My Trip to South America
(Chile, Argentina and Brazil)

After returning from my last trip abroad – an excellent guided tour of Myanmar with my friend Debbie Benson – I found myself facing an unusual conundrum. Debbie and I planned on traveling together again in 2019 but couldn't agree on a particular location because Myanmar had been such a fascinating cultural and historical journey – due in large part to the country's relative isolation for fifty years – that trying to replicate the experience would have been like choosing North Korea for our next outing. Debbie wanted to return to Southeast Asia (Bhutan) while I wanted to switch global scenery, so we went back and forth bouncing suggestions off one another and searching the Internet for travel deals. In the end, we elected to visit a part of the world somewhat closer to home, yet one we knew very little about. Both of us had already been to countries in South America but we were not familiar with the bottom half of that continent. Our final decision was cemented by an advertised special for a 15-day tour of Chile, Argentina and Brazil we found online. This whirlwind tour included stops to three fascinating cities – Santiago, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro – and would allow us to see several diverse geographical areas like the mountainous upper Patagonia region and the natural wonder of the Iguazu Falls along the jungle border that separates Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.

Preparing for this tour was easy. Neither Chile nor Argentina required tourist visas for Americans, and just four months prior to the trip Brazil also dropped their visa requirements. Our non-stop flight to South America originated in Miami, my hometown, so I didn't have to worry about annoying connecting flight schedules (except for one stop on the way back home). The only caveat was the luggage restrictions on the inter-country flights once we reached South America. Normally, 50-pounds is the allowable check-in weight on international flights, but we were informed by our travel company that domestic and inter-country flights on the tour had 30-pound restrictions. This proved a little challenging since the temperature diversity of the region meant we had to pack for both hot and cold weather. I used an extra wide backpack I purchased a year earlier to distribute the weight.

I had only two concerns regarding this tour. The first was safety. I register all my trips abroad with the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, something I strongly recommend to all American travelers. One of the benefits of doing this are the advisories you receive via email concerning the countries you're visiting both before and during your actual travels, allowing you to stay informed about any potential hazards or threats in the areas you may be visiting. There were no real travel alerts concerning Chile and Argentina. Those two countries seemed very safe to travel through. My worry was with the State Department's travel advisory pertaining to Brazil. I hadn't read anything this alarming since I visited El Salvador and Honduras. The crime rate in Brazil is apparently very high. In fact, it is a matter of public record that police officers have routinely engaged in vigilante killings in certain parts of the country. The warnings about Rio de Janeiro, in particular, were enough to make anyone who hadn't been there very nervous, indeed. As it turned out, though, we encountered no issues while in Rio de Janeiro. The touristy areas were very well patrolled, and our guides told us which sections of the city we should avoid.

The only other concern I had pertained to our leave date. September/October is the tail end of the usually busy hurricane season here in south Florida. Nothing can upend travel plans more than an impending hurricane strike. Luckily, my city avoided the major storms that pass through the region annually. So on September 30th, 2019, under a clear sunny sky – and an even brighter disposition – I took an Uber to the nearby Miami International Airport to begin my South American adventure…

Days One and Two

Our non-stop flight to Santiago, Chile was scheduled to depart at 9:45pm. Debbie was flying in from Tampa, Florida (where she lives) and we had agreed to meet in front of the LATAM Airline's check-in counter around 5:30pm. It took Debbie nearly thirty minutes to traverse the terminal buildings at Miami International Airport. The airport had been renovated and remodeled in recent years and for someone who wasn't familiar with the

new layout it could be a little confusing. When I saw her approaching – wearily dragging her wheeled luggage – she looked very tired, as if she had just completed a grueling nature hike. My initial reaction was to laugh and make a joke: *How are you going to walk all day in Santiago if you can't even manage the terminal buildings in Miami*? She dismissed my remark telling me she was fine; she was going to sleep on the plane and get plenty of rest. We hugged and proceeded to the check-in counter to get our boarding passes.

A primary concern when I fly – and a major source of anxiety – is securing an aisles seat. I suffer from claustrophobia and need to have the 'open space' of the aisles next to me to avoid panic attacks. The flights on this tour were relatively cheap because they were sold as discounted group tickets. The main drawback for this kind of booking, besides sitting in the very back of the plane, is that you cannot reserve a seating assignment in advance, which is why we decided to check in very early. Thankfully, we were both able to secure aisles seats, albeit in different rows.

After going through the security checkpoint we headed to our departure gate and sat down for a snack, spending the next two hours catching up on life's current events. Debbie and I hadn't seen each other since our trip to Myanmar a year earlier – we do speak on the phone and text regularly – so it was fun reminiscing face-to-face. By 9:00pm our plane started boarding and we took off on schedule forty-five minutes later. I had purchased a new noise cancellation headphone set for this trip and used it to watch *Aquaman* on the plane's entertainment system. Dinner was served almost immediately after we reached our cruising altitude. I dozed off after eating, sleeping on and off throughout the flight, waking fully just two hours before we touched down. Breakfast was served at this time. All in all, the flight was very comfortable and passed quickly. I can't say the same for Debbie. She told me later that she had gotten ill on the plane and had to use the bathroom several times. Poor girl. If ever there was an omen foretelling future events, this was it. But let me not get ahead of myself.

We touched down at Santiago International Airport (also known as Arturo Merino Benitez International Airport) at 6:45am, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. It was a rather long, meandering trek through the arrival terminal before we reached Immigration. The wait at the baggage claim took even longer because my luggage was one of the last pieces to appear on the luggage carousel, creating a moment of dread as I thought perhaps my bag

hadn't made the flight. Debbie and I proceeded to the exit area where a middle-aged mustachioed man from the tour company greeted us. He introduced himself as Eduardo, our local guide, and instructed us to wait with a growing number of other tour members while he rounded up the rest of our group. Nineteen of us had arrived on the same flight and when we were all present and accounted for, Eduardo led us outside the terminal building. The front of the airport was undergoing construction and we had to walk the equivalent of about two blocks over some pretty uneven sidewalks to reach our mini-bus transport, everyone towing his or her own luggage.

Santiago International Airport is located approximately 9 miles (15km) northwest of downtown Santiago. The drive to our hotel, which normally would take 20-25 minutes, took us over an hour due to the insane morning rush hour traffic. During the drive, Eduardo welcomed us to Chile and informed us our tour director was currently en route from Buenos Aires and would be arriving later that afternoon. We would be meeting her at the orientation meeting scheduled for 6:00pm; the rest of the day was free for us to explore Santiago on our own. He provided us with some basic information concerning the Metro train schedule and the costs of taxis and made a few suggestions on places we might want to visit. The conversion rate was currently 710 Chilean pesos for one US dollar, and while that might seem like a good rate, he said, everyday life in the city was rather expensive (at least for the average Chilean). He suggested we use our credit cards for most purchases since they were accepted everywhere, and to maybe exchange a few dollars into pesos at the hotel for transportation costs and essentials. Because the country was undergoing tough economic times, and inflation was at an all-time high, he told us many Chilean businesses would gladly accept US dollars. In fact, in both Chile and Argentina, US dollars were coveted as a hedge against inflation.

The drive provided us with our first glimpse of this beautiful, modern metropolis. Eduardo, who grew up in Santiago and was quite proud of his hometown, added a little background information:

Founded in 1541 by Pedro de Valdivia, a Spanish conquistador who would later serve as the first royal governor of Chile, the city has served as the capital of the country since colonial times. Santiago is part of the Santiago Metropolitan Region, the largest of the 16 administrative divisions of Chile. Both the executive and judicial branches are located here, while the national congress is situated in the city of Valparaiso, 75 miles to the

northwest. With over 7 million people living within its boundaries, the city is the largest, most densely populated urban area in the country, making it the cultural, political and economic hub of the nation.

The city is located in the middle of what is known as the Santiago Basin, a part of the longer Central Valley that runs from Peru all the way down to the Northern Patagonia region of the country. The Santiago Basin is a large, remarkably flat valley that extends 50 miles (80km) from north to south and 22 miles (35km) from east to west. Bordering the city to the east is the Andes mountain range, forming an incredibly *stunning* snow-capped backdrop (when smog isn't obscuring the view). Over the past century, urban growth has pushed residents to build communities up into these rocky Andean hillsides, so the elevation of the city gradually rises from 1300 feet to 2300 feet. And just a two-hour drive to the west of Santiago you'll find *another* significant mountain chain, the Chilean Coastal Range – running north to south along the Pacific coast – which acts as a natural barrier against maritime influences and air masses, helping to keep the humidity in Santiago relatively low.

In my current travels throughout Latin America, this was by far the most modern city I have visited. The various neighborhoods or sections within Greater Santiago are divided into 37 administrative zones known as *communes*. Each has its own government and many have a distinctive look or feel. The historic downtown area with its 19th century architecture is interspersed with modern-day museums, shopping zones, restaurants and government buildings. The financial district teems with modern skyscrapers, and one particular commune, Providencia, boasts not only a collection of pricey high-rise apartment complexes, but also a trendy bohemian quarter called Barrio Bellavista (where we had an excellent dinner later that evening). The Mapocho River divides the city in two, and there are several rocky outcrops punctuating sections of Santiago's cityscape. The valley on the outskirts of the metropolis is lined with some of the country's most famous vineyards. Even stuck in heavy traffic, my first impressions of this city were very positive.

But I soon discovered there were some geographical drawbacks to living here, as well. Santiago is located within the *Pacific Ring of Fire*, a horseshoe-shaped zone 25,000 miles (40,000km) long that stretches around a huge portion of the Pacific Ocean. This geological zone contains many of the world's volcanoes (both active and dormant) and is the source of the vast

majority of earth's deadliest earthquakes. As a result, Santiago (and the rest of the country) has been hit with numerous earthquakes over the centuries, including one in 2010 that is regarded as the sixth largest in recorded history. Over time, much of the city's colonial structure has succumbed to this continuous tectonic activity, so the capital lacks the quaint historical center and colonial architecture that you'll find in other significant cities throughout Central and South America.

Another natural phenomena plaguing the city is *thermal inversion*, this is when higher warm air in the winter time holds colder air closer to the ground, trapping and concentrating smog and air pollution in the Central Valley. This situation is exacerbated by the year round operation of a large smelter at the El Teniente copper mine some 68 miles from the city, a major contributing factor of Santiago's poor air quality. To be honest, though, walking along the well-maintained streets here, with the city's highly organized public transportation system and tall, modern buildings, a newcomer would be hard-pressed to envision the dangers of earthquake activity or air pollution. I mean, this place had the look of a modern hip city.

We arrived at our hotel, the Novotel Santiago Las Condes, shortly before 9:00am. As we waited for the front desk to make copies of our passports and hand out our key cards, I spoke to a man named Jorge who worked as a concierge at the hotel. According to our tour itinerary, the following afternoon was a free period for the group and Debbie and I wanted to hire a local driver to take us to Pomaire, a dusty little village west of Santiago. Pomaire is famous for its clay pottery industry and for making the world's largest empanadas. Jorge informed me the cost of a private tour would run us 100,000 Chilean pesos, or $140 US, whichever we preferred. Debbie and I agreed to split the cost and booked the trip for the following day.

After checking in I went up to my room and took a nice hot shower and made a cup of instant coffee. I met Debbie in the lobby at 10:30am. Back in the States, Debbie and I had planned and mapped out our own personal sightseeing excursion for this day. We wanted to take the Metro subway train to the downtown historic center and visit several sites in the area. Armed with a tourist map – and a wad of Chilean pesos we procured from a money converter machine in the hotel lobby – Debbie and I hit the streets of Santiago. The temperature was 48 degrees Fahrenheit (9 Celsius); a bit cold for a Miami boy like me. In addition, the sky was overcast with an annoying intermittent rain drizzle that lasted throughout the day. Debbie brought along

her foldable umbrella, which we shared whenever the rain picked up. I carried a small sightseeing backpack to store my camera, batteries, water bottle, etc.

In the chilly, wet morning weather, we set out on foot, walking four long blocks to the Manquehue Metro train station on Apoquindo Avenue. Our hotel was located in the Las Condes commune, one of the wealthiest subdivisions within Santiago. Together with the adjacent Vitacura and Providencia communes, Las Condes is part of what Chileans call *Sanhatten* (a take on New York's Manhattan), an urban area of mostly upper-middle and higher income families living in high rise luxury apartment buildings and condominiums. The modern skyscrapers that fill the financial districts of these three communes house the country's largest corporate headquarters. The weather made the walk a bit tasking, and Debbie, who had been experiencing pain in her legs prior to the trip and was probably still tired from our long flight, was having difficulty keeping up. It took us about fifteen minutes to reach the Manquehue Metro train station.

On a daily basis more than two and a half million commuters ride the Metro (as it is popularly known). This rapid transit subway system connects a great portion of the city along seven different lines, encompassing more than a 130 stations along the way. Currently, construction is ongoing to expand the service even further. The Metro was very clean and well organized. Maps outlining the various train routes were posted everywhere and easy enough to navigate. At the time, the cost of using the Metro varied depending on the time of day. During normal hours it cost 720 pesos, but during rush hour the fare increased to 800 pesos. To use the Metro, one needs to purchase a reusable *Bip!* card (it cost the equivalent of $2 US), which is swiped at the turnstile gates to allow entry into the subway system. At the Metro ticket counter you can add as much money as you want to this *Bip!* card. Our local guide, Eduardo, lent us his and recommended we put a minimum of 1,600 Chilean pesos on it (per person) for a round trip fare. When we reached the Metro station, I decided to charge 3,500 pesos on the card to cover both of us, and we proceeded to the red line platform below.

We rode the red line train for nine stops and then switched to the green line for one more stop, getting off at the Bellas Arte station in the downtown area of the Santiago commune, also called *Santiago Centro*. This commune encompasses the historic quarter – the oldest section of the city – and

contains the major civic center of the country, including the national palace where the president of the republic conducts the affairs of state.

From the Metro station, Debbie and I made our way north one block to a beautiful public park called *Parque Forestal*. Situated on reclaimed land from the Mapocho River, this narrow park runs for several blocks just south of the river and has many interesting monuments and a varying array of sycamore trees. In the center of Parque Forestal is one of Santiago's most popular museums, the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Arte* (the National Museum of Fine Arts). This building was our first stop of the day. Unfortunately, when we arrived, the entrance was jammed with a growing line of teenage visitors. It was wet and cold and Debbie was too tired to wait, so we decided to revisit the museum on our last morning in Santiago.

We continued west along Parque Forestal to our next destination, a famous seafood market called *Mercado Central*, or Central Market, which also serves as the city's main marketplace. Established in 1872, this bustling market is located within a block-long edifice featuring a unique vaulted ceiling. The roof has a central pyramidal structure made out of cast iron and is crowned by a dome and surrounded by eight smaller two-tiered rooftops. The various entrances into the marketplace are decorated with wrought iron patterns or sculptures. Having read that this was a great place to eat, we decided to take a break and have lunch here. Inside, food vendors sold produce, meats and a wide selection of fresh seafood from every corner of the building.

The middle of the Mercado Central has an open area filled with numerous restaurants specializing in seafood brought in daily from the Pacific Ocean. Debbie and I made our way around the vendors, taking photos of everything, before selecting a restaurant to have lunch. Our local guide later told us that most city dwellers avoid eating within the marketplace because the prices tended to be expensive, preferring the smaller eateries located around the Mercado Central, instead. *Live and learn, huh*? But to be honest, Debbie and I were so grateful to be out of the cold, wet air we couldn't have cared less what the meal cost. We each ordered the Chilean sea bass with fries (on a recommendation by our waiter), which came with a small salad and a basket of delicious warm bread. The whole meal, including the tip, came to roughly $28 US. Not a wallet-buster, by any means.

Re-invigorated after a leisurely (and delicious) hour-long lunch we exited the Mercado Central building on its south side, crossing San Pablo Street and made our way down Paseo Puente, a trendy pedestrian side street lined with stores and specialty shops. After three blocks we reached the city's historic main square, the *Plaza de Armas*. Most colonial cities began as a central town square that gradually expanded outwardly. In the case of *Spanish* colonial cities, the streets were originally designed in a grid-like pattern around this main square. Santiago's Plaza de Armas was established shortly after Conquistador Pedro de Valdivia founded the city in 1541, but none of the surviving colonial buildings around the square date back further than the late 1700s, and this is due to the frequent earthquake activity that destroyed most of the earlier structures. In fact, with some notable exceptions, I would venture to guess that most of the area around the 'historic' quarter has either been constructed or re-built within the last century.

Upon reaching the square the first thing that catches your eye is the large Santiago Metropolitan Cathedral, the oldest architectural structure in the Plaza de Armas. This church, which sits on the northwest corner of the square, serves as the center of the archdiocese of Santiago; adjacent to it is the Archbishop's palace. The Santiago Metropolitan Cathedral was originally built between 1753 and 1799, and while beautifully designed by an Italian architect in a Baroque style that features gilded columns, frescos and intricate ornaments, the masonry techniques of the time made it vulnerable to damage by earthquakes, and there have been constant periods of remodeling and rebuilding to keep the structure intact. Its two towers were actually added almost a hundred years after the initial building was constructed.

The north side of the plaza contains the three next oldest structures in the area. On the corner, across from the cathedral, is the historic Central Post Office building (constructed between 1881-1908), built on land that once contained the residence of Santiago's founder and was the site of the former royal governor's palace. Next to it is the former Royal Court Palace building (the *Palacio de la Real Audencia de Santiago*), a colonial holdover completed in the early 1800s, which served as the royal court of justice. Today, the building is the new home of the Natural History Museum of Chile. Next to it is the Municipal (City Hall) building that once held the *cabildo*, a council of colonial landowners who helped administer the city and acted as the legal representatives of the crown. These three structures, and

the cathedral, are considered a part of the country's heritage and are regarded as national monuments. The rest of the buildings surrounding the square were *relatively* new, probably built within the last sixty years or so.

The Plaza de Armas' open square was adorned with palm trees and a collection of modern and historic statues and monuments. The whole area was quite lively, even in the cold, drizzly weather; there were large groups of people milling about, including street entertainers and artists. Because we would be visiting this area again with our tour group the following day, Debbie and I did not linger here for too long. We took photos of the cathedral and then proceeded to the southern end of the plaza, making a right on an avenue called *Campania de Jesus* and walked one block to Bandera Street where we turned left and found our next stop, the Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, on our left-hand side. Santiago is a museum lover's paradise – with more than 50 museums located throughout the city – and this one, in particular, was considered one of the best, if not *the* best in the entire country.

The Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art is housed in the former Royal Customs Palace, one of the finest neoclassical structures in the city, and consists of artifacts donated by Sergio Larrain Garcia-Moreno, a famous Chilean architect and philanthropist who spent a lifetime acquiring his collection. There are thousands of *exquisite* pieces on display, covering roughly 4,500 years of American history. In addition to the artwork of the Andean cultures, the museum offers pieces from pre-Columbian Mexico, Central America and the Amazon basin. It is an incredible private collection beautifully showcased in this magnificent building. By the time we reached the museum lobby, though, Debbie was feeling very bad. She was extremely tired and her feet were aching big time. I, too, was pretty exhausted by this point, but if I wanted to see this superb museum it was now or never. So, we made a deal. Debbie would sit in the building's courtyard café and have a coffee (or two), while I made a quick run of the exhibits.

The entrance fee was the equivalent of $10 US. From the information desk I was able to acquire an English language map of the museum layout. The entire museum, or at least the areas with exhibits, was confined to the second floor and the basement level of the building, so it didn't take me a considerable amount of time to 'see' everything. Organized by four distinct regions covering Central and South America, I saw ceramics and pottery from most of the dominant pre-Columbian cultures, from pots to fertility

figurines, to intricately detailed anthropomorphic vessels and masks, to gold, silver and copper items, to a fascinating collection of Andean textiles. There were life-size Mapuche sculptures and Mayan stelae with fine carvings, and even one unusual display of wooden vomit spatulas (supposedly used by Amazonian shamans before they ingested psychoactive powders).

An hour later I rejoined Debbie in the museum's café. Poor girl, she had been trying to order a second cup of coffee for nearly fifteen minutes but couldn't get the attention of the wait staff. She was not a happy camper. At this point, we decided to head back to the hotel to get some much-needed rest. We walked back to the Plaza de Armas where the entrance to the local Metro was located. I was a little disorientated when we reached the green line platform, not knowing if we were on the right side of the tracks. But then something happened. Huge crowds started to gather around the connecting platforms, everyone talking excitedly, and nobody was using the green line. In Spanish, I asked one of the police officers manning the station what had happened. The gist of his response was that someone had fallen onto the tracks (in another part of the subway system) and had been killed. The Metro Transit authorities had temporarily shut down the green line to attend to this matter. It was approaching rush hour and thousands of commuters (including us) were now stranded in the downtown area. I asked the police officer if there was another way to connect to the red line but I didn't understand his explanation because so many people were inquiring about the delays that he seemed a bit harried, giving information to various commuters at the same time. Debbie suggested we take a taxi back to the hotel. I agreed, and we followed the throngs of people as they exited the subway system, at times shoulder-to-shoulder in the confined Metro tunnels, causing my anxiety level to ratchet up considerably.

When we finally reached street level we found ourselves in an entirely new area, having taken a different path out of the subway station. We walked to the street in front of the Metro, a wide busy avenue, and tried to flag down a passing taxicab. The only problem was that hundreds of other commuters were trying to do the same thing. No sooner than we waved a taxi down, somebody would rush in front of us and get into the cab. It was a tad frustrating, to say the least, and my Ugly American side was starting to come out. Eventually, Debbie and I stood our ground when one taxi pulled up to the curb to drop somebody off. We piled into the backseat without hesitating. Already irritated, I may have barked our destination at the driver in Spanish, who sped off like we were fleeing the scene of a crime.

As we approached our hotel on Alonso de Cordova Avenue some 25 minutes later, the cabby inadvertently missed the driveway entrance and had to make a U-turn one block down, asking us if it was okay to drop us off on the opposite side of the street due to the heavy traffic. Debbie and I were just so happy to be back at the hotel we didn't mind. We paid the man and quickly got out of the cab. But as he drove off, it suddenly dawned on me I had left my small backpack on the backseat. I went running after the cab, hoping he might see me in his rearview mirror and stop, but no such luck. He turned abruptly on the next corner and vanished. *I, too, was no longer a happy camper…*

Although my backpack contained only a few items – four rechargeable camera batteries, my camera case, and Debbie's foldable umbrella – it was a painful loss, nonetheless. I had only one battery left, the one in my camera (which, thankfully, was in my jacket pocket). I snap a ton of photos on each trip. I do this so that I have a chronological, visual record of the tour, which helps to jog my memory when I sit down later to write the final copy of my journal. My Nikon camera was more than eight years old, and the rechargeable batteries were pretty worn and did not charge to full capacity anymore. I had been meaning to replace the camera, but kept putting it off. Now, with only one battery left, I would need to incorporate my cell phone's camera and ration my picture taking. And I do not consider myself a great photographer (hence all the batteries).

