

## Podcast 098: Tango In The Night

*{INTRO: a recording of Tango music being played in San Telmo street market, by Dorhen on Freesound.org}*

*{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}*

*{Intro standard announcement:*

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}*

*{Music fades. Podcast begins}*

Hello!

Just in case you were in any doubt, the weather has not improved. It got warmer for a week, and then it got colder again. And damp. Again. Did I tell you the other week we had a humidity of 107% overnight? I had to look up what that meant; "unusual weather" was the answer, along with "expect a lot of dew, and to get damp as soon as you walk out the door". It was about 4am and -10°C. I was not going to walk out the door.

Did I also tell you I got chilblains last month? I always thought they were something your grandmothers invented to encourage you to wrap up warm. Turns out they were right. Horrid little tingles in my toes turning into bruises and blisters. They're normally found on the extremities, but clearly on-brand they went down there rather than to my fingers. I ended up wearing two pairs of socks for a few days. You know it's cold when I wear even one pair. Anyway they seem to have settled down a bit now, but it was clear what they were when they quietened down almost as soon as I went into a hotel room.

I've been in a couple of hotels recently, though mostly to make it easier to go to the office. I was supposed to be at a Queer Diary reading event on the first Sunday in February in Manchester but it was cancelled for venue reasons; by that time I'd already booked the hotel and the train back home the next day. Then the next weekend me and Laura went to Chester for a one-night trip, and while we passed through Manchester on the way back home on the Sunday, I stayed a night there to, again, go to the office on the Monday but also to visit the dentist to get rid of a tooth that had broken in half on a chocolate muffin when I was in Bradford a couple of months ago. £45 it cost, for about 2 minutes' work, that I could have done myself with a conveniently-bitten piece of toffee. But hey ho.

Chester's a quaint little town. You can tell from the name that it's Roman in origin; indeed it was one of the most important Roman cities in Britannia. Built to make it easier to conquer what is now Wales. It kept that role for over a thousand years; as such there's a lot of historical buildings (including half of what was the largest amphitheatre in Roman Britain), and a full length of city walls you can walk along, although the pretty bit is in the city centre, with timbered buildings and upper balconies and cobbled streets and a cathedral. We even had a few evening drinks in a very cool old-fashioned pub on one of the upper balconies, with low wooden beams, and a really nice meal in a Thai restaurant we only went to because we wanted something more fulfilling than Subway.

It's a city I've been to a few times, partly because it's the closest historical place of note to where I grew up (so it was a popular destination for school field trips), but also because it's only about 10 miles from where my mother lives. You'd've thought I'd've taken the opportunity to meet up with my mother, given I was so close.

Obviously, I did. I'm not a complete monster of a child.

Apparently she only sometimes listens to my podcast episode, because I, and I quote, "go on a bit". Well, mother, if you'd realised back then that I'd got ADHD then we could have got that all sorted out much sooner, and so my podcasts would be more coherent.

Anyway, it was nice to see her again, even if it was only for a couple of hours; she seemed to get along well with Laura which is always nice to hear, and I learned some fundamental things about my upbringing that I'd never been comfortable enough to ask. And she bought us lunch at a relatively nice Italian restaurant, which obviously included wine. At 12:30pm. Yeh, it was a heavy weekend.

My upcoming trip to South Asia is looming large, but we've almost got everything booked and sorted; all but the very last hotel is confirmed, and almost all the travel is either booked or relies on on-site taxis which I can't do until I get there. The one thing I haven't yet figured out is what to pack; given the temperature differential I'll either freeze on the way to/from the plane, or I'll end up carrying something thick and heavy for the duration.

Thicker than the sausages we had at the breakfast buffet in Chester, for sure. Touched both sides, they did.

*{section separation jingle}*

So, South America. It's been on my hit-list for a while. Well, to be precise, Bolivia has been on my hit-list for a while. When I've been looking into backpacking around South America, I've always had in mind a four to five week loop that encompasses Northern Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia, but when would I ever have had time or a chance to do that? I mean, I know, obviously, back in 2018 after my redundancy, but things just didn't happen that way and I honestly don't know why. Oh, well, I do know why, it's because I don't speak Spanish and I was always very wary about visiting with that in mind, given my social anxiety and lack of assertiveness. Weird that I've been around Central Asia without Russian, and, heck, Bangladesh, without Bengali. But for some reason South America has always angsted me in the same way parts of Europe (notably Spain and Italy) also angst me. An expectation that everyone will speak at least the dominant European language, and a pox on those that don't. In my head I'd go to Bolivia for a couple of months, do an intensive language learning school course thing, and \*then\* travel. But of course when's that ever going to happen?

Full disclosure to the entirety of that braindump: I have been to South America once before; back in 2014 I had 11 days backpacking in Chile. And it was ... I mean it was definitely not an easy walk in the pampas, but strangely less angsty than I feared. You'd have thought I'd've learned from this. Or maybe not, y'all know me well enough by now.

Anyway. I had an unexpected two weeks in my schedule suddenly appear. I can't remember why now; I think it had something to do with plans to travel with Laura being usurped because her father stepped in with a better offer. And by better offer I mean 'join me in New Zealand and I'll pay for you', which I'm absolutely not going to compete with. I was unsure what to do with the two weeks, but looking into things like wet/dry season, and flight prices, and, let's be honest, shiny new unvisited countries, plural, I figured now would be a good time to get over myself and head to South America.

