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THE WORLD

Soaring Crime Keeps Night Owls of Buenos Aires In After Dark

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BUENOS AIRES -- Tony Lauria runs a custom vault business called The Inviolable One. He helps people take care of their money, a growing concern here in Argentina, where people keep an estimated \$28 billion hidden in walls and mattresses.

"People are desperate," said Lauria, whose business has jumped 50% in the wake of a crime wave and the collapse of the country's banking system late last year. "They don't know where to hide the little money that they have left."

Lauria's safes are hidden in places where the armies of burglars and kidnappers who roam this city will have a hard time finding them. "We are building them in the floors, under countertops, in backyards under trees, in bathrooms," he said.

Once known as one of Latin America's safest big cities, Buenos Aires has suddenly become one of its most violent. The lawlessness has been a boon to security outfits, but it has also forced changes among a people famous for being flashy night owls.

Portenos, as residents of Buenos Aires are known, are suddenly less ostentatious. Until recently, most never worried about going anywhere at any time of the day or night. Restaurants began serving dinner at 9 p.m.; bar-hopping began at 2 a.m. Teenagers often would not return home until the next morning, and many young adults would go to work without sleeping at all.

But now, safety is an issue that Argentines dwell on. People think twice about where to go and how to get there. And it's not a question of avoiding certain places--crime is everywhere.

A few years ago when the economy was booming, Luis Paul, a pediatrician, decided to sell his city apartment, buy a house in the suburbs and commute to work.

Now he regrets the move. Sometimes he has to drive through "liberated zones" where corrupt police allow criminals free reign.

In the suburbs, he has discovered, "it's easier for robbers to just disappear into thin air. Once we get home, we rarely go out."

Since the end of last year, crime has skyrocketed and kidnappings have become a nationwide phenomenon. Federal police officials estimate that one person is abducted every 36 hours, five times

Businesspeople who bought expensive imported cars in the boom years of the early 1990s are being urged to sell them or keep them in garages until crime diminishes; drivers of luxury cars are prime kidnapping targets.

"I stopped using my 1999 Nissan Pathfinder and bought a beat-up 1980 Ford," Matias Marquez, 41, said. "I fear for my life and for my family. I'd rather have a lower profile. Melt in, go by unnoticed."

The capital's woes are on display on its streets. There are more homeless, more children begging.

"I've never felt so unprotected against crime than now," said Marina Calcanio, a 30-year-old waitress in Palermo Hollywood, an upscale neighborhood where century-old homes have been converted into restaurants. "We've been robbed at gunpoint. I always carry money with me, just in case I get mugged. It's to please the robbers."

Not far away, along the Rio de la Plata, the crime wave has forced a nightclub catering to teenagers to take new measures to keep their young customers.

Teens who used to come to the Pacha club by bus were staying away in droves, afraid to be out on the streets so late. But they didn't like their parents driving them either. "It was too embarrassing," employee Claudio Suarez said.

So the club came up with a solution: a shuttle service that runs back and forth from the club to nearby plazas, where parents can pick up their children until 1 a.m.

At airports and hotels, visitors are alerted about the growing crime. Anita Maria Correa, a Chilean tourist, said she was warned in her hotel about cabs, because many tourists and even locals have been assaulted in pirate taxis.

"We're a little scared and haven't ventured off too far away from the hotel," she said.

Rosa and Nestor Romera, who have owned a drugstore on one of this city's busiest avenues for 30 years, had never given their safety a second thought--until now. Since the beginning of the year, about 300 business owners have been killed in assaults in greater Buenos Aires. An additional 500 have been wounded.

"Sure there was crime before, but never like this," Nestor Romera said. "We are prisoners in this godforsaken city."

The Romeras have invested in a state-of-the-art alarm system and security bars. On weekends, their son brings his German shepherd to scare off thugs.

"When we compared ourselves with other South American cities, we used to think we lived in a sort of paradise," Rosa Romera said. "Now, we are no different from Brazil, Venezuela or Colombia."

Last month, the government eased restrictions it had placed on banks in the wake of last year's crash. Many people withdrew their money and brought it home.

"My business is about that," said Lauria, the vault maker. "Finding ways of hiding money or jewelry in places that are invisible to criminals."

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