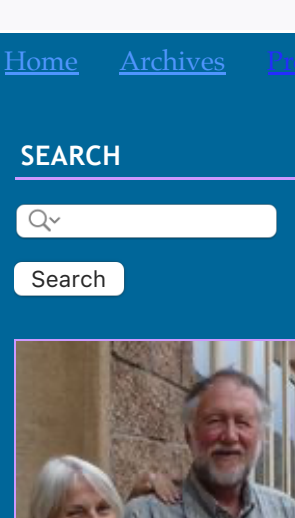
SEARCH

Search



RECENT POSTS

- EUROPE 2024: LUCCA, ITALY
- EUROPE 2024: BOLOGNA, ITALY
- EUROPE 2024: LAGO GARDA, ITALY
- EUROPE 2024: CHUR & THE BERNINA EXPRESS
- EUROPE 2024: ZURICH, SWITZERLAND
- EUROPE 2024: BASEL, SWITZERLAND
- EUROPE 2024: A TRIP ON THE RHINE
- EUROPE 2024: AMSTERDAM
- EUROPE 2024: EDINBURGH
- CHANGING THE WAY WE DO DISPATCHES

ABOUT

CATEGORIES

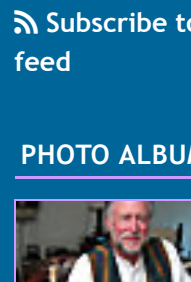
- Articles, Essays (4)
- Books (6)
- Comment (2)
- Cuentos/Stories (7)
- Food and Drink (3)
- Kino House Construction (5)
- RENTALS (3)
- Sailing (1)
- Tips for Living & Traveling in Mexico (4)
- Travel (147)
- Wilkes & Kinsman on the Beach (5)

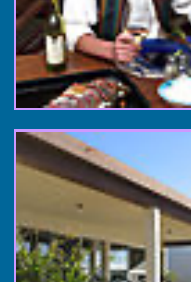
Blog powered by Typepad
Member since 11/2004

Subscribe to this blog's feed

PHOTO ALBUMS

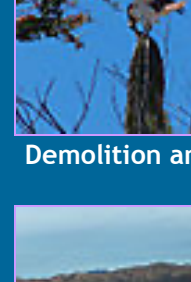
00 - Perry & Carolyn

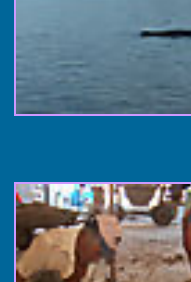

01 - Early days in Kino

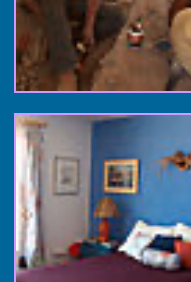

02 - Our Old House

03 - Sea Wall

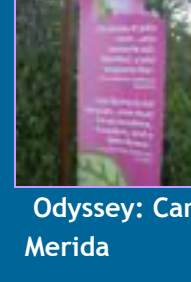
04 - Demolition and...


05 - House and more, January 2005

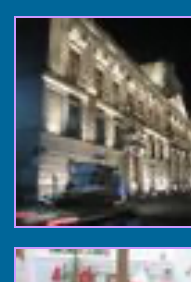

06 - House as of April 2005

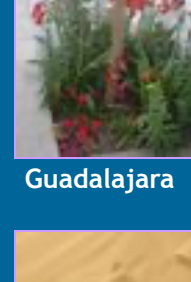

07 - House as of July 2005

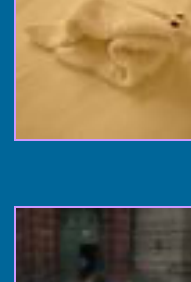
08 - House as of March 2006

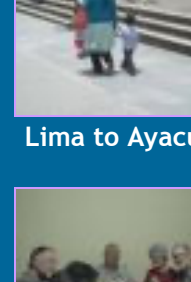

09 - Odyssey: Cancún to Merida

10 - Odyssey: Merida to Veracruz


11 - Odyssey: Mexico City


12 - Odyssey: Morelia to Guadalajara


13 - S. American Odyssey: San Diego to Lima


14 - S. American Odyssey: Lima to Ayacucho

15 - T'Day in Ayacucho -- and more!

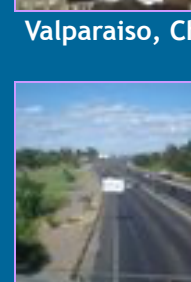
16 S. American Odyssey: What In the World...

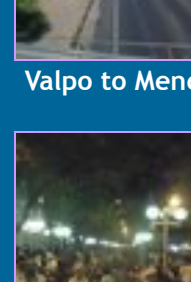
17 - S. American Odyssey: Overnight to Lima

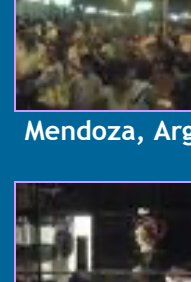
18 - S. American Odyssey: Street Life in Ayacucho

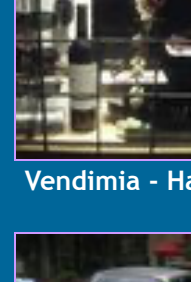
19 - S. American Odyssey: Eating well in Peru

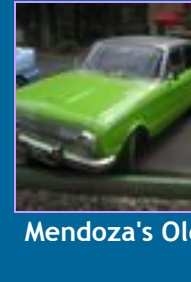
20 - S. American Odyssey: The $100 Apartment


21 - S. American Odyssey: Ayacucho to Huancayo

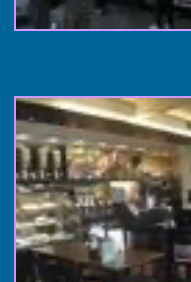

22 - S. American Odyssey: Huancayo to Lima

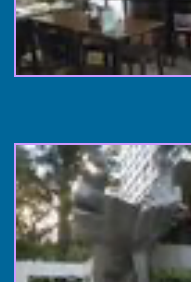

23 - S. American Odyssey: Peruvian Culture, Art...

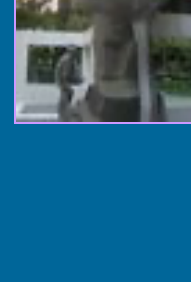

24 - S. American Odyssey: Santiago, Chile


25 - S. American Odyssey: Valparaiso, Chile

26 - S. American Odyssey: Valpo to Mendoza


27 - S. American Odyssey: Mendoza, Argentina


28 - S. American Odyssey: Vendimia - Harvest, Wine


29 - S. American Odyssey: Mendoza's Old Cars

30 - S. American Odyssey: Córdova, Condors, & Art

31 - S. American Odyssey: ¡Hola, Buenos Aires!