Two weeks isn't that long a time to wander through a region that huge, so I had to pin down a route. And the most obvious in terms of ease and interest would be one that took in Uruguay, Paraguay, and the bits in between. I did toy with the idea of visiting the Pantanal wetlands in Brazil, but around the time of my trip much of it was on fire. Plus then I realised 'hold up, maybe Buenos Aires is worth visiting; I forgot it was right there'.

All that said though, what I purposely didn't do is plan out a full itinerary. Rather I just went 'okay let's see how I feel at any given time, and then book my next destination the day before'. This was quite liberating.

I can't honestly say I went into this trip with any real set 'expectations'. There were a couple of things I actively wanted to see - including Iguazu Falls and the Jesuit Ruins of Paraguay - but in the main I don't think I went in with any specific aims, hopes, or fears. I was specifically open about Paraguay in general - it's not a country that appears on many people's bucket-lists; indeed some leading guidebook publishers don't even cover it outside the generic South America guides. In fact that's one of the reasons I actively wanted to go there - because it was such an unknown quantity, relatively speaking. Data from UN Tourism (a specialised body under the UN) suggests Paraguay is one of the least visited countries in South America, with just over 1 million visitors in 2022. Weirdly this is marginally more than Bolivia, which in my head is a much more known about and attested place, but I'm going to assume Paraguay's figures are boosted by Ciudad del Este, a town I'll talk more about later. The only other countries below it are Venezuela (which reported 680,000 more people than I'd've expected, not gonna lie), Guyana, and, at the bottom of the list, Suriname.

I was going to do a specific podcast about Paraguay in isolation. Then I decided against it because even I couldn't bring myself to write 3,000 words about the Chaco. This isn't Geography 'A'-Level. I am aware that Everywhere is Interesting, but I feel I should probably have gone there in order to report it in all its glory. If that's the right word. And I didn't, for reasons that will become obvious later.

I was, conversely, vaguely excited about Uruguay, I suppose, because it's seen as a bastion of liberal queer joy and forward-thinking society and culture, but it wasn't a country I knew much else about. Except football and Fray Bentos pies. Which makes it sound a bit like Lancashire.

My plans thus did not take me to Bolivia, the country that's been top of my bucket-list since 2012 and feels like it would take a lot to knock down. I probably should go one day. But then I'd lose the running joke about never having been. I should have planned for it to be my 100th country. But I have not.

*{section separation jingle}*

My trip did not get off to the most auspicious start. I'd been carrying around with me in a plastic bag a screw-top bottle of apple juice, and evidently it wasn't screwed on well. Insert your own AroAce joke here. Anyway what it meant was because of the way I was holding it between my legs (keep going) on the tube to Heathrow, I ended up with a damp patch in a place on my dungarees where a damp patch should not be. Nothing that an elongated time contorted in front of a hand dryer in the toilets didn't mostly fix. A fitting start to the trip, I feel.

I don't recall a lot about the flight over. I had a long first leg, to Sao Paulo in Brazil, followed by a quick change to a shorter flight to Montevideo in Uruguay. It was an overnight trip so I landed in Uruguay around mid-morning. I tend not to sleep on planes but if I were going to, that would be where I would. Actually, I do remember one thing about the flight to Sao Paulo specifically; I was in an exit row seat so I had a bit more room to wriggle around, but I felt really uncomfortable. Not because of the seat, not because I was on an aeroplane, but because ... I mean this might well be tmi but I felt kinda bloated, full of wind, and I couldn't get it out but it still being inside did not make for a good ride. In the sense that what I felt I really needed to do was to lie down for about two minutes and fart; not actually possible on an economy class flat even in an exit row seat, not even in the toilet, but staying sat just wasn't conducive to getting it out. I don't recall when it all dissipated but it was probably during the stopover; I don't recall having issues on the second flight.

Anyway. I've mentioned before about my travel anxieties, about how I get really tense and angsty when arriving in a new country because of fears about not being able to get money, not being able to communicate, not being able to find how to leave the airport even though I've looked it up, all that sort of thing. And I've also mentioned before about how those anxieties lift quite a bit once I \*am\* out of the airport and have done one or two things in the country. So it was in Uruguay, where I was worried about whether I'd be able to even find, let alone catch, the airport bus to the city centre, and while there was a very brief semi-worry - the bus didn't have a destination listed that made an awful lot of sense and I knew they went in both directions and I didn't want to end up in a small Uruguayan seaside resort or something, but I had to assume that if I asked 'ciudad?', they'd assume I meant Montevideo rather than, I don't know, Punta del Este or somewhere, and indeed I was correct. It was a long local bus not designed for tourists, but it was fine, it was cheap, and it got me to where I wanted to go.

Well, almost. In fact I didn't really know where I wanted to go, because it was mid-morning and I couldn't check-in to my guesthouse till mid-afternoon, so I let the bus take me into the city and got off somewhere near the end; it wasn't exactly clear where it was going as I assumed it was headed to a central bus station but it didn't seem to be headed to the one on my map and by the time I got off I was the only person still on the bus, but it gave me the opportunity to have a wander around the city.

I don't know how best to describe Montevideo, other than it probably isn't at all what you'd expect. My first impression was 'well, this place is quiet'; despite it being a Saturday there was virtually nobody on the streets. Initially I thought, well that's just because I'd been dumped out in a part of the city centre people don't go to, but no, even what passes for the central area had far fewer people in it than you'd expect from a city of over one million people. It felt like Swansea on a Sunday in the mid-90s.

