



BUENOS AIRES: FADED GLORY

With a Brief Side-Trip to Even More Faded Montevideo

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	12,100,000	Calcutta, Beijing, Cairo
Urbanized Area* Population	11,200,000	Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Delhi
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	1,070	Paris, Nagoya, Rhine-Ruhr-Wupper (Essen-Dusseldorf)
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	2,773	
Population per Square Mile	10,500	Hamburg, Johannesburg-Soweto, Porto Alegre, Sapporo
Population per Square Kilometer	4,000	
Capital of Argentina 11 th largest urbanized area in the world		
Urbanized Area Atlas: <i>Guia T Capital Federal Gran Buenos Aires</i> , purchase at newsstands (174 maps)		
*Continuously built up area		

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Miss McCafferty, the sixth grade teacher, required each of us to prepare a report on a South American country. My friend Norman Wilder chose Chile and I chose Argentina. We competed intensely in our efforts to learn about and demonstrate the superiority of our chosen nations. Perhaps that was one of the reasons for my particular interest in Buenos Aires.

But it was decades before I got around to actually visiting Buenos Aires. My daughter, Deanna and I had planned to set out on our third metropolitan tour together, to Buenos Aires. Previously, I had given her a whirlwind tour of Paris, and she had, with her friends Lilia and Aricelli, given me a tour of the Mexico City they had known long before me. This trip would be the first for both of us.

It was barely a week since 911. I rather expected that she would cancel and decided that if she did, I would postpone my trip as well. But once the planes were flying again, she showed no hesitancy, so why should I?

We met in Atlanta, her flight coming from Denver and mine from St. Louis. We are engaged in a competition to see who can get to all of the continents first. We were, at this time, tied at five. I had planned to lean forward upon landing in Buenos Aires, to at least claim the sixth continent first, but forgot. So we are now tied at six continents each, and the question is who will get to

Antarctica first.¹ I had been particularly interested in visiting Buenos Aires at this time because of the recent devaluation and the expectation that a bad economy was going to get much worse.

As we landed at the airport, I saw the favelas that I had not expected to see in Buenos Aires. They were not as large as one might see in Brazilian urban areas, or the much larger shantytowns in Mexico City. But they were there, near this city that had been capital of the world's third or fourth strongest economy in the 1930s. But that was before the populist levelers took over, in the form of Juan Peron and his successors, who set about consuming the seeds of wealth creation. The result, of course, was not more affluence, but an embarrassed, humbled country that may be the only nation to have ever transitioned from first world to second world status. Such are the ultimate fruits of the politics of envy.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about Argentina is how American or Western European it looks. This is Spain. But it is also Italy, it is Germany, and it is virtually the same ethnic recipe that has created Anglo-America and Canada. Hotel clerks may speak English with an Italian or German accent. One can only wonder how a nation so similar to the United States in so many respects has managed to do so poorly. I have my theories, but those are for another time.

We rented our car and began driving on the modern motorway (autopista) toward the central city. The city of Buenos Aires is, like Mexico City, Washington and Brasilia, a federal district, distinct from the provinces that make up the rest of the country. Like central cities around the world, **population is declining in Buenos Aires**. Since 1947, the central city of Buenos Aires (coterminous with the federal district) has fallen from 3,000,000 to 2,800,000 residents (2001 census), virtually all of them in the last decade. Since 1947, all of the 7,500,000 residents added in the metropolitan area have been in the suburbs. **Population density** in the city is more than 38,000 per square mile, **drops** to 14,500 in the inner suburbs and below 5,000 in the outer suburbs of the urbanized area.

Sector	Population	Area in Square Miles	Area in KM2	Population per Square Mile	Population per KM2
Capital Federal (Buenos Aires)	2,904,000	77	200	37,638	14,521
Inner Suburbs	5,202,000	360	932	14,463	5,580
Outer Suburbs	3,094,000	633	1,641	4,886	1,885
Urbanized Area	11,200,000	1,070	2,773	10,467	4,038
Estimated for 1998 by Demographia based upon INDEC information, physical inspection and review of maps.					