32 - Ciao, Buenos Aires

« February 2010 | Main | May 2010 »

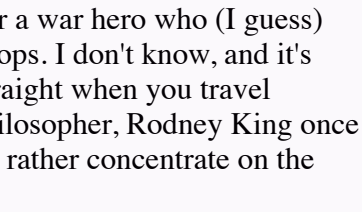
2 entries from March 2010

March 25, 2010

South American Odyssey: Córdova, Condors, and Art

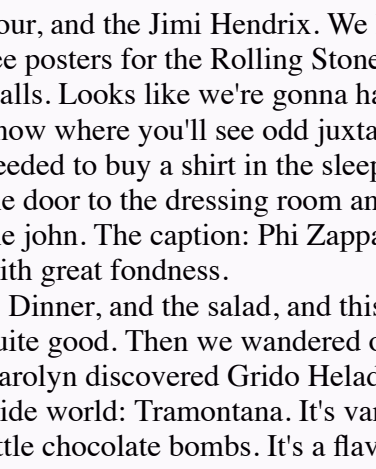
After wonderful Mendoza, the next stop on our meanderings would be Córdova, although it's not really on the way to our final South American stop, Buenos Aires. It's just that it sounded like one of those places you shouldn't miss if you're in the area. To get to Córdova, you travel south of the Central Sierras – a range of low mountains unrelated to the Andes – and then go north. We decided to break up the ten-hour bus trip by stopping over in San Luis, a small city along the way. Six hours on the bus (the distance from San Luis to Córdova) is pretty much the limit for my bony butt, if I have a choice. Sometimes you don't really have many choices in the matter because there may not be an acceptable layover spot along the way. But this time we did, and we decided to take it.

Most descriptions of San Luis highlight it as the jumping-off point for various nearby attractions, such as Las Quijadas desert park (for dinosaur bones and footprints) and various spas. None seemed to gush over the town itself. They were right. But being easily amused, we found enough to keep us there for two days. On our first night, we walked off toward the Plaza Pringles area in search of dinner. The Plaza was named for a war hero who (I guess) braved enemy fire to bring potato chips to the troops. I don't know, and it's really hard to keep all the different war heroes straight when you travel through various countries. As the well-known philosopher, Rodney King once said, "Can't we all just get along?" Personally, I'd rather concentrate on the wine and dinner.



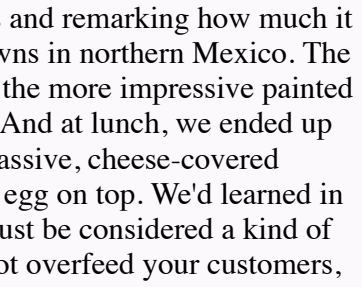
So we wander around the Plaza, trying to avoid the massive flocks of birds bombing everybody below, and settle on the Morrison Restaurant, with its dark-wood, pub-like atmosphere. We assume it's named for some English pub. I look over the entrees while Carolyn scans the salads. She finds that her choices include the Jim Morrison, the Fab Four, and the Jimi Hendrix. We look up and see posters for the Rolling Stones, The Who, and other 60s rock bands on the walls. Looks like we're gonna have a rock-n-roll salad tonight! You never know where you'll see odd juxtapositions on your travels. Back in the 1970s, I needed to buy a shirt in the sleepy Mexican town of Aguascalientes. I opened the door to the dressing room and there was a poster of Frank Zappa sitting on the john. The caption: Phi Zappa Krappa. I remember those irreverent days with great fondness.

Dinner, and the salad, and this time an Argentine beer, turned out to be quite good. Then we wandered off in search of ice cream. That's when Carolyn discovered Grido Helados, and her new favorite flavor in the whole wide world: Tramontana. It's vanilla with swirls of caramel, and laced with little chocolate bombs. It's a flavor to remember. I couldn't resist the one called Quinotos de Whisky, and I was not disappointed.

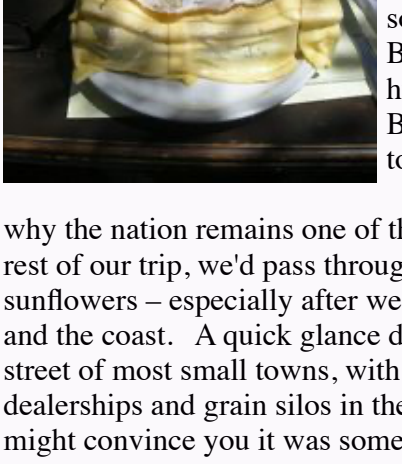


We spent the next day wandering the dusty streets of San Luis and remarking how much it reminded us of towns in northern Mexico. The church had one of the more impressive painted ceilings I've seen. And at lunch, we ended up with a typically massive, cheese-covered sandwich, with an egg on top. We'd learned in Mendoza that it must be considered a kind of Argentine sin to not overfeed your customers, so we'd only ordered one sandwich to share. But even that was too much. We took a big hunk of it back to eat on the bus the next day. But of course, we forgot it in our morning rush to the station.

Central Argentina is farming country. It's why the nation remains one of the major 'bread baskets to the world.' For the rest of our trip, we'd pass through vast areas of croplands –corn, soy, sunflowers – especially after we left Córdova and got closer to the Río Paraná and the coast.



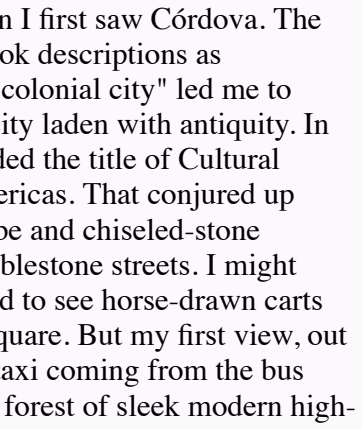
A quick glance down the main street of most small towns, with farm machine dealerships and grain silos in the background, might convince you it was somewhere in the US heartland. One difference would be the occasional horse-drawn cart. On the way to Córdova, we passed through a small city of high-rise buildings, called Río Quarto (Fourth River), that guidebooks didn't even bother to mention. Soon we crossed the Río Tercero, then the Río Segundo, and Río Primero. For a people and a language so filled with passion, I was surprised at such prosaic names.



I was underwhelmed, maybe even a bit disappointed, when I first saw Córdova. The name and guidebook descriptions as "Argentina's most colonial city" led me to believe that it's a city laden with antiquity. In 2006, it was awarded the title of Cultural Capital of the Americas. That conjured up images of old adobe and chiseled-stone buildings, and cobblestone streets. I might have even expected to see horse-drawn carts around the main square. But my first view, out the windows of a taxi coming from the bus station, revealed a forest of sleek modern high-rise apartment and condo buildings, wide streets, and traffic. Lots of traffic.

We found accommodations in an uncharming, but clean and serviceable hotel. After a short nap (one of the pleasures of retirement), we stepped out to see if we could find the heart of the city that inspires such lofty praise.