And looked like it. Oh my god. I know I said earlier I didn't go into this trip with much in the way of expectations, but I absolutely wasn't expecting the city centre of Montevideo to look ... quite how it did. The best way of describing it is that with a bit of love, care, and attention, it would look rather nice, with palm-tree-lined streets, ornate two-storey buildings with a huge amount of character, curved balconies with wrought iron flourishes, and tall church bell towers occasionally dotting the horizon. Sadly, it did feel like it needed quite a bit of love, care, and attention. It felt ... it felt slightly run-down, unloved, and derelict? Like, many of the shops were shuttered and long-tagged by graffiti artists. The buildings looked somewhat forlorn and in need of a good clean. The apartments didn't feel terribly inviting from the outside - functional, but not in a soviet architecture way, more in a ... okay we've built a nice block with plane stone walls, we'll leave you to touch it up, what do

you mean you're not going to<sup>2</sup>, way. It was a lot of beige. I was hoping for a bit more vibrancy, a bit more saturation. After all this is the Queer capital of South America. It was as colourful as the asexual pride flag, so I guess that's on-brand.

Spoiler alert: remember this when I talk about Asunción

The bus dropped me off close to the "Estación Central General Artigas", Montevideo's main railway station. It's a huge, grand building, two storeys, the frontage lined with many archways and the main entrance being itself a highly decorated portico. It looks exactly like the sort of old railway building that wouldn't feel out of place in a large UK city, and I'm sure it would be just as impressive inside. Sadly, it closed a decade or two ago and the entrance is blocked by a long fence. That's not to say the station itself is closed; there's active passenger lines stretching to both borders and a handful of Montevideo's northern suburbs. However passengers these days use a less-than-well-advertised bland platform a little way to the north of the original building.

The coolest, liveliest, place I came across was the Mercado del Puerto, the Port Market, which was rated in the guidebook and the few blogs I read online. Built in the 1860s, it's become \*the\* centre for people to buy and try traditional Uruguayan food, and by that I mean beef; this is a country built, like the neighbouring north part of Argentina, on the 'gaucho', the cowboy, the pampas plains and the estancia farms that are the basis of a whole culture and still cover at least 60% of the country. It's possible to go visit an estancia and spend a night or three there, seeing the country, helping out a little, going horse-riding, and spending evenings in a hot tub; I chose not to because I've ridden ponies before and was not in any way comfortable about it, so the idea of me horse-riding is one best left to the imagination.

Anyway, the Mercado; it's quite a crowded, intimate place, with restaurants everywhere – some having demarcated 'rooms', whereas others you just eat at the bar. Not everything is food though; apart from the obvious trinkets and souvenirs, it's also a place to buy clothing and décor – especially woollen shawls, blankets, and throws. In terms of design, the market's got a flagstone floor and a marvellously high ceiling, wood-framed and secured with iron arches, giving it almost the look of a repurposed Victorian-era railway station.

It's a great place to kill some time. Which is just as well, as I had a lot of time to kill.

The part of the city with the market in is known as 'Old Town', and it's where the city began. It's on a small peninsula on the south side of Montevideo Bay (a name that sounds far more tropical and fun than it is) and also houses the commercial harbour, the ferryport to Buenos Aires, and the start of the Ramblas, the promenade road that stretches east for some 22km (slightly longer than a half-marathon, which, given it's also predominantly flat, would make it quite a nice run to do). The beaches are more along the eastern stretch; in the area of the old town the majority of the seafront is quite rocky. Great for fishing, and for staring out to sea with a wistful, longing, look (not quite sure what you'd be wistfully wishing for, but given in a straight line you'd end up crashing into the Argentinian coast in the less-populated pampas south of Buenos Aires, your mileage may vary on whether that would be an improvement.

Also in the old town are a few pedestrianised shopping streets lined with more palm trees. The most notable is Sarandi Street, although that's only because of where it goes rather than what it is. It passes the Cathedral (which isn't the easiest building to appreciate from this direction as the street isn't that wide and the walls are quite flat and tall), the Plaza de la Constitucion, which is one of those large pedestrianised and green squares with a huge fountain in the middle, where you can sit and drink al fresco at one of the overpriced bars and cafes, and Plaza de la Independencia, which is similar but without the cafes; instead the square is surrounded by the large buildings, ancient and modern, that make up the government, a few museums, a hotel, and the commercial district. The centre of it has a huge statue on a huger plinth of José Gervasio Artigas, the chap who's seen as the founder of Uruguay as an independent state. He's on a horse. Because of course he was a gaucho. In fact the statue is also his grave; or at least, his remains were interred here in 1977 in a mausoleum below ground level. He died in exile in 1850 in Asunción, in Paraguay. Once again, your mileage may vary on whether death was an improvement.

The following day, when I wasn't feeling supremely tired having travelled a lot with a heavy bag and not having had much sleep, I had a wander around other parts of the city. It being a Sunday, I headed to the Feria de Tristán Narvaja, the oft-mentioned street market in the north-eastern part of the central city area. It was huge, covering not just the long street itself (at least a kilometre), but also many of the side streets – Montevideo is built in a grid pattern so the market expands across several blocks. Very little of the wares for sale were things I wanted or needed to buy (vegetables, herbs, vegetables, kids toys, vegetables, scarves, vegetables ...) but I did

pick up a couple of empanada for breakfast.

