebrate their uniqueness. “Four years ago it was harder to get *porteños* to Patagonia,” says Hube Gosse, who with his wife, Annabelle, owns the Arelauquen Lodge there. “They preferred classic beach and style destinations, like Uruguay and Miami. Now our main client is the *porteño*.”

A new president, Néstor Kirchner, and his wife, Cristina, are instilling national pride after so many *(continued on page 15)*



NATIVE INTELLIGENCE

Telephone numbers below, except for toll-free numbers, should be preceded by 011-54-11 when dialed from the United States.

What to Do

Buenos Aires is best seen on foot, and by cab when traveling between neighborhoods. [The ride from Recoleta to Palermo Viejo takes ten or fifteen minutes, as does that from Recoleta to Puerto Madero, the redeveloping waterfront area.] Don't miss the Recoleta cemetery, whose elaborate tombs make it the city's most famous site (1790 Calle Junín; 4803-1594); the Bellas Artes museum (1473 Avda. del Libertador; 4803-0802; mnba.org.ar); the MALBA museum of modern art (3415 Figueroa Alcorta; 4848-6500; malba.org.ar); and the Teatro Colón, the renowned opera house (621 Libertad; 4378-7344; teatrocolon.org.ar).

Leave time to explore weekend markets in Palermo's Plaza Cortazar and San Telmo's Plaza Dorrego, where you'll also find street performers and antiques stalls. Especially in the bohemian barrio of San Telmo, antiques shops, artisans' markets and cafés are constantly popping up amid the tenements and neoclassical churches with their crumbling, beautiful façades.

Where to Stay

Alvear Palace Opened in 1932, the lavish Louis XV- and Louis XVI-style Alvear long ranked as Buenos Aires's top hotel. (The king and queen of Spain and Catherine Deneuve are among the notable figures who have stayed there.) A high employee-to-guest ratio (three staff people for each of its 210 rooms), marble and gold-leaf decor and luxe amenities—a business center and in-room WiFi, LCD televisions and Hermès soaps—set it apart, as does a central location in Recoleta. After cocktails in its celebrated bar, have dinner at La Bourgogne, South America's only Relais Gourmand restaurant. A wellness center is slated to open by next year. *Double rooms from \$550. 1891 Avda. Alvear; 4808-2100; 800-223-1230; alvearpalace.com.*

Faena Hotel & Universe Over the top in its hipster style, from the

dramatic thirty-foot-high entrance hall to the naughty red cabaret, the Faena opened in 2004 in Puerto Madero and immediately became known for its "downtown" opulence and theatrical vibe. The 108 white guest rooms (there are apartments, too) have red velvet curtains, beds with gold claw feet and gold-leaf swan chairs. The luminous El Bistro, where white unicorns' heads are mounted on white silk walls, is the more formal of the hotel's two restaurants. The rustic El Mercado has redbrick walls, long wooden tables and an open kitchen with clay ovens. For a quick nature break, go jogging at the nearby ecological reserve; you can revive afterward in the hotel's huge hammam, part of its gym and spa, or with a drink in the library lounge or at the adjacent outdoor pool. *Double rooms from \$350. 445 Martha Salotti; 4010-9000; faenahotelanduniverse.com.*

Four Seasons Hotel Buenos Aires This Recoleta property's towering, somewhat plain façade belies the treasures behind it. Foremost among these are an outdoor pool in the hotel's inner courtyard and, next to it, a turn-of-the-century residence. The opulent Mansion, as it is still called, was a wedding gift from a husband to his bride and has many period details, including wood-paneled walls, tiled floors, high ceilings, marble columns, fireplaces and a grand staircase. The entire house, with its seven one-bedroom suites and five banquet rooms, can be booked for a private party or event.

The 158 Asian-style rooms in the tower are large and sunny, with views of the city, the river and the Mansion. Don't miss the invigorating Pachamama massage, in the hotel's gorgeous new Incan-influenced spa. There's also a Presidential Suite, popular with celebrities, but the Mansion is even more so: in just two weeks recently, U2, the Rolling Stones and Juliette Binoche were guests there. *Tower rooms and Mansion suites from \$310, Presidential Suite \$3,500. 1086/88 Posadas; 4321-1200; 800-819-5053; fourseasons.com.*

Palacio Duhaú-Park Hyatt Buenos Aires If it lives up to expectations—and to its truly extraordinary setting, which



includes a 1930s mansion—this just-opened property will rival the Alvear, right down the street, and the nearby Four Seasons for the title of best hotel in town. *Double rooms from \$410. 1661 Avda. Alvear; 5171-1234; 888-819-5053; buenosaires.park.hyatt.com.*

