

Playful Palermo

Exotic, elegant and oh so sexy, this chic Buenos Aires district should definitely be on your travel short list

BY DOUG WALLACE





Hands up: How many of you have at least some of the *Evita* soundtrack burned into your mind? The musical brought Buenos Aires to the attention of so many who would otherwise have thought South America was just one crime-ridden, financially challenged region after another. This enthralling sprawl of urbanity is the Paris of South America. Here's a brief list of ways to play in BA, things to do and where to get them done.

Set up camp

There are many neighbourhoods to hit, but establish home base in the fashionable, comfortable Palermo, which is divided into three sub-hoods: Palermo Viejo, Palermo Soho and Palermo Hollywood. From there, break up your days visiting other parts of town. The core (Microcentro), San Telmo, La Boca, Recoleta and Barrio Norte, just to scratch the surface. Our pick of the boutique bunch in terms of Palermo hotels is Home Hotel (homebuenosaires.com), whose name really suits it — fantastic decor, a cool spa, a termi-

nally cute back garden and pool, and some of the best cocktails in town.

For best value, though, consider renting a condo and getting a bunch of friends to travel with you. There are many websites that can set you up comfortably and easily, in particular, Buenos Aires Habitat (buenosaireshabitat.com). Try to find something chic with a rooftop pool — great for reviving the soul after an afternoon in the considerable heat.

See the sights

Take time for the obligatory Buenos Aires

must-dos, even if some of them are merely a breeze-through. Don't miss the Plaza de Mayo, a key commercial area bounded on one side by the Casa Rosada, the pink presidential palace with the world-famous balcony (and just try not to sing that song). Trip through the chaos of Florida Street, hopefully side-stepping the pickpockets. The Japanese Garden is a perfect chance to get away from it all for an hour or so, as is the Museo Evita (museoevita.org.ar), which is filled with memorabilia and some pretty cool souvenirs.

Set aside a solid two hours for the marvelous Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, or MALBA (malba.org.ar). The café there is top-notch, should you want to schedule your visit around lunch. Note that most art galleries and museums are closed on Tuesdays. Recoleta Cemetery (recoletacemetery.com) exhibits a maze of above-ground crypts old and new, where lie the city's well-to-do. The mix of architecture makes for interesting snapshots and the beauty is surprisingly un-creepy. This is where Eva Peron is buried, so make sure you get the obligatory photo. And if you really need to see an overpriced tango show, by all means: try Rojo Tango at the Faena Hotel + Universe (rojotango.com). Polo lessons, soccer games, flea markets, city tours, sky diving... The sky is the limit in this town. If there's time, a short trip to the Pampas, a sail through the River Plate or a train ride to the little town of Tigre are all within easy reach.



Recoleta Cemetery (left) has been called one of the most beautiful in the world. If that weren't enough reason to spend some time there, it's also the final resting spot of Eva Peron, presidents of Argentina and even a granddaughter of Napoleon. Its history dates back to 1732.



Buenos Aires is a beautiful city of contrasts. From the iconic Casa Rosada, with its stunning balcony (above left) where Eva Peron so famously spoke, to the humble and numerous *parrillas*, where barbecue is the order of the day. Taking in both experiences, by the way, is well worth your while.

Treat the tastebuds

Palermo's restaurant highlight award goes to Tegui (tegui.com.ar), for gorgeous meals in a glam setting. Tuna carpaccio with shaved foie gras, veal tartare, sea bass, stuffed quail, amazing desserts. Patrons are buzzed in through a graffiti-strewn entrance, enhancing the mystique. Make La Cabrera (lacabrera.com.ar) a priority, the top steak place — or *parilla*, is constantly busy to overflowing. Bio Solo Orgánico (biorestaurant.com.ar), a small organic vegetarian restaurant, is a delightful fresh-flavour experience, and a huge break from the barrage of beef.

For cocktails, Frank's (no website, Arévalo 1445) has a *Get Smart*-type entrance, where you gain entry by dialling the "secret code" in an American phone booth, the back of which then opens out onto a '20s-style lounge. Suspender-wearing bartenders specialize only in drinks fashionable from that era, and the well-dressed mixed crowd is interesting and friendly. For more pre-club congregating, head closer to the centre of town to step back in time at old Argentinian mansion-cum-restaurant bar Milión (milionargentina.com.ar) and see the town's beautiful people at play.

Hit the shops

Palermo Soho is one of the best shopping regions in Palermo, home to all the top boutiques in town, from clothing to shoes to gifts all kitted out in former industrial buildings and spruced-up old mansions. Set your sights on Jorge Luis Borges, Armenia, Honduras, Gurruchaga or Malabia streets and take it from there. The open markets on Plaza Serrano and Plaza Armenia are busy on the weekends with both tourists and locals, if you like that sort of thing.

Take Care

Palermo is relatively safe and quiet, but elsewhere, beware of the bling! Flashy jewellery and watches say, "I have money" and "My bag likely has a nice phone in it." Bank machines are few and far between, so stock up when you see one, unless it's at night (never a good idea). Expect lineups, especially midday. Tread carefully: The concept of picking up after your pet has not reached Argentina. Described by the guidebooks as a "relaxed atmosphere," customer service is hit and miss. Shoppers and retailers actually chat, sometimes for many minutes. Be prepared to watch servers bus a table for a full five minutes before wandering over with a menu. Have fun!



If you plan to be in the centre of it all, it's hard to miss the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Cathedral (top), overlooking Plaza de Mayo. For a refreshing break, try the chic back garden at Home Hotel (above left) or opt for a bite at the tricky-to-spot Tegui restaurant (above right).