

Buenos Aires: a city of style

Buenos Aires is back. As Argentina recovers from a decade-long recession, there has never been a better time to visit a city that, for all its chic boutiques, designer hotels and gourmet restaurants, has lost nothing of its individuality. Mark C O'Flaherty explores the 'Paris of the South'.



Home, Buenos Aires

Located in Buenos Aires's hip Palermo Viejo neighbourhood, the Hotel Home was designed by architects Rodrigo Cunill and Juana Grichener. The hotel is run by Patricia O'Shea, a BA native, who grew up a few blocks from where the hotel stands today. All 17 rooms have their own distinct style with a retro theme, mixing vintage European wallpapers, Chilean wool rugs and custom-made native watambu wood beds with CD and book libraries, MP3 players and Wi-Fi. 'It is a wonderful hotel with a retro Danish 1950s look – lots of rosewood and tulip chairs,' said wallpaper* travel editor Jeroen Bergmans. Home won Best New Hotel at the wallpaper* design awards 2007.



Relaxing in the gardens of Hotel Home (left), run by Patricia O'Shea (above).

It's breakfast time at Mark's Deli: A coffee comes with a de rigueur side of *alfajores*, the supremely moreish dulce de leche-filled biscuit that's nothing short of an Argentine institution. The sun is up, the cobbled streets are well aired and the boutique owners are getting ready to open up for the day. This is Palermo, the most fashionable quarter in what is arguably the most fashionable city in the world today. Given that Mark's is the busiest coffee shop in the area, the crossroads on which it stands must be the very centre of the style universe.

Buenos Aires is enjoying one of its most dramatic upswings in living memory. After several spins around the boom and bust cycle, the economy has picked itself up from the 2001 financial crash and is running away with itself in high-heeled couture shoes. While bad memories of the crash linger, it has had some unexpectedly positive effects in the short to medium term.

Independent designers

As the upscale shopping areas in the rest of the world have become one large, luxurious LVMH concession, the stores of Palermo are still predominantly small independent operations. Fashion designers have done their own thing, and now these cobbled streets are home to the likes of Cecilia Gadea and Nadine Zlotogora, two designers who run their own ateliers for men and women with very distinct, unique styles. Gadea's work is intricate, with embroidery and lace, while Zlotogora's fashion blends workwear with a medieval twist and flights of fantasy. You won't find anything like them anywhere else because, through necessity, they've become their own mothers of invention.

A morning spent wandering around the small stores of Palermo is an essential part of any visit to Buenos Aires. Then, after seeing what's new, it's

time to indulge in more classic fare. Much of the Recoleta area of the city has, in looks and manners, an air of the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris, which is one of the reasons why BA draws so many comparisons with the City of Light.

While the more cutting edge area of Palermo is being compared with bohemian-era New York (its own SoHo is established and Tribeca is on its way), Recoleta is where the ladies who lunch eat before perusing the luxury leather goods and the Parisian and Milanese flagships. The epicentre of consumer Recoleta is the Patio Bullrich, the swankiest mall of them all, and *the* place to find those crocodile skin shoes you didn't know you've always wanted. For a more modern take on luxury, visit nearby Tramando, Argentine designer Martin Churba's boutique, full of sleek but vibrant womenswear.

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Architectural renaissance

After lunching on *empanadas* and barbecued meats at the low key but often celebrity-filled *parilla* restaurant, La Brigada, in the historic, antique shop-festooned district of San Telmo, taxi over to Puerto Madera, where the new spirit of optimism is being interpreted by the world's most innovative architects on a grand scale. While property remains something of a steal across the city as a whole, apartments here are at London levels or higher, and rising.

This is the home of Buenos Aires' own docklands renaissance. Santiago Calatrava's asymmetric pedestrian bridge and the neighbouring, much-hyped, Starck-designed Faena Hotel + Universe are the benchmarks by which other design newcomers to the area judge themselves. Say what you will about the OTT fantasia of the interior of socialite and hotelier Alan Faena's Manchester brick building, the poolside at Faena is never anything less than totally hip. The red velvet and gilt chair cabaret space inside is also a major attraction – the tango show here is arguably the best in town. And where else are you going to find a mix of classic Buenos Aires with the strikingly modern, all within reach of a martini?



The insider

Martin Barrantes is one of Argentina's most famous polo players and co-runs the private vineyard development Santa Maria de los Andes (www.santamariadelosandes.com). He lives in Buenos Aires.

'For any visitor to the city I'd recommend San Telmo, which is a fun area to potter around searching for antiques and soaking up street tango. Palermo is the place to shop for trendy furniture, clothing and art, and enjoy some of the zillions of bars and restaurants. On Avenida Alvear you'll discover why people say BA is the Paris of South America.'

The best place to shop for boots is Fagliano. For wines visit any of Alvera's wine boutiques. La Dolfina and Etiqueta Negra are great for men's clothing, and Laura O and Ricardo Paz for furniture.