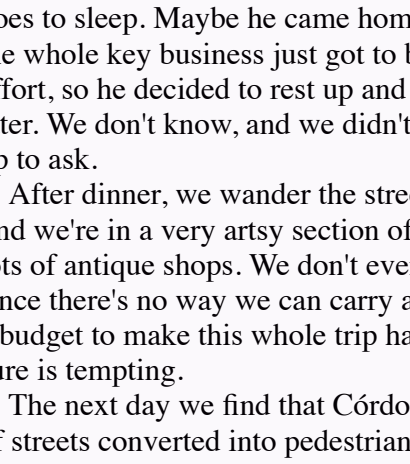
About two blocks away, we sat down to a fine dinner at "La Niña e La Pancha," on the upstairs balcony overlooking the street below. Dinner begins with (what else?) a bottle of very good Los Arboles Malbec from Godoy Cruz, Mendoza, and a basket of home made bread. As we wait for our order to arrive, we note the difference in sound between the diesel buses passing below (loud) and the electric ones (almost silent). We're in an area with lots of universities, and we see students walking below from streetlight to streetlight. One even rides by on a unicycle (!).



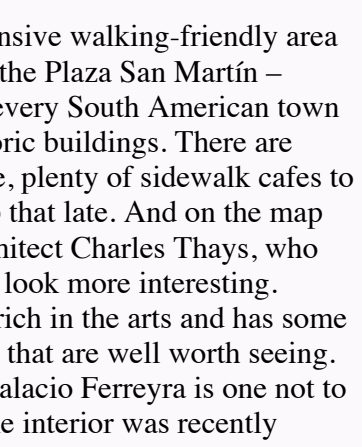
Carolyn asks me to pass the camera: there's an old man dressed in grey across the street who's standing at a door fishing for (we guess) his key in his pocket. Then he starts looking at the ground around him, as if he's dropped it. He stoops over and it appears that he's getting down on his knees to look for it, but then he just lays on the ground in front of the door and goes to sleep. Maybe he came home drunk and the whole key business just got to be too much effort, so he decided to rest up and try again later. We don't know, and we didn't wake him up to ask.

After dinner, we wander the streets a bit and find we're in a very artsy section of town, with lots of antique shops. We don't even dare to look much past the window glass since there's no way we can carry anything else with us. Also we're on kind of a budget to make this whole trip happen. But what we see in the windows sure is tempting.

The next day we find that Córdova has an extensive walking-friendly area of streets converted into pedestrian-ways around the Plaza San Martín – there's a Plaza San Martín, or Bolivar, in almost every South American town and city. This district also includes the main historic buildings. There are richly decorated churches and galleries to explore, plenty of sidewalk cafes to enjoy, and a hopping nightlife – if we can stay up that late. And on the map we see a very large park designed by French Architect Charles Thays, who did the one in Mendoza. Things suddenly start to look more interesting.

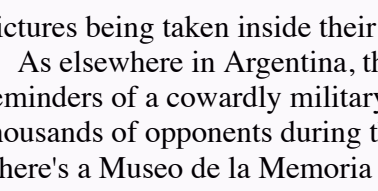


Córdova is rich in the arts and has some large museums that are well worth seeing. The classical Palacio Ferreyra is one not to miss. Part of the interior was recently remodeled with a modernist theme that's a bit hit-or-miss, but its extensive permanent collection and rotating exhibits of major Argentine artists reward the visitor. And the also-modernist Museo Emilio Caraffa (MEC) contains more of the excellent works that have made the Córdova area famous as Argentina's art center – including the massive piece by Luis Felipe Noé, that was chosen to represent Argentina at the 2009 Venice Bieniale. Unlike most US museums, the Argentines don't object to pictures being taken inside their museums, as long as no flash is used.



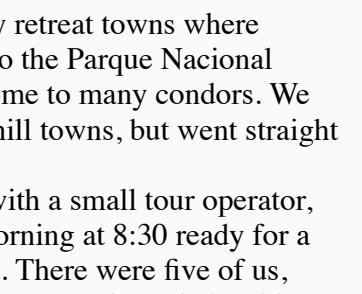
As elsewhere in Argentina, there are many reminders of a cowardly military that murdered thousands of opponents during the 1970s. There's a Museo de la Memoria in a space formerly used for torture. The military kidnapped people, murdered them, and gave their children away to others. The entire country is still trying to deal with the excessive horror and madness of those years, and public remembrances are common.

Soon we discover there's much more to Córdova than just the city. The nearby Sierra Central contain numerous sights, including Alta Gracia (one of Che Guevara's boyhood homes), Villa General Belgrano (home to survivors of the sunken WWII German battleship Graf Spee), and numerous arty retreat towns where Córdovans enjoy spending weekends. There's also the Parque Nacional Quebrada del Condorito, a small canyon that's home to many condors. We didn't bother with the many small and charming hill towns, but went straight for the condors.

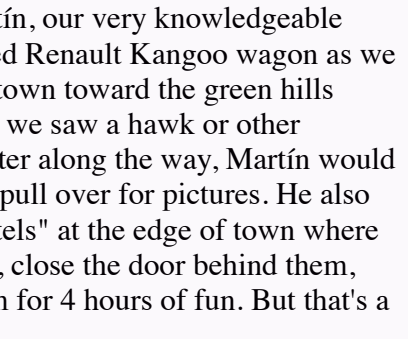


We signed on with a small tour operator, and met up one morning at 8:30 ready for a long day of hiking. There were five of us, including Martín, our very knowledgeable guide, in his red Renault Kangoo wagon as we headed out of town toward the green hills beyond. When we saw a hawk or other interesting critter along the way, Martín would identify it and pull over for pictures. He also pointed out one of the more popular "love hotels" at the edge of town where couples pull their car into a numbered garage, close the door behind them, and step into the adjacent well-equipped room for 4 hours of fun. But that's a different tour.

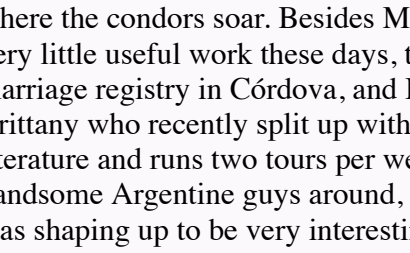
We arrive at the park's Visitor Center and begin our trek to the canyon where the condors soar. Besides Martín, our guide, and Carolyn and I, who do very little useful work these days, there was Teresa, who works at the marriage registry in Córdova, and Isabel, a young French agronomist from Brittany who recently split up with her German boyfriend. Martín teaches literature and runs two tours per week. I ask Isabel if she's noticed all the handsome Argentine guys around, and she smiles coyly. Our little tour group was shaping up to be very interesting.



The sendero (path or trail) is a 2 1/2 hour hike over rocky-grassy pampas for about 7 kilometers before dropping to the edge of the quebrada (gorge) that channels the winds needed for the condors to soar. Along the way, Martín points out trails of leaf-cutter ants carrying veggies back to the hive. They maintain a "trash area" where they pile the sticks and other debris to slowly compost back into topsoil. And there's a whole little trail network that they keep clean to transport things to the hive. It makes an interesting lace-like pattern across the pampas. Altogether, it's a pretty good system they worked out a long time ago.



We, tired and hungry, arrive at our vantage point to settle in for lunch and some serious big-bird watching. Across the gorge from us there's a favorite condor hangout area, almost inaccessible to anything other than condors and vultures. We could make out, with some difficulty, a few of the great birds resting on rock perches in shaded areas below the cliffs. And Martín pointed out a small spring-fed pool area high in the rocks, where the birds go to wash off.