I've always liked empanada, ever since I had them in Chile back in 2014. They're simply filled dough pasties, filled by the way with any number of things, but ham and cheese was very common in Montevideo. A perfect street food snack, that fills the same niche as (and indeed is in the same family as, in a sense) the Greggs Chicken Bake. Or the vegetable samosa. It's amazing that no matter where in the world we are, every culture seems to have created the idea of filling dough with stuff, and cooking it.

The market continued all the way to a very garishly-coloured stadium taking up the entirety of a block. This is the Palacio Contador Gastón Guelfi, and is the home of the sports club Atlético Peñarol. It's painted yellow and black; these are the club colours and apparently stem from their origin as a club founded by British immigrant railway workers - yellow and black being the colours of Stephenson's Rocket, the first self-propelled railway steam engine. It was originally a cricket club, not that Uruguay is in any way a noted cricketing nation, but switched to football in the early 1900s. As a men's football club, they are one of the most notable in South America and the third most successful in the Copa Libertadores - South America's premier cup competition for clubs - behind Argentinian heavyweights Independiente and Boca Juniors. Sadly their heyday in the competition was in the middle of the last century, but given Uruguay itself is a small country stuck between to ginormous heavyweights, they definitely punch above their weight. The women's club have been less successful internationally, but have won the Uruguayan championship four times.

Neither of the football clubs play here though - the men have a large new stadium quite a few miles to the north-east (not far from the airport in fact), while the women and the men's reserves use an old stadium in the north; rather this indoor stadium is the HQ of the sports club in general and home to their basketball team. The club also has a rugby union, cycling, and an esports side; like many sports clubs outside the UK, they've diversified rather than concentrating on one sport. They don't play cricket any more though; even the Montevideo Cricket Club, and that is their name, play rugby union now.

My guesthouse was to the east of old town, in the suburb of 'Barrio Sur'. It was a fairly nondescript, or at least non-distinctive, two-floored building, with a huge doorway in a white wall. The upper floor was red stone and the windows had small balconies. It's possible this was a different residence. It was run by a Uruguayan family who still lived in the property and occupied the front room. And possibly other rooms in the complex; it was a bit unclear. The guesthouse bit was through a long corridor, predominantly green, with a huge ceiling; the walls were lined at all levels with trinkets and décor, both generically Uruguayan and specifically displaying support for Peñarol, and ended at a small kitchen area. My room, also vibing green, was a little further beyond, next to the bathroom, and was comfortable, quite quiet, and airy. Oddly, it contained a retro vinyl record player and LPs from the 1960s from Uruguay and the wider world, tho I did not try it.

My room also overlooked a small tiled garden area with plants and little trinkets, that was lovely to just sit in and rest. There was a ladder to a roof terrace too, but that didn't really provide any views save of neighbouring building's roof terraces.

The guesthouse was two crossroads away from a small café that served Uruguayan beer, so it made sense to try some. I only went on my first evening (the Saturday); my plan was just to eat something there and go to bed early. It was called the Candy Bar, and was a small place on the corner surrounded by apartments. Tiled floor, wooden chairs, a small number of tables but you could sit either inside or outside, ornaments hanging from the ceiling, a small food menu - I had a burger-type thing and a chocolate dessert - and many many local beers available in bottles. I had two from Birra Bizarra, an IPA called Igor and an Oatmeal Stout called Harry, both of which I seem to have given good scores to. And yes, the brewery does name a lot of its beers with human first names. Including a weissbier called Edward, which is weird on several levels. They were the only beers I had in Uruguay; given how exciting Montevideo is on a Sunday, I'm not quite sure why.

*{section separation jingle}*

As an aside, one of the most awkward things about Uruguay was the money. Not the money itself; the Uruguayan Peso is a perfectly normal currency, there's around 54 to the pound, and while not a currency you're likely to easily be able to change in the streets of Bradford, it's not a currency with a reputation. No, the awkward thing is getting hold of it in the first place. ATMs have withdrawal limits, and these limits are set quite low. Doubly so when you learn that many of them will also dispense US\$, and you're lucky to be able to get US\$100 in one transaction, even if it allows you to in the first place. The reason for this appears to be not a Uruguayan problem but an Argentinian one.

The Argentinian Peso is notoriously worthless, and the Argentine economy is very ... let's just say their banking system is 'unreliable'. Obtaining foreign currency in Argentina is tricky. As Argentina is very close and very easy to get to and from, Uruguay sees large numbers of Argentinians coming over and using Uruguayan banks to draw out USD, which they then take back into Argentina as 'hard currency' which holds its value, allowing them to change into Argentinian Pesos at a time that's advantageous. In response to a significant value of currency effectively leaving the country, Uruguay has made it far harder to get hold of it, at least in transactions that make it worthwhile. You can imagine currency would otherwise be leaving the country in thousands of dollars per household.

I'd brought some USD (and GBP) from the UK, so I did have a small store of 'hard' currency, because I knew Argentina would be an issue, but, as a small aside, it did prove surprisingly tricky to change the GBP. I've still got about £80 of it somewhere; I rarely use cash in my day-to-day transactions at home any more so I really ought to put it in the bank at some point. Assuming I can find it.

On leaving Uruguay in Colonia, I changed all my Uruguayan Pesos to Argentinian ones. I handed over four or five notes, worth about £80 or so, and in return received ... a brick. Held together with three elastic bands. It was like being in Uzbekistan all over again.

