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## Continental Drifter: Neophythe soccer fan gets a real kick from Buenos Aires

Like a race car screeching away from the pit at Indy, my taxi rocketed away from the curb at Buenos Aires Aeropuerto Internacional toward the death-defying *autopista*.

Though I wasn't in a hurry to reach my hotel, and tried, in ruptured Spanish, to make my driver aware of this fact, he gunned the engine, shot between two cars attempting to converge on our lane, then broke left behind a bus that bathed us in a current of thick black exhaust.

As if Argentine taxi tips are based upon the number of times a driver changes lanes and the proximity upon which disaster is averted, he then weaved the car through a clash of highway traffic, his head whipping from side to side, lips pursed, brow creased, eyes gleaming with vehicular insanity.

### AN AIR OF RELIEF

Some 40 minutes later, after we leaped on an offramp and cruised toward the metropolis, I managed to breathe again. No thanks to the atmosphere, mind you. Although Buenos Aires literally means Good Air, there is precious little of it on steamy summer days like the one on which I arrived.

Because the taxis air-conditioning had malfunctioned, I felt compelled to open the window and join 13 million denizens simmering in a broth of heat, humidity and auto exhaust.

Still, Buenos Aires has a stately European charm. We drove along wide, spacious avenues lined with ornate 19th century buildings that reminded me of Paris and Madrid. I half-expected to see hordes of people blocking the intersections, shouting for justice and banging pots and pans. Such political protests -- *cacerolazos* -- occurred daily last year during Argentinas worst economic disaster.

In December 2001, after the government slashed jobs, commandeered pensions and devalued the peso in a futile attempt at harnessing an enormous foreign debt, rioters took to the streets. Dozens were injured and at least 20 lost their lives. But during my monthlong stay, the city seemed relatively calm. The only grim reminders were long bank queues where hundreds of people waited patiently each day to trade pesos for dollars.

After stumbling from the taxi in the prestigious neighborhood of Belgrano, I checked into Caserón Porteño ( [www.caseronporteno.com](http://www.caseronporteno.com) ), an immaculate four-room guesthouse owned by Argentine tango lovers Daniel Rodriguez Viau and Cinthia Gawianski. The couple met a few years earlier at a *melonga* (dance). They tangoed all night, fell in love and later opened Caserón Porteño which caters to foreign tango enthusiasts.

The property's centerpiece is a flowery courtyard, at the back of which lies an open-air dance studio where guests are given free tango lessons. I took just one lesson with Cinthia. Having stepped on her feet repeatedly, I hung up my tango shoes and left the floor to the professionals.

One such pro was Gerda Milpacher, a pink-haired German dance producer who occupied the guest room next to mine. Gerda had come to audition tango dancers for *Latino Classics*, an annual summer outdoor

festival in Berlin.

For two days, I sat in the courtyard sipping tea and watching Gerda audition dozens of Argentinas finest tango prospects. The female dancers wore high heels and sultry black skirts with the traditional split up one side. The men, their hair slicked back, donned black suits.

One couple, Johana Copes and Maximiliano Avila, flung each other around the studio like exasperated lovers. They spun away, embraced, displayed a flurry of rapid between-the-leg kicks, then looked into each others eyes as if life itself depended on their next move.

Johana is the daughter of Juan Carlos Copes, a world-famous Argentine tango dancer and choreographer. His soon-to-be famous daughter eventually got the part and will be performing with her partner in Germany this summer.

### **ASADO AND FUTBOL**

A few nights later I met with Sandra Suppa. A friend of a friend, Sandra introduced me to another Argentine pastime: *asado* -- barbecue.

Along with 15 of her friends, I dined at Ramona, a legendary steakhouse. In 1996, when Madonna came to town to film *Evita*, she asked the owner to close the restaurant and accommodate her entourage for one night. The owner refused. At Ramona, regulars like Sandra carry as much weight as celebrities.

Argentines are dedicated carnivores and consume, per person, about 130 pounds of meat annually. We exceeded the national average, beginning with beef empanadas and progressing to grilled chorizo, *cordero* (lamb), *chivito* (young goat), *lechón* (suckling pig) and *ternera* (veal). Between sips of merlot from Mendoza, Argentinas wine region, we graduated to more exotic pieces like *molleja* (thymus gland), *riñones* (kidneys) and *morcilla* (blood sausage) which has a sweet, gummy taste. The bill for 17, including appetizers and drinks, came to only \$180 U.S.

The next afternoon we attended Argentinas most coveted sporting event: a soccer match between hated rivals, Boca Juniors and River Plate. As Sandra and I approached the stadium, it seemed as though we had bought tickets to a riot instead of a soccer game.

Fifty thousand fans streamed toward the gates and were scrutinized by a phalanx of policemen on horses. Police helicopters flew overhead. We were eyed by hundreds of policemen with dogs, tear gas launchers and shotguns -- a testament to the violence that has marred nearly every meeting of these two teams.

My heart hammered against my chest as we entered the packed stadium. A sea of red and white-clad River fans let out a deafening roar from across the field. Uniformly dressed in blue and gold, thousands of nearby Boca fans countered with the earsplitting cry of "Boca! Boca! Boca!" Fifty thousand voices suddenly became one, charging the arena with an electricity the likes of which Ive never experienced.

I took my seat, watched the players spill upon the field and fell in love with soccer.

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*Next stop: French Polynesia.*