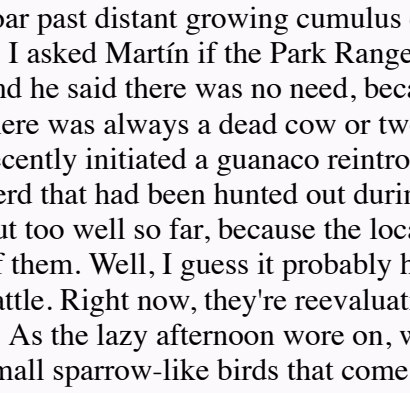
Condors have considerable white areas across their backs, and are not easy to see against a mottled background. But then, one would spread its wings, lift into the air and soar down the canyon on the building afternoon breeze. Usually we saw the shadow first, sweeping over the rocky canyonland below, and then we caught the condor in flight as it worked its way upward into the sky far above us, where it was easy to lose again, a black speck against the deep azure blue. With luck, it would soar past distant growing cumulus clouds that promised an afternoon shower.

I asked Martín if the Park Rangers put out dead animals for the condors, and he said there was no need, because, with all the nearby cattle ranches, there was always a dead cow or two out there to clean up. Also, the park recently initiated a guanaco reintroduction program to replace the original herd that had been hunted out during the 1930s. But that effort hadn't worked out too well so far, because the local hungry puma population had eaten most of them. Well, I guess it probably helped keep the pumas away from the cattle. Right now, they're reevaluating what to do about the guanaco program.

As the lazy afternoon wore on, we sat on our rocky perch feeding the local small sparrow-like birds that come to pester the hikers, and marveling at the condors overhead. Flocks of small beautiful butterflies drifted by on the breeze. Groups of Argentine tourists, mostly young professionals from Buenos Aires, shared our spot, and it was interesting to hear their distinctive Italianate 'porteño' Spanish. Martín, ever observant, pointed out a pair of small colorful eagles in a cave on a nearby rocky face. They'd take turns soaring out to look for lunch. Pairs of vultures would land on the rocky peak just above them.

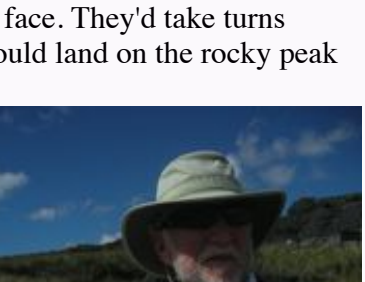
After lazing about for awhile, it was time to begin our trek back to the car. We paused at various viewpoints along the way, saw a small toad hop across our path, and a small garter snake disappear into the tall grass. We stopped to rinse off at a small, cold, spring-fed stream. Martín pointed out the water puddles left in rocky depressions during the rainy season. The water, warmed by the sun, is home to various small creatures that spend their time eating and breeding, to then provide an important food source for migrating birds – maybe even those long-ranging robins and other birds that come to brighten the Northern Hemisphere every Spring.

During the car ride back to Córdova somebody (probably me) brought up the subject of politics, and soon Martín and Teresa were in a rapid-fire discussion in the front that none of us sitting in the back seat could follow. So I turned to ask Isabel if everything is going well in France these days, and she answers, "Oh, non! Ah do not lack Sarkozy. Ah half thee paper to pruuv ah deed not vote for heem!" Ah, politics! There's no better way in the world to start a spirited discussion!



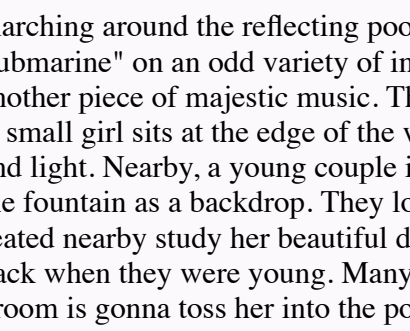
Back in town, we attend the opening of a sculpture exhibit at the new and modern Paseo del Buen Pastor, along with many of the city's truly 'beautiful people.' I am standing on one side of a particularly challenging piece of work and there's a lady studying it from the other side. After a bit, she looks at me, raises one eyebrow and grimaces as if to say, "Whatever…." I smile, also unable to fully comprehend the artist's intention. But there are other pieces of sculpture – many others – of varying quality, that I'd happily have around the house. The arts scene in and around Córdova is truly impressive.

Outside, an ad-hoc kind of band begins marching around the reflecting pool/fountain and playing "Yellow Submarine" on an odd variety of instruments. The fountain roars in time with another piece of majestic music. The cacophony is wonderfully indescribable. A small girl sits at the edge of the water mesmerized by the spectacle of color and light. Nearby, a young couple is having their wedding photos taken with the fountain as a backdrop. They look like movie stars together. Old ladies seated nearby study her beautiful dress and remember those days long ago, back when they were young. Many guys (maybe even me) wonder if the groom is gonna toss her into the pool.



The night has just begun – it's only about 10:00 p.m. – so we find a sidewalk cafe to enjoy our last night in Córdova. We start off with another bottle of good red wine (cost: about US$8) and linger over dinner, watching people come and go, with a beautifully-lit über-gothic church as a backdrop. It's nice to relax, feeling all elegant, because in the morning we'll shoulder our backpacks and drag our suitcases onto another bus, like a couple of drudges, for the leg into Rosario.

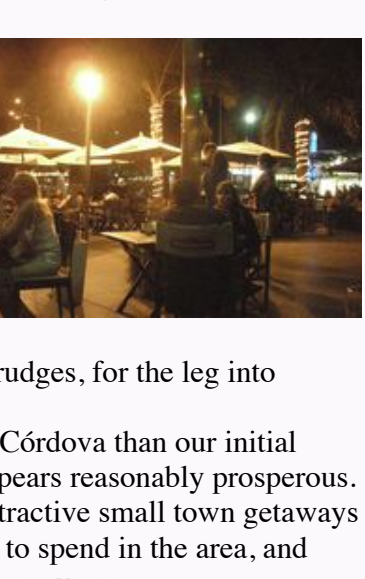
In the end, we recognize there's much more to Córdova than our initial reaction would suggest. It's a modern city that appears reasonably prosperous. There's a strong arts scene, and there are many attractive small town getaways in the nearby Sierras. We wish we had more time to spend in the area, and some day we may do that, but for now we need to move on.



Why Rosario? Again, to break up another 10-hour trip. This time, to Buenos Aires. And, who knows?, maybe we'd find something interesting to see there – like the broad Rio Paraná, one of the great rivers of the world.

It turns out that Rosario's offerings are somewhat limited. There's the Monument to the Flag – which is, uh, monumental. There's the long riverfront park, a beginning arts scene, river trips and visits to nearby islands, and pizza with beer. It's also the birthplace of Che Guevara, and current fútbol star Lionel Messi, who's now playing for Barcelona.

The truth is, we were more than a little sidetracked by our proximity to Buenos Aires, and probably didn't give Rosario enough time. We didn't even stop at the museums. Our plan was to rent an apartment for a month in Buenos Aires, and we really needed to move on since we needed to get a handle on the city before we'd know where to rent. We were anxious to move on.



