

TRAVELLER



Cheek to cheek in Buenos Aires

Relish the art of seduction
in the world's tango capital

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THE capital of Argentina is often compared to New York, Madrid and Paris — but Buenos Aires has a soul of its own. The city is seductive and fervent — best known for its guilty pleasures, its steaks and tango saunter.

As the birth place of tango, Buenos Aires pulsates with a passionate rhythm. The fiery dance is so adored here that it is everywhere — in bars, milongas and on the streets.

Milongas are traditional tango halls where aficionados can take to the dance floor or learn from an instructor. I had my first dance in La Calesita, a popular outdoor milonga with

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Tango dancers at one of the many alfresco cafes in Caminito, a pedestrianised street in La Boca neighbourhood.

Cheek to cheek in Buenos Aires

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excellent ambience. Getting swirled by grey-haired dance partners was not quite what I expected, but the experience was priceless.

For the dance-shy, there are several cabaret-style dinner shows in town, with the most popular being El Viejo Almacén. Tickets cost \$69.50 to \$145.

From Feb 27 to March 7, the city will host the world's most important tango event — Festival Buenos Aires Tango. This annual nine-day extravaganza of shows, free classes and open-air milongas attract over 250,000 participants. It's held along Avenida Corrientes in the evenings and the dancing continues until dawn.

Going boho in San Telmo

Along the streets of Bohemian district San Telmo, tango dancers — dressed in split skirt and suit, pressed hip to hip, cheek to cheek — dance with emotions so intense that observers will likely feel like voyeurs peeping into a private affair.

Many say this neighbourhood represents the authentic Buenos Aires. It's lined with historic architecture, antique shops and tango bars. Wandering through the labyrinth of crumbling colonial mansions and churches is a pleasure on its own.

Tango dancers especially like to strut their stuff at the Sunday antique market in Plaza Dorrego. Art lovers will enjoy browsing through antique curios, tango memorabilia and handicrafts here.

By night, Plaza Dorrego is transformed



A typical tango show in Buenos Aires.



A bife de chorizo at La Pergola Restaurant.



Statue of Spanish conqueror in front of Casa Rosada.



Caminito, the colourful street in La Boca.

Photos Nellie Huang

into a romantic dining spot. Parrillas (steakhouses) are aplenty; the tricky part is finding the best ones.

On the rooftop terrace of La Pergola Restaurant, I was treated to one of the finest culinary experience in town. The steak, roasted until crisp, was tender inside.

A meat-loving nation, Argentina knows how to prepare beef, serving the best asado (barbecued meat) in the world. A genuine Argentinean meal always includes bife de chorizo (sirloin strip steak), accompanied by a glass of Malbec wine from the Mendoza region. Finding a restaurant before 8pm can be a challenge, though — the Argentineans eat late, often starting only at 10pm.

Viva La Boca

Another district with tango flowing through its veins, La Boca is a grittier area flashing with bright colours and quirky warehouse-converted houses.

Its crowd-magnet: Caminito, a short pedestrianised street lined with crafts studios, souvenir shops and street performers. Tango and gaucho dancers take the stage at the numerous alfresco cafés.

Football fans would be familiar with the district's stadium, La Bombanera, home to world-famous team, Boca Juniors and its ex-player Diego Maradona. Fans continue to worship their national idol, whose name still graces local souvenirs.

Tips!

- 1. Getting there.** The cheapest way to travel from Singapore to Buenos Aires is via Los Angeles. Total cost is about \$2,500.
- 2. When to go.** Buenos Aires is in the Southern Hemisphere. The best time to go is in summer (January and February), when the city is less crowded. In winter, from June to August, temperatures can get as low as 3°C.
- 3. Budget.** The peso continues to be advantageous for travellers after the plunge in Argentina's currency. A standard restaurant meal costs between \$8 and \$20. Hotel prices range from \$15 per person (Hostel Colonia) to \$50 for a standard hotel room (Hotel Milan) and \$400 in a luxurious palace suite (Alvear Palace).
- 4. Addresses.** La Calesita milonga (Comodoro Rivadavia 1350. \$4 for entry, \$3.50 for lesson). El Viejo Almacén dinner show (Avenida Independencia y Balcarce, San Telmo. www.viejoalmacen.com). La Pergola Restaurant (Anselmo Aieta 1075, San Telmo. www.lapergoladesantelmo.com). Prices from \$10 to \$30 per person.)



A Boca Juniors football souvenir shop.

Heart of the city

Another personality the city produced was Eva Peron. The legacy of the charismatic former first lady lives on at Museo Evita in the Palermo district.

These days, you can visit the balcony of Casa Rosada, at Plaza de Mayo, where Eva charmed her fans. Plaza de Mayo is the city's original main square, lined with important buildings including Catedral Metropolitana and National History Museum.

Buenos Aires' vibrant façade belies the fact that its economy was battered in 2002. It has since regained its vigour and glory. As a city lost somewhere between past and present, Buenos Aires thoroughly captivates.

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