Sofitel Buenos Aires Located on a leafy, gallery-filled street in a renovated 1929 skyscraper, the midsize Sofitel, which opened in 2002, exudes elegance and charm. Its 144 rooms, though smaller than those at Buenos Aires's other luxury hotels, are decorated with rich earth tones and leather furnishings; those on the upper floors have nice views as well. Combine the amenities and style with its address—in Retiro, between the central business district and Recoleta—and attractive rates and you have a great addition to the B.A. hotel scene. Sip cocktails by the hearth in cozy La Bibliothèque lounge or at Café Arroyo, just off the

impressive glass-roofed lobby, or sample Mediterranean fare at Le Sud restaurant. *Double rooms from \$320. 841-849 Arroyo; 4131-0000; 800-SOFITEL; sofitel.com.*

Where to Eat

Porteño dining tends to be on the late side, with the day's meals growing progressively bigger. Breakfast, usually eaten around nine, is light fare, most often a *café con leche* and *medialuna* (croissant). Except for the cherished Sunday *asado*, a multi-meat, multi-hour extravaganza that even city dwellers observe, lunch—taken anywhere from one to four in the afternoon—is sit-down with pasta, sandwiches or salads; sometimes it is followed by yerba maté, a bitter herbal tea presented in a gourd that is passed peace-pipe style among friends. On-the-go options include delicious empanadas (pies, usually filled with meat). Many restaurants start serving dinner at six, but



evening meals don't really get going until ten, when reservations at the best restaurants are advised. Partly because of the late dinner hour, afternoon tea is sometimes taken; if you do indulge in this old-fashioned ritual, be sure to try melt-in-your-mouth *dulce de leche* (creamy caramel spread). At least once during your visit, you must order *bife de lomo* (filet mignon), which is practically the national dish, as well

make the rooftop patio a popular place for drinks in Palermo Viejo. The restaurant downstairs has wood-paneled walls and is furnished with mirrors, banquettes and a piano. Tapas include good *seviche*. 1688 Malabia; 4831-5735.

Gran Bar Danzón A fashionable, centrally located wine bar. More low-key than other venues, with a smaller and often crowded space, it offers jazz Wednesday and Friday in a candlelit setting. 1161 Libertad; 4811-1108.

Milión Affluent locals and expatriate Anglos gather in Milión's courtyard for cocktails, then climb the marble staircase of this former mansion to the upper floors for chicken-and-avocado salad, bruschetta and tapas. Situated in Barrio Norte (next to Recoleta). 1048 Paraná; 4815-9925.

Sucre Owned by the same people as Gran Bar Danzón, Sucre is among B.A.'s trendiest spots: tourists as well as the city's media and business players flock to this cavernous space in Belgrano. Also known for its chef, Fernando Trocca, and its great wine list. 676 Sucre; 4782-9082.

For Dinner

Brasserie Petanque Stylish Euros frequent this airy San Telmo brasserie with all the French fixings; try the crêpes and quiche. Among the entrées are escargot and boeuf bourguignonne. 596 Defensa; 4342-7930.

Cabaña Las Lilas The city's best-known (and most expensive) steak house, a canal-front favorite in Puerto Madero with rustic decor and outdoor seating. Tourists, businessmen and the well-heeled savor cuts from the restaurant's own grass-fed cows. 516 Avda. Alicia Moreau de Justo; 4313-1336. Reservations are a must.

La Cabrera A Palermo standby for older B.A. society. Try its famous *bife de lomo* and myriad accompanying sauces and side dishes. Packed tables and white-aproned waiters add to the appeal. 5099 Cabrera; 4831-7002.

Patagonia Sur This well-known establishment on the river is worth the trip to working-class La Boca for its soaring rafters, works by local artists and owner Francis

Mallmann's culinary offerings. 803 Rocha; 4303-5917.

Social Paraiso A cozy option in Palermo for couples, with French-style fare. The Patagonian lamb with eggplant and tabbouleh is divine. 5182 Honduras; 4831-4556.

Cafés, Live Music, Tango Shows and Lessons

"Real" tango dancers gather at smoky *milongas* (tango clubs), which range from swanky to seedy. The clubs open at about 10 P.M. but don't come alive until midnight. Many *milongas* and cafés hold lessons from, say, 7 P.M. to 9 P.M., plus tango performances on special nights. Proper tango shows, also of varying quality, take place all over town. For a more complete list, pick up a *Time Out Buenos Aires* at a newsstand or visit whatsupbuenosaires.com. Many cafés in La Boca and San Telmo advertise walk-in lessons; avoid these, as they can take advantage of tourists. The venues below are among the best.

Café Tortoni Consummate tango singer Carlos Gardel and writer Jorge Luis Borges were regulars at this must-see historic café in the city's center. Come here anytime for the Art Nouveau style, complete with marble pillars and tabletops and tuxedo-clad waiters. After dark, slip in for a *cafesito* (espresso) or the nightly tango show. 825 Avda. de Mayo; 4342-4328; cafetortoni.com.ar.

