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## ARTS & CULTURE

### Adventures in Buenos Aires

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By [David Shneer](#) / March 15, 2007

I'm sipping coffee looking out the window of the apartment I've rented here in Buenos Aires. A moment ago I forgot where I was. My French doors open onto a balcony overlooking a busy street in Recoleta, the beautiful and bustling part of town that was designed, like much of Buenos Aires, to look like Paris. From my window I see stores called "Rouge" and "Cuisine et Vins."

Forgive me for losing my sense of time and place, but Buenos Aires encourages that, even prides itself on it: "We are like Europe in Latin America." A colleague of mine who is a professor of Latin American history put it this way: "Buenos Aires has the energy of Paris and New York with the style of Italy." Or as my landlady insisted, "Unlike the rest of Latin America, you can drink the water here in Buenos Aires."

Sounds like Europe to me. The best part: no jet lag, because Buenos Aires is just a few time zones ahead of my home in Colorado.

The flight from the States was packed, post 9-11 packed, but not with Argentinians. I saw more than one Lonely Planet and many a TimeOut guide to Buenos Aires. This city is one of the hottest on the planet for tourists, if judged by the number of travel articles written about it. After the [currency devaluation](#) in 2002, Argentina went from being one of the most expensive countries in the world for foreign travelers to one of the least expensive. Clearly, most of the people on the plane got the memo. Damn the free and easy access to global information!

I came here with two missions: 1) to eat lots of beef, drink good red wine, and walk the city taking in its sights and sounds, and 2) to explore off-the-beaten-track Jewish Buenos Aires. With over 200,000 Jews, Buenos Aires has one of the largest urban Jewish populations in the world, up there with cities like Moscow, Paris, and Chicago. If Buenos Aires is *the* hot tourist destination, and it has one of the largest Jewish populations in the world, then I decided I ought to explore "hot" Jewish Buenos Aires.

Okay, before you snicker and click on the next hyperlink, let me explain. For most people who are not Orthodox Jews, Jewish travel means paying a visit to the local synagogue, whether in use or not. This usually isn't a religious experience but a cultural, communal pilgrimage that asserts one's Jewish identity.

When in Europe, the most Jewish thing most American Jews do is visit Holocaust memorials or museums; in fact, the Holocaust has now gone global and most major cities with a Jewish population (including Buenos Aires) have some form of Holocaust memorial or museum. And if a city has a large Jewish community, there may be a Jewish museum with a modest collection of Judaica and a small exhibition describing the Jewish history of the place, starting with the year the first Jew arrived in town. (Did the Jew *know* he was the first one in town? Did he get a toaster at the border? "Congratulations, Mr. Rabinowitch, you are the first Jew in Buenos Aires." More likely, for Argentina, whose first Jews were closet Jews from Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, no one mentioned it.)

For observant Jews travel is *by nature and necessity* Jewish. The first place I know in a city is the local café in which to have coffee and write; the first place an observant Jew knows is a kosher restaurant. None of these may strike the casual reader as particularly "hot" experiences.

Although I am a historian, when I seek out the Jewishness of any city, I tend to be interested in contemporary culture or unusual stories about local Jewish life. Jewish tours rarely help, because they almost always put death and the past over life and the present. That's true even in the biggest Jewish city in the world, New York, where Jewish tours almost always end up on the Lower East Side, rather than the Upper West Side.

A confession: my first visit in Buenos Aires was to the **Recoleta Cemetery**, one of the key stops on the tourist circuit. A cemetery is of course a monument to death and the past, but two things struck me about this one. First was the way people related to the tomb of Eva Peron, aka Madonna, I mean Evita. Her grave was surrounded by people taking pictures, staring respectfully and laying flowers. Evita's was one of the few tombs in the entire cemetery that had fresh flowers in front of it. It seemed like a pilgrimage site.

Second, I ran into two very loud, young, post-army Israeli tourists, casually dressed in tank tops, sandals and shorts, who took all of the somberness of the cemetery with several grains of salt. The now ubiquitous (and loud) sound of Hebrew coming out of the mouths of insolent Israeli tourists is one of the ways global travel has become more Jewish.

I went to the Recoleta Cemetery because I'd been told it was like Pere Lachaise, the famous cemetery in Paris, again putting Buenos Aires on a map in which it was not at the center. Like Buenos Aires in general, the city's Jews have been marginalized, always seen in relationship to other places. But cemeteries (like Jews?), while seemingly similar across space and time, also assert their distinctive local identities—in the stone that's used, in the language on the gravestones, and in the fact that the names on those tombs are *the* historical narrative of a particular place across time. So after participating in the celebrity of Evita, which felt like Jim Morrison's grave at Pere Lachaise in Paris, we meandered through the rest of the cemetery seeing how Recoleta was *not* the Pere Lachaise of Buenos Aires, but instead the central gathering ground of the ghosts of this city.

\* *Next Dispatch: [How to Recognize Jewish Places in Buenos Aires](#). Know something David should do or see in Jewish Buenos? Leave a comment below.*

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