As upset as I was, this minor travail turned out to be nothing, really. I made do with my cell phone and remaining battery, training myself to be a stingy but discerning photographer along the way; everything else was easily replaceable when I returned home. In fact, when we attended the orientation meeting later that evening we discovered something that made my loss seem downright trivial. One of the couples in our group had been the victim of a crime while riding the Metro; a pickpocket thief had lifted the husband's wallet, which contained nearly $3000 US. *Whoa*.

When we got back to the hotel, we split up. Debbie went up to her room to relax while I walked east along Alonso de Cordova Avenue for several blocks until I found a supermarket to buy instant coffee, creamer and a box of cookies (the latter to console myself with). Back in my room I made two cups of coffee and wrote the day's events in my journal notebook. At 5:45pm I met Debbie and the rest of the tour group in the lobby. Our tour

director, Paola, was already there together with local guide, Eduardo. She led us upstairs to a conference room where we sat in a semi-circle facing her. Our tour group consisted of 26 people, plus two more who were still in transit due to a delayed flight back in the States. Paola, an attractive brunette in her thirties, officially welcomed us to Chile and spoke briefly about herself. An Argentinean from Buenos Aires, she had been working as a tour guide for nearly 14 years. Afterwards, everyone in the group took turns introducing themselves and saying where they were from. The group appeared to be a fun, interesting mix of well-traveled people.

During the orientation meeting, Paola reiterated some of the points Eduardo had made earlier about exchanging money, the use of credit cards and when to pay in dollars. She quickly went through our itinerary for the tour and what we could expect, touching upon the usual topics: safety, punctuality and the daily seat rotation on the bus. She also mentioned that we would need to dress for cold weather for at least eight more days until we reached Buenos Aires; after that, she assured us, we could ditch our coats and get out the warm-weather apparel.

By 7:00pm, when the orientation meeting ended, the group boarded a big, comfortable (and brand spanking new) tour bus for a dinner trip to the *Bellavista* district. By now, traffic had eased considerably as we made our way across the Mapocho River at night and into the trendy neighborhood known as Bellavista. Situated between the river and the foot of San Cristobal Hill, in the upscale Providencia commune, this unique slice of Santiago represented the bohemian quarter of the city. The streets of this neighborhood are lined with avant-garde galleries, specialty boutiques, bars and nightclubs, and a seemingly endless selection of restaurants and eateries. Many of the homes and businesses here are painted in bright colors and decorated with large (often impressive) graffiti art.

One of the most popular streets in this section is *Pio Nono*, named after Pope Pius IX (a 19th century pope who was the last to rule over the former Papal States). On most weekends, a handicrafts fair runs the length of this street. Some of the items one can purchase here are jewelry made from a semi-precious stone called lapis lazuli, which, for the most part, is only mined in Chile or Afghanistan. Another interesting attraction is one of the former homes of Pablo Neruda, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and considered Chile's greatest poet. This quirky-looking home was built for his lover (and later third wife) Matilda Urrutia during the early 1950s and is

now a popular museum in the district. Not surprisingly, many of the city's artists and intellectuals live in the Bellavista area, so this section serves as a hangout for the cultural elite.

Our bus parked in front of Patio Bellavista, in the heart of the district, a medium-sized shopping plaza filled with restaurants, live music venues, pubs, fashion boutiques and jewelry shops. Paola led the group through this plaza and out onto a street called Constitucion where the famous *Como Agua Para Chocolate* restaurant was located. The title of this restaurant in English is Like Water for Chocolate, and the theme is based on the famous Mexican romantic novel by the same name (which was also an award-winning movie released in 1992). The décor is something out of a 19th century courtyard hacienda, complete with a water fountain and one unusual table made out of a bed with pillows. Normally, something this kitschy would have all the makings of a tourist trap, but this frequently visited eatery is very popular amongst the locals, and for good reason. The food is outstanding!

When we arrived, the restaurant staff pulled together several tables for our group. Debbie and I sat at one end together with Johnny, a retired machinist from Arkansas whose heart was as big as his 'good ole boy' frame. He was a great companion throughout the entire trip, and I'll be mentioning him many times in this journal. Local wine and beer was free flowing the moment we sat down. For starters, they served a delicious creamy portabella mushroom and cilantro soup. For the main course, I ordered the beef dish, a tender center cut portion wrapped in bacon and smothered in a Swiss cheese peppery sauce with a side of sliced potatoes and grilled veggies. My dessert was the recommended *Leche de los Dioses* (Milk of the Gods), an orgasm-inducing custard flan covered with cream and chocolate caramel. *What a feast*!

By 9:40pm we waddled out of there and back to the bus. Twenty minutes later I was in my hotel room, thoroughly exhausted. I barely had the stamina to brush my teeth. I set my cell phone alarm clock before collapsing onto the bed, falling asleep instantly.

Day Three

I awoke at 5:00am (I'm an early riser), feeling fully rested. Jet lag was not a problem on this trip because the local time zone was only one hour behind Eastern Standard Time. I shaved and showered and then busied myself making coffee, writing in my journal and setting out the clothes I would be wearing over the next few days, catching segments of the BBC International News network on TV.

At 7:30am I joined Debbie for the customary buffet breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Forty-five minutes later I returned to my room to use the bathroom prior to our morning tour of the city. Since I no longer had my sightseeing backpack, I improvised by using the smallest packing cube in my suitcase. I filled it with my camera, pad and pen, a local tourist map, some Advil and anti-diarrhea pills, a spare roll of toilet paper and a bottle of water. The packing cube had a nylon handle, and I must have looked like an idiot carrying it around. By the end of the tour I made sure to explain to everyone *why* I was using a packing cube instead of a backpack.

The entire tour group was already waiting in the lobby ten minutes before our scheduled leaving time of 9:00am, a good indication that this was a seasoned bunch of 'guided tour' veterans. You can normally spot the newbies because they're always late or straggling behind. I often tell family and friends that seeing the world on a guided tour is never really a relaxing situation, despite the fact you're on vacation. It takes some adjusting to be a 'productive' member of a tour group. First and foremost is the ability to be punctual. Most guided tours are a constant on-the-move endeavor. Being punctual means being well organized and ready to go when everybody else is. *Chop-chop*. If this doesn't appeal to you, or if you're the kind of person who likes lazy mornings and leisurely paces, then I suggest you make your own traveling arrangements or take a cruise. The purpose of most guided tours is to get you to view as much as you can in the limited time you're going to be there. This suits me fine. At my age, if I want to 'see the world' then I'm going to have to do it in a hurry. *Chop-chop*.

At 9:00am sharp we were on the bus heading out for our official sightseeing tour of the city. Throughout the drive, Eduardo was on the mic providing interesting tidbits about Santiago and its history. We drove east

along Alonso de Cordova Avenue and then turned right to get onto Apoquindo Avenue, driving west through the heart of the Las Condes commune. At one point we crossed over Americo Vespucci Avenue, a major roadway that encircles the city, passing the Military Academy where the country's military officers are trained. We were now traveling through the *El Golf* district, a very upscale part of the city so named because of an exclusive country club nearby. In Santiago, if you say you live in El Golf, everyone understands you are financially well off. This area also has a large business district.

We turned north on *El Bosque Avenue* and eventually reached *Andres Bello Avenue*, the main road just south of the Mapocho River, and continued west. The Andres Bello Avenue is an important roadway in Santiago. In addition to its impressive skyscrapers, this street is home to various embassies and consulates, including the US Embassy, which we passed on the right-hand side (a long line of visa applicants were already lined up at the entrance).

Not far from the US Embassy, as we crossed into the Providencia commune, we came upon the 62-story edifice known as the *Gran Torre Santiago* (the Great Santiago Tower), the tallest building in all of Latin America. Completed in 2013, its real name is the Costanera Center Tower 2, and it is part of the Costanera Center, a sprawling 500,000 square foot (47,000sq m) complex that includes the largest shopping mall on the continent, two hotels and two additional office buildings. During the workweek, it is estimated that approximately 250,000 people a day go to the Costanera Center (to work and/or shop). On the 61st and 62nd floors there is an observation deck called the Sky Costanera that offers a spectacular view of the city and is a very popular tourist attraction.

As we made our way further west, beyond the Costanera Center, the Mapocho River was to our left. Due to a lack of snow or rain up in the Andes, the water level was very low, highlighting the colorful graffiti along its cement banks. We crossed the Mapocho River and began ascending a 3-mile road that winds its way up San Cristobal Hill, the second highest rocky peak in the city. With a height of almost 2800 feet (850m) above sea level, San Cristobal Hill is a wonderful spot to get a panoramic view of Santiago.

San Cristobal Hill is part of the Santiago Metropolitan Park that stretches through four different communes making it one of the largest urban parks in

the world. In addition to the San Cristobal Hill, the park also includes two smaller hills (*Chacarillas* and *Los Gemelos*). There are a number of attractions here. The Chilean National Zoo is located at the foot of San Cristobal Hill. There is also a botanical garden, a children's park, two public swimming pools, and – at the summit of the hill – the Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception with its 42-foot statue of the Virgin Mary. In 1987, Pope John Paul II prayed and blessed the city of Santiago from this sanctuary. To showcase the iconic Virgin Mary statue, the city installed floodlights so it can be seen day or night. On Sundays and during special occasions, religious services are held in an amphitheater built at the base of the statue. The summit was considered a sacred area even before the sanctuary. Prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the indigenous people venerated the site, calling it *Tupahue*, which means "place of the Gods'.

One can access the summit by various means: for the more athletically-inclined you can hike it along nature trails, or take a vehicle, like us, up the roadway, or ride the funicular train (a 1925 holdover that goes from the Bellavista district to the summit), or take the Santiago cable car. Either way, Santiago Metropolitan Park is a very popular site for locals and tourists alike.

We only went half-up the hill, passing the Japanese botanical garden and a police dog training academy, before stopping at one of the many observation points along the road. We did not go to the summit because time did not permit it, but Eduardo gave instructions to those who wanted to return later that afternoon during their free time, telling them to take the Metro to the Bellavista district and then the funicular train to the top. We got off the bus at the observation point and took in the view. Across from us were the Vitacura and Providencia communes, with their high-rise buildings and business districts (including the Costanera Center Tower 2), beyond them we could make out a good portion of the city. Directly below us was the beautifully serene Bicentennial Park, the city's newest green space, inaugurated in celebration of the nation's 200th year of independence (2010). To the east was a section of the majestic Andean ridge, much of the snow-capped mountaintops obscured by low-lying clouds (or smog, I'm not sure).

After taking in the scenery we returned to the bus and headed back down San Cristobal Hill for a 30-minute stop (and bathroom break) at the Bicentennial Park. With its trails, bike paths and children's playground, this large nature park offers a quiet retreat from the hustle and bustle of the

nearby business district. Eduardo led us through a botanical section and a series of connected ponds occupied by flocks of white and pink flamingoes and adorable green-billed ducks. From here, we re-boarded the bus and headed to the historic quarter in the downtown area.

As we exited Bicentennial Park, Eduardo pointed out several nearby buildings. The first was a fairly huge complex housing the United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), responsible for promoting social and economic development and integration in the region, among other things. On the opposite side of the street was the central office of the ALMA Observatory. ALMA is the acronym for the *Atacama Large Millimeter/ submillimeter Array,* a combination of more than sixty radio telescopes arranged along a very high plateau in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile, used to observe electromagnetic radiation at millimeter or submillimeter wavelengths. Eduardo explained that the high elevation and the extremely low humidity of the Atacama Desert makes for an ideal location to observe outer space. Built by a consortium of international agencies, ALMA is one of several major observatories in the Atacama Desert. Anyone interested in traveling to that region of Chile can book tours to visit the observatory, but should do so well in advance, Eduardo suggested.

Just in back of this building was the office of the European Southern Observatory (ESO), a 16-nation intergovernmental research organization that has built some of the largest telescopes in the world. Currently, the ESO operates three large ground-based facilities in or around the edges of the Atacama Desert, including the aptly named Very Large Telescope (VLT), which is actually four enormous telescopes that can *each* detect objects four billion times fainter than the human eye. The images seen by the four telescopes can be combined to achieve a very high angular resolution. To date, only the Hubble Space Telescope has produced more scientific papers than the VLT. Among the pioneering observations made by the ESO are the first direct images of an exoplanet (these are planets outside our Solar System) and the movement of stars around the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way. I had no idea Chile was at the forefront of such serious stargazing and I made a mental note to check out the Atacama Desert region if I ever returned.

We drove east out of Bicentennial Park along Alonso de Cordova Avenue, through a wealthy art district in the Vitacura commune, passing

several art galleries and high-fashion boutiques. On Vitacura Avenue we turned right and eventually reconnected with Andres Bello Avenue and proceeded west towards the historic center.

During this portion of the drive, Eduardo spoke briefly about the governmental structure of his country. Chile is a constitutional republic, he said, governed by a president and a national congress, which is divided into a senate (the upper house) and a chamber of deputies (the lower house). The country is a unitary state, meaning that the central government is supreme. The administration of Chile is further broken down into three divisions: regional, provincial and communes (or districts). The judiciary is independent and includes a Supreme Court, a military court, a court of appeals and a constitutional tribunal.

Eduardo also spoke about a time of social unrest and political instability in Chile. In 1973, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, the first freely elected socialist head of state in Latin America. This occurred during the Cold War and many believe the CIA played a role in the coup. At any rate, Pinochet established a military dictatorship that ruled the country for seventeen years, repressing human rights and banning leftist political parties. Thousands of dissidents were killed or 'disappeared' during this upheaval. In 1990, democracy was eventually restored under the mandates of a new constitution that allowed for a relatively free and fair election, ending Pinochet's military junta. Chile has had democratically elected leaders ever since.

(**Interesting Aside**: One of the most peculiar holdovers of the Pinochet era was the use of a *binomial* voting system. If you think our electoral college is crazy, wait to you read how this system worked. Essentially, political parties were grouped into blocs and allowed to run two candidates in every voting district. After the election, the votes were tallied (not by candidates, mind you, but by party) and if the political party with the most votes didn't get at least *double* the amount of votes that the second-highest party received, then a candidate from *each* of the top two parties wins a seat, practically guaranteeing a fifty-fifty split in congress.

To better explain it, imagine during a congressional election in the United States that the Democrats win the majority of the seats but fail to garner twice as many votes as the Republicans, this would mean that the

Republican Party, which lost the majority of the races, would now be rewarded by getting *half* of the seats in congress. *What the f…?*

This insane voting method was incorporated into the new constitution by the outgoing military junta in order to insure that neither of the top two political parties in the country would ever gain dominance over the other. At the time, the argument for using this binomial voting system was to foster political stability, forcing the top two political parties to debate, negotiate and build a consensus to get anything done. In other words, everyone had to work together. And while the system, at the time, helped ease the transition from a military dictatorship back to a constitutional republic, many critics of this system rightly argued it impeded democracy by dismissing not only the true wishes of the electorate but also ignoring the smaller political parties who couldn't muster enough votes to be included in the top two ranking. This voting method was eventually repealed in 2015 and a more representative and proportional system was put in place. *Hallelujah*!)

We continued towards the historic center, passing *Parque Balmeceda* (Balmeceda Park) on our left, sandwiched between Andres Bello Avenue and the larger Providencia Avenue. As we approached a bend in the road, we came upon a large oval plaza separating Parque Balmeceda from yet another public park, Parque Forestal. This famous plaza is known as *Plaza Baquedano*, it was inaugurated in 1928 to commemorate a military commander who led several successful campaigns during the War of the Pacific (1879-1884), which pitted Chile against an alliance of Bolivia and Peru. Chile's victory over both countries in that war greatly extended its territory in the resource-rich northern part of the country, resulting in Bolivia becoming a landlocked nation. In the center of the plaza is an equestrian statue of General Baquedano. This plaza – which also serves as a busy intersection, connecting several of the city's major streets – was the scene of riots during the recent protests over the government's increase in the Metro fare rate. Several protesters were killed by the *carabineros* (the national police force of Chile) and the plaza is now being informally referred to as *Plaza de la Dignidad* or Dignity Square.

We made a left on *Jose de la Barra Avenue* and drove across Parque Forestal (and the National Museum of Fine Arts). We then made a right onto the narrow Monjitas (Nuns) Street, passing the large Ministry of Health building, and continued until we reached the historic Plaza de Armas a few

blocks later. Once we arrived at the square we got off the bus and spent the next two hours or so walking through the historic downtown area.

We gathered in the Plaza de Armas' open square while Eduardo gave us a brief history of the area, pointing out the four main colonial structures that Debbie and I had seen the day before. He explained that the reason so few colonial buildings survived to the present – besides the destruction caused by earthquakes – was because Chile was mostly a poor country during its early history and the building materials used for construction back then were not the kind to hold up well with the passage of time. The city we see today, he said, was built mostly within the last century, and much of it within the last five or six decades, making Santiago one of the more modern-looking cities in Latin America.

We were given time to explore the square on our own. I took several photographs of the entire plaza, including the monuments. One interesting (and amusing) scene going on in the square was that of an actor dressed up to look like a bronze statue of a Chilean copper minor. Curious onlookers would go up to the 'statue' and have the bejesus scared out of them when it suddenly came to life. In recent years, minors have been celebrated in the country. In 2010, the world was riveted by a cave-in crisis at the San Jose copper-gold mine in the Atacama Desert where 33 minors were trapped deep underground for 69 days before being rescued. The entire nation held its breath, as the men, who all survived, were pulled out of the ground one-by-one. The minors became – um, pardon the pun – *minor* celebrities for a while. A major motion picture entitled *The 33* was made of the ordeal starring Antonio Banderas.

On the northwest corner of the plaza, the Virgin Mary statue in front of the Santiago Metropolitan Cathedral had been sectioned off and adorned with white flowers. A large crowd had assembled in front of it; many people were praying or looking on in admiration. Debbie and I decided to check it out. Afterwards, we went inside the cathedral to take photos.

Our group left the Plaza de Armas, following Eduardo and Paola as they led us on foot down Campania de Jesus Avenue and then left onto Bandera Street to visit another major city square, the *Plaza Montt Varas*. This square is also known as the Justice Plaza because it is located in front of the *Palacio de Tribunales de Justicia* – (the Supreme Court Palace) – a magnificent block-long building built in a Neo-classical style in the early 20th century,

famous for its metal and glass dome and the decorative stained glass made in Germany.

On the opposite side of the Supreme Court Palace, taking up another entire city block, is the former National Congress building. Originally completed in 1876, the building was destroyed in a fire in 1895 and rebuilt and reopened in 1901. It was the former meeting place of Chile's National Congress until the military junta officially moved the legislative body to the city of Valparaiso in 1990. This equally impressive structure was constructed as a cross within a square, geometrically divided by four courtyards, and features Neo-classical pediment porticos with Corinthian columns and gardens surrounding the exterior. And while the National Congress no longer officially meets here, the building currently contains offices of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, and is home to the National Library of Congress.

We walked to the center of Plaza Montt Varas (the Justice Plaza) and gathered around the only monument in the square, a tall memorial with statues of Manual Montt and Antonio Varas – two important statesmen from the late 19th century – adorning the top. The space that makes up the actual open plaza was once a parking lot for the authorities of the Supreme Court building. Remarkably, a five level underground parking garage has been built beneath it. This civic square – which stretches between Banderas and Morande Avenues – has several reflecting pools along its horizontal axis. The simple open-space cement design was intentional. The architects did not want to take away from the historical Neo-classical buildings surrounding the square; this includes not only the Supreme Court and former National Congress buildings, but also the former Royal Customs Palace that now houses the Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, which is located on the plaza's eastern end. After Eduardo's historical lowdown, we were given time to walk around and take photos.

We continued to the western side of the plaza and entered a shopping mall across the street called the *Mall Espacio M* for a quick bathroom break. This unique mall is situated within the ruins of the former Larrain Zanartu Palace, another Neo-classical gem built in 1872 by one of the most influential political families of Chile at the time. The palace, a designated historical landmark, was badly damaged during an earthquake in 1985. The inside of the structure completely collapsed and only the façade of the palace remained standing. Instead of demolishing the ruins, though, it was decided

to ‘rehabilitate’ the building and this three-story mall was constructed within its remaining walls. The ground floor has an historical display of the former palace, and you can still see the exposed brick and some original doorways from the original structure. It is one cool place to shop (there is also a large food court on the second level).

From the Mall Espacio M we walked south several blocks to the *Plaza de la Constitucion* (Constitution Plaza) in the heart of the city’s civic district. This is Santiago’s most formal public square, surrounded by many important government buildings. The wide-open space is adorned with statue monuments – one on each side of the square – of four notable Chilean historical leaders including (I was surprised) Salvador Allende, the socialist president who was overthrown in the 1973 coup. In one section of the plaza, encircled by 12 Chilean flags, the carabineros (national police force) perform a changing of the guard ceremony every other day at 10:00am that includes horses, a band and much pomp and circumstance. There was a considerable amount of security in this area because fronting the southern end of the plaza is the *Palacio de la Moneda* (Palace of the Mint), where the president of Chile conducts the affairs of state. The presidential palace also houses the offices of several top cabinet ministers, including the Minister of the Interior.

Hands down the most interesting structure around the square is the Palace of the Mint. Completed in 1805, this colonial landmark is one of the oldest buildings in the capital and actually functioned as the country’s mint from 1814 until 1929. *La Moneda* (the Mint) – as it is fondly known – officially became the seat of government in 1845, and for more than a hundred years – until the 1950s – it was also the presidential residence. With its wide horizontal shape, rectangular composition and Roman Doric columns, this building is one of the best examples of late 18th century Italian Neo-classical architecture in Latin America. Three large courtyards or patios lie behind the main façade that fronts Constitution Plaza, which are used as the official entrance into the palace and for presidential ceremonies. In back of La Moneda, along Liberator Bernando O’Higgins Avenue, is a new public square called *Plaza de la Cuidadania* (Citizenry Plaza) built to commemorate Chile’s bicentennial in 2010.