Club del Vino Enjoy tango, jazz and other live music in this theater-café, which serves light fare. 4737 Cabrera; 4833-0050.

Confitería Ideal Crumbling plaster, floor-to-ceiling mirrors and antique chandeliers make this grand old tango hall perfect for tango lessons—or for taking in a quintessential Buenos Aires scene that time seems not to have changed. 380 Suipacha; 5265-8069.

Esquina Carlos Gardel A traditional tango show: eighty dollars for a three-course dinner and a tango extravaganza. 3200 Carlos Gardel; 4867-6363.

Where to Shop

Each neighborhood serves up something special. Shoppers of a more conservative bent head to Recoleta for classic stores. Fashionistas generally opt for

Palermo, which is worth the better part of a day for its outdoor markets and boutiques. Those pressed for time may want to visit the eighty-shop Patio Bullrich or another of the city's high-end, boutique-filled malls, which are chicer than their U.S. counterparts. Also consider hiring a personal shopper through your concierge. I did so while staying at the Alvear and spent a delightful afternoon with Parsons design school graduate Damasía Lemos. Well connected to the local fashion establishment, Lemos was more than worth her thirty-dollar-an-hour fee. For leather, head to Calle Florida: it's touristy but good. For purses and bags, off-the-beaten-path options are the wholesale boutiques of the Villa Crespo barrio, at the junction of Malabia and Murillo.

Below is a small selection, by neighborhood, of standout stores, many of which feature the work of homegrown designers.

RECOLETA

Cat Ballou This tiny boutique is a local favorite for its romantic silk and satin gowns, slip dresses and more. 1702 Avda. Alvear; 4811-9792.

Evangelina Bomparola Tailored suits in earth tones and fine fabrics. Lovely beaded sweaters and silk dresses. 20 Quintana; 4814-2553.

Perez Sanz Handbags, belts and jewelry intaid with wood, crystal, marble, nickel, silver and bronze. Also beautifully designed home accessories, such as boxes and sculptures. 1317 Posadas; 4812-1417.

Tramando Haute couture and the avant-garde. Garments, shoes and accessories, often of woven fabrics. 1973 Rodríguez Peña; 4811-0465.

PALERMO VIEJO

Bacano Home furnishings and gifts in an airy space with mosaic floors. 1544 Armenia; 4831-3564.

Mariano Toledo Jeans, haute couture and slinky, brightly colored dresses. 1564 Armenia; 4871-5327.

Trosman Edgy, nearly rebellious pieces with vintage appeal. Feathers, beads, even photographs converge in designer Jessica Trosman's creations. 1998 Armenia; 4833-3058.

Varanasi Fanciful frocks in slick, vivid colors; structured garments and original silhouettes. 4761 El Salvador; 4833-5147. —C.W.

Santiago Calatrava's Puente de la Mujer bridge. OPPOSITE: A San Telmo courtyard market.



as Argentina's fine Malbec wine, a rich red blend of the celebrated Malbec grape, which is grown outside Mendoza.

For Lunch or Tea

Florencio Enticing aromas waft from the open kitchen in this intimate patisserie, which seats only sixteen. The blackboard menu features sandwiches with fresh prosciutto, *salami de campo*, eggplant and zucchini. 2363 Francisco de Vittoria; 4807-6477.

For Cocktails (All serve dinner)

Casa Cruz Currently one of the places to see and be seen, located in the Palermo Viejo neighborhood. Towering brass doors open to a dimly lit, high-ceilinged lounge and restaurant with red walls, plush velvet couches and iris-filled vases. 1658 Uriarte; 4833-1112.

El Diamante Kitschy Mexican decorations and tropical plants

BUENOS AIRES STEPS LIVELY

(continued from page 112) past leaders, it is said, sold off the country's riches (Menem's name draws the most sneers). Cristina Kirchner has even been compared to Hillary Clinton because of her dual roles as first lady and as a senator representing the province of Buenos Aires. The regional shift away from globalization has also sown a sense of community; residents concoct homegrown solutions and share what they have with their neighbors.

Argentine generosity is legendary. During the two years I lived there, strangers invited me to *asados* (barbecues) and to go sailing. Men chivalrously insisted that I board buses first (my friend Phyllis was once lifted onto a bus when her pencil skirt kept her from climbing the steps). Though fashion is a priority in looks-obsessed Buenos Aires, human relations trumps all. That fact translates into heartfelt service at the best restaurants and locals who ensure that visitors feel at home.