On the morning of our departure, we walked just a few blocks from our hotel and got pictures of Che's family home. Then it was time to leave for the big city.

In politics, the British recently gave Argentina's Presidenta, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, the opportunity for some major saber rattling. And like any good politician, she grabbed it. You may recall that Argentina and the Brits had a disagreement in 1982 when the failing and inept dictatorship decided to distract people's attention by invading the Falkland Islands. The British quickly defeated them, and the Argentinians still feel the sting to this day.

So when the Brits recently announced they would be exploring the area for oil, Argentina's politicians made lots of noise about it – even bringing it up at the UN, and at the recent conference of Latin American and Caribbean states held in Cancún. In a sense, it's all play-acting. The Falklands/Malvinas are a sore spot for both nations just waiting to be agitated. There's really no way any Argentinian politician could have done otherwise.

Fortunately, according to a recent article in the newspaper, Argentina spends the least on its armed forces, per capita, of any South American nation – less than a fourth of what Ecuador spends. This reluctance to fund an irresponsible military may help prevent any real hostilities, and probable humiliations, from developing.

But the Malvinas thing may have come at a good time for La Presidenta, since she's been embroiled in a controversy over use of the country's currency reserves, and needed a handy diversion for public amusement. She wanted to use the reserves to pay down foreign debt, but she had a major blowup with the country's previous Treasurer over the issue and she forced him to resign. There's been tremendous opposition from various sectors who want to use the money to pay teachers, and to repair hospitals damaged in recent downpours and flooding. She was also blocked by a deeply divided Congress. Then, to everyone's surprise, she simply issued an executive order to have it done. But that was blocked by legal challenges, and the party continues.

The question remains, why, with all the problems Argentina has, is she so insistent on paying those debts now? She says it's to stabilize the currency and maintain Argentina's credit rating with the world, which would lead to lower borrowing costs and a strengthening of the economy. After she made her move, the Buenos Aires stock market went up.

But inflation remains a big problem, and nobody really believes the official annual estimates of 9% – the real rate is probably double that (or even more). Beef prices have risen to such high levels recently (up 40% since December) that the Secretary of Commerce worked with the Customs Service to slow down exports in order to pressure the beef industry for price reductions. The price of beef is a big concern in Argentina where per capita consumption is among the world's highest. But as world beef consumption rises, we may be watching the beginning of a major cultural paradigm shift here as people look for more-affordable sources of protein. Like chicken and pork. And maybe they'll even eat a few more vegetables – something of a rarity on most local menus.

Meanwhile, the government reports that "illegal labor" remained constant in the fourth quarter of 2009 and stood at 36.1% of total jobs (!). There was almost no variation from previous figures despite efforts to register more workers.

As always, there is a photo album with many more images of San Luis, Córdova, and Rosario.

Permalink Comments (0)

March 07, 2010

South American Odyssey: Mendoza, Argentina

Ciudad de Mendoza

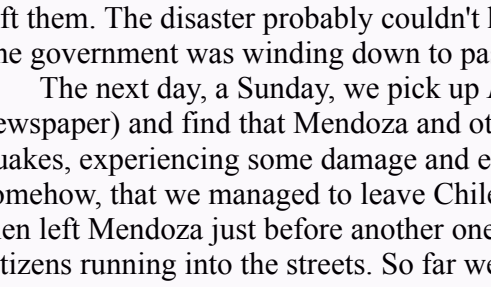
Mendoza, Argentina is the kind of place that can slow you down, that can make you stay (as we did) several more days than you had intended. It can also make you put off things that you maybe should have done at some earlier time. Like write the blog about Valparaiso, Chile before the memories are gone. Luckily, Valparaiso is a memorable place, and we have lots of photos to remind us.

So I find myself finishing up the Valparaiso blog during our last days in Mendoza so Carolyn can post it, with the pictures, the day before we move onward. We awake early and pack our gear so we're ready to catch a taxi to the bus station. Our next destination is Córdova, but we decided to break that 10-hour trip into two segments with a stop in San Luis, a small city along the way, as we work our way slowly toward Buenos Aires.

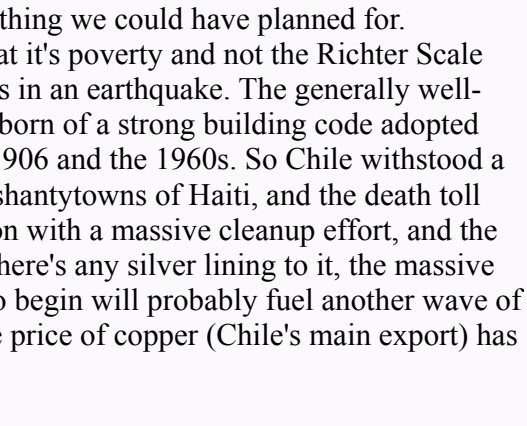
Then Carolyn checks her email. There's a New York Times story about a huge earthquake south of Santiago, Chile. It happened in the early morning after the daily papers had been printed, so there's no way to read about it on our way to San Luis. After a four-hour bus ride, we check into a modest business-men's hotel and spend much of the afternoon watching news reports about the quake. The Spanish-language broadcasts of CNN and MSNBC do a credible job of covering the unfolding crisis, and we see footage of destruction in places where we'd been just a week before. The TV Chile channel stays on the story after the international channels depart for other pastures. Helicopter footage of tsunami-swept port areas show destroyed buildings, and massive shipping containers in random piles where the water left them. The disaster probably couldn't have happened at a worse time: as one government was winding down to pass the reins of power to another.

The next day, a Sunday, we pick up *La Nacion* (a major Buenos Aires newspaper) and find that Mendoza and other parts of Argentina have also felt quakes, experiencing some damage and even a few deaths. It seems odd, somehow, that we managed to leave Chile shortly before the big quake, and then left Mendoza just before another one hit there, sending frightened citizens running into the streets. So far we, personally, haven't felt a thing. Terms like, "leading a charmed life" and "dodged another bullet" come to mind.It was only luck that managed to steer us away from those areas. Dodging earthquakes is certainly nothing we could have planned for.

An article in the paper notes that it's poverty and not the Richter Scale that determines the number of deaths in an earthquake. The generally well-engineered structures in Chile were born of a strong building code adopted after previous large earthquakes in 1906 and the 1960s. So Chile withstood a far bigger jolt than the poorly-built shantytowns of Haiti, and the death toll was far less. So now they must get on with a massive cleanup effort, and the rebuilding effort will take years. If there's any silver lining to it, the massive amount of new construction about to begin will probably fuel another wave of growth in the economy. Already, the price of copper (Chile's main export) has gone up.



But let's get back to Mendoza, its tree-lined streets, its fine restaurants, and of course its dozens of wineries. We had emailed ahead to what looked like the most interesting place in town, the B&B Plaza Italia, and were able to score a couple of open nights – one night in in a room downstairs, the next night in an upstairs room – before we'd have to move. We took it. It was pricey, but well worth it, and we were secretly hoping whoever was coming to take our room would cancel and we could extend for a few more days.



