

Travel

Foot traffic in Buenos Aires, Argentina's San Telmo area, where the streets are lined with vendors, shops and galleries.

NAOMI R. PATTON/Detroit Free Press



South America, city and country



ALEXANDRE MENEGHINI/Associated Press

Often compared to New York, Sao Paulo is ideal for travelers not interested in packaged tours.

SAO PAULO: 20 MILLION PEOPLE — AND SAMBA — KEEP THINGS LIVELY

Two days into my five-day trip in Sao Paulo, Brazil, I asked a Brazilian man: “What’s with all the pizza joints around here?”

In South America’s largest city, with nearly 20 million people, pizza shops appeared on nearly every corner in every variety — walk-up, carry-out, dine-in, old school, new school, up-scale, low end.

My query set off a soliloquy on the virtues — the supremacy — of Brazilian pizza, owed to the lineage of Brazil’s large, 19th-Century Italian immigrant population.

This set off a friendly but serious debate between the Brazilian man and a New Yorker about whose pizza was better.

So I had the pizza at Pizzaria Nova Zi, near my hotel on Rue Fernando de Albuquerque in the city’s central district near Avenida Paulista. It was good enough to want to sample my way through the city.

But the city’s pizza only scratched the surface of the country’s rich and enigmatic history.

Brazil — where 5 million slaves were brought from Africa during the slave trade, compared to 500,000 slaves brought to the U.S. — has the largest black population outside of Africa. It was the last country to abolish slavery, in 1888.

If you go, set aside the better part of a day to take a guided tour of the Museu Afro Brasil.

The museum, with its captivating collection of nearly 5,000 modern and traditional pieces, is one of the largest museums of its kind outside the U.S.

The pieces of the collection dedicated to the Brazil’s slave trade are particularly haunting. The open hull of a ship that carried slaves as cargo has its own room.

Better still, the museum is located among a complex of museums, auditoriums and restaurants in the Parque do Ibirapuera, the Oscar Niemeyer-designed, largest park in the city.

Often compared to New York, Sao Paulo is ideal for travelers who want to avoid the trappings of packaged tours.

Lush vegetation abruptly stops as you approach the city’s favelas, or slums. Commerce thrives in areas like Jardins and Pinheiros. And, you might find yourself stepping out of a little samba club in the bohemian Vila Madelena for air at 3 a.m. on a Thursday.

BUENOS AIRES: AN HOUR OUT OF TOWN, A DAY OF HORSES AND INDULGENCE

Stories by NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Buenos Aires, Argentina, is like a Rorschach test. Depending on the angle, the picture changes.

One visitor was reminded of his native Savannah, Ga., with its palmettos.

Another found that it resembled Chicago, with high-rise neighborhoods that look an awful lot like those along Lake Shore Drive.

A couple of jet-setters said it looked like Paris, with its neoclassic French architecture.

You can’t help but be drawn in by the beautiful, walkable, cosmopolitan city, the second-largest metro area in South America after Sao Paulo.

There’s also a very rural side.

A group of us ventured an hour north, where for a day, we rode easygoing horses at Estancia Los Dos Hermanos in Zarate.

Upon arrival, Pancho and Ana Peña, owners and operators of the ranch, greeted us and presented us with a breakfast of pastries, yerba mate, juices and coffee.

Soon after breakfast came the ride. For nearly an hour, there was sauntering and occasional galloping across the farm. The horses were matched with riders according to their personalities. Riding helmets and leather riding spats were provided.

The Peñas were our guides, wearing traditional gaucho berets, kerchiefs around their necks and ornate, sheathed knives held fast by their tooled leather belts.

After the ride, we had our pick: a dip in the pool, bocce ball, foosball, futbol, volleyball, or one of the three hammocks hanging under the trees.

Or we could just sit around and wait for the bells to ring.

There was the lunch bell. Broiler trays of sizzling, grilled cuts of beef, pork and poultry were offered along with salads. There were juices, coffee, tea, bottles of Malbec wines — and perhaps a bit of Chivas Regal from Pancho Peña’s personal bottle.

A brief downpour moved the party inside, but the Peñas, with daughter Josefina, were generous and attentive.

A dessert course of chocolate and vanilla ice cream bars and fresh strawberries followed.