Throughout its history, La Moneda has undergone periods of restoration or modifications. The most recent occurred following the tragic 1973 military coup against President Salvador Allende. When the president

refused to be deposed, the military bombed the palace to dislodge him and his armed supporters, inflicting heavy damage to the building. Allende had been guaranteed exile if he stepped down, but rather than surrender to the mutinous armed forces, he committed suicide inside the palace. Perhaps that's why his statue stands in the plaza; that kind of brass-ballsiness deserves recognition.

At different times during the day, this section of the city becomes very congested with thousands of government employees going to and from work. I took plenty of photographs of Constitution Plaza, convincing one affable, older carabinero to pose for a picture with La Moneda in the background. Our tour bus picked us up on a nearby street corner, but about half the group stayed behind in the civic center since the rest of the day was free for us to explore Santiago on our own. A few had chosen to take an optional winery excursion into the valley. As for Debbie and I, we had already booked our own private trip to visit the town of Pomaire.

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We got back to the hotel by 1:20pm. Jorge, the concierge we had spoken to, was already waiting for us in the lobby. Debbie and I went up to our rooms for a quick bathroom break before leaving. As it turned out, Jorge also doubled as a tour operator, and he was the one who drove us to Pomaire. We departed the hotel in a white van at 1:35pm. Jorge was an amicable fellow in his late forties with an excellent sense of humor and a solid command of the English language. He told us his parents had immigrated to Canada when he was a teenager and he lived there for many years before returning to Chile. Apparently, the frigid Canadian winters had not agreed with him.

At that hour of the day, traffic was not too heavy and we made it out of the city in good time. We were traveling southwest on Highway 78 – the Maipo River to our left – through a flat fertile valley of farms and fruit groves. In the distance, just beyond the farmlands and vineyards, a continuous ridgeline of rocky outcrops flanked both sides of the valley. It took us an hour to reach the town of Pomaire, located approximately 68km from the capital. Our official tour itinerary for the two and a half days we were in Santiago had us confined to the city, so Debbie and I chose to

venture out into the Central Valley for our free time. We settled on the town of Pomaire, nestled halfway between Santiago and the Pacific Ocean, because we read online that one can buy beautifully handcrafted pottery here made from *greda* (a brownish natural clay found in abundance in this valley). Over the years, the townsfolk of Pomaire have become famous nationwide for making the earthenware used to cook Chile's most popular dishes, like *pastel de choclo* (a mouth-watering traditional sweet corn casserole flavored with an assortment of delicious ingredients) or *paila marina* (a savory stew laden with seafood). In fact, the town is full of restaurants offering up these tasty dishes…and Debbie and I had not eaten lunch yet. *Mmmmmmmm.*

Pomaire could easily be described as a 'one-horse town'. It was – judging from our little drive around – roughly seven blocks long and about five blocks wide with simple, mostly one-level homes, the older ones made out of adobe. The two main avenues appeared to be Roberto Bravo and San Antonio, which were adjacent to each other and lined with a long succession of pottery shops and restaurants that opened up to the sidewalk. On the far end of these two streets we saw a section containing several small factories with open kilns where visitors can see how pottery is made; although, many of the shops make their own pottery in their backrooms. The high tourist season was still a few weeks off, so we found the town relatively empty, but the amount of restaurants alone told me this place was probably a popular stop on the tour guide circuits. Jorge asked us what we wanted to do first, and we both blurted out, "*Lunch*!"

We spent about 10 minutes driving in circles looking for a suitable restaurant, but with so many to choose from we didn't know which one to pick. Finally, (I think out of frustration) Jorge pointed at one rather large establishment taking up an entire street corner and asked, "How about that one?" We were so hungry I think our stomachs growled their approval first. We parked on a side street and went inside.

Back in the States, when Debbie and I decided to visit Pomaire, we read that – in addition to the wonderful greda pottery – the town was also famous for making *large* empanadas. Essentially, an empanada is nothing more than a doughy turnover stuffed with any number of fillings and then either baked or fried. In Chile, the most common is referred to as *empanada de pino*, a baked turnover filled with ground beef (chicken and seafood can also be used), sautéed onions and spices, a hard-boiled egg, olives and raisins. This

empanada is considered a national dish and is quite popular during the holidays. No visit to Chile would be complete without eating one. But in Pomaire, they take their empanadas to whole new extreme. The town currently makes the biggest empanadas in the world (look it up). *How big exactly*? Anywhere from three pounds and above! Many of the restaurants display a sample of their largest empanadas to entice customers. I'm not gonna lie…these oversized turnovers were the *main* reason we opted to visit Pomaire. *Let the fat shaming begin*!

We ordered two of them, a baked 1.5-kilo (3.3 pounds) *empanada de pino* – it came filled with both ground beef and an entire over-sized chicken breast – and a much smaller fried cheese empanada. Jorge, who we invited to join us for lunch, suggested we try the *pastel de choclo* (his favorite), as well. The empanadas were served with a side dish of *pebre*; a condiment made of onions, chopped tomatoes, coriander, olive oil, garlic and ground *aji* peppers. This simple order of two empanadas and a sweet corn casserole dish (with soft drinks) became quite the feast. *We couldn't finish it*. The whole meal came to 20,000 pesos (about $28US) with a tip.

After a pleasant hour-long lunch we crossed the street and began browsing through the (seemingly) endless selections of pottery shops. Pomaire is one of the oldest towns in the region, founded in 1771 as a settlement for the indigenous people. At one point in their history the townsfolk began making pottery – mostly the earthenware cooking pots and utensils used for making their stews and sweet corn dishes – and began selling them at open markets. A tradition was born and now greda pottery from Pomaire can be seen all over the country. Many of the shops sold similar items – pots with handles, lids, serving bowls, utensils, vases and decorative plates – but some focused more on artwork like sculptures and wall fixtures. The quality varied from shop-to-shop, too, depending on the craftsmanship of the proprietor. Earthenware made from greda is dark brown, but many of the artwork pieces were painted in bright colors.

One popular item sold here are greda piggy banks. And another is the tiny three-legged piglet statue considered to be a good luck charm in these parts. The story behind the piglet image is that a local farmer's swine was born with only three legs and he decided to kill the poor creature. On the day of the slaughter, though, a group of visiting tourists saw the animal, fell in love with it, and began photographing and posing with it. The farmer got an idea. His pig was put on public display, drawing in the crowds. Ever since, three-

legged piglet statues (usually no bigger than a thimble) have been sold as good luck pieces all over town.

We spent about an hour shopping around for souvenir pottery items before returning to the van and heading back to Santiago. There wasn't really much else to see or do here. We arrived at the hotel by 5:30pm. Debbie and I thanked Jorge for a wonderful time and gave him a generous tip for his services. Afterwards, we each returned to our rooms to rest but agreed to meet an hour later for a stroll around the neighborhood with a possible stop to have coffee and dessert somewhere (we were too full from lunch to have dinner that night).

When we rendezvoused in the lobby, we ran into our tour director, Paola, talking with several members from the group. They asked us how the trip to Pomaire had gone and we showed them photos of the enormous empanada we ate. Paola suggested we get our dessert at the Emporio La Rosa, a famous chain of ice cream shops. There was one located in a public park called *Parque Aruacano* just down the street from our hotel. The idea of ice cream suited us fine. Debbie and I headed out into the cool but pleasant night air, walking several blocks west along Alonzo de Cordova Avenue until we came to an intersection that led us into Parque Aruacano.

As daylight faded we became a little disorientated, inadvertently passing the park entrance, but I asked a woman pushing a baby stroller and she kindly pointed the way. Even with night settling over the city, this park was very active. On the northern side of Parque Aruacano, across from Cerro Colorado Street, is a large shopping mall called Mall Parque Aruaco, so the area always has a lot of pedestrian traffic. Debbie and I slowly made our way through the center of the park looking for the Emporio La Rosa, not certain if we were in the right place.

We passed a large children's playground, a dog park and a basketball court. Festive families were gathered on the grass, many with their dogs (leashed and unleashed), people were jogging or riding bicycles, couples were walking hand-in-hand, some young men were playing hoops while groups of teenagers hung out on the various park benches. By now, Debbie and I were getting a little tired of walking and we were just about to turn around and leave when we spotted a family coming towards us, all four members licking ice cream cones. I asked the father where the Emporia La Rosa was located and he told me we had to go up a series of stairs to the

other side of the park. A few minutes later we found the ice cream shop, it was situated over what looked like a busy underground mall with restaurants and arcades. *This was one fun park*!

Debbie ordered a scoop of *dulce de leche* (caramel) on a cone that was served with the ice cream in a cup and the cone stuck on the top. I had a chocolate mint ice cream bar. Absolutely delicious. We sat inside the establishment, ate our dessert and chatted away. Later, as we headed out the park we stopped at an outdoor kiosk and grabbed a couple of *café con leches* (coffee with steamed milk) to keep us warm as we walked back to the hotel. I was in my room by 8:45pm. I wrote most of the day's events in my journal, at times pausing to catch the international news broadcast on TV, before sleep overcame me.

DAY 4

I awoke at 4:30am. Our group was scheduled to leave for the airport at noon for a flight to the Patagonia region. Before we left Santiago, though, Debbie and I wanted to re-visit the National Museum of Fine Arts, which we were not able to see on our first day. I went through my usual morning routine and later met Debbie for breakfast at 7:30am. When I returned to my room I repacked my suitcase and brought it down to the lobby, checking out at the front desk and handing my luggage to the bellhop for safekeeping. We had decided to leave for the museum at 9:45am (it didn't open until 10:00am). The concierge assured us it would take only twenty minutes at that hour of the morning to get to the museum, allowing us at least an hour and fifteen minutes to see the exhibits before we had to head back to the hotel.

I used my cell phone app to get an Uber. The car appeared within minutes. But traffic was actually quite heavy, and even after I explained to the driver we were in a hurry – and he took a couple of shortcuts to get us there as quickly as he could – it still took forty-five minutes to reach the museum. On the way, I engaged the driver in conversation in Spanish, asking him questions about the city. He told me the entire country was undergoing a bad economic spell, and that the cost of living in Santiago was

very high. At first, I thought perhaps he was giving me a 'sob story' in order to solicit a higher tip, but as he weaved in and out of traffic he became more animated in his frustrations over the city's plight. He said housing costs had gone through the roof. The average city dweller could barely afford rent, and inflation kept rising, making every day staples more expensive. Both him and his wife were working two jobs to make ends meet. *And what was the government doing about all this*, I inquired. His reaction couldn't have been more negative if I had insulted his mother. He almost spat into the windshield telling me the president of the country was the former CEO of LAN, the continent's largest airline, who hailed from the upper class and only cared about his cronies and big business. *Ahhhh, this driver was a fellow Democrat*! I empathized immediately.

We pulled up to the National Museum of Fine Arts at 10:30am. We now had less than an hour to walk through the exhibition halls and we needed to step lively. To our pleasant surprise there was no fee to enter and we found the place relatively empty save for some visiting high schoolers. I had previously read that the artwork on display is just a fraction of the pieces collected since the middle of the 1800s, when art began to flourish in the country and an effort to gather it for posterity's sake was formally organized in 1880. But without a definitive place to showcase the art most of the pieces were kept in various buildings until 1990 when the National Museum of Fine Arts was opened. Not all of the artwork is Chilean; there are many international items on display ranging from Antiquity to the present.

The structure housing the National Museum of Fine Arts looks like a work of art in itself. It was built in 1910 in a Beaux-arts style, an architectural concept from Paris popular throughout the 19th century featuring Neo-classical French designs mixed with Gothic and Renaissance elements and utilizing more modern materials like iron and glass. And just behind *this* building is another wonderful museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, which is affiliated with the University of Chile (a chubby horse sculpture by my favorite Colombian artist, Fernando Botero, adorns the plaza in front of the museum).

Debbie and I started in the central hall on the main floor, an impressive space with an enormous glass cupola overhead that illuminated the entire ground floor. The central hall contained a series of fine marble busts and statues, some dating back to Greco-Roman times. From here we climbed the staircase to the second level (there are only two floors) where we found a

number of different exhibition rooms highlighting oil paintings from renowned artists like Jose Gil de Castro and expressionist painter Israel Roa. We walked through one hall with a fascinating collection of textile murals, and another with African themed artwork, representing the role that people of color have played in South American history. In addition, we came upon displays featuring Spanish and Italian paintings that spanned the period from the 15th to the 17th centuries. The varied works represented a cross section of artistic themes, influences and schools. Surprisingly, we covered the entire length of the museum in the short time we were there. Granted, we couldn't focus for too long in any one area.

By 11:20am we climbed into another Uber for the ride back to the hotel. The morning traffic had subsided considerably and we reached the hotel in only 15 minutes. Curious to see if this Uber driver felt the same way as the first one, I asked the man what he thought about the Chilean economy. His response was very similar, if a little more reserved. It was now apparent to me that the working class in Chile was really taking it on the chin. In fact, just a week after we returned home from this tour, the city of Santiago – and later the rest of the country – erupted in a series of street protests and rallies that turned into deadly riots after the government announced an increase in the Metro fares. Sadly, sections of this beautiful city and its infrastructure were subjected to considerable damage as rioters took to setting fire to the subway stations (at one point shutting the entire system down). Confrontations between the national police and protestors led to more than two dozen deaths. The (now) much-despised billionaire president of Chile, Sebastian Pinera, had to sack many of his ministers and reorganize his government in response to the pandemonium.

I believe the protests in Chile – and elsewhere, for that matter – should serve as a wake-up call to governments everywhere, including here in the United States. While one can argue that globalization (and the current economic world order) has benefited many emerging third-world economies, it has also forced a very painful displacement of the traditional working classes in other parts of the world, resulting in a new socio-economic stratification that, if left unchecked, will lead to continued rioting and social upheavals.

Our tour group left the hotel for the airport shortly after 12:00pm. During the drive, Paola handed us our boarding passes, which she downloaded the night before on her laptop, and when I saw I had a window seat my anxiety

level shot up. After we reached the airport terminal I told Paola about my claustrophobia and she spoke to the check-in counter rep and was able to switch me to an aisles seat in the front row of the plane. I was absolutely delighted. But, as it turned out, my euphoria would be short-lived.

We waited in the departure lounge for an hour and half before they announced our boarding. The airline began loading passengers from the back of the plane first, so Debbie was way ahead of me as we made our way down two flights of stairs to the tarmac. Suddenly, one of my fellow tour members, who had reached the stair landing before me, turned back to look up at me and said, "Richard, I think Debbie has fallen". As I continued down the stairway I caught a glimpse of Debbie sitting on the edge of a luggage transporter being attended to by Paola and several airline personnel. My initial impression was that she seemed shaken up but was otherwise fine.

When I reached her it became clear to me that she had, at the very least, severely sprained her ankle. I inquired what happened and she told me she lost her footing at the bottom of the platform leading to the tarmac and had fallen sideways. She was in pain, and the pain got worse when she stood up. Walking was out of the question. My heart sank for a number of reasons. I was very concerned for Debbie, and, I'll admit, I became anxious over what to do. Debbie refused to go to a local hospital because it meant missing the flight, so she insisted on continuing. Paola told us she could take Debbie to a clinic once we reached Puerto Varas, our next destination. Airline personnel brought a wheelchair and Debbie was hoisted, step-by-step, into the plane. I gave up my coveted first row aisles seat for her, taking her spot in the middle of the plane. Paola immediately asked for ice from the stewardess to put on Debbie's rapidly swelling ankle.

What a nightmare. This has got to be one of the worst fears for any traveler: being injured or falling seriously ill while in a foreign country. I sat in my seat with images from another trip racing through my head. When I toured Morocco several years back – the trip, incidentally, where I met Debbie – I was traveling with two women, one of whom fell in Casablanca on the last day of the tour, sustaining a hip fracture. This poor woman could not be moved for several days and had to remain behind in Morocco (by herself, mind you) for nearly a week before she was able to return to the United States. It was a terrible ordeal, and now, looking at Debbie, I couldn't shake the notion of déjà vu.

Before I continue, I must make a confession. I am not a caregiver, although I greatly admire caregivers and the important role they play in every society. Doctors, nurses, medical technicians, first responders, orderlies, nursing home workers, candy stripers…*they're all saints and heroes in my book*. It takes a *truly* special, dedicated and unselfish individual to heal and work with the sick, disabled or elderly amongst us. I am often in awe of them…because I am not made from that kind of stock. I wish I were, but I am not. I care. I can sympathize and empathize. I have been moved to tears seeing others suffering. But beyond encouraging words and basic, often cursory, assistance, I fail miserably as a caregiver. And now, watching Debbie in pain, I was shamefully thinking about how this was going to affect *me*.

When she told me later – after visiting the local clinic in Puerto Varas – that she intended to continue the tour despite her badly sprained ankle, my response was less than positive or encouraging. I argued that her limited movement would mean she could not enjoy the tour fully and she should take advantage of her travel insurance to cut and recoup her losses and go home. *After all*, I rationalized, *you can always come back at some later date*. What I neglected to tell Debbie was that my arguments for her going home were based more on my own inability to be a thoughtful caregiver – and how her condition would hinder *my* ability to enjoy the tour – than the discomfort she was currently feeling. Believe me, this is an embarrassing thing to admit in such a public forum. I was not a good traveling companion when it mattered the most. And for that, I am ashamed and truly sorry. I recently apologized to Debbie over this matter. As usual, she was very gracious and dismissed the whole thing, reminding me we still had a lot of fun on this tour, which was true. But I needed to mention this in my journal because even though months have passed since we returned, the issue still plagues me. Having said that, I will not be bringing this up again in the journal. *Um, I can only handle so much guilt…*

Our flight departed shortly after 3:00pm and lasted only an hour and fifteen minutes, landing at El Tepual International Airport in Puerto Montt. We had flown south approximately 567 miles (913km) from Santiago through the Central Valley of Chile and were now at the northernmost gateway into the country's Patagonia region. Puerto Montt is a relatively large commune nestled on the northern side of the Reloncavi Sound, a body of water that marks where the Central Valley runs into the Pacific Ocean, usually the first stop for anyone wanting to visit Patagonia from the Chilean

side. After retrieving our luggage we boarded another big, comfortable tour bus and headed north towards the town of Puerto Varas, where we would be spending the night. Debbie had to be helped onto the bus; her ankle was swollen and she could barely put any pressure on her foot.

Our new local tour guide was Andres, a smiling, friendly sort who would accompany us through our Andean mountain crossing into Argentina the following day. On the drive to Puerto Varas, he gave us some information on the Chilean Patagonia region:

Patagonia refers to the sparsely populated land, shared by Argentina and Chile, which makes up the southern tip of South America. Looking at it on a map, the region appears like a dagger pointed towards Antarctica. On the western side, the Chilean Patagonia, the area encompasses the southern end of the Andes Mountain Chain, with plenty of lakes, fjords and – as you move further south – barren ice fields with spectacular glaciers. On the eastern side, the Argentinean Patagonia, you'll find an equally unforgiving region of deserts, steppes and tablelands. Sandwiched by the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, Patagonia has a number of channels and straits connecting these two great bodies of water. Living in the southern parts of Patagonia, on either side of the border, is a challenge. The landscape here is quite extreme and difficult to tame, and the year-round isolation and very cold winters make it suitable only for the heartiest of souls, which is why the population is so small. But it is a beautiful region nonetheless: a mix of deserts, steppes, majestic mountains, volcanoes, lakes and glaciers. A truly unforgettable natural experience for those who venture here.

Prior to the arrival of the Spaniards on the South American continent, Patagonia was inhabited by multiple indigenous tribes whose origins date back to about 10,000 BC. On the northwestern side these early natives practiced limited agriculture, while in the rest of the region they subsisted as hunters-gatherers, traveling either by foot or in dugout canoes through the many fjords, lakes and channels. By the end of the 16th century, one indigenous group, the Mapuche, crossed the Andes into western Patagonia and quickly conquered or subdued the other tribes living there, becoming the principal indigenous tribal community in the region.

The word 'patagonia' is attributed to the famous Portuguese explorer, Fernando Magellan, who led a Spanish expedition that would become the

first to circumnavigate the world. In 1520, while passing through the straits of South America on his way to Asia, Magellan was forced to spend an exceptionally brutal winter in the region, encountering a small tribal group known as the Tehuelche. These people, who were apparently taller than the average European males at the time, were described by Magellan's official reporter as *patagons*, or human giants, and the name stuck.

During colonial times, the main goal of the Spanish Crown in Patagonia seemed to be to keep other European powers away from the region. Other than the straits that rounded South America – connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans – the harshness of the terrain made the area less suitable for human settlements. But this all changed once Chile and Argentina became independent countries in the early 1800s. The two newly minted nations began to jockey for control of Patagonia. One particular obstacle was the rebellious indigenous Mapuche who had been raiding Argentinean towns in the pampas region, a large fertile lowland area that extends from central Argentina through the western side of Patagonia. The government of Argentina initiated military campaigns that, over the years, would eventually quell the Mapuche uprisings and make the region more suitable for settlements. With the natives subdued, Patagonia was slowly repopulated with a mix of Argentineans, Chileans and small waves of white European homesteaders, adventurers and fortune seekers.

Chile and Argentina fought many times over control of Patagonia. The region became officially divided between the two countries under various treaties signed throughout the 20th century; this division, though, is a lopsided split, with Argentina controlling roughly ninety percent of the territory. The area we were in was the Los Lagos (the Lakes) Region of Patagonia, one of Chile's 16 administrative regions, with its capital in Puerto Montt. Fishing, salmon aquaculture, forestry, cattle farming and tourism drive the local economy. The salmon industry began in the early 1980's when salmon eggs were imported from Canada. Salmon are born in fresh water before going out to sea. The fresh-water Andean lakes are cold but do not freeze, which is an ideal condition for salmon aquaculture. Today, this region is the second largest producer of commercial salmon in the world (after Norway), with most of it sold in the U.S. and Japan. But not too long ago, according to our guide, a disease called Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) nearly killed off the three species of salmon that are farmed here. Luckily, the industry has been able to slowly bounce back from it.