*{section separation jingle}*

Monday saw me head off to the main bus station, not the one the airport was going to, which I never actually found, but the one where all the long-distance coaches head out from. This is Tres Cruces, three crosses, because let it not be forgotten what the dominant religion is in this part of the world. Although at a ratio of 54:44:1.2, Christianity is only just ahead of 'no-religion', albeit the vast majority of that 'no-religion' is more of the 'I believe in something, just not that' type rather than 'there is no god' type.

That said, I met a "there is a god and he is the Christian one" type in the bus station as I was waiting for my coach to Colonia del Sacramento. He was an immigrant from Brazil who was heading back to his home also in Colonia - although we seemed to be on different services. In more ways than one. We chatted in slow, broken, English, because my Portuguese is even more limited than my Spanish, and he seemed keen to chat. From what I can gather, he seemed to live in some kind of church group commune, who'd just come from visiting his family back home in Brazil, and this seemed to be a trip he did quite regularly. I guess it's not all that far across Uruguay really - the bus to Colonia was only scheduled to take a couple of hours and Montevideo is maybe a third of the way from there to the Brazilian border along the coast. It's not the most exciting journey in the world though - I can only speak for the western leg but it's ... gaucho country, for sure. A bit like Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. Flat. Green-ish. And the road follows the coastline, so you'd imagine you'd see the sea. You do not see the sea.

Colonia del Sacramento is a small town in the far west of Uruguay, directly on the opposite side of the Rio de la Plata estuary from Buenos Aires. As such it's notable for being one of those towns swamped with over-tourism; in this case mainly Argentinians doing shopping and third-party tourists doing day trips to tick off another country. In fairness though, it's not anything like a dull frontier town full of duty free shops. I'll talk about Ciudad del Este next time. Rather, it's a small but cute colonial town - the name's a bit of a giveaway - that's nice to have a wander around and take pictures of. It's got stone walls, cobbled streets, vintage cars, a disused railway station building that's now a small community marketplace, a 27m tall lighthouse, and lots of cafes.

There isn't a heck of a lot to \*do\* here, other than just wander and avoid the tour groups. There are a series of small museums, but probably only really useful for the completist - like, one's a tile museum, another is a small house recreated with colonial-era décor, a couple of others focus on other aspects of the colonial times here; a future podcast episode will talk about how I'm not overly museumy.

I simply had a walk and then found myself a small café at the end of a backstreet, close to the water's edge and hidden away enough to not be busy. The toasted cheese sandwich was lush. Would I be able to find that place again where I to go back? I would not.

My time in Colonia was brief; I was using it as a place to stop by on the way to Buenos Aires, though had it just been a small frontier town full of duty-free shops I would have just caught the ferry directly from Montevideo. This way though I got a couple of hours in a pleasant tree-lined town and a much shorter ferry ride. Not that

the scenery was much different, just grey instead of off-green.

The ferry was quite easy to use. I'd bought the tickets online a couple of days earlier; although there's several a day from both Colonia and Buenos Aires, from at least two different companies, at at least three different price points, they do sell out relatively frequently. It's quite easy to buy online, though it definitely helps if you can read Spanish. You're supposed to be at the port at least an hour before departure, though when I arrived there was still a queue to pass through security for the previous sailing which was running a bit late.

Colonia's port is close to the bus station and the dead railway station, slightly outside the old town so it is a little bit of a walk. It is quite a calming place though – open-plan and cavernous. I say I bought the ticket online; to be precise I bought a confirmation online, and I just needed to type that confirmation into a machine in the port to get the actual paper ticket, well, boarding pass, in the same way as buying paper rail tickets in the UK. When you're buying the ticket online it asks for things like your passport and your birthday; for reasons officially unknown but probably that I'm an idiot, my boarding pass had the wrong birthday printed on it, but when I queried this with the customer service rep who was helping people use the machine, he simply said 'yeh, don't worry about that, it's fine'. Listener, it was absolutely fine.

What was interesting was that emigration from Uruguay and immigration into Argentina were both handled at the port; this involved a lot of queuing (twice over in the case of third-party nationals who have to do both), but it did mean that all that happened on arrival in Argentina was we had to push our bags through an x-ray machine. Turns out, not a spoiler alert because honestly, it's not that exciting, this is a feature of all Argentinian immigration points. Once through security we just had to wait around in a bland white large holding area with plastic seats before our ferry was called; it did mean I could be one of the first on though!

The ferry itself ... it was quite nice actually. The main body where the seating was was quite plush, and the seats themselves were fairly spacious. I had a window seat, which, let's face it, was hope beyond expectation, but the journey was maybe an hour and a shade so while at no point did I see anything other than a grey sky, grey water, a distant lighthouse that never appeared to be getting closer, and, by the end of the trip, raindrops, I did so in the comfort of a smooth ferry ride.

*{section separation jingle}*

*Me: Hello :) It's time for a mid-episode break. Half time. Seventh Innings Stretch. That sort of thing. Put the kettle on. Grab a snack. Get comfortable. I'm just here to remind you ways in which you can get in touch and help this podcast out. You probably know this already, but in case you don't:*

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*Now, on with the show.*

*{section separation jingle}*

It was still raining as I arrived in Buenos Aires; it was first precipitation I'd seen for a few days, and incidentally it would be the last I'd see all trip. It was also a little unexpected. It also didn't last too long, but it lasted long enough to make me a bit damp on my brisk walk to my accommodation.

