

Argentina, heart stealer

Tracey Davies is bowled over by Buenos Aires and Bariloche on her first trip to South America

I ego-bright shanty houses, dogs drunk on the smoky barbecue scent of *asado* and silver-tipped porteños practising a smouldering tango on the street; if anywhere is going to banish my impending jet lag, it's La Boca, Buenos Aires' liveliest and most colourful neighbourhood.

Now a snapshot of life in Buenos Aires, La Boca was once the poorest *barrio*, historically where immigrants settled. Established by Spanish colonists in 1536, it turned technicolour in the 19th century, as Genoese fishermen daubed their shabby homes with paint left over from decorating their boats.

The birthplace of tango and home to the legendary Boca Juniors Football Club – where Diego Maradona rose to fame – it's impossible not

to be swept up by La Boca's love of the beautiful game. It's also where I found the best *alfajores*, the chocolate-dipped biscuits sandwiched with *dulce de leche* (which, frankly, should be illegal).

Mere hours into my first foray into South America, and already it's captured and kissed my heart. And I'm not the only one who's enamoured. Our fam trip group of four travel agents – Lisa, Hannah, Toni and Isobel – led by Latin Routes head of sales Gaynor Atherton, is quickly falling head over heels.

PARIS OF THE SOUTH

Already Buenos Aires is proving to be quite the charmer. Shimmering under a sky as bright as the blue and white of the Argentine flag, ➤



ABOVE: Feria of San Telmo, a weekly antiques market in Plaza Dorrego, Buenos Aires PICTURE: Shutterstock/gvictoria

this vast city has sprawling green parks, huge palm-lined boulevards and an abundance of neoclassical architecture, making it easy to see why it's known as 'the Paris of the South'.

Still keeping the jet lag at bay, we head to San Telmo, the city's bohemian *barrio* that fizzes with life during the Feria de San Telmo, the Sunday flea market that flogs everything from antique maté gourds to authentic gaucho boleros. To add to its charm, there are smoochy septuagenarians practising an already-perfect tango, while moustachioed young men accompany them on the accordion.

Tango has been an integral part of Argentine culture for the best part of 150 years. A 'secret danced between two people', the moves come from the heart – not the feet. That night, we get first-hand experience of its passion at La Ventana, one of the oldest *milongas* (tango houses) in town.

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THE HAMPTONS OF BUENOS AIRES

When *porteños* (local residents) need a break from the city, they head to Tigre on the Paraná Delta, earning it the moniker of 'the Hamptons of Buenos Aires'. From Puerto Madero, we take a river boat along the Delta Tigra for lunch at El Descanso, a glorious private island famed for its beautiful wild gardens and sculpture trail.

Three days barely scratches BA's surface but, back in the city, we squeezed in a visit to Cementerio de la Recoleta and saw grand marble mausoleums, open crypts with dusty coffins and the grave of former first lady Eva Perón, of *Evita* fame.

There was just enough time for a tour of Teatro Colón, the 19th-century opera house renowned for having the best acoustics in the world, and a feast of the finest Argentine beef from an eight-course *asado* (roasted meat) tasting menu at Fogon Asado in Palermo Soho. ➤

ASK THE agents



"Argentina blew me away. I see it as an alternative to Canada or New Zealand. It's got the buzz of Buenos Aires, but in just a couple of hours you can be on a gaucho ranch in the pampas."

Hannah Porter,
Travel by Hannah



"Argentina welcomed us with incredible landscapes, the finest malbec and some of the best vegetarian food I've tasted. It's a destination of contrast, adventure and discovery."

Toni Sharp, Holidaysplease



"From tango in San Telmo and art installations in Tigre to horse-riding with gauchos in Bariloche, we didn't waste a single second. It's left me wanting to go back."

Lisa Russell,
Wanderlux by Lisa



"Living in Scotland, I'm used to impressive landscapes. But nothing prepares you for the breathtaking views in Bariloche."

Isobel McCardie,
Rock My World

DESTINATIONS

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WHAT'S NEW IN LATIN AMERICA

Unesco has designated two new World Heritage Sites in South America. The **ESMA Museum and Site of Memory**, in Buenos Aires, was a detention and torture site during the 1976-83 military dictatorship.

The **Jodensavanne Archaeological Site**, in Suriname, one of the earliest sites of Jewish settlement in the Americas, is home to a synagogue and other 17th-century buildings.

Chile has created a new national park less than 40 miles from the capital, Santiago. The **Santiago Glaciers National Park** – which covers 75,000 hectares – is home to 368 glaciers that provide water to the region's ecosystem, including the Olivares Gamma, Juncal Sur and Tupungatito Volcano glaciers. It's also a habitat for pumas, condors, peregrine falcons, Chilean eagles and guanacos (camelid).

New flight routes are making South America more accessible. **Latam Airlines**, which launched a five-times-weekly direct service between Heathrow and Lima last month, has announced that, in February, it will offer a million more seats compared with the same month in 2023 – a 16% increase. **Virgin Atlantic** is set to begin flights from Heathrow to Sao Paulo in May.

BOOK IT

A 12-day Highlights of Argentina trip with **Latin Routes** starts at £3,899 per person, including international and internal flights, nine nights' B&B and all tours. The itinerary takes in Buenos Aires and Bariloche, a winery tour in Mendoza and a trip to Iguazu Falls.
latinroutes.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tango dancers in Buenos Aires; the fam trip group; Mount Campanario, Patagonia

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Alexandr Vorobev, sungsinger



GATEWAY TO PATAGONIA

Although I'm reluctant to leave BA, seven thousand miles is a long way to come for just one city. A two-hour flight from the capital sits Bariloche – the gateway to Argentine Patagonia – where I get my first glimpse of the world's longest mountain range, the Andes. Darkened, dog-toothed peaks draped in early spring snow are reflected in the mirrored waters of Lake Nahuel Huapi – the Andes is everything *National Geographic* promised it would be.

We're staying at Villa Huinid Bustillo, where the best rooms overlook the range – I'm late for breakfast every morning. A half-day Circuito Chico trail is an easy way to get a sense of the area. Stopping at Mount Campanario, we take chairlifts up to the top and gaze as the world unfurls like a diamond-dusted map of shimmering glacial waters, snow-dusted mountains and thick Patagonian cypress forest.



GAYNOR ATHERTON head of sales, Latin Routes

Do your homework on the destinations: You can learn lots about the diverse regions around Latin America, even if you haven't travelled there yourself. We have some great tools on our agent hub to help with this, as well as a handy 'how to sell' guide that helps agents see the main highlights of each country, plus useful information such as the best time to travel.

Have detailed conversations with clients about their requirements: The more information you have, the easier it is for our expert team to build an itinerary matching your customers' requirements, interests and needs – they can even arrange a Zoom meeting to help answer questions or bring the itinerary to life.

Keep an open mind: There are plenty of opportunities to incorporate activities into an itinerary, and it's possible to combine culture, adventure and beach all in one trip.

On our final day, we go 'full Patagonian' with a horse riding excursion at La Fragua estancia (ranch). In the safe hands of gaucho Jesús, we spend the morning riding the gentlest horses through the creeks and canyons of Patagonia, as Andean condors soar overhead.

Leaving six enamoured women speechless, it was a tranquil and damp-eyed end to a fantastic Argentine adventure. **TW**