We were traveling north now along a rural road, passing mostly flat grazing lands and scattered farms, several wooden homes visible in the distance. Andres explained the unique European ethnic make-up of the Patagonia region. In the second half of the 1800s, non-Spanish Europeans began arriving on both sides of the Patagonia border. Some came to mine gold, while others were encouraged to settle here by the governments of Chile and Argentina through homestead laws that granted these newly arriving white immigrants free land and farming assistance.

In the mid-1800s, both Chile and Argentina had a difficult time encouraging its citizens to settle in the Patagonia region. Meanwhile, in Europe, people were rebelling against the established autocratic order. Germany, which had not been united yet, consisted of 39 independent states grouped together in what was called the German Confederation. In 1848, the German Revolution broke out as middle class liberals, together with the working classes, sought to unite the fatherland under a more democratic society with better living and working conditions. This revolution was crushed in short order, and many liberal Germans left Europe to live elsewhere. Both Chile and Argentina courted these Germans, passing favorable laws that allowed them to settle in the Patagonia region. Over the next six decades, tens of thousands of German immigrants arrived and established communities in Patagonia. Puerto Montt and Puerto Varas are two examples of thriving German-Chilean towns in the area. In fact, some of the towns in the region, on both sides of the border, seem more like European enclaves, with streets and homes designed in the architectural styles of the Old Country.

During our drive we saw fields covered with gorse weed, a prickly, perennial evergreen that produces pretty yellow flowers but is actually an invasive species that can easily overwhelm an entire area. German immigrants introduced the plants to the Patagonia region, using it, as they did back home, to create sturdy hedgerows for the purpose of separating property lines. The weed quickly spread out of control, though, and has become a continuous nightmare for the region. Gorse weed produces deep and extensive roots, and can grow up to 3 meters (more than nine feet tall) with prickly stems and leaves. It chokes out other plants and vegetation, is unpalatable to cattle and sheep, and during the dry season the plant is prone to wild fires. Andres told us the introduction of foreign animals and plants (like the gorse weed) by European immigrants has often led to problems

with the area's delicate eco-system. We would learn more about this when we crossed over into Argentina.

At one point during our drive we turned left onto Road V-50 and headed east into the lakeshore town of Puerto Varas, passing the famous Pan-American Highway (Route 5), a system of roadways that stretch almost uninterrupted from Argentina all the way to Alaska along the Pacific coast. Once we entered the town, we veered onto Del Salvador Avenue, which Andres described as the main street of Puerto Varas, and continued until we reached the town square located next to beautiful Lake Llanquihue. We passed several farming equipment dealerships before the street gave way to local shops and storefronts. Most of the homes and businesses were made of cypress wood and covered with wooden shingles, giving the place a lovely quaint aura.

Puerto Varas is a small town situated along the southern shoreline of Lake Llanquihue (Chile's second largest lake). The population hovers around 40,000 inhabitants; the majority of German ancestry. The picturesque town is known for its German architecture and traditions, and is surrounded by magnificent natural scenery. Across the lake on its eastern side is the majestic snow-capped Osorno Volcano, a fairly active stratovolcano that is similar in appearance to Mt. Fuji in Japan. To the southeast is the Calbuco Volcano. Both peaks can be seen from the lake. Puerto Varas is famous for its outdoor activities like kayaking, fishing, hiking and skiing along the slopes of the Osorno Volcano, and also serves as a good place to stay if visiting the nearby lakes and national parks (and there are quite a few in the area). The town is also the starting point for the bus-and-boat crossing of the Andes Mountains into Argentina, which we undertook the following day.

Before we proceeded to the hotel, our group was dropped off near the small town square and given about an hour and a half to walk around and/or shop. During this time, Andres took Debbie to a local clinic to have her ankle and foot treated. I wandered around the square and to the nearby lakeshore, taking photographs of the town and the stunning Osorno Volcano in the distance. Although the start of the official tourist season was still a few weeks away, several sailboats and passenger vessels were already cruising Lake Llanquihue. In one sandy section along the shoreline a group of locals were flying kites. I returned to the town square and joined some of my fellow tour members in an artisan shopping area featuring locally made jewelry and other crafts. I purchased a pair of lapis lazuli earrings to give to

Debbie, hoping it would make her feel better (and, um, to assuage my own guilt-ridden thoughts).

Around 6:30pm our tour bus returned to take us to our hotel, the Hotel Cabanas Del Lago, a beautiful wooden structure overlooking Lake Llanquihue. My window faced the Osorno Volcano. After I squared away my things I went outside to take in the natural beauty of the area. Lake Llanquihue is 22 miles (35 km) long and 25 miles (40 km) wide with a depth of 5,000 feet (1500 m). Along its western shore are farmlands, but to the east lie the forested Andean foothills and several more lakes.

Shortly after 7:00pm I joined my fellow tour members in the hotel restaurant for an included dinner, a delicious meal of pumpkin soup, grilled salmon stacked on top of veggie lasagna and a fruit dish for dessert. Debbie was still at the clinic. After dinner, Paola went over the itinerary for the following day's Andes Mountains crossing, telling us that the weather, once we reached Argentina, was going to be very cold.

I was back in my room by 8:30pm. It was very dark outside and chilly. I made a cup of coffee and wrote in my journal, calling Debbie's room several times but getting no answer. I was beginning to worry that perhaps her injuries were worse than expected. Flipping through the TV channels I found an English-language nature show on TV, hoping it would keep me awake until Debbie returned from the hospital. She called me shortly after 11:00pm, waking me out of a deep slumber to tell me about her prognosis. She was taken to a small clinic where a very young doctor – (she referred to him as Doogie Howser) – was the only physician on call. The x-rays revealed no fracture or broken bones. She was given pain meds and fitted with a special boot to hold her swollen ankle and foot in place. The doctor had to sign a release form stating that, in his opinion, she could continue the tour under her present condition; he did recommend she limit her walking as much as possible for the next five days in order to allow the ankle to heal. Debbie told me she was delighted she wasn't going home. To be honest, at the moment it all sounded encouraging. That is, until I saw her foot and ankle the next day. When we hung up, I rolled over and went back to sleep.

Day Five

I was awake by 4:00am. I shaved, showered and then repacked my luggage, placing it in the hallway for the porters to pick up. I spent over an hour editing photos on my camera and writing in my journal before heading over to Debbie's room. She was already packed and ready to go, her swollen foot secured inside a large gray medical foot brace. She went over the details of the clinic visit with me; her out-of-pocket medical expenses came to $250. I gingerly broached the subject of her continuing the trip but she was adamant about seeing it through. The hotel had provided her a wheelchair the night before and I rolled Debbie to the hotel dining room for breakfast, everyone in the group asking about her ordeal. Afterwards, when she was ready, I wheeled her to the lobby and returned to my room to use the bathroom and grab my backpack/packing cube. At 8:00am, the tour group was on the bus for what would be an entire day's journey to cross the Andes Mountains into Argentina.

I'm not sure when the crossing of Chile into Argentina (or vice versa) along the mountainous northern portion of Patagonia became a travel tour thing, but locals and indigenous peoples have been doing it for centuries. This daylong endeavor takes you over the same route settlers and tribal natives once used to go back and forth between the regions. From the Chilean side of the border, the trip begins by bus from Puerto Varas. Over the course of the day we would traverse mountain passes, national parks and cross three mountain lakes by boat before reaching our final destination, the town of San Carlos de Bariloche in Argentina. I read that approximately 30,000 tourists a year embark on this journey. The experience was one of the most memorable passages I have ever taken on a guided tour.

We set out on Route 225 – an international highway that looked more like a wide country road – heading east along the southern rim of Lake Llanquihue. We passed a German school on the way out of Puerto Varas and Andres gave us a brief history on the German migrations that originally settled in the area. He said the German schools in the region were private institutions and offered the best education. After leaving Puerto Varas we began traveling through a section of farmlands and rolling hills with grazing fields for cattle. To our left, in the distance, was the Calbuco Volcano

situated within the Llanquihue National Reserve, a stratovolcano with an elevation of 6,611 feet above sea level. This is a very active, often explosive, volcano, with 36 confirmed eruptions within the last 12,000 years, the most recent in 2015 (certain sections of the highway were still covered in ash from that eruption).

We continued east along Route 225. Beyond Lake Llanquihue we drove through the Vicente Perez Rosales National Park, a 997 sq mile natural reserve that is almost entirely situated within the Andes mountain chain. Established in 1926, this is the oldest national park in Chile. Within the park's boundaries are active volcanoes, the pristine waters of Todos los Santos Lake (All Saints Lake) and thick temperate rainforests of native nothofagus trees. Together with three adjacent reserves – the Puyehue National Park (in Chile), and the Nahuel Huapi National Park and Lanin National Park (in Argentina) – it is part of a continuously protected natural area of 5,800 sq miles (15,000 sq km).

Approximately an hour into our bus trip we stopped to visit the Petrohue Waterfalls located within the Vicente Perez Rosales National Park. This popular lookout is just off Route 225. We had to walk for a few minutes through a winding trail to reach the chute-like waterfall, which has been carved into place over its lifetime by basaltic lava stemming from the Osorno Volcano. The waterfall lies along the upper reaches of the Petrohue River, its water source coming from the nearby Todos los Santos Lake. Although not a towering waterfall, the rapids gush through its rocky avenues and into a small, crystal clear incanted lake of a most striking greenish-bluish hue. Due to the sand and silt sediments found in the occasional debris or mudflows emanating from the Osorno Volcano, the rocks along the waterfall edges appear polished and shiny. This was a great spot to photograph the snow-capped Osorno Volcano in the distance.

From here we drove a few more miles down Route 225 to the tiny locality of Petrohue, which is nestled on the western end of Todos Los Santos Lake. We headed straight to the small pier in Petrohue and boarded a passenger catamaran run by Cruce Andino, a company that has been ferrying passengers between Chile and Argentina's Patagonia region since 1913. The original company actually dates back to the end of the 1800s, when it ran a lake-crossing route for the purpose of transporting sheep's wool between the two countries (the wool would eventually find its way to the markets of Europe). But after the Panama Canal was built and the onset of WWI,

demand for Patagonia wool decreased and the business went bankrupt. A pioneering Swiss entrepreneur named Ricardo Roth later purchased the company. He realized that the natural beauty of the region would attract visitors from all over the world and transformed his company into a tourism business. Throughout the day I did not see many catamarans crossing the lakes, so I imagine Cruce Andino is one of the principal means by which to do this.

Because the start of the official tourist season was still a few weeks away, there were only three separate tour groups (including ours) taking this journey across the Andes. The catamaran had two sections: a glass-enclosed sitting area below and an open observation deck on the upper level. Once the vessel got moving, the cold weather and the winds sweeping across the lake made for a very chilly upper deck experience, so Debbie and I – together with fellow passenger Johnny – secured seats below in the front row facing the bow. The large glass windows gave us an excellent view of the surrounding natural wonders without subjecting us to the cold weather. Occasionally, though, I would wander upstairs to the observation deck to take photos and get some fresh air.

Todos los Santos Lake has a surface area of approximately 70 square miles (178.5 sq km) and reaches a depth of 1,106 feet (337 m). The source of the water comes from the Rio Negro; a river in neighboring Argentina that generally flows east-southeastward across northern Patagonia and empties into the Atlantic. Depending on the weather, the lake's waters can appear silver, green or blue in color. The greenish tint is a result of glacier meltwater, which contain mineral deposits. Early German settlers referred to this body of water as the Emerald Lake, but it was later officially named Todos los Santos (All Saints) Lake by Jesuit missionaries. There are only two small ports along its borders: Petrohue (where we set sail from) on the western end, and Peulla (our next destination) on its eastern end. The only way to reach Peulla is via the lake crossing since there are no roadways through the mountains connecting these two tiny villages. The journey took us nearly two hours.

Using a mic, the ship's official guide offered information in both English and Spanish throughout the trip. He told us that roughly 20,000 years ago the basin of the lake was actually filled by a large glacier that did not begin to recede until around 8,000 BC. Later, lava flows from the Osorno and Calbuco volcanoes formed a dam separating the lower part of the valley,

trapping the waters from the nearby rivers and forming what has become Todos los Santos Lake. Surrounding this beautiful body of water are three volcanic mountains (Osorno, Puntiagudo and Tronador) and steep hillsides of dense temperate rainforests. The lake has trout and salmon and is a popular spot for fishing.

At times we spotted isolated homes up in the hillsides and the ship's guide told us these were the descendents of the original German homesteaders who settled the area more than a hundred years ago. Under the law they are allowed to live in this national park, but if they decide to move elsewhere then their properties must be sold back to the government. These were *real* mountain folks, a sturdy group of diehard survivalists. They made their own electricity using mills powered by water, grew their own food and basically navigated the area via boats because there were no mountain roads. Catamarans cruise the lake all 365 days of the year, and they provide low-cost transportation for the hearty souls who live here. Locals will use a rowboat or canoe to ferry themselves over to the ships, which stop in the middle of the lake to pick up these passengers. We actually witnessed this during our crossing.

It was a very pleasant journey. The scenery was incredible; a seemingly endless terrain of unspoiled forested mountains (including the Puntiagudo Volcano, with its unusual 'needlepoint' summit). We passed waterfalls cascading down the rocky edges of the lake. We reached Puerto (Port) Peulla shortly after 12:00pm. I do not know if there is an actual town associated with Port Peulla because we could not see one from the dock. We disembarked the catamaran and boarded local buses that shuttled us a very short distance to one of the few hotels in the area, the Hotel Natura. This beautiful six-story alpine inn is situated along a clearing surrounded by hills and wilderness. We stopped here to have a delicious included lunch of salmon, veggie soup and flan.

An hour later we re-boarded our bus and continued our journey, driving east towards our next destination, Puerto Frias (Cold Port), located along the western banks of Lake Nahuel Huapi in neighboring Argentina. We made a quick stop at a lookout point just outside Port Peulla to get a clear view of the majestic snow-capped Tronador Volcano in the distance. This extinct stratovolcano straddles the border between the two countries and towers over the other notable peaks in the region, reaching over 11,000 feet (3,491m) above sea level. Tronador is a mountaineer's wet dream, but it

does have its dangers. The name *tronador* means 'thunderer' in Spanish, and refers to the sound that falling blocks of ice make when they slide off its high ledges, something that can happen without warning.

We spent nearly two hours driving from Puerto Peulla to Puerto Frias, traveling at first through a mountainous valley along a lonely roadway surrounded by cattle grazing fields, the Tronador Volcano to our left. As we approached Argentina our driver slowly maneuvered a switchback one-lane road that led up and over the Andes Mountains. The higher we went we encountered snow-covered wilderness. At one point, as we reached the summit, we officially crossed into Argentina. Our guide, Paola, stopped the bus on the demarcation line between the two countries so we could go outside and take pictures of the welcome signs on both sides of the border. We were high up in the mountains at this point, on a cold, crisp day; the woods around us covered in snow. A playful snowball fight broke out between the tour guides. We continued our journey, traveling down the mountain road until we reached the tiny port clearing known as Puerto Frias.

The only building at the port was a small Argentinean Immigration and Customs office, and considering its isolated location it was remarkably well staffed. Our group went inside and had our passports stamped and then we waited about thirty minutes or so around the empty pier for another catamaran to show up and ferry us across Lago Frias (Cold Lake). Near the customs building was a large outdoor display case containing a replica of the Norton 500cc motorcycle used by legendary revolutionary Che Guevara and his close friend, Alberto Granados, when they embarked on their famous South American road trip back in the early 1950s, an experience that ultimately changed Guevara's life and was immortalized in the book (and later film) "The Motorcycle Diaries".

The catamaran that picked us up was much smaller than the first one. It took us roughly twenty minutes to cross Lago Frias, a small but beautiful body of water whose tributaries bring melted snow from the surrounding mountains, the sediments in those waters (and from the receding glacier that once filled its basin) giving the lake its enchanting turquoise color. Debbie sat upstairs on the bridge deck during the short ride while I sat with Johnny below and marveled at the scenery. Ringing the lake were thick, unspoiled forests that grew almost to the edges of the water.

We disembarked at a tiny docking area known as Puerto Alegre (Port Happy) on the northern shore of Lago Frias and boarded another bus for a ten-minute drive through Nahuel Huapi National Park to the next pier, Puerto Blest. The only building at Puerto Blest was the Puerto Blest Hotel, which has been in operation since 1904. The hotel was recently renovated and its unique location along the Patagonia crossing has attracted visitors for more than a century who wish to explore the natural beauty of Nahuel Huapi National Park. We arrived at Puerto Blest by 4:30pm. Our next – and final – catamaran ride was going to be delayed almost two hours so our group hunkered down in the hotel's café, ordering snacks and coffee. Twenty minutes into our wait, Paola – together with the tour guide of one of the other groups – coordinated a one-hour hiking venture into the surrounding wilderness. Johnny and I tagged along. Not everybody went because it was getting pretty cold outside.

About twenty of us set off on a nature trail that wound its way up the hillside in back of the establishment and finished along a shoreline path adjacent to Lake Nahuel Huapi. The scenery was amazing, a magnificent mixture of native forests, canals and snow-capped mountains. A guide from the hotel was on hand to give us details about the environment. During our walk she discussed the history of Nahuel Huapi National Park. It is the oldest national park in Argentina, established in 1934, and the largest of the national reserves in the region, stretching over 2,720 sq miles (7,050 sq km) around Lake Nahuel Huapi. Due to its varying elevations, this park is home to many different biospheres or habitats. At the higher elevations you'll find rare Valdivian rainforests, a unique temperate forest characterized by evergreen trees and thick undergrowth of bamboo and ferns. At the lowest level, but not visible from where we were, is a section of the Patagonian steppes, which is a part of the eighth largest desert in the world.

The guide also pointed out many nearby plant and tree species, and spoke about the varied wildlife (like pumas, cougars and foxes) that inhabit the park. At one point we came upon the oldest *coihue tree* in the area, a towering 600-year old specimen that had a large opening in the lower part of its thick trunk, as if a family of Hobbits lived inside. On our way back to the Puerto Blest Hotel – following a path next to the lake – we spotted a condor soaring high above the surrounding Andes Mountains. It was a wonderful hike, I was so glad we got the opportunity.

We left Puerto Blest around 6:30pm aboard another large catamaran, heading east across Lake Nahuel Huapi towards Puerto Panuelo (Port Hankerchief), a lakeside port located approximately 15 miles (25 km) from the town of San Carlos de Bariloche, our final destination. The emerald green waters of Lago Frias now gave way to the equally striking *blue* waters of Lago Nahuel Huapi, the color made even more prominent by the contrasting snow-covered mountains in the distance. Like most of the area, the lake was carved out by glacial movements a long time ago. Along its 200 sq mile (530 sq km) of surface area, the lake contains seven branches and a number of small islands, and connects to other smaller lakes in the region. It has a maximum depth of 1,522 feet (464 m).

The name *Nahuel Huapi* comes from the indigenous Mapuche language and means "island of pumas'. The ship's guide mentioned several fun facts about the lake. For example, it is filled with several species of non-native trout that were introduced into the area by European settlers, making this region a paradise for anglers from all over the world. Also, the lake's average surface temperature is 45 F (7 Celsius), so bathers and kayakers often face hypothermia-like conditions when going into the water. Another unusual characteristic of Lake Nahuel Huapi are the species of marine-based birds found here. Although the lake is nowhere near an ocean and situated at a very high elevation, you'll find cormorants and sea gulls around its shoreline. I'm assuming this is due to the abundance of tasty fish in the water.

When we arrived at Puerto Panuelo (at 7:30pm) darkness was rapidly descending over the town. The temperature had dropped to 25 F (3.8 C) with gusty winds that made my South Florida body shiver uncontrollably. We wearily boarded another tour bus for a forty-minute drive to our hotel in the lakeside town of San Carlos de Bariloche. Most of us nodded off during the drive. We reached the Hotel Alma del Lago around 8:15pm. After checking in, everyone retired to their rooms for the evening. Poor Debbie had been limping around in some pain for most of the day and she just wanted to climb into bed. I gave her kudos for being such a trooper. It was too dark and cold to go out for dinner, so I elected to order a hamburger and fries from room service. I watched a national soccer match on TV while eating my burger. Afterwards, I quickly drifted off to sleep.

Day Six

I awoke at 4:30am. Over several cups of instant coffee I entered the previous day's events into my journal. Around 7:00am I went to pick up Debbie for breakfast. She was limping along slowly but told me she felt a little better. I was skeptical, though, when she showed me a picture of her injured ankle from the day before and it still looked painfully swollen. We inched our way to the hotel's restaurant for a delicious breakfast buffet. The dining room windows faced Lake Nahuel Huapi, offering us a spectacular view of the mountains across the water.

After breakfast I returned to my room and sorted out my clothes looking for the warmest items in my suitcase. Although today was not going to be as cold as last night, we would be heading to the top of Cerro Campanario (Belfry Hill) and our guide told us it was going to be very chilly and windy up there. I made sure to layer appropriately, wearing both my fleece and traveling vests underneath my hoodie, rounding out this unusual ensemble with a scarf and gloves. At 8:30am we were on the bus for a tour of San Carlos de Bariloche and the surrounding areas.

Our local guide was a cheerful and delightfully entertaining middle-aged woman of German descent named Georgina, who was born and raised in the region. Throughout the morning she told us funny homespun stories about the local people and their customs that gave us an insider's view of what living in this part of Patagonia was really like. We began our tour by heading east along Bustillo Avenue, a major roadway that hugs the southern shoreline of Lake Nahuel Huapi. As we drove out of the main section of San Carlos de Bariloche, Georgina gave us a brief history of the area:

San Carlos de Bariloche (referred locally as Bariloche) is a small city of roughly 135,000 people. Officially established in 1902, it is located along the southern boundary of Lake Nahuel Huapi, cradling the foothills of the Andes Mountains in the Rio Negro province of Argentina. Centuries before the first Europeans arrived in South America, indigenous tribes were already living on the banks of Lake Nahuel Huapi. The town's name *Bariloche* is derived from a Mapuche word meaning 'people from behind the mountain'.

During the late 1800s, Argentina was trying to claim and hold onto territories in the Patagonia region, but was having a difficult time getting its citizens to re-settle to such a harsh environment. Chile, on the other hand, had been successfully courting European immigrants to Patagonia for years and had several well-established German communities with strong ties to the small groups of European settlers on the Argentinean side of Patagonia with whom they traded. Following the Conquest of the Desert – a military campaign by Argentina in the 1870s that subdued the local natives and establish Argentina's control over their share of the region – the government, according to our guide, began offering free lands and other types of assistance to the European settlers in Chile, hoping to entice them to cross the Andes and settle on their side of the border. Over the years, thousands of Germans and Swiss took them up on their offer and formed the communities you see here today, San Carlos de Bariloche being perhaps the most famous. But it took a while before the area was tamed. Like America's Old West, the region resembled a rough-and-tumble wild frontier, with an odd mix of Argentineans, native tribal peoples and European homesteaders. Eventually, though, European influences held sway, transforming the region culturally.

