**South America – A Land of Superlatives**

**It seemed I was never far from the snow-capped Andes.  The highest mountains outside Asia, they gloriously dominate the landscape standing tall in crisp black-and-white livery outlined against a brilliant blue sky.  Whether we were bumping along a rutted tractor path through the endless vineyards of Mendoza, or watching a gaucho ride off across the grasslands to work huge herds of cattle, the jagged backdrop of the majestic mountains was always there reminding me of exactly where I was, Argentina.**

South America sprawls across almost seven million square miles, most of which is in the southern hemisphere and almost half of which is occupied by Brazil.  Next down in size is Argentina, on the southeastern coast, the eighth largest country in the world.

I began my journey in Buenos Aires the nation’s cosmopolitan capital, situated on the western shore of the Rio de la Plata, the widest river in the world.  Reaching a maximum *width* of an unbelievable 140 miles, this liquid highway is so wide, most of the time it’s impossible to see the other shore.

In keeping with this huge scale of things, the nation’s capital is a city of monumental buildings, immense public squares, and broad, multi-lane boulevards, all reminiscent of an oversized Paris. The oldest public square in the city is the Plaza de Mayo**,** the historic beating heart of the metropolis that has been at the center of many of the milestone events in the city’s history.

Around the square are several important buildings including the Metropolitan Cathedral where Pope Francis held mass for 20 years and the Casa Rosada, seat of the national government.  The square has long been the focal point for public gatherings, either in support of or to protest successive governments, a tradition that reached its apex with the monster crowds that came to hear Eva “Evita” Peron speak from the balcony of the Casa Rosada in the 1940s.

The city’s opera house, the Teatro Colón, is also something of impressive proportions.  The horseshoe-shaped auditorium has 2,500 seats, which is more than London’s Covent Garden, plus standing room for 1,000 more. Many of the world’s greatest superstars have performed here including Luciano Pavarotti who was one among many to claim the theater’s stunning acoustics place it among the top five classical music venues in the world.

Superlatives touch almost every aspect of life in Argentina including dance, of course.  Buenos Aires is the birthplace of the tango, one of the most popular dances in the world.  The steamy dance synonymous with Argentina evolved in the late 1800s in dance halls and brothels in the low-class port districts along the Rio de la Plata.  It roared onto the international dance scene in the 1920s.

Here in the nation’s capital, you can see some of the finest professional tango dancers in the world performing electrifyingly moves seldom seen anywhere else and hear musicians who have raised music and song accompaniment to an art form.

When we think of Argentina we also tend to think of exceptional beef and the legendary horsemen known as gauchos who patrol the herds of cattle roaming the rich grasslands that cover five provinces of South America, all of Uruguay and the southernmost state of Brazil, a total expanse of 460,000 square miles.

No mention of Argentina could pass without raising a glass to its historic viniculture going back almost 500 years. Argentina today is the fifth largest wine producer in the world with the province of Mendoza producing more than 60% of the country’s output.

Of course, the country has many other well-known attractions. Argentina is credited globally as the capital of polo, the world’s oldest known team sport, which has been played here since 1875.

But it’s not polo but soccer that is the national obsession.  Lionel Messi, the legendary captain of the multi-cup winning Argentinian soccer team, is a national treasure. Widely considered the finest soccer player in the world, he is featured in multi-media all over the country. His career earnings are over $1 billion making his income as super-sized as the Messi Burger on offer in a Buenos Aires McDonalds.

One more mega-attraction not to be missed is the UNESCO World Heritage site on the nation’s northern border with Brazil**.** Iguaçu Falls, dividing Argentina and Brazil, is one of the largest and most famous



waterfall in the world.  Technically, it’s not one but a series of waterfalls, anywhere between 160 to 200 of them, depending on the time of year, plunging together side-by-side over towering basalt cliffs in such powerful volume they fuel no less than three power stations downstream.  It’s significantly wider than Victoria Falls and three times wider than Niagara Falls.

But there’s more.  Set within 40 acres of Brazilian sub-tropical forest close to Iguaçu Falls is the Parque das Aves, the only institution in the world focused on the conservation of Atlantic Rainforest birds. Hundreds of exotic birds of multiple species roost, eat and fly here within enormous, caged enclosures so carefully camouflaged by fauna and flora the structures are barely noticeable.  Visitors following a carefully controlled walkway are allowed to step into one or two of these gated enclosures here and there allowing access to within an arm’s length of some of the world’s most beautiful aviators or within a telephoto length of those too shy to come too close.  Some can be seen perched high in the forest canopy ripping apart a furry lunch.  Some swoop past in a flapping riot of color homing in on a group target in a technicolor squadron, while still others feed nonchalantly in brilliant clusters of yellow and green around trays of seed placed conveniently close to the meandering pathways.



The Toucan is the world’s most popular bird and practically a national mascot here, which perhaps is why its busily cawing enclosure is kept as a spectacular finale at the end of the route. Toucans can grow up to 25 inches tall and proudly sport a beak as much as eight inches long.  It looks like an awkward bulk that must be painfully heavy to drag around but in fact its hollow.  Charles Darwin thought such a Cyrano de Bergerac protrusion was a sexual lure to attract a mate.  But a new study believes the outrageous structure is an AC unit keeping the bird cool in tropical climates.  In any event, accustomed to their celebrity status, or possibly aware that their stuffed effigies are the hottest item in the gift shop, these adorable toucans have no hesitation in dragging their plump little bodies over to their visitors to be admired.

In fact, there’s much to be admired in this land of superlatives: dramatic mountain landscapes, super-sized rivers and waterfalls, and vineyards and grasslands that reach as far as the eye can see.  The economy is volatile and the politics unstable.  Much of the population is poor, but the natives still enjoy their traditions, their culture and pastimes. And still take time out to enjoy their coffee, food and wine; and music, song, and dance, that has made their homeland justifiably famous. All of which they are happy to share with open arms.

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