

# Buenos Aires



Mix together a beautiful European-like city with attractive residents (call them *porteños*), gourmet cuisine, awesome shopping, a frenzied nightlife and top-drawer activities, and you get Buenos Aires, a cosmopolitan metropolis with both slick neighborhoods and equally downtrodden areas – but that’s part of the appeal. It’s an elegant, seductive place with a ragged edge, laced with old-world languor and yet full of contemporary attitude. BA is somehow strangely familiar, but unlike any other city in the world.

In between cutting-edge designer boutiques, ritzy neighborhoods and grand parks are unkempt streets full of spewing buses and bustling fervor. Seek out the classic BA: the old-world cafes, colonial architecture, fun outdoor markets and diverse communities. Rub shoulders with the formerly rich and famous in Recoleta’s cemetery, making sure to sidestep the ubiquitous dog piles on the sidewalks. Fill your belly at a *parrilla* (steak restaurant), then spend the night partying away in Palermo Viejo’s trendiest dance club. Hunt for that antique gem in a dusty San Telmo shop, or visit on Sunday for the *barrio’s* spectacularly popular fair. Learn to sweep your leg dancing the sultry tango, and then attend a super-passionate *fútbol* match between River and Boca. These unforgettable adventures (and many more) are just waiting for you to go out and experience them.

Everyone knows someone who has been here and raved about it. You’ve put it off long enough. Come to Buenos Aires and you’ll understand why so many people have fallen in love with this amazing city, and even decided to stay. There’s a good chance you’ll be one of them.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Commune with BA’s rich and famous dead at the **Recoleta cemetery** (p101)
- Marvel at those amazingly high leg kicks at a tango show in **San Telmo** (p124)
- Shop the fun and stylish designer boutiques in **Palermo Viejo** (p129)
- Feast on tasty steaks or more exotic cuisine in Palermo’s **Las Cañitas** (p119)
- Party all night long in BA’s chic and super-happening nightclubs in **Palermo** (p126)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 011

■ POPULATION: 3 MILLION

■ AREA: 200 SQ KM

## HISTORY

Buenos Aires was settled in 1536 by Pedro de Mendoza, an adventurous and aristocratic Spaniard who financed his own expedition to South America. Food shortages and attacks by indigenous groups prompted Mendoza's hasty departure in 1537; to add insult to injury, he died at sea on the way home. Meanwhile, other expedition members left the settlement, sailed 1600km upriver and founded Asunción (now capital of Paraguay).

By 1541 the original settlement was completely abandoned. In 1580 a new group of settlers moved downriver from Asunción under Juan de Garay's command and repopulated Mendoza's abandoned outpost.

For the next 196 years Buenos Aires was a backwater and a smuggler's paradise, due to trade restrictions imposed by mother Spain. All the same, its population had grown to around 20,000 by 1776, the year Spain decreed the city capital of the enormous new viceroyalty of Río de la Plata. Suddenly Buenos Aires was a very important place, and many *porteños* have had a notoriously high opinion of themselves and their city ever since.

After repelling British invasions in 1806 and 1807, *porteños* reckoned they could handle themselves without Spain's help (or interference). Napoleon's 1808 conquest of Spain led to BA's *cabildo* (town council) cutting ties with the mother country in May 1810. Decades of power struggles between BA and the other former viceregal provinces ensued, escalating more than once into civil war.

Finally in 1880 the city was declared the federal territory of Buenos Aires, a separate entity from the surrounding province of the same name, and the nation's capital forevermore.

Buenos Aires' population by then was nearly half a million, and waves of immigrants (chiefly Spanish and Italian) continued to roll in. Many of them settled on the southern edge of town, to work in the booming port and the meat-processing industry. The 1871 yellow-fever epidemic had already driven the wealthy northward, and now the middle class abandoned La Boca and San Telmo to the newcomers.

The nation's agricultural exports soared from 1880 to 1914, which resulted in great wealth accumulating in BA. Well-heeled *porteños* built opulent French-style mansions, and the government spent lavishly on public works, including parks, ornate offices and a subway. Much of the unique look BA sports

today dates from this period, although Av 9 de Julio's transformation into a block-wide mega-boulevard didn't occur until the late 1930s.

But the boom times didn't last forever. Immigration burgeoned, export prices began to drop and workers became frustrated and militant. The Wall Street crash of 1929 dealt the final blow to the country's markets, and soon the first of many military coups took over. It was the end of Argentina's Golden Age.

Immigration to Buenos Aires kept climbing, but now it was mostly mestizos (people of mixed Indian and Spanish descent) from the rest of Argentina. Shantytowns popped up and social problems grew as the city failed to absorb its increasing population. The capital was the center of the country's economy, but as its prosperity waned there were no other centers of commercialism to help.

Pollution, poverty, unemployment and decaying infrastructure were constant problems in the 19th century, and even today greater Buenos Aires holds an astounding one-third of Argentina's population. Extreme governments and a roller-coaster economy have been constant plagues, but at least the 20th century saw a turn-around in the country's direction, though the recent global financial crisis has had an impact. For more on Argentina's roller-coaster history, see p28.

## ORIENTATION

Buenos Aires is a huge city, but most places of interest to travelers are concentrated in just a few easily accessible neighborhoods.

At the heart of the city is the Microcentro, the downtown business center; it's small enough that you can walk around it fairly easily. Further south is San Telmo, known for its tango and its Sunday antiques market. South of here is La Boca, famous for its colorful houses clad in corrugated metal.

West of the Microcentro is Congreso, BA's seat of politics. To the north is Retiro (with the city's main train and bus station) and northwest, Recoleta, upscale areas of museums and fancy stores. Further north are Palermo and Belgrano, upper-middle-class suburbs with spacious parks and plenty of shopping.

BA's Ezeiza airport is about 35km south of the center; see p135 for details. Aeroparque Jorge Newbery airport is northwest of downtown BA.

(Continued on page 92)