Germans and Swiss not only brought their languages to the area, they also introduced a host of practices and customs from the old country that are now ingrained into local life. You can see it everywhere. Architecturally, many of the homes in San Carlos de Bariloche are made from sandalwood and stones from the nearby mountains and have that inverted V-shape look of Swiss chalets. As early as the 1930s, the city took on the appearance of a small central European alpine town. In fact, skiing in the nearby mountains is a key tourism draw here.

These early European settlers, according to Georgina, believed their lands back in Europe were better than what they found in South America, and so after clearing the forests to build their homes and farms they introduced species of flora and fauna to the area in order to mimic the environment they were accustomed to, impacting the local habitat in profound ways. Trout, for example, was introduced into the lakes and rivers and have dominated these waters ever since. Germans also brought with them wild deer and boar, releasing them into the environment so they could hunt them as they did back in Europe. As a result, there is now an over-abundance of these creatures roaming the park; annual hunting seasons try to curtail their population but apparently make little headway. (On the flip side, you'll find

a lot of tasty venison and boar dishes on the local restaurant menus!) Invasive species of European plants and shrubs (like the gorse weed and rosehip) have disrupted the area's delicate ecosystem. At one point, the practices of these settlers nearly wiped out the local condor population. To kill the pumas and other animals preying upon their sheep and cattle, farmers and ranchers would often poison sick livestock, not realizing that condors, which are natural scavengers, were also dying in the process. Over the years, the government has had to launch information campaigns to address these and other concerns.

Surrounding San Carlos de Bariloche is the beautiful Nahuel Huapi National Park, the country's oldest national park. It was officially established in 1934, but its history goes back a little further. During the 1500s, when settlers and explorers from neighboring Chile first 'discovered' this pristine mountainous passage there were indigenous peoples already living here for centuries. During colonial times it was rumored that this section of Patagonia concealed the City of the Caesars, a mythical place filled with gold and diamonds, which brought explorers and unsavory adventurers and fortune seekers – and later Jesuit missionaries and settlers – to the region.

In the late 1800s, a famed Argentinean explorer and academic named Francisco Pascaiso Moreno (better known by his nickname Perito Moreno) led several expeditions to map out Patagonia, paving the way for the incorporation of this territory and its subsequent development. His work was later used by the Argentinean government to lay claims to a vast portion of the region. For his services, the government gave Perito Moreno a huge tract of land around Lake Nahuel Huapi. In 1903, he donated a portion of this land for the purpose of establishing a national park, which grew in size and became known as the Nahuel Huapi National Park. Today, it is the largest of all the national parks in Patagonia, covering 2,720 sq miles (7,050 sq km) of protected wilderness.

As we continued east along Bustillo Avenue, Georgina pointed out several places of interests. We passed a military camp used to train soldiers in rock climbing and skiing. While on the subject of skiing she said this was a big tourism draw during the winter months. Avid skiers from around the globe come to the region to hit the slopes when it's summertime back in their countries, allowing for year-round skiing. A short distance later we came upon the Centro Atomico Bariloche facility, one of the research and

development centers for the Argentine National Atomic Energy Commission. The facility is devoted to physics research and nuclear and mechanical engineering. Georgina told us that Argentina manufactures small nuclear reactors for research and medical purposes, and sells them to countries like Egypt, Australia and the Netherlands. Hmmm, go figure.

We reached our first stop of the day around 30 minutes or so into our drive. Cerro Campanario (Belfry Hill) is located approximately 11 miles west of San Carlos de Bariloche. It is one of the most important tourist stops in the area because the summit offers a breath-taking panoramic view of the entire area. To get to the top of this forested mountain, which is roughly 3400 ft (1050m) above sea level, one can hike a trail or take a chairlift. We parked at the base of the mountain and bordered the chairlifts two at a time for the 10-minute ride to the top. Sadly, with her injured foot and ankle, Debbie could not go and had to remain on the bus. I sat with Minoo, a lovely retired New York City native who was traveling by herself. I was a tad worried about our pairing; I was more than twice her size and envisioned our chairlift tipping over as we ascended the hillside, but we made it to the summit with no problems. On the way up, the winds were strong and chilly. Thank goodness I wore my hooded jacket and scarf.

At the top of Cerro Campanario is an enclosed cafeteria where you can have delicious pastries and coffee and watch the sights through an enormous glass window (if the cold bothers you), or you can walk around the outdoor observation decks that allow for an amazing, unfettered 360-degree view of the entire landscape. Below us were Lake Nahuel Huapi, stretching out to the north, east and west, with various islands and smaller lakes and the majestic snow-capped Andes in the background. Just to the south was Lake Moreno, named after the famous explorer who charted this territory, and several notable hills like Cerro Catedral (Cathedral Hill) a popular skiing spot, or Cerro Lopez (Lopez Hill) a wonderful mountain for hiking. And all the way to the west, along the border between Chile and Argentina, you can spot the mighty Mt. Tronador volcano, the highest peak in the region. From this vantage point we could even trace the path our catamaran took along Lake Nahuel Huapi from Puerto Blest the day before. To the east lay the entire city of San Carlos de Bariloche, and near the foothills of Cerro Campanario – adjacent to Perito Moreno Lake – we could see the Colonia Suiza (Swiss Colony), the first European settlement in the region, which has been declared a cultural heritage site and still retains the original appearance

of its late 19th century foundation. We spent a good 45-minutes up there before heading back down.

We continued our drive, stopping along Perito Moreno Lake for a photo-op. The water was crystal clear. Georgina told us nearby residents use the lake as their water source, bringing it into their homes via pumps. We drove around the western part of Perito Moreno Lake and pulled over next to a bridge called the Puente Arroya la Angostura, built over a wide stream connecting Perito Moreno Lake with the Bay of Lopez, which opens into Lake Nahuel Huapi. Our group got off the bus and trekked to the stream below the bridge to witness what appeared to be hundreds of spawning trout suspended in the shallow, clear water. I'm not a fisherman, so the sight of all those fish just 'hanging' in the stream was fascinating to me. A sign near the bridge declared this area a designated recovery zone for the south river otter (Lontra provocax species), an endangered mammal. The bridge itself offered a spectacular view of the Andes Mountains to the west.

We drove across the bridge, traveling north and then cutting eastward across the foothills of *Cerro Llao Llao* (Llao Llao Hill), a forested hiking hill that rises high above the Llao Llao natural reserve. We drove through the Llao Llao Municipal Park before turning southward again near Port Panuelo – where we docked the night before – on the way to the famous Llao Llao Hotel and Resort located along the peninsula of Lake Moreno. This swanky, award-winning resort has a coveted 5-Star rating and is considered the best hotel in the Argentinean hinterland. Surrounded by mountains and lakes, the Llao Llao Hotel boasts an 18-hole golf course, a 15-hectare park, a private beach and marina, and heated indoor and outdoor infinity edge swimming pools. Considered one of those 'playgrounds' for the rich and famous, many of the summer homes and villas in the area cost millions of dollars.

Construction of the Llao Llao Hotel began shortly after the inauguration of Nahuel Huapi National Park. It opened in 1938, designed in a traditional Canadian home style with cypress logs and larch tiles. The original building burned down less than two years later and was rebuilt in 1940 using more cement and stone. The intention was to lure wealthy Europeans to Argentina, but the notion of spending government money for an elite playground did not sit well with the general populace. After WWII, though, the government double-downed on the resort because Europe was in tatters, and the rich needed some place nice to vacation. Later, when economic hard times befell

the country – followed by the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s – the hotel was abandoned for a period of 15 years. In 1993, the resort re-opened under the administration of a private company, which later added a magnificent wing along Lake Moreno. Due to safety and privacy concerns, non-guests cannot simply wander around the property taking photos, but our driver managed to pull up to the main entrance so we could ogle – if only for a few minutes.

From here, we ascended a hill to the east of the hotel to visit the Capilla de San Eduardo (the St. Eduardo Chapel), a small, but beautiful little structure built in 1938 by Alejandro Bustillo, who also constructed the Llao Llao Hotel. The chapel was designed in a European neo-gothic style, made out of cypress logs and stones from the surrounding area, its stained glass windows depicting religious scenes. Normally, the tiny church is not open during non-service days, but we were in luck. The inside was very narrow, with about nine rows of pews leading to the altar. The best part of this church, though, was the view. From the front of the structure you can see the entire splendor of the Llao Llao Hotel at the bottom of the hillside, and Lake Nahuel Huapi and the eastern part of Lake Moreno. In the distance was a clear view of the Mt. Tronador volcano.

We headed back to San Carlos de Bariloche for a drive through the town. Along the way, Georgina talked about a popular local drink called *yerba mate*. She said if someone made a house visit in the region, they would normally be offered coffee, tea or yerba mate. Derived from a plant species native to South America, the leaves are steeped in hot water like tea. This liquid contains caffeine, but in lesser quantities than coffee. Yerba mate drinkers prefer to imbibe the brew in cups carved artfully out of pumpkin gourds, and use a fancy hallow metal spoon that acts as a straw to sip the hot beverage. According to Georgina, people are particularly fond of their drinking cups and will not share them with anyone (her husband jealously guards his). She convinced our driver, who always had a cup of yerba mate on hand, to pass around his cup and spoon so we could take a look. The day before, as we climbed the mountains from Chile into Argentina, Paola prepared yerba mate on the bus and handed it out for us to try. The best word I can use to describe the flavor? *Yuck*. I'll stick to coffee, thank you.

We drove for about 45-minutes around the center of town. Since the rest of the day was free for us to explore on our own, Georgina wanted to give us an idea of the key spots to visit in San Carlos de Bariloche. We passed the

town square (the civic center) and the cathedral, and drove by Mitre Street, a busy commercial avenue, before taking Moreno Street back to the hotel. The city itself is not very large, but it is densely packed with eateries, small stores and chocolate shops. Georgina pointed out some of the more popular restaurants in the area.

In addition to the architectural designs of the homes and government buildings, another aspect of Swiss influence in the town is the incredibly high number of chocolatiers concentrated along Mitre Street. Our guide strongly recommended we buy some chocolates before leaving the region. San Carlos de Bariloche is known as the Chocolate Capital of Argentina. I think the locals would consider it *sacrilegious* not to sample the wide assortment of delicious confections made and sold in the twenty or more chocolate shops you'll find all over town.

We got back to the hotel around 12:30pm. I wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon exploring San Carlos de Bariloche on foot. I went up to my room to use the bathroom and remove one of the two vests I wore underneath my hoodie. Although it was still chilly outside the temperature had warmed enough that I felt comfortable. Debbie decided to relax in her room, resting her foot and ankle. Before I left she asked me if I would be kind enough to pick up three boxes of chocolates for her. When she saw the silly frown on my face, she explained – *with a straight face, mind you* – the chocolates were to be distributed as souvenirs back home. HA! She ate all three boxes before the tour was over. (Okay, to be honest, I ate my 'souvenir chocolates' before we reached our *next* destination…so let the fat shaming continue!).

By 1:00pm I began what would turn out to be a four-hour trek through the town. I walked east several blocks from my hotel and continued along Juan Manuel de Rosas Avenue, which runs adjacent to Lake Nahuel Huapi, a splendid pathway offering a magnificent view of the Andes Mountains across the water. I passed *Playa Centro*, a pebble-filled beach situated along the shoreline. At this time of the year it was empty. Twenty minutes into my walk I reached the *Centro Civico* (Civic Center) *de Bariloche*, the city's town square that sits on a hilltop just off the avenue overlooking the lake. This beautiful town hall complex – built in 1940 – was constructed in a Swiss alpine style, utilizing stones and hardwood from the nearby forests.

Occupying the east wing of the Civic Center is the small, two-story home of the Francisco P. Moreno Museum of Patagonia. I am a big museum fan and decided to pay the place a visit. The entrance fee was only 100 pesos (just a little more than one US dollar) and included a map brochure of the exhibits in English. The young man who worked the ticket counter advised me to begin my tour on the second floor.

The first two exhibition halls – the Prehistory Room and the Native People's Cultural Heritage Hall – focused on the history of the indigenous people, their story told through information boards and a sampling of artifacts and prehistoric artwork. An authentic dug out canoe was on display to show how these native tribes navigated the lakes and rivers of the region. The only other exhibition room on the second floor was the Regional History Hall, a stark testimony to the difficult and often cruel struggles the early settlers endured, and the brutal military campaign known as the 'conquest of the desert' (conducted during the 1870s), which subdued or wiped out many of the tribal peoples. A ton of old firearms, swords and uniforms were on display in this room, along with depictions of famous battles. The entire downstairs level consisted of the Natural History Room, dedicated to the unique natural environment of Patagonia. Scientific maps and illustrations showed how the region formed geologically from the last ice age and through volcanic activity. You'll see displays of the local plants and tree species, and there are two main dioramas filled with stuffed wildlife and flora depicting the diversity that exists between the forested sections of Patagonia and the desert steppe region. It took me just under 40-minutes to walk through the entire museum.

I exited the building and took some touristy photos of the Swiss-style buildings and arcade surrounding the town square. I then continued east for five more blocks and came upon the *Plaza Italia* (Italian Plaza), a small well-maintained park containing a Capitoline Wolf statue donated to the city by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini back in the 1930s. The statue depicts a wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome. Mussolini donated copies of this famous statue to dozens of cities around the world prior to WWII. Argentina actually has four of these Capitoline Wolf sculptures throughout the country.

Next to the Italian Plaza – on the other side of Palacios Street heading east – is the town's cathedral, Our Lady of Nahuel Huapi, designed by Alejandro Bustillo, the famed Argentinean architect responsible for building

the Llao Llao Hotel. Constructed during the 1940s out of white stone and cement, it was designed in a Neo-gothic style with high, elegant walls and a dome topped by a large crucifix and globe. Colorful Byzantine stained glass windows were later added. The church sits in the middle of a large, neatly arranged public plaza surrounded by gardens and pine trees. The white stones of the cathedral, especially on the side facing the lake, have some deteriorating marks due to the local humidity, but this somehow lends a gracefulness to the entire structure.

In front of the cathedral is an interesting wire statue of the Virgin Mary. I read online that inside the structure, before entering the nave, parishioners are welcomed by a wood-carved statue of Ceferino Namuncura, the son of a Mapuche tribal chief who became the first South American indigenous person to be beatified by the Catholic Church. I tried entering the structure but the massive wooden doors were closed, so I walked around the building taking photos. In the park area behind the cathedral I sat down on one of the benches to give my feet a respite, taking in the serenity of the moment. Mothers were engaged in happy conversations while keeping a watchful eye on their playing children. A group of teenagers was practicing some kind of dance routine on the grass, clumsily falling over each other and laughing. Elderly couples walked arm-in-arm through the plaza, enjoying the day.

As I sat there, taking in the idyllic scenery – this beautiful little town surrounded by such spectacular natural wonder – my mind couldn't resist playing the Devil's Advocate. There is a dark history hovering over this city; indeed, the entire country. A history few like to talk about. Argentina has one of the world's largest immigrant populations. Like the United States, the country is a huge melting pot, but unlike the United States, a staggering 97 percent of its entire population is directly descended from European stock. These strong bonds to Europe have sometimes influenced Argentinean politics. During the late 1930's, a young Juan Peron, while serving in the military, was sent to Italy to study mountain warfare tactics in the Italian Alps. He also served as a military observer in other European countries. During this time, Peron developed relationships with European dictators like Mussolini and Hitler and became sympathetic towards Nazism prior to the outbreak of WWII. In 1946, when Peron was elected president, his government secretly arranged passage to Argentina for several high-ranking Nazi officials so they could avoid prosecution for their crimes. Among them was Dr. Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death, who performed sadistic physical experiments on Jews at Auschwitz. He lived for a few years in Argentina

and Paraguay before moving to Brazil where he supposedly drowned after suffering a stroke in 1979. Perhaps the most famous Nazi to live in Argentina was Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of Hitler's Final Solution. He was captured by Mossad agents in Buenos Aires and taken back to Israel where he was later hanged for his crimes. Many of the secreted lower-level Nazis ended up living normal lives under assumed names in the German communities of Patagonia, including San Carlos de Bariloche.

The most publicly outed Nazi to live in San Carlos de Bariloche was Erich Priebke, a mid-level SS commander who was accused of carrying out the execution of 335 Italian civilians in retaliation for a bloody Resistance attack that left 33 SS police officers dead. Supposedly, Hitler himself ordered the executions. Priebke was arrested after the war and was imprisoned in Italy awaiting trial. In 1946, with the help of the notorious *ratline* – a group responsible for creating exit routes for fleeing fascist war criminals – he escaped prison and fled to northern Italy and lived for several years under the name Otto Pape. In the late 1940s he resettled to San Carlos de Bariloche where he lived quietly for 50 years with his wife and children before being arrested and eventually sent back to Italy to stand trial. An investigative news team led by ABC's Sam Donaldson tracked the man down in 1994. In San Carlos de Bariloche, Priebke was well liked, and rose to become the director of the town's prestigious German school, *Colegio Aleman*. When he was arrested, the town was genuinely shocked that this affable, long-standing and law-abiding German immigrant was a Nazi war criminal. But there were other Nazis who passed through this region, as well, and one can only speculate how many people in the community knew about them.

After a ten-minute break I continued east along Vice Almte. O'Connor Street – which borders the cathedral's southern side – for several blocks before turning right and walking to Mitre Street, the town's busiest avenue. The rest of the afternoon was spent stepping in and out of souvenir stores and chocolate shops along Mitre and Moreno Street (one block further south). This is the main touristy area of San Carlos de Bariloche, lined with small hotels, restaurants, bars and shopping venues. I had promised Debbie I would pick up three boxes of chocolates for her and I soon discovered that every confection shop in the city offered free samples. My inner fat guy was doing cartwheels…ah, who am I kidding, so was my *outer* fat guy.

I don't know how many chocolate stores I visited, but I opted to buy all five boxes – (three for Debbie and two for me) – from different places in order to sample the wide variety of delicious sweets on sale. My favorite shop was Mamuschka, located on the corner of Mitre and Rolando Street. The top of the bright red entrance was decorated with adorable over-sized *mamuschka* dolls (also known as Russian stacking dolls). When I went inside, the festive interior reminded me of Christmas. Long counters with an assortment of chocolate displays made my eyes light up. The varieties seemed endless: boxes of bonbons, cream-filled white chocolate eggs, long rolled chocolates wafers oozing with caramel, etc, etc. I headed straight to the sample plate, chewing thoughtfully like a wine connoisseur swirling a sip of Chardonnay in his mouth to determine its fruitiness.

From Mitre Street I headed one block over to Moreno Street, stopping in a small café to eat two freshly fried empanadas. (Um, I had to get the taste of all that chocolate out of my mouth). In various souvenir shops I purchased T-shirts and kitchen magnets to hand out as souvenirs back home. One thing I noticed in each store I visited was their willingness to accept US dollars. Paola told us the current rate of inflation in Argentina was so wacky that nobody knew what the price of staples would be on any given day. The price of milk or eggs, she said, could change daily or weekly depending on the ongoing strength of the Argentine peso. So as a hedge against inflation, many Argentinean small business owners welcomed American currency.

By the time I returned to my hotel around 5:00pm, the temperature had dropped and the winds were kicking up again. Thoroughly exhausted, I laid down for what turned out to be an hour and a half long nap. Debbie called me at 6:30pm. We decided to go to one of the restaurants Georgina had recommended earlier for dinner. This particular establishment, the Jauja Restaurant on Ada Maria Elfein Street, was a popular eatery specializing in local dishes. Both Debbie and I wanted to sample the boar and venison. At 7:00pm we met in the lobby. Debbie was still experiencing discomfort in her foot and ankle, but limped along admirably. The concierge called us a cab for the five-minute drive to the restaurant.

When we reached the Jauja Restaurant they were just opening for dinner, and Debbie and I were their first customers of the evening. In less than an hour the place was packed, though. We were seated at a table next to the window fronting the street. I ordered a local boar dish, which was cooked in a brown sauce and served with carrots and potatoes. The meat was tender

and delicious. Debbie had the equally tasty venison, cooked in a sweet wine sauce and served with a side of rosette potatoes. We shared each other's plates, and spent more than two hours just talking and reminiscing about our previous trips together. The bill came to approximately $33 US, which I thought was reasonable for such a nice restaurant. It was a memorable meal, and I think Debbie needed the night out to forget about her injured ankle. We didn't get back to the hotel until almost 10:00pm. Before going to bed I charged my camera battery and checked my emails on my iPhone. I slept soundly that night.

Day Seven

I awoke at 6:00am and went through my usual ritual of coffee drinking and journal writing before shaving and taking a shower. Outside, a hellacious storm was pounding wind and rain against the hotel window. We were flying to Buenos Aires later that afternoon so there was no need for an early breakfast. I met Debbie in the hotel restaurant at 8:30am. I returned to my room immediately after breakfast and finished packing my suitcase, placing it in the hallway for the porters. It was still raining heavily and I decided to spend the rest of the morning editing my photos and reading up on Buenos Aires in my guidebook. By 12:00pm we were on the bus heading for the airport. Paola handed out sack lunches prepared by the hotel. By now the storm had cleared and the sun was beginning to shine through the scattering cloud cover.

We drove east out of the city along Nahuel Huapi Lake and then turned right onto Route 80, taking that directly to the small International Airport of Bariloche. By the time we reached Route 80, the scenery changed dramatically. The forested mountains and lake region gave way to the mostly flat, barren steppes of Patagonia. According to Georgina, who accompanied us to the airport, eighty percent of the Argentinean Patagonia consisted of this desolate, empty space. It was quite a remarkable, and almost unsettling, geographical change. We had spent two and a half days

traveling through natural parks, surrounded by scenic snow-capped mountains, lakes and rivers, only to end up in this vast expanse of desert and shrub lands.