It was a small ground-floor flat in a fairly nondescript apartment building – a large living room-cum-bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen, which to be honest I didn't make use of. The owner, a lovely lady who wanted

to make things as easy as possible for me (including, on my day of departure, giving me a much later check-out time than even I'd been hoping for), took me through some admin, although this did not extend to working out how to unlock the apartment block's front door from the inside – fiddling with the key was a little more subtle than it looked and took at least one 'walking away to breathe' moment. The bed was pretty large, everything was quite comfortable, if a little 'plain' – it was the sort of place I'd own, in the sense that if you don't spend much of your life in somewhere there's no incentive to make it homely. The only downside was at 8am sharp, construction noise would begin somewhere above me, which continued I assume most of the working day.

The flat was in the San Telmo district of the city. I'd chosen there because it seemed quite an interesting and quirky area, not too far from the city centre, and not too expensive. It's a straight road from the shopping area of the city centre, past a couple of churches, quite a narrow road, and lined all the way with ornate colonial-era buildings made of stone blocks and with balconies with wrought-iron grilles with flourishes. A bit like Montevideo. But pretty. Like, how it should look if someone was looking after them all.

San Telmo itself is noted for a kind of slightly alternative culture. It's not as vibrant or notorious as La Boca, which to be fair is only a few blocks to the south, but it's certainly not the posh affluent neighbourhood that Palermo in the north of the city is. 'La Boca lite', maybe. It didn't feel seedy, just a shade more indie than most. There's a bit of street art, of course, and there's a couple of museums, and Plaza Dorrego which is a small café-lined square where you can chill in the sunshine and, if you're lucky, watch people dance. Tango, obviously. We'll come onto that later. The most notable spot in San Telmo though is the Mercado. This is a decently-sized building, with tiled floors and a huge ceiling lined with iron or steel arches, with a large number of stalls inside where you can buy food and sit at the bars to eat it ... if that sounds familiar, then yes it is and my conclusion is, if you want to see Montevideo, save yourself the hassle and visit San Telmo instead. Google Maps even tells me that nearby there's a gay-only B&B, so you even get the queer vibe here.

San Telmo is also home to the most unlikely of drinking establishments – a British pub. Just past the crossroads near where I was staying is the Gibraltar Pub, which for all the world, both inside and out, looks like something you'd find in any British town. Wooden panelling, portraits of historical British figures like Lord Nelson on the walls, a long bar, little back snugs to sit in, and a menu that's full of dishes like Fish & Chips, Sausage & Mash, and Beef & Ale Pie. Clearly I partook, though more because it sold decent Argentinian craft beer. A pint, or whatever local approximation for legal reasons, was between £3 and £4.50 so not too bad really. Note its name, by the way. Named after a small place in the sea, once owned by a Spanish-speaking nation, taken by the British a couple of centuries ago, and the Spanish-speaking nation are still bitter about it. It's either an incredibly brave move by a Brit, or it's some Machiavellian-level trolling of Spain by an Argentinian. Either way, while I saw many a sticker on lampposts, walls, and the outside of the city buses saying 'Las Malvinas son Argentinas', I did not see anything relating to it in the pub. Nor outside.

I did have more authentic food and drink in my time in the city, including but not limited to empanada, but definitely empanada, because empanada. I'm sure there's a travel blogger out there who has written and vlogged in depth about the difference between empanada in all the countries of South America; me, I just choose one and eat it and I've never had a bad one. Apart from that, and obviously beef, one culture dominates the food culture here like no other. Buenos Aires has been described as 'Italians who speak Spanish but think they're French', and both the pizza and gelato scenes are immense and legion. In fact one gelato/ice cream shop a way to the west of the city centre, on Avenue Corrientes beyond the theatre district, is said to have the best ice-cream in the city, if not the country. This is a small place called Cadore; there's a covered seating area outside too so you can eat it as god intended, although it's not the most aesthetic of locations, being set at a busy crossroads near a Starbucks. You get the vibe. Having said which I did try it out because it's always good to sample the local specialities. Given gelato isn't my go-to foodstuff, that I went to it twice despite it being a decent walk (just over a mile) from the city centre, probably tells you it's not half bad.

Now. My original plans in the early days of planning a routing for this trip didn't have me visiting Buenos Aires at all. Largely this is because I forgot it existed. In the sense that when I was looking at routes, I was so focussed on getting to northern Uruguay that it didn't occur to me to look what was across the river further south. And as you now know, I did not go to northern Uruguay. Mainly because gaucho country, and only partly because 'oh yeh, Buenos Aires is right there, d'oh'.

Anyway. It's a city I'd heard of, but one I didn't know a lot about, with the obvious exception of football. I did tentatively look at potential matches to go and watch, but because I'd drifted in at the start of the week and most of the games take place at weekends, it wasn't an option. Instead I contented myself to have a wander around the streets and get a vibe for the place. There were a few points of interest I wanted to visit, but most of

them were buildings, objects, sights; few of them required going in to anywhere.

It is a very nice and aesthetic city. One could compare it to Montevideo, but let's not do that. Historically it's been compared with Paris, and I can see what they mean – long, straight, wide avenues (or are they 'boulevards'), lined with trees and tall 19th Century buildings that give an air of, not quite opulence, but certainly a historical style and classy vibe. I mean, yes, there are modern structures that jar loudly with it – it's not a city short on modern skyscrapers for sure – but then no-one goes to Paris to marvel at La Défense. Well, I mean, I know some people that have done, but mainly for ironic reasons. I did have a wander through the leafy streets of Palermo on my way to the Recoleta Cemetery, but didn't linger long. To date this, I was in Palermo the day before Liam Payne died there; it's rare I'm that close to a breaking news story. Recoleta, by the way, you all probably know, has one of the most famous cemeteries in the world – it covers 5½ hectares, and contains nearly 5,000 graves, including lots of Presidents, the occasional poet, and of course Eva Peron. Sadly I didn't get to visit it because they charge an entry fee for foreigners, around 20,000 Pesos (£16). Not because they charge the entrance fee (although that's quite high for a cemetery when most of the rest of the world's are free), but because they insisted on card payment only and I was only carrying cash on me that day, and the next day was when I was due to leave so I'd've had my backpack with me and they wouldn't've liked that either.