The B&B sits across the street from quiet and beautiful Plaza Italia, with its tall trees and statuary – a gift from the people of Italy. Our room, looking out onto the Plaza, was charming, bright and clean, the breakfasts were quite good, and Mercedes, the owner was a true delight. The bathroom even had an interesting little sink standing there right beside the toilet. I figured it was for washing your hair and thought I'd give it a try one day.

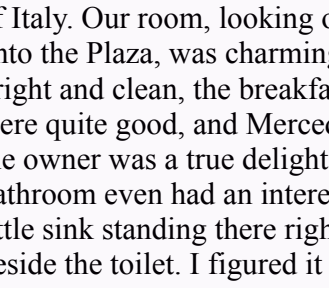
One-sided conversation:

P: "It's not for washing your hair? Well then what's it for?"

P: "It's for washing what?!"

P: "Oh my god!!"

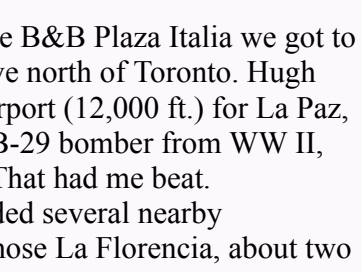
You meet some very interesting people out traveling the world, and sharing your breakfast table. At the B&B Plaza Italia we got to know Hugh and Marilyn, a retired couple who live north of Toronto. Hugh and I shared stories of landing at the very high airport (12,000 ft.) for La Paz, Bolivia. His first flight there was in a converted B-29 bomber from WW II, with oxygen breathing tubes for the passengers. That had me beat.



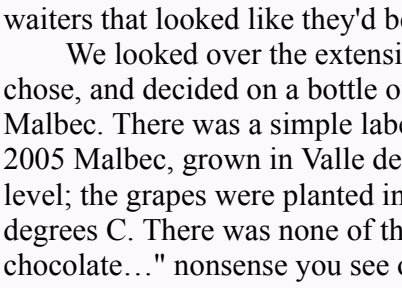
Mercedes recommended several nearby restaurants, and we chose La Florencia, about two blocks away. It looked like a very good place to acquaint ourselves with Mendoza dinner society. The sidewalk was filled with tables but it was a cool night (one of very few), and we decided to eat indoors. We'd arrived about 9:00 p.m. and the place was mostly empty, except for a few older waiters that looked like they'd been with the restaurant for a long time.

We looked over the extensive wine list, not really knowing which to chose, and decided on a bottle of their own wine, a decent Florencia Nievas Malbec. There was a simple label on the back listing all the data: It was a 2005 Malbec, grown in Valle de Uco, Mendoza, at 1000 meters above sea level; the grapes were planted in 1914, and it should be served at 16 to 18 degrees C. There was none of that "… taste of cherries, with a hint of chocolate…" nonsense you see on lots of labels. This was just good red wine. Just drink it and enjoy your dinner.

Dinner arrived. It was good and there was lots of it, in fact more than we could eat. This would be the case often – serving too much food is a common Argentine malady – and we slowly learned to order only one salad and one main dish for the two of us. We dug into dinner, and finished as much as we could. It wasn't fancy gourmet stuff, but it was good solid food. And there's definitely a need for that in the world.



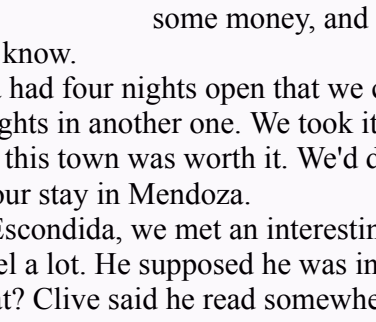
As the clock neared 10:00 p.m. the place began to fill to the rafters with older couples, young couples, even families with very little children. We guessed the little ones were given naps in the afternoon so they were ready for the late nights. Anyway, they probably need to get used to it, if they're going to grow up as Argentinians. Most nights, we found ourselves leaving restaurants as the party really got into swing, small kids and all.

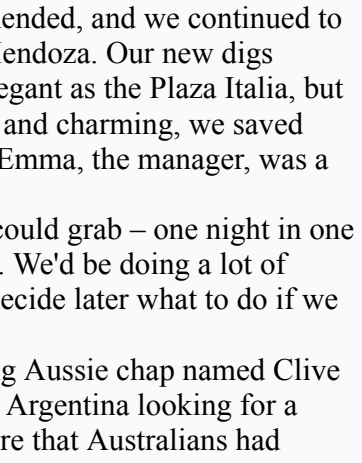


Two days later, we were out of luck, and had to move again. Nobody had cancelled, and we had to leave charming B&B Plaza Italia. We moved to La Escondida. a place which Mercedes recommended, and we continued to enjoy exploring Mendoza. Our new digs weren't quite as elegant as the Plaza Italia, but it was clean, quiet and charming, we saved some money, and Emma, the manager, was a lot of fun to get to know.

La Escondida had four nights open that we could grab – one night in one room, and three nights in another one. We took it. We'd be doing a lot of moving, but so far this town was worth it. We'd decide later what to do if we wanted to extend our stay in Mendoza.

While at La Escondida, we met an interesting Aussie chap named Clive who seems to travel a lot. He supposed he was in Argentina looking for a "bolt-hole." A what? Clive said he read somewhere that Australians had doubled the number of slang words in the English language. They're always coming up with some clever new way to express themselves. Maybe it's their convict heritage. A bolt-hole. You know, some place you can "bolt off to" if things get chancy. Hmmm. Doesn't sound like a half-bad idea to have a Plan B. It sounds even better with an Australian accent.



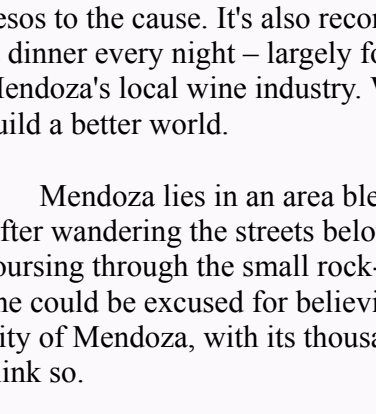


In Mendoza, it's pretty easy to go for long walks, exploring the city, forgetting about politics, and planning where to enjoy another fine dinner. With wine, of course. Just a few blocks from our latest habitation were another couple of fine restaurants: Sr. Buqué, and Azafrán. They sit beside each other on busy Avenida Sarmiento, and their sidewalk tables fill up almost every night. Even weeknights. We had dinner at each place on different nights, and wouldn't hesitate to return to both. Wandering musicians came by to fill the night with good music and we were happy to give a few pesos to the cause. It's also recommended that you drink a bottle of red wine at dinner every night – largely for health reasons – and we did our best to help Mendoza's local wine industry. We believe that 'drinking locally' helps to build a better world.

Mendoza lies in an area blessed with glacial runoff from the Andes. After wandering the streets below a canopy of leaves, and watching water coursing through the small rock-lined canals on each side of each street (!), one could be excused for believing that the water source is endless. So far the City of Mendoza, with its thousands of tall street trees to water, seems to think so.