Towards the east, as far as the eye could see, there wasn't anything higher than some small hills. How far did this desert area stretch? More than 260,000 square miles (over 700,000 sq km). Georgina said most of this arid land was only suitable for sheep grazing. As for the locals themselves, they referred to the steppes as 'the middle of nothing'. Life, as one can imagine, is incredibly lonely out here. The homes/ranches tended to be widely scattered and isolated, making the living conditions exceptionally harsh for the locals, who are made up of indigenous peoples and, oddly enough, the descendents of Italian immigrants. Health issues like depression and alcoholism tend to be higher out here. In fact, a famous local quote advices "young people to leave this place".

We arrived at the airport just before 1:00pm. We said our 'goodbyes' to Georgina, giving her a nice tip for her services. Debbie gave the driver, Juan, a generous tip, as well; he was constantly assisting her whenever we were out of the bus and she had to stay behind. Our 2-hour flight to Buenos Aries departed just before 3:00pm. Because Debbie needed the assistance of a wheelchair – and I was accompanying her – we were always the first passengers to board the plane from that point on. We were also assigned seats in the roomy first row section of the plane, next to the exit, alleviating my claustrophobia. This prompted me to joke that one of us should always try to twist our ankle on every trip!

We touched down at Jorge Newbury Airfield in Buenos Aires at 4:50pm. We had traveled more than 800 miles from the Patagonia region to the country's capital, which is located along the eastern coastline of the country. The cold weather was behind us now, which was a good thing since I inadvertently left my hoodie jacket on the plane. After retrieving our luggage, we trekked for about ten minutes through the terminal building's outdoor parking lot area before reaching our tour bus; a large, roomy coach that looked like it just came off the assembly line. Paola, who lives in Buenos Aires, doubled as our local guide.

From the airport we drove to the downtown area, the *Rio de la Plata* (River of Silver) was to our left. Buenos Aires is situated along the western estuary of this river, which leads out into the Atlantic Ocean. Rio de la Plata

served as a gateway river during colonial times, allowing for the continued exploration and settlement of this part of South America. It was so-named because Venetian explorer Sebastian Cabot – who was under the service of Spain – acquired silver trinkets from the indigenous Guarani tribe in what is now Asuncion, Paraguay, while navigating this waterway. Previous conquistadors thought perhaps the river might lead to the famed kingdom of El Dorado, a place rumored to be filled with untold riches. Alas, El Dorado was nothing more than a myth, but the search for it allowed Europeans to explore and eventually settle larger areas of the continent. The Rio de la Plata stretches for about 180 miles but only has a depth of 10-30 meters. It is considered the widest river in the world. The section that borders Buenos Aires is 30 miles wide. On the other side of the river, across from Buenos Aires, is the country of Uruguay.

Leaving the airport, we drove through the Palermo Barrio, one of the largest and nicest neighborhoods in the city, which is divided into smaller sections or subdivisions. It was a beautiful sunny day in Buenos Aires. We came upon the Parque Tres de Febrero (the February Third Park), a large public park that most locals simply refer to as the Bosques de Palermo (the Palermo Woods). The city's residents were out in full force enjoying the sunshine. Established in 1875, the Parque Tres de Febrero has grown and morphed into a sprawling natural landmark featuring lakes and rose gardens, a planetarium and a beautiful Japanese garden. In addition, a new ecopark and botanical garden recently opened in the southeastern corner of the park where the former city zoo used to be. Porteños, as the people of Buenos Aires like to call themselves, enjoy outdoor activities when the weather is nice, and the city has no shortages of venues and parks to choose from. As we headed southeast along Avenue of the Liberator – one of the famous multi-lane streets in the city – I cannot recall how many small parks and monument plazas we passed. Each one teeming with festive-looking city dwellers. Like Santiago, Chile, I was immediately impressed with Buenos Aires. And I wasn't the only one. In 2018, this city was ranked as one of the top places in Latin America to live due to its 'quality of life'.

The most striking feature of Buenos Aires – from a visitor's perspective – has to be the architectural make up of the city. It's as if a large European metropolis somehow landed in South America. Throughout most of the late 19th and 20th centuries, construction in Buenos Aires was heavily influenced by the millions of European immigrants who would come to populate this multi-cultural city. Buenos Aires looks like a mix between Paris and Madrid,

with palaces, churches, government and residential buildings designed in an eclectic ensemble of Colonial, Neo-Gothic, Baroque, French Bourbon, Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles. To say that all these designs are aesthetically pleasing would be a huge understatement. Every neighborhood we crossed had numerous architectural gems, and coupled with the enormous roundabouts and avenues – not to mention the well-maintained parks and plazas – this was one lovely city. Over the past thirty years more modern, high-tech skyscrapers and towers have been constructed, but frankly, I think they distract from the older buildings. I couldn't wait to walk around this place!

We continued southeast along Avenue of the Liberator, passing the embassies of Lebanon, Italy and Peru. At one point we reached another massive park complex that included the Mitre Plaza, the French Plaza (with its beautiful *Monument of France to Argentina* statue, sculpted by famed French artist Emile Peynot in 1910), the Ruben Dario Park and the National Museum of Fine Arts building. From here we turned onto Alvear Avenue, in what seemed like a pretty ritzy part of town, traversing this wide seven-block long boulevard lined with more embassies, government buildings, historic mansions, museums, art galleries, learning institutions and shopping plazas.

As we reached the end of Alvear Avenue, just beyond the Brazilian and French embassies, our bus turned southbound onto the largest boulevard on the planet. The 9th of July Avenue (named in honor of the country's independence day) is something to behold. Stretching for almost 2 miles (3km), this massive thoroughfare has up to seven lanes in *each* direction, and two additional lanes that run parallel to it, for a combined total of 16 lanes! Dividing the north and southbound lanes is a corridor for one of the city's Metrobus routes. Seen from above, it must appear as if an earthquake split this section of the city in half. To get a better understanding of just how large this street is, to cross it usually requires two traffic light changes. The boulevard is beautifully flanked by greenery and interspersed with monument plazas.

We drove southbound along 9th of July Avenue for seven long city blocks through rush hour traffic, turning right when we reached the historic Teatro Colon (the Colon Theater). We made a left onto Uruguay Street a few minutes later and took that down one block to Corrientes Avenue, another major boulevard that runs through a large swath of the city. Our hotel, the

Novotel Buenos Aires, was located on Corrientes Avenue in what is considered the heart of the city's theater district. We checked in by 6:00pm.

After securing my luggage and using the bathroom, I went down to the lobby where a group of us had gathered for an evening stroll through the area led by Paola. At 6:45pm, as night fell over the city, she took us three blocks east towards the 9th of July Avenue. On the intersection of Corrientes and the 9th of July Avenues – in between the north and southbound lanes – is the Plaza de la Republica (Republic Square), the site where the Argentinean flag was hoisted for the first time. In the middle of this big square is a striking 221-foot high (67.5m) obelisk constructed in 1923 that is colorfully lit up at night. We crossed the 9th of July Avenue and walked for several blocks north along the massive boulevard while Paola pointed out specific buildings in the area and places where we might want to eat or shop. Several of the side streets we passed were bustling with street vendor activity.

We re-crossed 9th of July Avenue and stopped in front of the Teatro Colon, the famous opera house of Argentina. The present-day building – which takes up nearly an entire city block – opened in 1908 after a 20-year construction period. It replaced the highly successful opera house with the same name from the mid-1800s that once stood there. The structure has six floors above ground and three below and was designed, basically, in an Italian Renaissance-influenced Neoclassical style, but with French motifs thrown in towards the end of its construction. The horseshoe-shaped auditorium seats almost 2,500 and its acoustics are so good the theater is continuously ranked amongst the top five concert venues in the world. Paola suggested that for our free time in the city we might want to take the interior tour of the theater, which she said was worth the cost.

From here, Paola led us west along Tucumán Street to Lavalle Plaza. This three-block long public park was named in honor of Juan Lavalle, a military hero during the country's War of Independence. Fronting the southern end of the plaza on Talcahuano Street is the Palace of Justice, a large Neo-classical building complex that is home to Argentina's Supreme Court and several lower courts. In addition to the statue erected in General Lavalle's honor, the park has several other notable monuments. Situated in the plaza in back of the Teatro Colon is the Argentine National Ballet Memorial, the statue – a pair of sculpted ballet dancers – pays tribute to the members of the National Ballet who died in an airplane crash in 1971. And another, perhaps more somber monument, is the one by Argentinean artist Mirta Kupferminc,

which honors the victims of a 1994 suicide car bombing at the AMIA, Buenos Aires' largest Jewish community center. Eighty-five people were killed and hundreds wounded. To date, this is the worst terrorist attack in Latin American history, and while the bombing is still unsolved, the general consensus among police and intelligence agencies worldwide is that agents from Iran were responsible for the attack.

We continued south along Tucumán Street until we reached Corrientes Avenue again. Our hotel was just around the corner. Johnny and I wanted to have a steak dinner in one of the restaurants Paola had recommended. At 8:00pm I called Debbie in her room to ask her if she wanted to tag along. The restaurant was only a few blocks from the hotel but she told me she had already taken off her medical brace and was resting comfortably for the night. Johnny and I set off on foot, walking less than three blocks to the *Revire Brasa Brava* restaurant located on Corrientes Avenue. When we went inside we found several other members of our group having dinner there, as well. We were seated near the entrance.

Argentina is known globally for its cattle. The country has the second-highest consumption rate of beef in the world. It is estimated that the average Argentinean eats 186 pounds (84kg) of red meat annually. In certain areas of Buenos Aires it's impossible to throw a rock down any busy commercial street without hitting a steak or grill house. The *Revira Brasa Brava* seemed like typical steak joint, maybe a tad classier. The star attraction is always the beef. Besides the cut and age of the meat, very little other than sea salt is used to bring out the flavor. And how do they do that? By slow cooking the steak on a *parilla* (grill) over a wood or charcoal fire that must be kept at the perfect temperature throughout. No gas-grills or pan-frying here.

Johnny and I looked over the menu but weren't sure which steak to order, so I asked our waiter in Spanish for his recommendation. The man didn't blink; he glanced down at us – two Americans who could easily tip the scales at 250 pounds apiece – and, without hesitation, replied, "*Bife ancho* (ribeye)". We closed our menus and each ordered the 1.5-pound (.68kg) ribeye, cooked medium well with a side of thick cut fries and (out of guilt) diet cokes. The waiter brought us our drinks and bread, and separate little trays containing spreads and sauces. It took a while before they brought us the steaks, but let me tell you, it was worth the wait. I cannot recall having a better chunk of meat in my life. The big, serrated knives our waiter

handed us were unnecessary; I could have cut through my thick steak with a butter knife. When I began eating it, I would momentarily close my eyes after every bite and mentally exclaim: *mmmmmm-mmm*! In fact, the meal was so good I don't even remember what Johnny and I talked about for over an hour. The bill came to $25 (US) each, but that included a generous tip from both of us. We waddled out of there like…well, like two fat guys who just had an awesome dinner!

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a local supermarket. I needed to buy instant coffee and creamer for my morning fix. Johnny wanted to purchase some local sweets for the members of his church group back in Arkansas. I returned to my hotel room around 10:00pm too tired (or full) to unpack or write in my journal. Like a contented, grass-fed bovine, I drifted off to sleep…

Day Eight

I was up by 5:00am. I sorted out my clothes, hanging up the items I would be wearing during my stay in Buenos Aires and separating my increasing pile of dirty laundry into two nylon packing cubes. I also charged my camera and iPhone batteries after discovering that my universal voltage converter had a three-prong extension that fit the wall socket. Over several cups of coffee I sat down and wrote the previous day's events into my journal. Finally, I showered, dressed and at 7:00am met Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I made sure to eat my fill because today was going to be a long day.

We began our city tour of Buenos Aires at 8:45am. We drove east three blocks, crossing the *9th of July Avenue* and the tall obelisk monument in the Republic Square, continuing east along another famous thoroughfare called President Roque Saenz Pena Avenue, which is known simply as the *Diagonal* because it runs in a southeast slant, cutting across the rest of the streets in the area. Situated along this wide busy commercial boulevard are

many government buildings. In fact, the Diagonal actually ends at the Plaza de Mayo, the city's historic main square. It was our first stop of the day.

On our way to the Plaza de Mayo, Paola gave us some general information about the city. Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina and the country's largest metropolis. During the early half of the nation's independence, the city was originally part of the Buenos Aires Province, but after decades of political in-fighting over which party controlled the capital, the city was federalized in 1880 and became the seat of the national government, ceasing to be a part of any province. In 1994, a constitutional amendment granted the city full autonomy. The actual name of the capital now is the *Ciudad Autonoma de Buenos Aires* (the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires) and is sometimes identified by its acronym CABA. Since 1996, the residents of the city have elected their local mayor, officially called 'chief of government'.

The meaning behind the name 'buenos aires' has different origins. The phrase means either 'good air' or 'fair winds' depending on the historical reference. Both definitions can trace their roots back to a particular hill in Sardinia, Italy. The 'good air' moniker referred to the air quality on top of the hill, which was located just far enough to avoid the smell and/or mosquitoes of a nearby swampland. The 'fair winds' is based on a story about a Virgin Mary statue located on this Sardinian hill that was thought to have saved a group of sea voyagers from certain doom during a storm. Either way, the residents of Buenos Aires will tell you that both names are really misnomers. Porteños colloquially refer to their city as 'el quilumbo' (the disaster or mess), a whimsical play on Buenos Aires' charming – but often wild – active social and political scene. This can infer any number of things: the regular political protests or rallies downtown, with the inevitable crazy traffic jams they produce, the happy chaos or fallout from rival soccer fans on game day, the festiveness of holiday celebrations, etc, etc. A *liveliness*, if you will, that most city dwellers passionately embrace.

The population of Buenos Aires – combining the Metro and surrounding urban satellites – is estimated at about 15 million, making it the fourth largest city in all of the Americas. It is also one of the most culturally diverse. Since the 19th century, Argentina has welcomed immigrants from all over the world, although most notably from Europe. Many have ended up in Buenos Aires, making this a huge melting pot on the level of New York City. In addition to the large percentage of Spanish descendents, huge waves

of Italian immigrants began arriving in Buenos Aires between 1880-1930. In fact, approximately 25 million Argentineans can claim Italian or mixed Italian heritage, making up almost 63% of the entire population. And the cultural influence of Italians can be seen everywhere, from the city's architecture to the Argentinean tango.

Buenos Aires also has other sizeable ethnic groups from different parts of the world. Currently, it has the eighth largest Jewish community in the world (more than 250,000 Jews live in the city). A fairly large Chinese community resides in Buenos Aries that came from Taiwan and the Chinese province of Fujian starting around the 1980's (many of the city's supermarkets are owned by them). There is also a substantial number of Japanese and Korean descendents; the Japanese began arriving in the early 1900's, and the Koreans came following the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945. Less than three percent of the entire population of Buenos Aires is of indigenous or African descent. All this incredible diversity makes for a dynamic and lively city.

Our first stop that morning was at the Plaza de Mayo, the city's historic main square. We spent roughly 45-minutes here. Located within the city's financial district – known as the *microcentro* – in the neighborhood of Monserrat, this plaza was formed in 1884 to replace two previous plazas built to commemorate the country's independence. As the city's main square, though, it dates back to the late 1500s. The plaza, which runs nearly two city blocks long, is surrounded by many historical points of interests.

On the eastern side of the plaza sits the *Casa Rosada* (the Pink House), the executive mansion and office of the president of Argentina. Its construction is said to have been motivated by envy. During the 1870s, a magnificent national post office building was constructed next to the old Government House (the former president's mansion) on the corner where the Casa Rosada now stands, which made the presidential palace seem dull by comparison. So a new executive building was commissioned. The Casa Rosada was inaugurated in 1898, and is now attached to the adjacent national post office building by an archway. The Casa Rosada has three stories, with an additional four-story building (which also houses the Casa Rosada Museum) constructed just in back of it. The complex takes up an entire city block and has been declared a national historical monument of Argentina. Visitors can tour both the Casa Rosada and its museum on specific days. The president of Argentina no longer lives in the Casa Rosada;

the building serves only as the executive office. And considering the riots, coups and bombings that have occurred throughout the Plaza de Mayo's history, I'm not surprised. We were able to walk up to the iron gates and take pictures of the balconies in front of the Casa Rosada, including the one from where Evita Peron used to give speeches to her adoring supporters below.

Surrounding the Plaza de Mayo are other important buildings, like the National Bank of Argentina, the city hall building of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, the Ministries of Energy and the Economy, and the Federal Intelligence Agency. Beneath the square are three connecting lines of the city's subway system. On the western end of the plaza is the former colonial city hall (the *cabildo*) building, which is now a national cultural museum. And on the northwestern corner sits the Metropolitan Cathedral, seat of the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires. We had the opportunity to go inside and look around.

An interesting tidbit about the Metropolitan Cathedral is that this is the same church where Jorge Mario Bergoglio used to serve Mass when he was archbishop (and later cardinal) of Buenos Aires. If you're not familiar with the name it's because he is now called Pope Francis. This cathedral is interesting for a number of other reasons, too. The church has been torn down and reconstructed and renovated many times throughout its long history. Looking at it today, you would be hard-pressed to even guess it was a church. The design is a mix of architectural styles; the traditional 18th century nave and dome contrast sharply against its 19th century Neo-Classical façade, which consists of a tall, austere portico with twelve large columns and a triangular pediment that seem more at home on a Supreme Court building than a place of worship. The interior is no less eclectic. Remaining from colonial times are gilt wood altarpieces occupying the main chapel and a large sculpture image of the Crucified Christ, the oldest image in the church. The walls and ceilings are decorated with frescoes depicting biblical scenes, and all of the Stations of the Cross are showcased in original canvas oil paintings. During the early 1900s, the floor was covered with Venetian-style mosaics which have recently been renovated.

The Metropolitan Cathedral also serves as a national historical monument, containing the mausoleum of General Jose de San Martin, the venerated military man who led the successful struggle for independence against Spain in the central and southern parts of South America. His

enormous black sarcophagus sits in a room off to the right aisles of the church guarded by three life-size female statues representing the countries of Peru, Chile and Argentina, which he helped liberate. Two other Argentine generals from the War of Independence are entombed here, as well: Juan Gregorio de las Heras and Tomas Guido. In addition, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the Independence is also housed here. When we arrived, we witnessed the ceremonial changing of the guard …inside the church! I've never seen *that* before.

After visiting the Metropolitan Cathedral we gathered in the middle of the plaza, next to a tall pyramid-shaped monument topped by a Liberty statue known as the *Piramide de Mayo.* Inaugurated in 1811 after the country's first year of independence, it is the oldest national monument in Buenos Aires. Surrounding the Piramide de Mayo is a brick walkway with painted images of white bandanas dedicated to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo movement. This courageous group of women (who donned white bandanas or head scarves in a show of unity) gathered yearly to protest the disappearances of their children during Argentina's Dirty War years (1976 – 1983) when the military dictatorship running the country waged a secret war against leftists that killed tens of thousands. Even today, Paola told us, there are still pilgrimages to the plaza by those who do not want the country to forget the brutality of the dictatorship years. Just about every social or political group that has a cause to champion or an ax to grind uses the plaza as a rallying point. In fact, during our visit the police were busy cordoning off streets around the square for a noontime political rally expected to draw thousands. The country's presidential elections were just weeks away.

The square has known its share of violence, too. The only air assault ever committed on Argentine soil was done by its own air force during a coup attempt against President Juan Peron in 1955. A Peronist rally – being held in the Plaza de Mayo – was bombed and strafed by the air force, leaving 364 people dead. The marble façade of the adjacent Ministry of the Economy building still has cracks from bullets fired during that coup. This blatant disregard for human life on the part of the military would serve as a sad portent for the violence that would envelop the nation during the seventies and eighties.

We boarded our bus and left the plaza, traveling south along Paseo Colon Avenue through the Monserrat District. We passed a large, sprawling building complex on our left housing the Ministry of Defense and adjacent

to it was another large plaza dedicated to President Juan Peron, which I found ironic considering the military had once violently deposed him. As we continued south, we entered the San Telmo district of Buenos Aires, perhaps the oldest neighborhood in the city. Dating back to the 17th century, this section of the city – the first to have a residential settlement – was once occupied by colonial dockworkers and bricklayers, becoming the first industrial center of Buenos Aires. Today, the district is characterized by its well-preserved colonial buildings and has plenty of cafes, tango parlors and antique shops situated along cobblestone streets to make it worth a day visit.

On our right we passed a large public park called *Parque Lezama* that is home to the Argentine Historical Museum, and then turned left onto Admiral Brown Avenue, named after Irish-born William Brown, who rose to the rank of admiral while leading Argentina's navy against the Spaniards during the War of Independence. Admiral Brown Avenue led us into the heart of the La Boca district, which is located in the southeastern section of the city near the old port area. La Boca has a large concentration of Italian descendents, many of whom can trace their lineage to the early Genoese immigrants who settled the neighborhood back in the late 1800s. Some of the neighborhoods here might be considered poor or working-class, with a higher incidence of petty crime than the rest of the city. We passed several public housing units; most of the buildings colorfully painted and a few had enormous murals of the district's favorite soccer team, the Boca Juniors. As we drove through the area we could see the Alberto J. Armando Stadium – home of the Boca Juniors – affectionately called *La Bombonera* by the locals because it resembles a giant bonbon box.

We stopped for an hour-long visit at a section of La Boca known as *El Caminito* ("little walkway"), located several blocks south of the stadium. The area around El Caminito has been build up over the years as a tourism draw, and you will find many interesting places like the famous La Ribera Theater, tango clubs, restaurants and Italian taverns in the vicinity. El Caminito itself consists of several pedestrian streets (or alleys) lined with oddly shaped and brightly colored two-story buildings. The area was once an old Italian neighborhood that has been transformed now into a lively street museum, with outdoor restaurants, art stalls and novelty shops selling tango-related memorabilia. Among the crowds are street entertainers dressed as prostitutes or tango dancers who encourage tourists to take pictures with them for a gratuity.

El Caminito became famous for inspiring one of Argentina's most memorable tango songs, *Caminito*, composed in 1926 by Juan de Dios Filiberto. In fact, Paola told us that the tango originated from the tough Italian neighborhoods of Buenos Aires at the turn of the last century. She said the frenetic dance moves often mimic the furious back-and-forth seen in a knife fight; the more sensual moves have sometimes been associated with the intimate (and raw) exchanges between sailor and prostitute. Hence, the dance's scandalous reputation during the first half of the 20th century.

