

Argentina Adventure 1984

Argentina is a country that has a special place in my heart. I worked there in 1984. I grew very fond of the wonderful people and the culture. They are a very warm, loving, giving people. It makes me sad to see what is happening there. The population is mostly of European descent. I did not see many (South) American Indian people. The number of African heritage people I saw in my entire stay (months), I could count on one hand. I think that almost all of those were Americans.

Unfortunately, it appears that Argentina has been destined for this kind of economic occurrence since Peron took power in the early 1950's. They went from a lender nation to a debtor during his reign and have never recovered. When I was there, inflation was so rampant, that the shops kept the prices in the Windows on a roller type gadget that could be easily adjusted to reflect the changes. I learned not to change money until I wanted to spend it. Even over a few days the loss of value would be significant. As an aside, I received a better exchange rate on the street than I did at the hotel where I lived, or anywhere else for that matter. As I walked around town, I would be approached by strangers asking me if I wanted to exchange any money. They wanted dollars. (I must have been easy to spot.)

When I was there, it was right after the military relinquished power for a civilian form of government. During the military years, anyone who was opposed to them could easily disappear. Thousands went missing during those years. Argentina is almost as large as the U.S.A. with a small population of 37,000,000 according to the CIA fact book. Buenos Aires has about a quarter of that. It is a very large city. It is the capital of the country. The President's house is called the Casa Rosada (The Pink house - it is made from a pinkish brick) and is one building on a large plaza (or square) called the Plaza de Mayo. The plaza has many other government buildings surrounding it. When I arrived, the mothers of the missing people marched every Thursday, wearing white scarves on their heads and holding placards appealing for information about their missing loved ones. It was a peaceful march which grew in numbers every Thursday.

One of the largest papers in Buenos Aires (BA) was an English language daily. Naturally, I read it. One day it announced a march, scheduled for that evening in the Plaza de Mayo, for anyone interested in protesting the missing people. I was one of two Americans working in our part of the company there. Our Argentinean cohorts said that if it looked safe, we would go to the protest. They did not define how they would be able to tell. The plaza was only a few blocks from our office. At this time, my Spanish was rather weak. I could read it okay, but listening to the unfamiliar Argentine accent left me puzzled most of the time. A few of my coworkers spoke English, but many did not. After work about a dozen of us started walking towards the Plaza. We stopped at a restaurant a few blocks from the plaza and proceeded to have a few repasts. Everyone was speaking Spanish, so I had no clue as to what was going on. Our street was a pedestrian only street, no cars. It ran perpendicular into Congress Avenue. Congress Avenue ran between the Plaza de Mayo and the Congress building. Our street (Florida) came into Congress (8 lanes wide as I remember) about a block from the Plaza. As we approached Congress, the noise from the Plaza got louder and louder.

When we got to Congress Avenue, I could see a sea of protestors marching, singing, chanting, beating drums, and carrying their placards with the dates their loved ones went missing and pictures of the missing ones in the Plaza. The noise was deafening.

Just as we got to Congress, and began to cross it, the protestors started exiting the Plaza to march down Congress to the Congress building to continue the protest there. I was separated from most of my other coworkers as I dashed to get across the street. One other coworker made it with me. He was one of the few who spoke fluent English. It really did not matter much as we could not hear each other for the next 45 minutes as the crowd marched by. I had only been in BA for a week or so at this time. I had no idea what was going to happen. We were in front of a bank building next to the curb. There was nowhere for us to go as all exits were blocked by protestors. There was absolutely no police or military presence. I was petrified. I had just met this fellow I was with a few days before, was in a foreign country and in the middle of this protest. It was estimated later that there were 250,000 protestors at the march.

There was no violence, no rocks, nothing thrown, only chants and songs by this really large, angry crowd. The entire time I was in BA, I never felt in danger. I did this time, only because I was ignorant of what could happen. I often walked the streets very late at night (no one eats in BA until 10 P.M.). There never was a moment after this march when I thought I might be in danger.

Because of my experience, I am surprised at the violent protests in BA. I can understand them, but Argentina has had economic woes for decades. This is nothing new for them. I only hope that my friends there are doing ok.

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