¹ My supreme embarrassment occurred in 1982, when I took my three children, then 16, 14 and 11 to Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories of Canada. I had made quite a point of having reached further north, at least on the ground, than any other family member, when we got to Hay River, on the southern shore of the lake (the drive from Edmonton is highly recommended). Jeffery went out onto a spit on the lake and had me take a picture of him. Perhaps 50 miles south of Hay River, on the way back to Edmonton, he told me that he had been farther north than anyone in the family, and reminded me of the picture. It was his theory that, if the lake shore was east to west, which it is in Hay River, and if he went onto a spit extending into the lake that I did not, then he had been further north than I. Since that time, I have on at least three occasions been farther north on land. But somehow these seem hollow victories. Jeffrey wins.

Buenos Aires is an urban area on the decline. There are certainly of precincts of prosperity, which will, of course, be found in nearly all urban areas, even the poorest ones. This is especially evident in the high-class high-rise residential areas in the northwest quarter, such as along Ave. Santa Fe and there are the impressive new and prosperous neighborhoods in the western and southwestern suburbs where one can find billboards advertising lots for subdividing and housing developments. We visited an attractive, expensive new housing development in the far northwest southwest suburb of Pilar. Pilar and other western suburbs are accessed by the Rúa Panamericana, which eventually reaches Rosario, Argentina's third largest city. This toll motorway is among the widest in the world, rivaling or exceeding the MacDonal Cartier in Toronto, the A-6 in Paris or Interstate 75 in Atlanta. It appeared to be at least 16 lanes on four roadways, and perhaps 18 --- it is not always easy to tell at the speeds Argentines (and visiting Americans) drive in 130 kilometer per hour (81 mile per hour) speed zones. The Buenos Aires area may have the highest speed limits in the western hemisphere, and for that matter the southern.

Like so many other urban areas, it is in the core of Buenos Aires that the best dining, at least by reputation, is to be found. There was dinner at the Puerto Madero Porte Madera, a long row of renovated warehouses adjacent to the former ship basins on the north side of downtown. The problem here was choosing from the many well-appointed menu-rich restaurants. But, there was plenty of room for Americans seeking an early dinner at 8:00 p.m., as the locals seem to arrive at 9:00 p.m. or later. Here also there appears to be the construction that denotes a prosperity eluding the rest of the urban area, with high-rise buildings residential buildings under construction in the reclaimed port land. The culinary highlight, however of Buenos Aires is its fast food --- "empanadas," tasty meat or otherwise filled pastry. To this day, the magnetic advertisement for *Gourmet* empanadas hangs in my library, though they seem not inclined to keep their 15 minute delivery pledge (telephone 4813-3888).

But overall, things are not well in Buenos Aires. Underneath nearby motorway bridges, it is not unusual to the dispossessed living in cardboard. There is the shocking state of the Constitution Railway Station, at the east end of the marvelous ceremonial boulevard Ave. 9 de Julio. The station appears ready to collapse and would surely have been long ago condemned in many nations. But here, it remains in service. "Amshacks" would be an improvement.

Many of the downtown streets to the east of Ave. 9 de Julio are dark and dreary, canyons of medium rise buildings reminiscent of downtown St. Louis, Cleveland or Detroit when they were at their very worst. Yet downtown has its favored quarter, to the northeast and just to the south of Retiro Station at the west end of Ave. 9 de Julio. There, the leading companies have buildings of modern design similar to those found in more prosperous central business districts elsewhere. All in all, downtown is large, with employment levels similar to that of Chicago's Loop.



The residential districts on the south side of the city are far less well off; with many lower middle-income single-family dwellings that speak volumes about the nation's scant prosperity. Then along the ring roadway (which is the city and district boundary except on the east side, and of course the north side, which is on the Rio de la Plata) there are favelas, not large ones, but favelas nonetheless. In the green spaces along the autopistas will also be found the informal shantytowns, such as in suburban Avellanada, to the southeast of the city, on the way to La Plata.