I spent my time at El Caminito taking photographs of the colorful structures, many with balconies sporting funny statues or large paper mache figures of Eva Peron, Argentine soccer legend Diego Maradona or Carlos Gardel, the French Argentinean who is universally known as the most influential figure in the history of the tango. I also bought several souvenirs from the various shops, including a Maradona T-shirt for a soccer crazy co-worker who requested it prior to my trip. Debbie was able to purchase a beautiful painting from one of the many artists working the pedestrian streets. She has a good eye for picking up interesting art pieces; the walls of her home in Tampa are covered with framed original artwork she has collected over the years from her travels abroad. It's quite impressive.

We left La Boca and drove north through the Puerto Madero district, which occupies a large portion of the city's waterfront along the Rio de la Plata. This district includes the dock areas of the New Port of Buenos Aires (completed in 1926) and a protected lowland space along the riverbank known as the Buenos Aires Ecological Reserve. According to our guide, this area has a remarkable comeback story. The dock area once boasted a very popular promenade along the river and was a bustling summer time destination for the city's residents, filled with bars and coffee shops. But by the end of the 1950s, the area began to decline rapidly. Bathing in the river was prohibited as unchecked pollution contaminated the waters of the Rio de la Plata. Restaurants, bars and coffee shops closed and the area was basically abandoned, making the Puerto Madero district one of the most economically depressed sections of the city. In the 1970s, a program to reclaim land from the river was instituted. Land filling, dumping and draining allowed for the formation of what is now the ecological reserve. Different plant species began growing spontaneously, providing refuge and food for wildlife, and by 1986 the city council voted to make this new green park a protected natural reserve.

Today, the area of Puerto Madero is a thriving business sector and home to the latest architectural trends of Buenos Aires. During the 1990s, a massive recycling and refurbishment movement transformed the district. Abandoned or neglected warehouses were turned into elegant homes and apartment complexes, luxury hotels, restaurants, theaters and other cultural centers. The project started drawing the interests of companies and builders from around the world and Puerto Madero now boasts some of the most modern architectural designs in the city. The streets here are all named after women. We passed a rotating bridge connecting the east and west docks called *Puente de la Mujer* (Woman's Bridge). I read that the rehabilitation of the Puerto Madero district is considered one of the world's most successful waterfront renewal projects within the last fifty years.

We continued north, the Rio de la Plata to our right, traversing through the business section of the Monserrat district once again and entering the Retiro district, one of the city's main transportation hubs, with local and long distance railway stations and bus terminals located within its borders. When we reached the San Martin Plaza, situated in the middle of a large leafy park and surrounded by elegant palaces and hotels, we turned right onto Avenue of the Liberator and headed into the Recoleta district, a relatively affluent residential neighborhood. Our next stop was at the famous Recoleta Cemetery located within this district.

The Recoleta neighborhood was named after a Franciscan Monastery (*Convento de la Recoleta*) that was established here in the early 1700s. In 1822, the monastic order was disbanded and the gardens surrounding the convent were converted into Buenos Aires' first public cemetery. Over the ensuing two centuries the cemetery grew and became the final resting place for a veritable who's who of Argentina's dearly departed denizens. While the idea of visiting a graveyard might seem gruesome to some, I have been to several notable ones in my travels over the years and they are *very* fascinating places. And the older, the better. This one, the Recoleta Cemetery, is often listed as one of the most beautiful in the world. One could argue that people are just *dying* to get in…(um, sorry, I couldn't resist).

The cemetery is spread out over 14 acres (5.5 hectares) and contains almost 4,700 above ground tombs. Seen from above, it resembles a tiny town with wide main avenues and narrow side streets. To enter the cemetery you must walk through neo-Classical gates that are adorned with tall Doric

columns, which, in itself, makes quite an impression upon the first time visitor. Inside, the collection of funeral vaults and tombs will make your mouth drop. Many of the older vaults were built using materials imported from Paris and Milan, and the architectural styles run from Art Deco to Art Nouveau, from Baroque to Neo-Gothic. Each one is different. Some mausoleums are plain and austere while others have elaborate decorations, including statues and sculptures. Some have fallen into disrepair while others are noticeably maintained. Because of the limited space, and the coveted location, only the very wealthy (or powerful) can be interred here, providing, of course, the family already has a vault in the cemetery to begin with.

We spent about 45-minutes walking through the cemetery. Paola led us to some of the important vaults, giving us a brief history of the occupants and describing the unique architectural designs of the more elaborate tombs. Ninety-four of the mausoleums have been designated National Historical Monuments by the government and are preserved by the state. The list of Argentinean historical figures laid to rest here makes for an interesting outing if you know where to look for them. I'm certain they sell maps of the cemetery to guide one to the more important mausoleums. Luckily, we had Paola for that.

Some of the important males interred here include: William Brown, the Irish-born Admiral and founder of the Argentine Navy, and other military leaders from the early stages of the republic; Carlos Saavedra Lamas, the first Latin American to win the Nobel Peace Prize, numerous presidents, famous artists and academicians. The woman's list has several notable patriots, artists, socialites and businesswomen. A granddaughter of Napoleon is buried here, as is the wife of the Liberator Jose de San Martin. Because the population of Argentina draws so heavily from European stock, you'll also find the tombs of many foreign-born individuals who played significant roles in Argentina's development.

But perhaps the most famous mausoleum, or at least the most visited, is that of Eva Peron, the wife of the late president, Juan Peron. She served as the First Lady of Argentina from 1946 until her death from cancer in 1952. An extremely popular woman of the working class, especially the pro-Peronist trade unions, she was instrumental in helping her husband's political party garner widespread support. She championed women's suffrage and helped the poor through her charity foundation. Over the years,

her image has become part of popular culture due to the success of the musical *Evita*.

When we set out that morning on our city tour, Debbie told me she was really looking forward to visiting Eva Peron's mausoleum, and was hopeful a wheelchair could be made available when we reached the cemetery. Unfortunately, there were no accommodations for her, and she had to limp along painfully – at times falling behind the group – to see the tomb. And considering all the hype surrounding Eva Peron – she is still a popular figure in the country – her resting place was situated on a crowded 'alleyway', in a fairly nondescript mausoleum that also contains other members of her family. To be honest, one could have walked right by it without so much as a glance.

While at Eva Peron's tomb, Paola told us the fascinating story of what happened to Evita's body, a journey that could have easily inspired another Broadway show. Her husband paid a small fortune to have her embalmed and cosmetically restored, and was planning to build an enormous monument in her honor; her body was to be displayed in a glass coffin at the base of this memorial. But following the coup in 1955 that overthrew her husband's government (Juan Peron fled to Spain), the military removed her embalmed corpse and hid it from public view. The reason was to prevent her gravesite from becoming a lightening rod for Peronist supporters. I later uncovered some lurid allegations of what the military might have done to Eva's body. For the sake of decency, I will not be mentioning them here. Eventually, the military smuggled Eva's corpse to Milan, Italy, where she was buried in a simple cemetery plot under another name. Fourteen years later, in 1971, Juan Peron discovered the whereabouts of Eva's body and had her exhumed and brought to Spain. Supposedly, Eva's perfectly preserved body was kept in open view inside the home of Juan Peron and his third wife, Isabel. In 1973, an aging Juan Peron returned to Argentina from his exile in Spain and was elected president for a third time. He died a year later and Eva's body was brought back to Buenos Aires. The chamber that holds her remains – according to my online research – was carefully constructed twenty feet underground to prevent any more grave robbing. *Rest in peace, Evita*.

We left the cemetery and headed back to our hotel driving south through a neighborhood known as *Barrio Norte*. We arrived at 1:15pm. The rest of the afternoon was free for us to sightsee on our own before we gathered

again in the evening for an optional excursion to see a tango show at the famous *Café de los Angelitos* dining hall. I met Debbie in the hotel lobby at 2:00pm and we crossed the street from our hotel and had a pizza lunch at an Italian restaurant called *Los Inmortales* that was recommended by Paola. Afterwards, I walked Debbie back to the hotel and then proceeded on my own for a two-hour walk around the neighborhood.

I revisited the Plaza of the Republic and the historic Colon Theater, taking some extra photos before proceeding east beyond the 9th of July Avenue into the San Nicolas neighborhood that runs adjacent to the Montserrat district. Locals refer to the San Nicolas neighborhood as *El Centro* (the Center) and the area just east of the 9th of July Avenue as the *Microcentro*. The busy streets here, together with the nearby Montserrat district, make up most of what is known as the Buenos Aires Central Business District, home to the headquarters of Argentina's largest corporations. The area is concentrated with offices, service companies and banks, with a high congestion of pedestrians walking to and from work or shopping along the many small and larger retail stores in the vicinity. I came across Florida Street, a long pedestrian walkway lined with retail shops, and followed that for several blocks stopping to browse in several of the stores. When I reached Corrientes Avenue I turned right and eventually made my way back to the hotel. Exhausted from my walk, I laid down for an hour-long nap.

At 7:00pm I joined the rest of the group in a conference hall located on the E Level of the hotel for a 45-minute tango-dancing lesson. I am not a dancer. In fact, I'm the only one in my family who isn't. In my defense, though, I grew up listening to heavy metal music. But I was willing to give it a shot…*up to a point*. And that point came fairly quickly. The instructors, a pair of middle-aged professional dancers, had the group on our feet in the center of the room in no time. The only ones sitting out were Johnny and a dance-disabled Debbie. Unlike me, Johnny knew his limitations and was not going to make a fool of himself.

We began the lesson by practicing the simple back and forth stepping technique that is the basis of all tango dancing. This simply entailed walking three steps forward and then three steps back. But this proved too much for me. Apparently, I cannot relax enough to just walk back and forth on a dance floor, so I joined Johnny and Debbie on the sidelines, taking photos of the rest of the group as they tried to learn the art of tango dancing. Some

members of the group – especially the long-time married couples – were quite nimble on their feet and seemed to catch on quickly. Not to be outdone, Johnny took a hilarious picture of Debbie and me pretending to be tango dancing. For the photo, I held up Debbie's leg at waist level, her braced foot dangling comically.

When the session ended we returned to our rooms and prepared for the dinner show excursion. At 8:30pm, we reassembled in the lobby and boarded our bus for a ten-minute ride to the *Café de los Angelitos* ('Café of Angels') located in the Balvanera district just three blocks west of the National Congress Building on Rivadavia Avenue. Originally called the Bar Rivadavia, this iconic coffee house/theater has been around since the 1890s. During the first half of the 20th century, the place drew a wide and unusual mix of artists, musicians, social elites and gangsters. Today, the building has been renovated to recapture its glory days and puts on one of the best tango shows in the city, incorporating 21 professional dancers who perform a set of various tango songs and dance routines that will keep you *utterly* enthralled throughout.

Our group was seated at a long table adjacent to the stage. Debbie, Johnny and myself were actually at the front of the table, so we got a real close look at the twirling, frenetic movements of the dancers. I never thought I was going to enjoy this as much as I did. The show started at 10:00pm and lasted about an hour and fifteen minutes. Dinner was served beforehand. I had ordered the *humita* (a spicy corn empanada dish) as an appetizer, following that up with a steak entrée and finishing my meal with a heavenly custard and honey dessert called *tocinillo del cielo.* Beer, wine and soda were free flowing the entire night. It was a wonderfully entertaining experience and I heartily recommend it.

We arrived back at the hotel close to midnight. I immediately went to bed.

Day Nine

My cell phone alarm was set for 6:30am this morning, but I was wide-awake an hour earlier. Unable to go back to sleep, I watched a little bit of the international news broadcast on television before shaving, showering and getting dressed. I then finished entering the previous day's details into my journal while consuming several cups of instant coffee. By 8:30am I joined Debbie for breakfast in the hotel dining room.

Today was a free day in Buenos Aires, but the entire group had signed up for an optional daylong excursion to visit a horse ranch located about an hour and a half north of the city. We left the hotel at 10:00am, taking a major highway (Route 8, I believe) out of the capital and through the northern sections of the Buenos Aires Province, which is the largest province in Argentina and the only one to be further subdivided into smaller administrative units known as *partidos* and *localidades*. The entire province sits within a geographical area called the Pampas region, a massive fertile lowlands that stretches for more than 460,000 sq. miles (1.2 million sq. kilometers), encompassing five Argentinean provinces, the entire country of Uruguay and even parts of Brazil. There are unique ecosystems within this Pampas region. In the Buenos Aires Province, though, much of this vast fertile area is used for agriculture and raising cattle.

During the drive, Paola explained the history and lifestyle of the gauchos, the legendary 'cowboys' of Argentina, who traditionally work on the large farming estates or ranches within the Pampas region. Historically, most gauchos tend to be *mestizos*, people of mixed European and native Indian ancestry, but there are also white, black and mulatto gauchos throughout Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. Their origins date back to the mid-1700s when European traders made a lucrative business in hides and tallow from the large herds of escaped horses and cattle that roamed the vastness of the Pampas lowlands. The farmhands and horsemen who were hired to round up these animals became known as the *gauchos*. In the early 1800s, they served in the local militias and armies that fought for independence from Spain (and later in the occasional civil wars that sprang up within the newly minted countries). Like the American cowboy, their rugged, nomadic lifestyle, coupled with their impressive horse riding and fighting skills, inspired sagas and ballads that celebrated their free-wheeling, outlaw image, romanticizing them in popular culture.

The decline of the nomadic gaucho-lifestyle coincided with the end of the 19th century when wealthy landowners acquired most of the half-wild livestock roaming the Pampas. By this time, most of the Pampas region in Argentina had been fenced into large ranches or estates called *estancias*. The gauchos were hired as skilled animal handlers by these estates, essentially becoming farm workers and cowhands. But their legend precedes them, and even today they tend to be romanticized for their skills and past exploits (good or bad).

The modern gaucho still dons the costume of his predecessors: a rectangular woolen garment called a *chiripa,* usually tucked in at the belt and wrapped in various ways around the hips and thighs, with long accordion-pleated trousers (*bombachas*) that cinch at the ankles over traditional high leather boots. It's an unusual ensemble. In fact, I had to refrain from giggling the first time I saw my first gaucho, for the man looked more like a sea pirate then a cowboy. With a long knife sheathed underneath his belt, the only thing missing was a three-pointed sailor's hat, an eye patch and a squawking parrot on his shoulder! But make no mistake about it, these were real tough horsemen.

The ranch we were visiting was called the *Estancia Santa Susana*, located about 83 kilometers northwest of Buenos Aires, near the small village of Los Cardales. Several decades ago some of the larger ranches situated within the Pampas region began offering tours featuring the horsemanship skills of the gauchos and performing shows highlighting their unique talents. These 'gaucho ranch' tours have become quite popular in Argentina, and the Estancia Santa Susana is one of the more famous ones. The ranch covers nearly 3,000 acres (1,200 hectares) of land, and while it is a traditional horse ranch most of the property is actually used for farming.

We arrived around 11:30am after a brief pit stop at a Shell station in the town of Pilar some thirty minutes south of the estate. In my online research I discovered that the estate was founded in the late 1800s by Francisco Kelly, an Argentinean of Irish descent who named the ranch after his wife, Susana Caffrey. Their original ranch home still exists and is now a well-preserved museum on the property. As we walked through the entrance we were immediately greeted by smiling gauchos (and some of their wives) offering plate loads of fried beef empanadas (a tradition in these parts) and juice or mate tea. After the long bus ride I was feeling pretty hungry and helped myself to *two* of the tasty empanadas. *Let the fat shaming continue…*

The area of the Santa Susana Estancia that we visited consisted of the original wooden home (the museum) with an adjacent chapel and guesthouse, a corral filled with horses and an enormous grilling station where gauchos barbecue an assortment of meats and sausages for the included lunch. The property also has a large, roofed outdoor dining hall that can accommodate several hundred people at one time, denoting the popularity of this place.

Most of us lined up for a free horseback ride around the ranch area. There were no saddles on the horses, just cloth-like reins to gently prod the animal one way or another. These were very docile, broken in creatures, and we rode them in a caravan for about twenty minutes or so. In a way, it felt like a pony ride for adults. Afterwards, Johnny and I visited the small chapel and then toured the original settler's home museum. The one-story dwelling has been around since the end of the 1800s, but the furniture inside was probably from the 1920s or 1930s. There was a sitting room where the family once gathered to listen to an old-fashioned wooden-boxed radio set or play records on an even older gramophone with an extra-large metal sound horn for better acoustics. The bathroom had a wooden chair toilet that sat low to the floor with a round hole cut in the middle so you can do your business. From here, Johnny and I visited the barbecue station; two affable older gauchos were busy grilling hundreds of pieces of chicken, beef and sausages for our lunch. The aroma made me forget the empanadas!

By 1:15pm we rejoined Debbie who was sitting on an outdoor bench in a shady area near the entrance. Her ankle was bothering her and she didn't want to walk around too much. The three of us proceeded to the dining hall for lunch. More than a 150 guests filled the hall, most of them tourists from Latin America, Europe and the United States. Each tour group sat at their own long table, on top of which were bottles of beer, wine and water. The gauchos and their wives began serving what seemed like an endless array of food to us. There were three types of salads – tomato and onions, beets, and potato – and plenty of fresh bread with garlic oil for dipping. This was followed by a long procession of barbecued meats. Gauchos went up to each table holding large silver trays and began serving us both meat and blood sausages. Next came plate after plate of grilled chicken and slices or strips of different cuts of red meat. It was all very tasty and by the time the last gaucho appeared at our table with yet another tray of meat, I was stuffed to the max.

When they finally stopped bringing food to the table we were treated to a musical show performed on a small stage in the center of the hall in front of an impromptu dance floor. The show began with a couple doing a traditional tango dance. The emcee, a middle-aged woman with an excellent singing voice, belted out a few traditional Argentinean songs accompanied by a guitarist. This was followed by several gaucho dance numbers. My favorite was the one where the cowboy dances while twirling a *boleadoras* (or *bolas*). This is a device made of three leather cords with an attached iron ball on each end that is thrown like a lasso and used to intertwine an animal's legs in order to immobilize it. The dance requires considerable skill to avoid injury. The gaucho began the number by dancing in place – almost like an Irish riverdance routine – with a lot of boot heel clicking, all the while he's twirling a boleadora in each hand in circular and crisscross fashion. As the music picked up, so did the dance tempo, and soon the gaucho is whipping the floor all around him in a frenetic, almost insane, pace, jumping in and out of the way of the boleadoras. I noticed that the emcee and the guitarist stepped back to the furthest reaches of the stage during this part, probably to avoid getting accidentally hit by the whips. It was very exhilarating to watch. The show finished with the emcee singing various popular songs from the countries represented by the Latin guests, all the while encouraging people onto the dance floor.

After the show, the entire dining hall emptied out towards a large corralled open area where four gauchos performed various stunts for us. First, they displayed their roundup skills by dividing themselves into four groups, each one leading a pack of horses around the corral in a gallop and then bringing them to a complete stop in a steady line right in front of us. That was pretty impressive considering the amount of horses involved. Occasionally, a jittery horse would stray from the group and several herding dogs would quickly bring the animal back into the fold. The gauchos then performed several stunts in which they lined up on one side of the corral and then raced at breakneck speed towards a small ring suspended by a string from an overhanging wooden beam. The idea was to catch the ring – the size of your index finger – as they raced underneath it with a small wand extended in front of them. This trick required great eye coordination and an incredibly steady hand as they sped underneath the ring and pierced its center with the stick in what looked like a nanosecond. Afterwards, they would saunter back to us on their horses and, in a chivalric manner, handed

the rings to admiring women in the crowd. My thoughts on all this? *I bet these guys get laid a lot*!

When the stunt show was over our group used the restrooms one final time before the long trip back to Buenos Aires. It had been a long day and, combined with the heavy lunch, most of us nodded off during the drive. I awoke as we entered the capital via the elevated Illia Highway that merges into 9th of July Avenue. As we approached the heart of the city along the port area on this highway, we came upon a convoluted mesh of densely packed shacks made of corrugated sheet metal, wood and scavenged bricks, some several stories high – built illegally and haphazardly – where approximately 40,000 of the city's poorest residents and immigrants live. According to Paola, Buenos Aires has several of these slums (called *villa miseria*, or 'town of misery'), but this one – referred to as Villa 31 – is by far the largest and most notorious, known for its drug gangs and violence. Because this is a makeshift neighborhood it is not connected to a power grid. The residents illegally tap electricity from nearby power lines (to the increasing chagrin of local officials). There is no sewage system or running water here, as well. During periods of heavy rain, the labyrinth of alleyways in Villa 31 turn into a series of smelly, muddy canals. Paola said that the city is preparing to formally recognize these 'shanty towns' and begin the process of paving roads and extending services into the slums. The idea is to stop them from proliferating any further. This one, for example, is not far from some of the city's nicer neighborhoods. And that has everyone a tad nervous.

We arrived at our hotel by 5:15pm. I went up to my room and took an hour-long nap. By 7:00pm, the entire group had assembled again in the lobby for an included dinner. We boarded the bus and drove to a unique restaurant called *Bajos Llave* ('under key') in the El Retiro district of the city. This restaurant is actually a converted apartment located within what looked like a brownstone-style residential building. In fact, if you didn't know there was a restaurant here, you sure as hell couldn't tell from the outside of the place.

The owners of the establishment greeted us at the entrance lobby and then led us to a second floor dwelling. I thought the interior of the apartment would resemble an eatery of some kind but this was an *actual* apartment. We entered into a spacious living room where hors d'oeuvres had been placed on the coffee and end tables next to the sofa and lounge chairs. I half-

expected to see the owner's children in their pajamas watching television. The adjoining hall appeared to be an extended dining room with three large tables. Just beyond the dining area were the bathroom and kitchen and another hallway with a staircase leading to an upstairs level (that I assumed was where the owners lived). We sat down for a three-course gourmet meal, but to be honest, I think most of us were still full from lunch. We started out with an appetizer of sliced potatoes on toasted walnut bread and a fresh salad with garlic dressing. The main course was a shredded chicken dish cooked in oil and vinegar and served with red peppers and onions. The chicken had soaked too long in the vinegar and had a sour taste that was a little over-powering. Dessert was a brownie topped with coffee ice cream and cookie crumbles. It was a leisurely dinner, our last in Buenos Aires, and our group had a nice time conversing and sharing stories.

I was back in my hotel room by 9:30pm. I wrote some of the day's events into my journal and emailed several photos of the gaucho ranch to family and friends back home before calling it a night.