The centrepiece of aesthetic Buenos Aires is Plaza de Mayo, a large, long, rectangular-ish public square containing a large monument to the May 1811 revolution that began the successful fight for independence. It also contains a statue of General Belgrano. Not the ship. That's a whole different subject that was barely mentioned. Rather, General Manuel Belgrano was one of the leaders of the revolution and independence movement and is seen as one of the Founding Fathers of Argentina, despite seemingly being quite sickly and not lasting long, politically nor existentially, after independence was achieved. He's on a horse. But because he was a soldier, not because he was a gaucho.

Around Plaza de Mayo are the Presidential Palace, the National Bank, a couple of museums, and the cathedral. One of the museums is called "Museo Nacional del Cabildo de Buenos Aires y de la Revolución de Mayo". This is possibly the longest museum name I've ever come across, and most people just call it the Cabildo. It's a gloriously-white baroque (apparently) building from the mid 18th century that consists of two storeys of archways either side of a tall tower, also with arches. It was a government building prior to the revolution, and in those days it would have looked even grander, with more arches either side, except these were successively demolished in the 19th Century to make way for those grand Parisian boulevards.

As for the Cathedral, it's the least Cathedral-looking Cathedral that's ever Cathedralled. It was completed in the early years of the 19th century and if you didn't know it was a cathedral, you'd be looking at the map going '... but it's supposed to be right there'. Indeed when I first went to the plaza, I thought the Cabildo was the cathedral, and felt slightly underwhelmed by it. It looks ... from the outside let's be honest, it looks like a bank. Or some other kind of financial or administrative building funded by colonial money, in the classical style so popular at the time, that wouldn't look out of place in Liverpool. Possibly a library. It's made of stone blocks, fronted with twelve columns, and is topped with a triangular, and today I learned a new word, pediment, that bit on top of the columns that continues the wall upwards to a point; the pediment has a fresco of apparently the biblical figures of Joseph and Jacob. It does, at least, look like a cathedral inside, and contains the mausoleum of another of the Independence leaders, José de San Martín, guarded by two soldiers of the regiment he founded.

The Plaza itself has been seen as the centre of Buenos Aires pretty much since the city was founded. Indeed it's believed the first buildings in the city were constructed here; at the time the area beyond what is now the Presidential Palace was the sea so it would have possibly been where the first landings by colonial settlers would have been. The sea (well, river, it's kind of hard to tell here because it's an incredibly wide estuary) has retreated and/or been reclaimed a couple of hundred meters further back. As a result of its historic importance and symbolism, and because of its size, it's been used as the site of protests, demonstrations, and celebrations. Sometimes, as in the case of the notorious stereotype of the revolving door of Argentinian presidents, all at the same time. The most recent example being as recently as 2001, when President Fernando de la Rúa was seen to leave the Presidential Palace in the face of one such riot. By helicopter. Right in front of everyone. Subsequent administrations removed the helipad from atop the Palace. On my visit, the only demonstration was the regular, peaceful, protest by a handful of women concerning the Disappearances orchestrated by the military dictatorships in the 1970s. It's nice to think the days of autocratic rulers of significant countries suppressing dissent by kidnapping people and removing them entirely from existence have long passed, right?

Going down one of the Parisian boulevards from the Plaza de Mayo, Avenue Presidente Roque Sáenz Peña, you reach Plaza de la Republica. This is where the main north-south Avenue Nueve de Julio crosses, allegedly the widest road in the world, though that's quite a dubious thing to even prove (what defines a road's edges, for instance), and it's a test of vibe to see if you can cross it entirely when the lights are on green, and yeh, I may have fudged it. But Plaza de la Republica is notable more for being (the site of the now ubiquitous 'I heart town name' Instagram sites, but also) where the Obelisco de Buenos Aires stands. This is a 71m tall, white, obelisk, that pretty much dominates the surrounds. It was built in 1936, to celebrate the city's alleged 400 year anniversary, nearly demolished a couple of years later on safety and aesthetic grounds (it's ugly and it might fall down), later used as a centrepiece for specific political protest, and, conversely, where crowds gathered to celebrate the Argentinian victory in the 2022 World Cup. Tens of thousands of people surrounded the obelisk, filling the nearby streets and blocks, climbed onto the said instagrammable sign, and a message of congratulations was beamed onto the obelisk itself. Though it's possible to climb it (there are stairs inside), access has been restricted for many years, although I'm positive that on that night, unofficially that might not have been quite the issue it normally is.

All these places, and more, were visited while I was one of those free walking tours that I always find really useful to get my bearings in a new city, especially one this large with plenty to see that it's easy to get overwhelmed. And lost. The company that runs the one I went on (Buenos Aires Horizon Tours) also do all manner of other, chargeable, tours and events that are more specialist and niche, including one that looks purely at maté, the caffeinated herbal drink that has even more cultural and social nous than tea does in the UK. I didn't get a chance to sample any while I was in the city though; I just didn't seem to have the opportunity.