When I go out for drinks I go to Congo for hip cocktails at the weekend and Bar 6 for a mid-week chilled drink; the interior is stunning. For dinner I'd recommend El Obrero in La Boca, which has the best traditional Argentine food, and the staff treat you like family. Also Petanque, which is five minutes from my home but makes me feel like I'm in France, and Oviedo for exquisite seafood.'



Norman Foster's Aleph apartment complex at Puerto Madera (left); The romantic Candelaria del Monte (above).

It's worth spending an hour or so strolling around Puerto Madera, around the outside of the new Faena apartment complex which was designed by Norman Foster and overlooks the water. Sitting on the quayside, you'd be hard pushed to find a more arrestingly handsome bunch of people anywhere in the world than the *portenos* (the 'people of the port'). The people are an integral part of the feelgood factor of Buenos Aires. As Alan Faena himself puts it, 'Everybody wants to spend more time here. There's nice sun, good food, beautiful women, handsome men, nice nightlife, great meat... What more could you want?'

Art and elegance

From Puerto Madera's alfresco beauty pageant, make your way to MALBA, Eduardo Constantini's impressive collection of contemporary Latin American art. The exhibitions are fine indeed, but the building, with its dramatic angular sweeps and terraces, is the star of the show.

Even if it wasn't housed within the finest hotel in the city, the art collection in the gallery at the Palacio Duhau Park Hyatt (see Hit List) would still be a must. Once you're suitably culturally enriched, check into the Duhau's rather wonderful spa and then take drinks in the multi-tiered garden between the two wings of the palace – overpoweringly *la dolce vita*.

Nightlife

For another pre-dinner cocktail (no one eats early here!) or indeed dinner itself, stroll up the hill to the polished concrete and candlelit Gran Bar Danzon, a sibling of similarly super modern destination dining rooms Sucre and El Diamante. Move on to Osaka for Peruvian/Japanese fusion cuisine or Casa Cruz for wild-style progressive and lush dishes such as poached oysters with truffle and pear. Both of these Palermo restaurants have white-hot scenes and it can be tricky to secure a table, so ensure your concierge is on the case the minute you've made up your mind about where you want to go.

To round off any night out in Buenos Aires, hurl yourself (metaphorically of course) into the culture of the *milonga*, the traditional milieu of the tango. Lest we forget, for all the forward thinking that's going on here, tango is still the fast-beating heart of the city. Since 2001, it's enjoyed a high-profile renaissance, with the young of Argentina throwing pop culture into the mix to create 'electronic tango'. See it in action and be enthralled as hundreds of couples of all ages twist around to hip-hop beat cover versions of The Beatles and other musical eccentricities at La Virutaga, the hippest *milonga* of the moment. Sip a glass of fernet and coke and ponder, from the safety of a side table, how Buenos Aires keeps weaving and dipping its way around the dancefloor until 6am, wearing heels in which most mere mortals would find it hard to make it from taxi to front door. This is a city that's got style and energy to burn. ■

THE HIT LIST

The Wealth Collection's choice of the top places to stay, eat, shop and be seen in Buenos Aires.

IN TOWN

Palacio Duhau-Park Hyatt, Avenida Alvear 1661. Tel: 5171 1234

This renovated family mansion has been sympathetically annexed with a pristine new sci-fi tower in the centre of elegant Recoleta; a shimmering marble, crystal and silver temple of classic-with-a-twist glamour.

Hotel Home, Av Honduras 5608. Tel: 4778 1008

If you want to stay in Palermo, you want to stay here. Ignore the underwhelming exterior; the bright 50s interior has plenty of boutique wow factor, all within walking distance of the city's hippest action.

La Bourgogne, Av Alvear 1891. Tel: 4805 3857

Jean Paul Bondoux's cooking in this, the very heart of the glamorous Alvear Palace hotel, shouldn't be overlooked in favour of newer destinations. The room is surprisingly contemporary in style while the predominantly French-style menu is as rich as it is inventive. The wine list is a wonder.

Olsen, Gorriti 5870. Tel: 4776 7677

Scandinavian *smoresbrod* and vodka flights served in a shrine to contemporary Danish interior design. The front garden is very much the focal point of the Palermo 'Hollywood' media celebrity scene.

Juan Carlos Pallarols, Defensa 1039, San Telmo. Tel: 4300 6555

Silversmith Juan Carlos is the sixth generation Pallarols to control this atelier, and his work is truly exquisite – as you'd expect from the studio that produces all of the silverware for the Vatican.

Rossi & Caruso, Posadas 1387, Recoleta. Tel: 4811 1965

The colourways, quality and design on display at the flagship store of Argentina's most famous luxury leather manufacturer justify the inevitable excess baggage. Simply sumptuous.

OUT OF TOWN

If you can find the time to visit just one estancia, make it Candelaria del Monte (www.candelaradelmonte.com.ar. Tel: 2271 442431), run by the infinitely glamorous Inez and Sebastian, just two hours from Buenos Aires. Stay here for a long weekend in the incredibly plush, wildly floral chintz interior of the farmhouse: hopelessly romantic, atmospheric and luxurious.