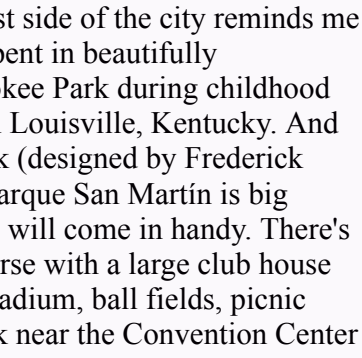
And Mendoza is also a city of parks. The huge Parque San Martín (designed by Charles Thays), on the west side of the city reminds me of summer days spent in beautifully meandering Cherokee Park during childhood visits to cousins in Louisville, Kentucky. And like Cherokee Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmstead), Parque San Martín is big enough that a map will come in handy. There's a sizable lake with a Club de Regattas, a golf course with a large club house and a few ponds, an equestrian center, a soccer stadium, ball fields, picnic areas, the list goes on. There's another ample park near the Convention Center and City Hall, and still another one near the old city center that was destroyed in an earthquake in 1861.

And then there are the five tree-filled plazas. The city is centered on the very large Plaza Independencia, which contains a large amphitheater, several smaller performance venues (with nightly jugglers, clowns, musicians playing for tips), extensive walkways, and the Museo Municipal de Arte Moderno. The other four plazas (smaller, but each occupying a city block) are a two-block walk from each of the corners of the main plaza. It all makes for a very 'civilized-feeling' city, where there's something to do almost every evening. There were signs reading, "En Verano, Mendoza está de Fiesta" – more or less, "Summer is Party-time here!"



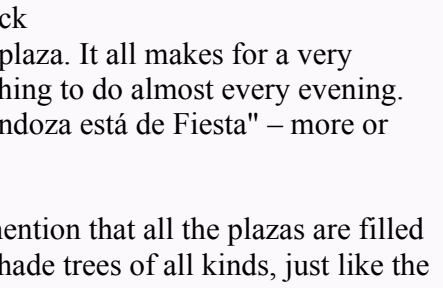
And did I mention that all the plazas are filled with large shade trees of all kinds, just like the ones that line all the streets? I don't know whose idea it was to create this oasis in the desert, but it certainly makes for an attractive city. We spent several days wandering the beautiful streets, acquainting ourselves with several of the plazas, and enjoying some wonderful dinners before even remembering to visit the nearby wineries of Maipú, where most Argentine wine seems to come from.

There are plenty of Wine Tour operators in town, but we prefer to just take a cheap bus and figure it out from there, whenever possible. So we buy a bus card and charge it up with enough pesos to last during our stay. Lonely Planet had a good tip: go to the bus stop on La Rioja, and grab the one for Maipú. Cost: AR$1.40 (US$.35) each. We start to get off the bus at a little triangular park where we see a bike rental place, but the bus driver says no, this isn't the place. We figure, what the heck, local knowledge, maybe there's a main plaza up ahead. We stay on the bus until he drops us off at no place in particular – but where his buddies happen to be renting bikes. Not enjoying being hustled, we walk back about a kilometer to the other place and rent some bikes (AR$25/US$6 each) that had seen better days. But the walk was good exercise and we were soon on our way, peddling down a pretty country lane to some wineries.



Our first stop, Bodega la Rural, producer of Rutini Wines (Expensive!), was a fairly large operation, with stainless steel tanks and all the works, but they had a genuine-looking wine cellar, and we got a good overview of the process. It was early in the day for us to be drinking, so we shared a small glass of their 2007 Museo Cabernet Sauvignon. But we enjoyed watching others have fun with the tasting ceremonies.

Then we peddled about 7 kilometers to a small place called Viña el Cerno, that makes organic wine and does no exporting at all. In fact, they produce so little wine they don't even sell much out of the Mendoza region. That sounded interesting to us. We parked our bikes under a friendly sign reading, "Bienbebidos," and headed for the open air lunch tables. Soon we had large platters of food in front of us, served family style. One platter was filled with grilled beef, pork, and chicken and slices of fresh-baked bread. The other was full of vegetables. And we each got a glass of wine, of course, to go with it. After all that riding, it was time to eat. After the tour, we headed back to drop off the bikes and catch the city bus back to Mendoza.



And then there are The Falcons of Mendoza. The Ford Falcons, that is. Ford must have sold more early 1960s Falcons – sedans, station wagons, pickups – here than anywhere else in the world, and most of them still seem to be on the road. Maybe they manufactured them in Argentina. Or maybe Ford sold the factory to someone who kept producing them here. I don't know, but the Ford and Falcon nameplates are still on most of them.

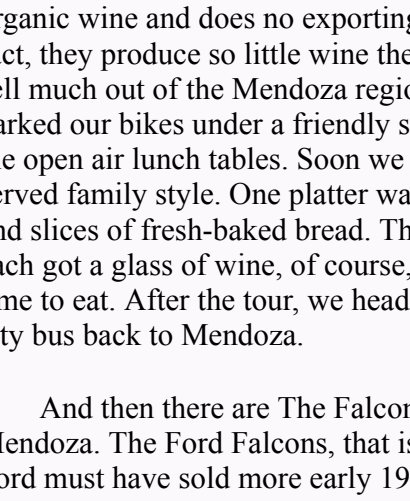
They just seem to be everywhere in Mendoza. While you stop to take a picture of one shiny (or rusty) example parked along the street, another one or two drive by. I never saw this many Falcons, ever, in the US. It must be a testimonial to their durability that there are so many still running here. Sure, it's a desert climate and that helps keep them preserved, but engines still wear out. They must be tough little cars, indeed. There are so many Falcons driving the streets of Mendoza that there may well be more of them still registered here than any other single model of car. Somebody oughta research that. Looks like a doctoral thesis in Mechanical Engineering lurking in there someplace.

If you're an old-car buff, Mendoza's the place to go. Well, at least if you're really into old 60s European cars like you remember from those Fellini-type movies that were showing in art-house theaters near the university back in those days. You won't look far in Mendoza without seeing wonderfully tinny 1960s Fiats, Renault Dauphins, Peugeot 504s, and Citroen 3CVs. One day, I even saw a Simca. Remember that one?

Judging by the cars, there seems to be some kind of strange time-warp thing going on here. There are lots of shiny new cars on the street (it's a very prosperous city), and then there's a bunch of 1960s sheet metal. There's not much in the middle. It's almost as if they just skipped those decades, car-wise. The 1960s were the days when sheet metal still looked like sheet metal. And sounded like it too, when it was rattling down the road in your direction. A biker friend once gave me a little window sticker reading, "Loud Pipes Save Lives." Maybe we shouldn't forget the lifesaving virtues of rattling sheet metal, either.