What I did book with them though was a night of Tango. Partly for two reasons; Tango is an integral part of Argentinian culture, and not something I'd ever thought to do, so where best to sample it than its spiritual heartland. Also, someone I know online, Sasha Cagen, founder of the Quirkyalone movement that discovering was the first step on the long journey of personal identity I've travelled since, lived for a while in Buenos Aires and always posted content about her Tango adventures, so it's always been in my mind.

The Tango experience I had was in two parts. Firstly, in an upstairs room in a random apartment building about a block from where my accommodation was, we met up for what amounted to an hour-long lesson. There weren't many of us - me, a young backpacking couple from Germany, and the two instructors - so I ended up partnering with one of the instructors, no pressure of course. Now, I would say that being a dyspraxic loon with no sense of balance, special awareness, or much ability to follow simple instructions when it comes to visual concepts, might be a bit of a problem when it comes to dancing. And for the most part you'd be right - in a future episode on festivals you'll hear a bit about my failure to even \*comprehend\* the Charleston, never mind dance it. However, Tango vibed a little different. For one thing, in terms of the basics, there's only actually about four basic steps. Everything else is a flourish, and while it might look quite sedate in comparison, knowing those basic steps is enough to spend a night dancing it without anyone looking down on you. For another, having someone there with you definitely helps, even if you're the one leading the steps. It's supposed to be a fluid movement, and if someone's there it means it's easier to glide past and around them; in a sense they act as a reference point and a signpost, to help frame your next steps. Or to put it another way, if you put a foot wrong, they're in the way, so you don't. That said, wearing walking sandals probably doesn't help; many people wear specialist Tango shoes, and it's said you can tell how dedicated you are to it by the shoes you wear. Can you dance Tango barefoot? I didn't ask.

As an aside, Sasha has always spoken about how Tango helps develop self-confidence and awareness of who you are, especially as a woman (notable, given that Tango has very defined gender roles), and also how there's an interesting clash of styles between her Quirkyaloneness - promoting the belief that there's nothing wrong with choosing to be single rather than always be looking for relationships - and the fact Tango is a \*very\* sensual dance style, one misstep away from a public decency citation. It's interesting for me, as an AroAce enby, to think about this, and whether I 'get' the undercurrent of sexual tension obviously inherent within it, whether it made me feel awkward, or even a fraud, doing it, especially given I by definition had to take on the leading man role in the lesson, and whether it would make me feel any different about it if I were dancing with a man rather than a woman. Or another enby. I don't think I have a definitive answer to any of that yet, given that my only experience was with a tutor in a very short and educational setting, but it'd be interesting to experiment. Not that I can remember the steps now, of course, but it might all come back to me.

The second part took place in the centre of the city, not far I think from the Obelisk, though it was dark and we were in a taxi so it's hard to tell. One of the tutors took us to a milonga, a dance hall specifically for Tango

and similar styles. The one we went to very much had the vibe of an old-time music hall type venue, with a central dancefloor leading to a small stage, just off which was the house band. Either side of the dancefloor were a series of tables, mostly occupied by people whose average age felt higher than mine. There was also a bar, and an awful lot of large potted plants.

As it turned out, none of the four of us danced at all, we just sat and watched everyone else. It turns out there's a whole series of rules and guidelines about dancing Tango at a milonga. For example, the band tend to play three short reels, each a couple of minutes long, and have a minute or so's rest between them. If you're dancing with someone, you have to dance for the full set, but there's no obligation to stay dancing with the same person all night, so you use the frequent breaks to rest, find a new partner, or sit out the next session. But once the next reel starts, you're not supposed to join in halfway through.

There's also a whole culture about how to attract a partner that involves casual eye glances and slight movements. It's very easy to misinterpret this of course, which means the safest method is simply not to look at anyone. Now, of course, some people only dance with the same person all night, and both are fine. In fact, some people even make a side-hustle living from Tango, by acting as paid partners. It might be that someone wants to dance one night, but for whatever reason can't arrange to go with someone. So they 'hire' a dance partner for the evening - that way they can still be social and get to dance without losing face.

Our table was right next to the dancefloor so we saw at close hand the whole variation on abilities and styles. Some people did indeed just simply move around doing steps that we'd learned, others were swinging and kicking and doing things that would probably have caused me muscle strain. About halfway through, two professional dancers came on exclusively and did a whole set, showing just what Tango is capable of.

I don't know how long the venue was open until; we were there for maybe four or five hours and the clientele in that time regularly changed as people arrived and left. There's no set pattern to it; you can spend as much or as little time there dancing as you like, which makes it quite informal and easy to access. My understanding is that each milonga is slightly different; it may play a different genre of Tango music (some are more 'classical music oriented', others more 'jazzy', etc), or they may cater to a different audience or skill level, but there's enough in the city - certainly over a hundred, and regardless of the night there'll always be a good number of them open - for you to have an enjoyable evening.

There are no pictures or video of me even attempting dancing Tango, by the way. Not just because it would have been awkward to set it up, but because just before leaving Buenos Aires, I had my phone nicked.

## AND ON THAT BOMBSHELL

*{end pod jingle}*

Well, that's about all for this episode. Join me next time where I talk about the second week of my trip, including waterfalls, religious ruins, and the fascinating city that is Asunción. Until then, remember to keep an eye out for your belongings, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

*{Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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*Show-notes are available on my website: [barefoot-backpacker.com](http://barefoot-backpacker.com).*

*Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}*