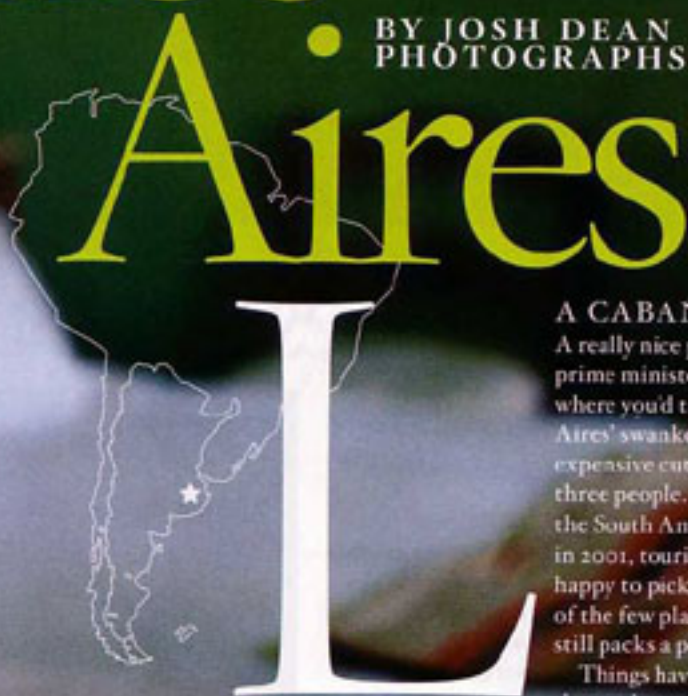


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Bienvenido a Buenos Aires

Argentina proves that the best things in life don't have to cost so much

BY JOSH DEAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEITH KING



A CABAÑA IS A NICE PLACE.

A really nice place. If you were to take your prime minister out to dinner, La Cabaña is where you'd take him. And yet, at Buenos Aires' swankiest steak house, the most expensive cut of meat is \$40, and it feeds three people. Welcome to Argentina. Since the South American giant's economy tanked in 2001, tourists have been slowly amassing, happy to pick at the starving body of one of the few places on earth where the dollar still packs a punch.

Things have rebounded considerably since the crash—people are no longer banging pots in the streets, demanding the government's ouster. But even today, with the exchange rate at about 3 pesos per dollar, the place is a steal. At the buzzing Gran Bar Danzon, my friend Jason and I paid 192 pesos (\$64) for appetizers, entrées, dessert, two bottles of mineral water, two after-dinner drinks, and the best Sauvignon Blanc on the list at this downtown restaurant and wine bar. All that in a sleek room full of beautiful girls who, inexplicably, seemed to dine largely without dates. There were pairs, groups of four and six, even one table of seven—plus, alone at the bar, an attractive blonde who put away a huge slab of Argentina's renowned beef.

Porteños (as Buenos Aires natives are known) come to dance and drink at Palermo, a sprawling, rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of century-old renovated low-rise buildings packed with stores that hawk haute cuisine, designer clothing, and modern furniture. It's also home to Bo-Bo, a boutique hotel that landed on last year's *Condé Nast Traveler* "Hot List" even though its rooms cost less than \$100 a night. It was Bo-Bo's excellent concierge, an attractive woman in a brown suit, who, when I asked where to pick up a bottle

of Malbec to take home, directed me to Terroir, whose owner sent me packing with a receipt for an entire case of wine that showed up—bubble wrapped and with a handle—at Bo-Bo the next morning.

Argentineans have a reputation for arrogance, but this was the sort of genial hospitality I ran into everywhere—in bars, at dirt-floored restaurants in the countryside, and at Paragonia Sur, a narrow restaurant in the ramshackle La Boca neighborhood, just blocks from La Bombonera, home of the Boca Juniors soccer team (where Diego Maradona began and ended his legendary career). Determined to see a Boca game before we left the country, my friends and I headed to Paragonia for brunch. When the server heard of our plan to buy scalped tickets, he said, "Let me see what I can do." An hour later when the bill came, he handed us three tickets for seats at field level. They cost us 20 bucks apiece.

La Bombonera was packed with supporters who danced, cheered, and sang for the entire match. I've been to hundreds of sporting events and have never seen anything resembling the organized chaos of a Boca game. Although our section had seats, sitting was discouraged, and in the general-admission section, surrounded by chain-link fences to prevent rioting, fans couldn't sit if they wanted to—there were no seats. At times, the place was so loud that the stadium seemed to be shaking on its foundation.

My only complaint: no steak. Or wine. Luckily, I had one more day.



CHOW TIME An old gaucho and Alejandra Martinez await a dinner of asado, Argentinean barbecue.

The Best of Buenos Aires

Sleep

BOUTIQUE Buenos Aires' answer to the designer-hotel rage crisscrossing the globe is **Hotel Bo-Bo**. Each of the seven rooms in this refurbished early-20th-century mansion celebrates a different artistic period—Art Deco, minimalist, and, our favorite, Pop, with a balcony overlooking the Palermo district. Rooms start at a paltry \$80 per night. bobohotel.com **PALATIAL** The **Alvear Palace** is an exercise in opulence, with sweeping marble staircases, butlers, and Hermès toiletries. You'll shell out more here, but you also might bump into Prince Charles. \$440 to \$3,700 per night. alvearpalace.com

Eat

STEAK Charles de Gaulle, Walt Disney, Henry Kissinger, Fidel Castro, Louis Armstrong, and the last, oh, 27 Argentinean presidents have all eaten here. It's called **La Cabaña**, and some have said it's the best



KICKING IT No trip to Buenos Aires is complete without a Boca Juniors game.

steak house in the world. 011-54-11-4814-0001, lacabana.com.ar **FUSION** A recent influx of international chefs (from New York City to Norway) is responsible for a welcome wave of innovative fusion joints. **Olsen**, housed in a former warehouse, stands out for its surprising Scandinavian fare. 011-54-11-4776-7677 **BARBECUE** Not every *parilla* (the Argentinean equivalent of a Southern barbecue joint) can claim the members of U2 as favorite customers. **El Obrero**, in the working-class Italian district of La Boca, can, and it's so inexpensive that you can feed a family of four here for \$12. 011-54-11-4362-9912

Drink

Millon is a restored 1920s mansion-turned-restaurant/bar where the beautiful people relax with Pisco sours and Quilmes cervezas. 011-54-11-4815-9925, million.com.ar