B.A.'s postcrisis energy is most evident in Palermo Viejo (adjacent to the more central and residential Palermo), whose streets are chockablock with boutiques. Palermo Viejo's popularity has spawned sub-neighborhoods with catchy names like Palermo Soho and Palermo Hollywood. But to really tap into B.A.'s up-from-the-ashes vibe, start at the Recoleta Cultural Center, with its art shows and outdoor artisans' fair. Then take a taxi along Figueroa Alcorta to the MALBA museum and its notable collection of Latin American art. End the day in the boutiques and galleries of Palermo Viejo, and start the night there.

"Our friends were killed by dictators, our economy has collapsed several times, and we've worked exhausting hours because of hyperinflation," says celebrity chef Francis Mallmann, who has a restaurant in B.A.'s La Boca neighborhood (as well as ones in Mendoza, in the west, and Punta del Este, Uruguay). "But we are warm people. Time, patience and intimacy are now luxuries in the world—and we have them all. Those things make Argentina even more appealing."

WHEN TO GO

Buenos Aires is at its loveliest in spring (September through November), when its

jacaranda trees are in bloom, and in autumn (March through May), when the weather is warm and languid. The city clears out somewhat in summer (December through February), when *porteños* head to coastal and mountain resorts.

PRICES

With the exception of its luxury hotels, which run almost as much as their U.S. counterparts (about \$300 a night and up), B.A. is still a relative bargain. A meal at a good restaurant, with wine and dessert, will set you back roughly \$25 a person, and one at a top restaurant up to triple that amount. Taxis are inexpensive.

SAFETY

Crime in B.A. is a concern. As in all big cities, especially those with large disparities in their residents' incomes, random purse snatching and pickpocketing do occur, particularly in tourist spots. Even if you're staying at the finest hotel in tony Recoleta, it's a good idea to carry just one credit card and smaller bills for cabs and to stow valuables, including jewelry, in the hotel safe. When leaving restaurants, have the front desk call ahead for safer radio taxis, and when on the street look for trusted names, like Premium (011-54-11-5238-0000). Ask at your hotel for names of other recommended taxi companies.

LAY OF THE LAND

Many of Buenos Aires's low-rise barrios are minutes from the city's center, 9 de Julio Boulevard, which runs parallel to the port area, on the Plata river. In the east is the historic Plaza de Mayo and its Casa Rosada, the palace where the president's office is located. To the southwest is Congreso, an Italianate neighborhood whose Champs-Élysées-inspired Avenida de Mayo is lined with ornate cafés and old hotels. To the southeast are vibrant La Boca and San Telmo. The most fashionable parts of the city are clustered in the northwest, in Recoleta and Palermo, with the hippest quarter, Palermo Viejo, just beyond them. Recoleta and Palermo offer sumptuous hotels, parks and excellent shopping, and Palermo Viejo is notable for its lively boutiques, restaurants and nightlife. ❧

SEDUCED BY ST. BART'S

(continued from page 148) screen TV, a DVD player and a fax machine, and spa treatments are available. The interiors are a pleasing mix of Caribbean colonial and south of France, notably in the red-on-white toile de Jouy fabrics. At the restaurant, Le Gaïac, chef Maxime Deschamps prepares exceptional food. Breakfast is served here as well, by the infinity pool. Or so I'm told; I couldn't resist ordering room-service breakfast, which arrived on Bernardaud china and white linen on the terrace by my pool. *In high season (January 5–April 9), suites from \$2,000 to \$3,355. 27-88-88; fax: 27-89-30; hotelletoiny.com.*

VILLAS

The several hundred villas for rent on the island are an excellent option for families and large groups. Long gone are the days when a "villa" was a bungalow or cottage with no air-conditioning and maybe a pool. Many of those on St. Bart's are luxurious by any standard, with well-equipped kitchens (though guests rarely use them), air-conditioning, a plasma TV in every room, WiFi and designer pools. "You cannot believe some of the requests we get," says Brook Lacour, who with her husband, Roger, started the villa-rental company Sibarth thirty-one years ago. "People want treadmills, chefs, nannies and more."

Four companies handle villa rentals: Sibarth Real Estate (800-449-1553), Ici & La Saint Barthélemy (27-78-78; icietla.villas.com), Marla (27-62-02; marlavillas.com) and Saint Barth V.I.P. (27-94-86; www.st-barth-vip.com). Sibarth is the largest by far; the five villas below represent the range of its listings. Rates are for high season, January 6 through April 15. For a complete list, visit the Web site of the firm's U.S. partner, WIMCO, at wimco.com.

Amber House A small villa with two bedrooms (and a third available downstairs), Amber House has views of Corosol Bay and Gustavia, a large outdoor living area and a pool. \$9,600 a week.

Bon Temps You'll delight in a fantastic panorama of the northern coast of St. Bart's and several nearby islands from this Italianate villa, in the hills of Pointe Milou. It has gorgeous custom stonework and mosaics depicting shells, an oper-