

# Buenos Aires: Poetry, politics and Porteños

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Seven years ago, when I first visited Buenos Aires, a single word – “smitten” – written on a wall expressed everything I felt about this absurdly beautiful city, where faces seemed Southern European, tango music was in the air, and steak was on the menu. I vowed to return.

Last winter, my husband and I celebrated our winter escape with several weeks in the Argentine capital. We booked an apartment in the Poetry Building in Recoleta, the upscale yet old-fashioned quarter that shares its name with the city’s famous cemetery and its elaborate mausoleums.

“Go to Disco” were the first directions from Brent Federighi, the owner of our belle époque building. Turned out “Disco” was the name of our local supermarket. Confiding that that he too had been smitten by Buenos Aires back in 2005, this ex-Californian proved the most gracious of hosts. With the knowledgeable input of Brent’s spouse Julia, a film and stage actor, the Poetry Building had been renovated and tastefully decorated with art and antiques.

At the rooftop pool, we’d relax and mingle with fellow guests. One afternoon, a young man arrived from London for his wedding the same night. “Come along,” he urged. “It’s at the cathedral beside Recoleta Cemetery. It starts at 8:30 and the party goes on till six in the morning.” We thanked him, but went to sleep instead.

Porteños, as city dwellers call themselves, stay up late – after all, they drink gallons of coffee. When not meeting friends in cafés or walking their dogs, it seemed they also read lots of books. In addition to newspaper and magazine kiosks – flower sellers too – bookstores are everywhere: from antiquarian, ordinary, all the way to sumptuous, like the theatre-turned-bookstore, the 1919 El Ateneo Grand Splendid, (1960 Santa Fe Ave.) where visitors pose for photographs, the mezzanine as their backdrop.

Among the most interesting bookshops is Libreria Sigal (2854 Corrientes Ave.). This family-owned business offers Jewish books, religious objects, music, as well as publishing and translating religious texts. Half a million Jews once lived in Argentina – less than half that remain today – and those interested in the still-vibrant Jewish Buenos Aires must meet Salito Gutt for one of his wonderful tours.

I had been smitten with Salito’s tour on my first trip, and last winter we met again, at a charming café steps from the Poetry Building. We caught up on family news and discussed politics, especially Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner’s scheme to hold a “truth commission” into the 1994 AMIA bombing, in – of all places – Tehran.



**A family stands by a wall of street art in Buenos Aires.**  
[Nancy Wigston photo]

Like untreated wounds, the terrorist bombings in Buenos Aires (1992, Israeli Embassy, 29 killed; 1994, AMIA Community Centre, 85 killed, hundreds injured), still fester. Argentine prosecutors concluded the second attack was financed by Iran and carried out by Hezbollah.

Gesturing to the elegant streets outside our café, Salito says, “This is fantasy.” He has a point. Yet, steps away, a large bronze plaque in the sidewalk bears the name of filmmaker Raymundo Gleyzer, who “disappeared” in 1976, during the country’s long “dirty war.” Its final words are “Memory and Justice.” Few seem to forget this country’s rocky history; instead, past becomes woven into present.

When my husband meets Salito, they immediately hit it off, which is hardly a surprise. No man could be prouder of Jewish Buenos Aires history, or better able to communicate it. New stops have been added to the tour, including a Sephardi temple, and we end our morning in the Oncé district (“Like the Lower East Side” says Salito, who has lived in New York) at a gigantic mall with a mezuzah at its entrance and a kosher McDonald’s inside.

A visit to Buenos Aires inevitably brings exposure to politics and art – sometimes simultaneously. Eva Peron – subject of a hit musical, but rumored to have kept Jewish treasures stolen by Nazis – spoke to her supporters from the pink Presidential Palace balcony in the Plaza de Mayo, where the Mothers of the Disappeared tenaciously march each Thursday seeking the truth about their vanished children.

Javier, our guide-volunteer from Cicerones, a free greeters service, showed us famous city sights – a highlight being the Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires’ lavishly refurbished 1908 opera house. With Javier, we also peeked into the venerable Confiteria Ideal, where tango lessons were underway amongst the tea tables. We then lunched outdoors on the shaded grounds of Monasteria de Santa

Catalina, close to the city centre.

A few days later we headed off to a graffiti tour, a popular attraction – our group numbered over 30 – and the brainchild of two women from England, so impressed by the city’s graffiti that they’ve made a film about it called *White Walls Say Nothing*.

We’d already been struck by the abundance of art on the walls of the trendier barrios, and our tour also included some not-so-hip areas, where porteños dwell in large apartment blocks. Formerly blank walls have been painted by visiting artists in a tradition of self-expression that Buenos Aires has long tolerated.

Our guide, Anna, told us that locals speak with pride of these huge paintings by “international” painters, who have added flair to empty spaces. Political messages – one artist likes to include Mao Zedong’s face – are frequent but not dominant. When a nonagenarian was asked whether she’d like her corner

house painted, she granted permission. The result is an enchanting exterior of yellows, pinks and purples.

We saw enormous portraits of John F. Kennedy and Che Guevara (together) and Apple founder Steve Jobs (alone). A series of written messages (anonymous) from a father to his child (*Te Amo*) flowed from one corner to the next. “I love you” nicely echoed the “smitten” of my first visit. At the tour’s end, we stood on opposite edges of a circle stenciled on the pavement. We took photos of our feet facing the encircled message: “Hug Here.” It seemed right.

**If You Go:** Air Canada flies nonstop to Santiago, then continues on to Buenos Aires. The Poetry Building is listed on Vacation Rentals by Owner ([vrbo.com](http://vrbo.com)). Jewish Tours: ([jewish-tours.com.ar](http://jewish-tours.com.ar)); Cicerones, ([cicerones.org.ar](http://cicerones.org.ar)) is a great resource for free English-speaking guides; Graffiti Tours ([graffitimundo.com](http://graffitimundo.com)).

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