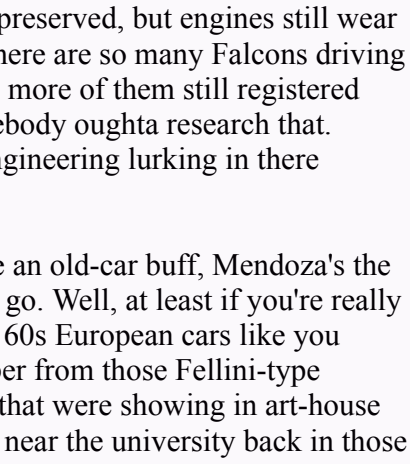
One day we thumb through the local paper and find that Ibrahim Ferrer Jr. is giving a free open air concert at the main plaza in nearby Godoy Cruz. Ferrer's father Ibrahim Ferrer Sr. was famous for his role in Cuban music, as memorialized in the movie and sound track, "The Buena Vista Social Club." We ask around, and catch the bus to Godoy Cruz Centro, where we buy a cheap sandwich and a soda from a 'mini-tienda' and wait for the concert to begin. People look up from their seats at us standing there, and get a couple more chairs for the Gringos to sit in. We spend the next hour and a half enjoying the music before it gets a little too late for the Gringos, and we catch a city bus back to a stop near our resting place in Mendoza.

Ferrer Jr. now lives in Buenos Aires and has a bar near the port. We intend to look him up when we get there.



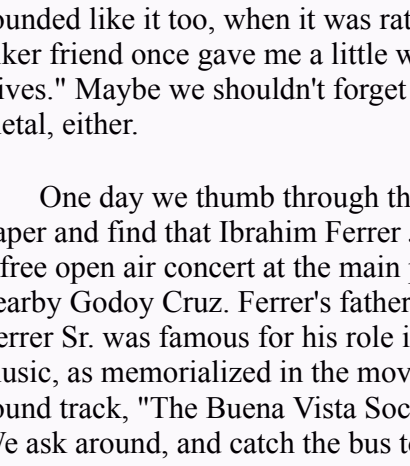
We got to the end of our stay at La Escondida and had to move again. There was no more room at the inn. But we weren't done with Mendoza yet. We moved to the Hotel Argentino, right on the Plaza Independencia for the last few nights of our stay. The annual Fiesta de la Vendimia (the Grape Harvest) was starting to crank up and most of the main events were scheduled for the Plaza. We were a little concerned about the noise from events scheduled to last late into the morning hours, but soon discovered the rooms in this classy new hotel were in the back of the hotel, they were well-insulated, and the windows were double-glazed. We had no trouble at all sleeping every night. By now, our 6-night stay in Mendoza had turned into 9 nights!

On one of our last few nights, we make an exception to our 'semi-early to bed' rule and go to a tango club. It turns out to be an excellent idea. For AR$100 (about US$25) each, we got a decent dinner, a bottle of good wine (is there any bad wine in this town!?!), and a very good show. We got to "Almacen de Tango" when the doors opened at 9:00 p.m. – which meant we were early, of course. The waitress uncorked our bottle of Los Haroldos Malbec and we settled in to a good dinner. The show, entitled "El Tango y el Vino," began at 10:00 p.m. and used film clips, a singer, two musicians, and four dancers to tell the story of how the Tango and Argentina's wine industry were intertwined with the arrival of many European (mostly Italian) immigrants.



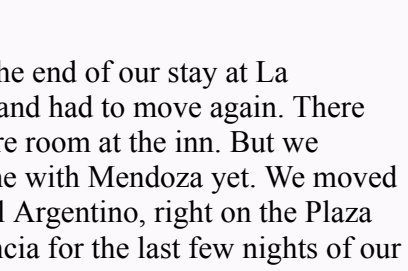
The Tango is an exceptionally athletic and sexy dance – the lighting at this show was, appropriately, carnal red. It's best watched up close and personal, and we had a table that was front and center. Carolyn, who had always wanted to be a dancer, was nearly moved to tears. But at the end of the show, they picked several audience members to try it on stage with the cast. That's when Carolyn and I tried to make ourselves look small and unnoticeable. It worked. They didn't call on us. Afterward, we walked just a few blocks back to the hotel, breathing the clean night air and feeling a rosy glow from the evening's good bottle of Mendoza red.

We began our last night by cruising the wine tasting festival that stretched several blocks along Avenida General Belgrano, featuring dozens of wineries. We didn't want to start drinking lots of wine just yet, and we certainly weren't in a position to buy a bunch of wine either, so we just enjoyed the scene, the colors, the displays, the pretty girls carting cases of wine around. Then we wandered off to stop at a nice small sidewalk cafe called "Albahaca" ("Basil") for another good dinner, and a bottle of Trapiche Reserva Malbec. They grow lots of Malbec in the area, and there was an article in the paper one day urging the growers not to forget that they also bottle some very good Cabernets and Syrahs.



Dinner, once again, turned out to be wonderful. Maybe it's due to their strong Italian heritage, but they sure put out a lot of good pastas in the area. There are so many places in Mendoza that turn out platters of excellent delectables that a tourist might end up very disappointed when they have to return home, to the real world. We sat and savored the moment, and finished the bottle before walking the few blocks back to the Plaza to check on the action.

The Plaza was hopping with festivities. There was a big show in the amphitheater, with an excellent light and sound show, and fireworks. The walkways around the perimeter were crammed with small booths selling finely-crafted jewelry, leather goods, wooden sculptures, candles, and most everything else you can imagine. Several streets around the plaza were closed and filled with people of all ages out enjoying the evening. The adjacent several-block-long pedestrian street was also packed with people.



We cruised the night and reveled in the crowds, until Carolyn mentioned ice cream. We headed to one of many good ice cream parlors just off the Plaza and stood in line with the kids, their parents, and their grandparents. We headed back out into the merriment, cones in hand, and reluctantly made our way back to the hotel. We had to get an early start in the morning, and needed to be in bed by midnight.

A little after 3:00 a.m., there was a tremendous earthquake far away in Chile. The hotel staff who were manning the front desk felt it. But we didn't feel a thing, sleeping soundly with the rosy glow of Mendoza filling our dreams.

Now, a final bit of non-wine-related news that recently captivated local attention: A pair of teenagers named Yanina Torres, aged 14, and her boyfriend Salim Tapia, aged 15, fled Mendoza with 7,000 pesos (US$1823) stolen from her father. Apparently, this modern-day Romeo and Juliette fled because their school grades were bad; so they grabbed a bus to avoid taking their final exams. The story was on the front page for about a week until they were found at a camping area on the Atlantic Coast, and returned to their parents in a tearful reunion.

Los Andes, the local paper, published a long interview with the fugitive pair. Salim, the realist, said, "I knew my mom was going to find me." They both promised never to do anything like this again, saying they were more in love than ever and now their families valued their relationship. Yanina said her father "...didn't like him much before, but now he likes him a little more and is more tolerant." So in the end, the story had a happy ending – and turned out a lot better than Romeo and Juliette.

than Romeo and Juliette.

There are THREE photo albums to accompany this entry! You can see that Mendoza caught our fancy. The first is just "Mendoza." The second is "Vendimia: Harvest, Wine, Independence," featuring the activities of the huge Vendemia festival; and the third has pictures of "Mendoza's Old Cars." The cars are not labeled; see how many you can identify!

Posted on March 07, 2010 | Permalink | Comments (0)