Miraculously, an hour or two later, the sun returned and another bell rang — dessert was here again. This time, chocolate meringue cream pie and an even more decadent strawberry tart were served, along with handmade doughnut holes served hot with powdered sugar.

We parted, literally, with sweet sorrow.

Back in the city, we could hop in a cab and get around with elementary-grade Spanish.

Many visitors to Buenos Aires tour the gravesite of Evita Peron, the former first lady of Argentina, in Recoleta, while others venture to the chic riverfront of Puerto Madero.

There’s also the tango dinner theater at El Querandi. It may be a tourist trap, but patrons will be hard-pressed not to smile.

So much time in Buenos Aires revolves around eating and drinking. There’s tray after tray of sizzling meat and bottles of Malbec wine.

At the suggestion of a Buenos Aires resident, who insisted that pizza in Argentina was the best in South America, we went to El Cuartito, an old school pizzeria, which opened in 1934.

The pizza had a medium crust, a semi-sweet tomato sauce, a thick layer of toppings under an even thicker layer of cheese and more toppings.

Like Buenos Aires, it was different and tremendous.

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NAOMI R. PATTON/Detroit Free Press

Juan Butler, a gaucho, and Estancia Los Dos Hermanos owners Ana Peña and Pancho Peña prepare to lead a horseback riding group at the ranch about an hour outside Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Language: Spanish

Currency: Peso. The U.S. dollar is strong in Argentina; U.S. \$1 = 3.97232 pesos.

(All prices below are in U.S. dollars)

HOTELS

■ Dazzler Tower Maipu 856, Buenos Aires; www.dazzlertowermaipu.com. Part of a small chain of modern, boutique hotels in the city. \$74-\$128 per night.

■ Also, try the views at the Hilton Buenos Aires on Puerto Madero Macacha Guemes 351; www.Hilton.com/BuenosAires. \$179-389 per night.

■ For complete opulence, try the Alvear Palace Hotel Avenida Alvear 1891, where you can do your money-is-no-object shopping for Versace, Gucci, Prada, and Louis Vuitton on Avenida Alvear; www.alvearpalace.com. \$490-\$580 per night.

TO DO

■ Los Dos Hermanos Estancia in Zarate at Escalada, Cuartel IV, Zarate 2800, about an hour outside Buenos Aires; www.estancialosdoshermanos.com. For rates, e-mail Ana or Pancho Peña at: cabalgatas@estancialosdoshermanos.com or anapenia8@hotmail.com.

■ El Cuartito — La Buena Pizza — in the Recoleta area at Talcahuano 937; www.galeriaelcuartito.com.ar. A medium pizza with drinks and dessert for two will cost \$10-\$20.

■ El Querandi tango dinner show at Peru 302; www.querandi.com.ar. Dinner and the show is \$29; and just a show costs \$18 with champagne and a cheese and meat plate.

■ Malba/Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, Avenida Pres. Figueroa Alcorta 3415; www.malba.org.ar. A collection of Latin American art dating from the early 20th Century to contemporary — and another great place for lunch. Noon- 8 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Sunday.



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Sao Paulo, Brazil

Language: Portuguese. English is spoken in most restaurants and other locations mentioned below.

Currency: Reais. The exchange rate is not great; R\$1 will get you about \$.60 U.S.

All rates below are in U.S. dollars.

HOTELS

■ For the budget-minded, the Heritage Residence Service at Rua Fernando Albuquerque, 122 in the Consolação district will work; www.heritageresidence.com.br. \$175-\$200.

■ If you have more to spend and want a central location, consider the Comfort Hotel Downtown at Rua Araujo 141 Consolação; www.comfortinn.com/hotel-sao-paulo-brazil-BR076. \$141-up.

TO DO

■ The Museu Afro Brasil at the Parque do Ibirapuera, Avenida Pedro Álvares Cabral. www.museuafrobrasil.org.br.

■ Museu Arte Moderna, at the Parque do Ibirapuera Avenida Pedro Álvares Cabral. www.mam.org.br. One of the best lunch buffets you’ll have in your life for around \$50.

■ Escola de Samba Perola Negra. Learn more at: www.gresperolanegra.com.br.

— NAOMI R. PATTON