At the same time, there are impressive sights. The Avenida 9 de Julio is one of the most attractive ceremonial boulevards in the world, and has been called the world's widest, a title claimed by others of chamber of commerce persuasion elsewhere. The obelisk at the Plaza de Republic that looks like the Washington Monument is not accessible for climbing, which didn't

bother me a bit, but disappointed Deanna. We walked around the square adjacent to the Pink House (the presidential palace) as Deanna successfully bridged the gap between Spanish and Portuguese with Brazilian tourists. Three months later, people died in riots on the same spot.

Far to the south, in the metropolitan area, but outside the urbanized area (continuously built up area) is the capital of the state of Buenos Aires, which surrounds the Federal District. La Plata's street pattern is meticulously planned, following a unique numbering system. Streets radiate in eight directions from the central square (Plaza Moreno), adjacent to which is the large cathedral. Avenida Circumvalacion surrounds the central part of the city. Within the rounded square street pattern, east-west streets are numbered from 1 to 30, while north-south streets are numbered 33 to 72. Diagonal streets are numbered from 72 up. Outside the circumferential boulevard other numbering systems are employed. This is a real engineer's city. It is not, however, a prosperous place, appearing largely to reflect to gray prosperity Buenos Aires suburbs, such as La Matanza.

But if Buenos Aires seems to be a city on the decline, close-by Montevideo (capital of Uruguay) is a city in collapse. A recommended side-trip from Buenos Aires is the ferry to Montevideo, across the Rio de la Plata. A round trip can be made in a day. In Montevideo, one sees architectural neglect, doubtless the result of economic difficulties, that is more intense and wider spread than in Buenos Aires. One also finds a people every bit as polite and accommodating as Argentines in this capital of Uruguay. And the matte is worth sampling in both places.

But back to Buenos Aires. Among those inclined toward free markets, the Buenos Aires public transport system --- at least parts of it --- is exemplary. Bus services are comprehensive and earn a profit. They are privately operated by route associations. The suburban railway system has been privatized and performs much better financially than before.  not because ridership has grown so much, but rather because the private owners have an incentive to collect the fares (something that eludes government owners). The subway has also been privatized. *Jane's Urban Transport* indicates that more than 50 percent of travel is on the buses and another five percent is on the subway and suburban rail system. 

Even so, however, this public transport system, one of the most comprehensive to be found in any middle income world urban area, does not provide automobile competitive service except within and to the core, mirroring the situation in Mexico City, Sao Paulo and throughout Western Europe. Trips from points in the eastern suburbs to the western suburbs can take as long as travel from the eastern suburbs of Paris to the southern, or the eastern suburbs of Atlanta to the southern (which means that many trips are simply not practical). This does not aid an urban area in need of improved affluence --- Remy Prud'homme and associates at the University of Paris have shown that transport access is an important contributor to metropolitan prosperity.

It might be better if Buenos Aires were stuck in time. But it may be regressing, like its nearby sister, Montevideo. Argentina bears strong witness to the fact that prosperity once achieved does not become automatic and can be lost. An enduring political tradition that has too often included gross misgovernment (and worse) has had its effect. No city, however grand could have been immune to the results. Now, both the nation and the urban area must fight a losing battle to keep its young who have the resources to move away from doing so. But Argentina and Buenos Aires are not without hope. It is not impossible that wiser leadership and a wiser electorate might succeed in turning it around. But it will take realism, not romanticism, pragmatism, not ideology. *Evita* may be good theatre. But it is dreadful politics.



Newstand and Deanna (purchasing the *Guía T*) in Downtown Buenos Aires



Avenida 9 de Julio, Looking East



Opera House



Avenida 9 de Julio from the East



The Favored Quarter of Downtown (Near Retiro Station)



Downtown Street



Skyline from the Montevideo Ferry



The Pink House



Favela in Avellaneda



Cathedral in La Plata



Residential Neighborhood: City of Buenos Aires Southern Sector



Eastern Suburban Neighborhood: Almirante Brown



Downtown Montevideo (Uruguay)



Government Building, Downtown Montevideo

By Wendell Cox

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