Day 10

I awoke at 5:15am. I quickly made instant coffee and finished entering the previous day's events into my notebook before shaving and showering. I repacked my luggage and left it outside in the hallway for the porter to pick up. At 6:45am I met Debbie for breakfast. By 8:00am our group was on the tour bus heading to the domestic airport for our short flight to Misiones, a province located in the northeastern part of the country. When we reached the check-in counter, Debbie and I were separated from the rest of the group because she needed special assistance to board the plane. A LATAM airline employee appeared with a wheelchair and took us through a special security screening area and then straight out onto the tarmac where a loading vehicle picked us up and drove us to the plane. The truck's lift gently raised us up to an entrance on the right-hand side of the plane. We were the first to board. It was so cool. Our seats were in the first row, too. I couldn't help but think to

myself that Debbie's injured ankle definitely had a silver lining, to which I quickly (and guiltily) added: *Um*, *yes*, *poor girl*…

Our flight left on schedule at 10:45am and we touched down at the Cataratas del Iguazu International Airport roughly an hour and a half later. Our new local guide was Mathias, a young, friendly sort whose main job was to walk us through our visit to Iguazu Falls the following day. Our driver's name was Hector, a stout, uncomfortable-looking middle-aged man who seemed upset that our group's luggage was so heavy. He would grab each piece and push it into the carriage's storage area while exclaiming his disapproval in Spanish. But, in his defense, it was very hot and humid day and the physical exertion didn't make it any cooler. From this point forward in the tour we could put away our winter wear.

The airport was situated in a forested area about 10 miles (16 km) southeast of Puerto Iguazu, a small border town surrounded by two neighboring countries: Brazil and Paraguay. Puerto Iguazu serves as the hub for day trips to the nearby waterfalls and much of its infrastructure is centered on tourism. The drive there lasted less than thirty minutes. Because the airport is adjacent to the protected Iguazu National Park (where the famous Iguazu Falls are located), the only thing visible through the windows of the bus was thick, mostly undisturbed jungle. It was as if we had landed in a completely different country.

During the short drive, Mathias enlightened us on the area. The province of Misiones is the second smallest in the country, with a population hovering around 1.2 million. It is wedged into the northeastern corner of the country in a geographical area called the Mesopotamia Region. This region encompasses the provinces of Misiones, Entre Rios and Corrientes and has two dominant parallel rivers running through it, the Parana and the Uruguay Rivers. When Spanish settlers first came upon the two rivers, and the lush fertile spaces between them, they couldn't help but draw a comparison to the two mighty rivers (Tigris and Euphrates) of ancient Mesopotamia in what is now modern-day Iraq. And so the name stuck. The region is characterized by its humid, verdant landscape, a seemingly untamable wilderness.

The geography of the Misiones Province consists of a wide plateau that stretches into Brazil and contains the Sierra de Misiones, a mountain range that rises between its two principle rivers. The rock formation here is rich in iron and gives the hills and adjacent soil a reddish tint. In addition to the

Parana and Uruguay rivers, the province has another major waterway, the Iguazu River (a tributary of the Parana River), which is responsible for the formation of the Iguazu Falls that we would visit over the coming days. The climate is humid and subtropical, characterized by abundant rainfall. There is no dry season here. The average annual rainfall is approximately 85 inches. Due to the elevation of its mountain range, the weather has a mean average temperature of 70 F (21 C) – with periods of frost in the higher elevations – but the summers can reach sweltering humid highs in excess of 90 F (32 C), or what I like to call *Miami weather*!

Mathias briefly touched upon the history of the province, as well. There were several ethnic tribes living in the area by the time European explorers arrived, but by the end of the 18th century the main group was the Guarani people. During the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries began setting up small mission villages known as *reductions* (hence the name Misiones, which means 'missions' in Spanish). They taught the Guarani people western-style crafts and agriculture. Many of these settlements prospered for a while, growing in number to roughly 30 villages, trading along the rivers. But most of the Misiones area was a territory of Portugal at the time, and the Portuguese lobbied the Vatican to close the Jesuit missions arguing that they were undermining their authorities in Brazil. In 1773, Pope Clement XIV ordered the Jesuits to close shop and the missions were abandoned. Almost immediately, European colonists replaced these successful trading villages with a brutal plantation system that used the Guarani as slave labor.

In 1814, Argentina claimed the Misiones area as part of its territories, sending in troops to occupy it. In 1838, Paraguay sent in its own military under the pretense that the Guarani were the major ethnic group of Paraguay and the territory should belong to them. This back-and-forth led to the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870), which pitted Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina against Paraguay. The war proved to be the deadliest in Latin American history. Paraguay was utterly defeated and lost quite a bit of territory, becoming a landlocked nation. It is estimated that close to 70 percent of the population of Paraguay may have perished during this horrific war. In 1876, Paraguay signed a peace treaty ceding the Misiones region to Argentina. Following the peace treaty, Argentina's government – to encourage settlers to the area – passed an immigration law that encouraged Europeans to migrate into their sparsely populated frontier provinces. Surprisingly – for me, anyway – immigrants from Sweden, Poland and the Ukraine ended up settling in the Misiones area.

The economy of the Misiones Province, like most provinces in northern Argentina, tends to be underdeveloped yet fairly diversified. While the region's heavy rainfall creates soil erosion that discourages intensive crop farming, the province nonetheless raises much of its economic revenues from agricultural products like yerba mate, citrus fruits and to a lesser extent tobacco, rice, sugar cane, coffee, cocoa and coconut. Because of its abundantly thick jungles, the province also produces round wood lumber from the many varieties of trees in the area, and this is done (according to our guide) with minimal disruption to its local ecosystem. Rounding out the economy is some light manufacturing industries and the growing tourism business focusing on the Iguazu National Park and its spectacular waterfalls.

Mathias went over the itinerary for the following day's visit to the Iguazu Falls. He told us there were three trails involved in seeing the massive waterfalls and that we would be walking all of them (a combined distance of approximately 5 miles), so he recommended wearing comfortable shoes. He also suggested we use sunscreen, wear a brimmed hat and bring along a plastic rain poncho ("You *will* get wet" were his precise words).

We reached Puerto Iguazu by 1:20pm. The road we were traveling on – Route 12 – merged into Victoria Aguirre Avenue, the town's main street. With a population of just over 81,000, this is the smallest of the three border towns that meet at the confluence of the Parana and Iguazu Rivers. Known as the *Triple Frontier*, the two rivers dissect the borders of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. Across the Iguazu River from Puerto Iguazu is the Brazilian border town of *Foz do Iguacu*. Just opposite that, on the other side of the Parana River, is the Paraguayan border town of *Cuidad del Este*.

We drove along Victoria Aguirre Avenue heading northwest through the very heart of Puerto Iguazu. This was not a large town; most of the buildings, with the exception of the hotels, were of the single or two-story variety. We stopped for an hour and fifteen-minute lunch break on a touristy side street offering an array of restaurants and gift shops. Debbie and I picked a corner eatery with an outdoor section. I had a burger and fries and she ended up ordering a fruit salad. Afterwards, we drove ten more minutes to our new hotel, the Amerian Portal del Iguazu, located at the end of a quiet street called the Three Frontier Avenue (the *Tres Fronteras Avenida*).

After checking in, Johnny and I went up to the hotel observation deck overlooking the convergence of the Parana and Iguazu Rivers. I took photos of the countries of Brazil and Paraguay on the other side of the two waterways and then returned to my room to make a cup of instant coffee and write in my journal. At 4:15pm, I grabbed my camera and a bottle of water and hit the streets to explore the area. It was a hot day but fortunately the Three Frontier Avenue in front of the hotel was lined with tall, leafy trees that provided plenty of shade.

I turned left from the hotel and walked for roughly eight blocks – passing other large hotels, an Argentinean naval academy, a few restaurants and several mini-mart stores – before reaching the main square, San Martin Plaza. It was a small, nondescript park with several monuments. Across the street was another plaza filled with some interesting stone murals of the indigenous people, colorful depictions with solemn religious and historical references. Most were quite dramatic and thought provoking. I also visited the town's cathedral, the Catedral Virgen del Carmen, a small chapel-looking house of worship. It was located on the northeastern corner of the plaza. There wasn't a soul inside (pardon the pun). Next to the church was a middle school. And *that* was the extent of my walk. Puerto Iguazu is a sleepy one-*caballo* town. I concluded that whatever exciting places existed here were located somewhere else. I stopped at a local grocery store and picked up some snacks before returning to my hotel room.

At 7:00pm I met Debbie in the hotel restaurant for an included dinner. The dining room was packed with different tour groups. Our gang sat around two tables in one section of the restaurant. My three-course meal consisted of a salad made with palm hearts, beets, carrots, lettuce and corn, a tasty, but rather thin, local fish (*pacu*) and a fruit mousse for dessert. Unlimited soda, bottled water and wine accompanied the meal. Since there was nothing else to do that evening, most of our members hung around late, chatting up a storm. I was back in my room by 9:00pm. I re-sorted my luggage and set aside the clothes I would be wearing for tomorrow's outing to see the Iguazu Falls. I then watched a little of the international news broadcast on TV before nodding off.

Day Eleven

I was up at 4:30am and quickly showered and dressed. I re-sorted and re-packed my growing pile of dirty laundry into two packing cubes and then sat down to edit my photos, deleting the bad ones from my camera and cell phone. At 6:00am I met Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. She was not in a good mood. During the night she had to change rooms three times because the A/C units were not working properly.

At 7:15am the entire group assembled in the lobby for our daylong visit to the Iguazu Falls. Our new (and more affable) bus driver was named Angel. On the 30-minute drive to the Iguazu National Park, local guide Mathias filled us in on some interesting aspects of the park, like the coatis and the capuchin monkeys that inhabit the area. The coati is a furry mammal capable of growing to the size of a large house cat. They have long, often striped tails and pointy, upturned noses and small ears. Their paws are similar to a raccoon's and they can walk on the soles of their hind feet like humans do. When we saw them along the trail they looked cute enough until you realize they have large, sharp teeth that can cause serious bite wounds. Although they are mostly harmless if left alone, some visitors to the park have been bitten for trying to interact with them. Mathias warned us not to do that no matter how docile they appeared.

As for the capuchin monkeys…well, they presented a different problem altogether. Signs along the nature trails will admonish visitors not to feed the monkeys, but even if you don't, these creatures will seek out any food source you may be carrying or eating at the time. Capuchin monkeys can smell food, even if it's stored in a plastic bag or backpack, and they will try to grab it from you, sometimes violently. Granted, most people don't hike nature trails while nibbling on Doritos, but even in the rest areas – where park vendors sell food – these monkeys can be quite aggressive, as we discovered later in the day. Mathias told us not to engage the monkeys in any way lest they think we're offering them something to eat.

Mathias also talked briefly about the local economy. Puerto Iguazu is the smallest of the three border towns surrounding the famous Iguazu Falls, with roughly 81,000 inhabitants. The largest, in terms of population, is the

Paraguayan town of Cuidad del Este (with just over 300,000), followed by the Brazilian town of Foz do Iguacu (with 260,000). The reason for this size disparity was the construction of the Itaipu Dam during the early 1980s, the second largest hydroelectric dam in the world. Located north of the Iguazu Falls along the Parana River separating Paraguay and Brazil, the dam's massive generators provide nearly all of Paraguay's electricity and roughly 20 percent of Brazil's. In order to construct the Itaipu Dam (voted one of the Seven Modern Wonders of the World), the infrastructure of the Brazilian and Paraguayan border towns had to be improved to attract workers (and their families) to the area, which is why today both are more heavily populated than Puerto Iguazu. Another thing that hindered Puerto Iguazu's growth was the poor exchange rate of the Argentinean peso to the US dollar back in the 1990's, making it much cheaper for tourists to stay in Brazil to see the Iguazu Falls. But in the past twenty years, according to Mathias, a concerted effort has been underway to build up the tourism trade in Puerto Iguazu, doubling the town's population and increasing its revenues.

We pulled up to the entrance of the National Iguazu Park around 8:00am. We had to arrive early because the park can have as many as 7,000 visitors on any given day (over 1.6 million visit annually) and the wait times for the jungle train ride to the top can be long. Mathias told us it was crucial to be on the first or second train of the day in order to take advantage of the park and see the various falls before it gets too crowded. The earlier we reach the popular Devil's Throat Trail at the very top, he said, the easier it would be to navigate the rest of the park. A wheelchair was provided for Debbie, and a local man, for a fee of $50 US, wheeled her around for the day.

Our group boarded the second train at 9:00am. There are only three train stations connecting the tracks. At ground level is the *Estacion Central* (Central Station). A third of the way up along a winding jungle hillside is the second station, *Estacion Cataratas* (Waterfalls Station), and at the very top is the *Estacion Garganta* (the Throat Station). The best way to see the National Iguazu Park is to start at the top and work your way back down, taking the three main trails that run along the waterfalls' edges. This affords the visitor three different viewpoints of the amazing waterfalls. We would spend the rest of the day doing precisely that. It would be an exhausting endeavor, but the spectacular chain of waterfalls and the area's natural environment made it extremely worthwhile.

We got off the train at the *Estacion Garganta* and proceeded to take the Devil's Throat Trail, which is essentially a concrete and metal walkway built over the upper Iguazu River. The waters from this meandering river drop over tall canyon walls into the lower Iguazu River, creating the largest waterfall system on the planet. The distance between the beginning of the metal walkway and the Devil's Throat Canyon, according to our guide Mathias, was approximately 3,600 feet (1,100 meters). As we marched across this narrow bridge we could see almost to the bottom of the Iguazu River, the water was clear and not too deep at this point. The rock formations along the riverbed and banks were imbued with the characteristic reddish tinge of the region's iron-rich soil. Surrounding the waterway is nothing but rain forest.

It was slow going due to the fact that several hundred people were trekking across the walkway at the same time. After about twenty minutes or so, we reached the edges of the Devil's Throat Canyon, a deep and narrow chasm with more than a dozen separate falls that command nearly half of the river's water flow. The powerful force of the water going over the canyon's edges makes it almost impossible from the observation deck to distinguish the different waterfalls. It seemed like one gigantic, frenetic rush of water crashing down onto the lower Iguazu River below, a spectacular 350-foot drop. The sound of the water was intense, the mist rising for several hundred feet, drenching everyone near its edges. Simply put, the whole thing was just… *wow*.

There are anywhere from 150 to 275 continuous waterfalls here – depending on the time of year and amount of water flow – stretching out over a span of 1.7 miles (2700m) along the lower Iguazu River. The water cascades down rocky walls that are separated by small islands along the river's edge. The average height of these waterfalls is over 200 feet, with the Devil's Throat being the highest. During the rainy season, as much as 450,000 cubic feet of water go over these falls *every* second. *Whoa*. One of the fascinating bird species that live here are the brownish Great Dusky Swifts, which, incredibly, nest and perch themselves on the face of the sheer vertical cliffs behind the waterfalls. We saw several of them hovering above the Devil's Throat Canyon and then diving down to the swirling river below.

The name 'iguazu' means *big water* in the indigenous language. Like all great natural wonders it has a legend behind it: a local deity was set to marry a beautiful woman who ended up running away with her lover. Angry, this

god split the river in two, condemning the young lovers to an eternal fall. Yeah, I guess that's not *too* off the mark; I mean, I've had relationships end where I felt like I was tumbling over a waterfall…

If seen from above, the natural alignment of the waterfalls appears like an upside-down letter J, the curve of the 'j' is where the Devil's Throat Canyon is located. In order to see the whole thing you need to view it from different angles, hence all the trails. The following day we visited the Iguazu Falls from the Brazilian side, which lies just opposite the river, and that view was also amazing…and perhaps more panoramic, even though we were not as close to the waterfalls as we were from the Argentinean side. Sometimes you need to step back to take it all in. But one thing is certain, no matter what angle you see it from, the Iguazu Falls will not disappoint.

By 10:20pm our group rendezvoused at the train station as we'd been instructed. We used the restrooms and boarded the train again and proceeded back down the hillside to the Waterfalls Station. We disembarked here and headed over to the *Paseo Superior*, the Upper Circuit Trail. This was another concrete and metal pedestrian platform trail that wound its way through a section of the park's natural habitat, taking us behind numerous waterfalls that lie to the left of the Devil's Throat Canyon. Along the trail are signs explaining the fauna and flora of the area. The jungle here contains about 2,000 species of plant life, and indigenous animals such as the jaguar, jaguarondi, ocelot and the endangered giant otter and giant anteater. This was also the first time I saw signs admonishing visitors not to interact with the coatis and capuchin monkeys. These warning signs had graphic photographs of hand injuries sustained by previous visitors who failed to heed their advice. To be honest, it made me feel a tad apprehensive, especially when we first encountered the creatures, which were neither timid nor frightened by our presence and moved freely and casually around and between us. But I have to admit they were *definitely* adorable.

We spent roughly an hour and a half walking the Upper Circuit Trail. I don't recall how many separate waterfalls we encountered along its path, but they were numerous. Each had its own unique formation, with names like the Two Sisters, the Small Waterfall, Adam and Eve, the Bossetti Waterfall and a cluster of falls known as the Bernabe Mendez Falls. Adjacent to the Devil's Throat Canyon, at the very end of the Upper Circuit Trail, we came to another wide, very powerful collection of cataracts, which included the Escondido, San Martin and Mbigua Waterfalls. Below us – inside the large

curve of the J-shaped Iguazu Falls formation – was San Martin Island, probably the largest of the small islands that ring the bottom of the Iguazu Falls. For those who would like to get up-close-and-personal with the cataracts, you can take a speedboat ride that travels up through the lower Iguazu River rapids, around sections of San Martin Island, to get a good feel of the power of all that water cascading down from the rocky ledges. We could see the boats below us as they struggled to angle themselves and move against the powerful currents. I was a bit envious of the passengers, because it must have been exhilarating, indeed, to look up at the Devil's Throat Canyon from the vantage point of these crafts…(and possibly a little scary, too).

We returned to the center of the park and took an hour and fifteen-minute lunch break at the El Fortin Restaurant, one of several eat-and-rest spots within the complex. This facility offered a full buffet, a sit-down restaurant and a fast food section. I sat with Debbie and Johnny at an outdoor table, we each ordered two empanadas from the fast food area to avoid the longer lines elsewhere. The main restaurant was completely screened in, and this should have been a tip-off. I initially thought the screens were to ward off mosquitoes and other insects. Actually, their main purpose was to keep out the capuchin monkeys…something we discovered soon enough.

It was like a scene reminiscent of the Planet of the Apes. A small army of capuchin monkeys descended on us from the nearby trees. We barely got a conversation going when someone at an adjacent table would suddenly jump up in complete shock as a monkey leapt onto their table and snatched…*whatever*, fries, empanadas, bottled soda etc, etc. Afterwards, as if to rub it in, these tiny primates would scurry back to their trees, eating and drinking whatever they just finished stealing, looking down at us with complete impunity, sizing up their next victim. We ate quickly, our hands over our empanadas the whole time. And to make matters worse, the coatis were at our feet, scavenging for any dropped food. Whenever their long striped tails brushed up against the leg of a shorts-wearing tourist, a scream ensued. To be honest, I couldn't wait to get back to the trails.

Around 2:45pm our group re-assembled and we set out on the third and final trail, the Lower Circuit Trail, to finish our waterfalls viewing. Poor Debbie had to stay behind since her wheelchair couldn't maneuver the series of steps on this particular pathway. And as bummed as Debbie may have felt about missing this portion of the park, I did notice a smile on the middle-

aged man who'd been pushing her around all day. Apparently, *he* welcomed the respite.

We followed this trail along the now familiar concrete-and-metal hiking platforms surrounded by the park's jungle. The trail took us closer to the lower Iguazu River, offering a more panoramic view of the waterfall system. There are numerous observation decks along this bridge showing the impressive length of the falls. The final viewing point took us to the mid-way level of the series of wide and powerful waterfalls at the end of the Upper Circuit Trail. We could see San Martin Island right below us. A speedboat, packed with passengers donning life vests, was cutting through the rapids, circling around the bottom of the larger waterfalls. I took so many photographs I lost count. I was humbled and awed by the incredible natural wonder of this place.

Our group made it back to the Fortin Restaurant rest area by 3:30pm. Johnny and I told Debbie about the sites we'd just seen while she updated us on the capuchin monkeys' shenanigans. From there we wearily made our way down to the first level and to a parking area where we waited about 20 minutes for the tour bus to appear. We had logged about five miles on this outing; on the drive back to the hotel it was pretty much nappy time for everybody. When we reached our hotel, Johnny and I walked over to the adjacent Three Frontier Monument Park to take photos. In addition to some interesting monuments, this park serves as an observation point for viewing the territories of Brazil and Paraguay on the opposite side of the intersecting Parana and Iguazu Rivers.

I was back in my hotel room shortly before 5:00pm. I made several cups of instant coffee and sat down to write the day's events in my journal and peruse the many photographs I'd taken. I was still pretty tired from all the walking and, despite the coffee, took an hour-long nap. Later in the evening, Debbie and I opted to have dinner in the bar area of our hotel. I don't recall what we ate, but I was back in my room by 9:00pm. We had an early morning departure the next day, so I repacked my luggage, watched some of the international news broadcast on TV and then hit the sack. That night I dreamt of waterfalls…um, *I got up to pee constantly*.

Day Twelve

I was awake by 4:00am. Over a cup of instant coffee I reread my journal notes, adding some details along the way. I then shaved, showered and dressed. At 6:00am I placed my luggage in the corridor for the porter to pick up and proceeded to meet Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. By 7:15am we were on the bus heading for the Brazilian border. Our guide Mathias collected our passports and had them stamped at the Immigration and Customs office in Puerto Iguazu. We never got off the bus. A very short distance later we reached the Iguazu River, crossing the Tancredo Neves Bridge into the town of Foz de Iguacu, officially entering Brazil. Once again, we stayed on the bus while Mathias had our passports stamped at the Brazilian Customs and Immigration checkpoint.

Brazil and Argentina share the territory that makes up the protected Iguazu National Park system. Eighty percent of the waterfalls, though, lie on the Argentinean side. But the view from the Brazilian side is sometimes more spectacular because you get a panoramic view of the entire waterfall system from across the lower Iguazu River. Looking up at these amazing waterfalls from the Brazilian side is quite an experience, especially around the Devil's Throat Canyon area. The park did not open until 9:00am, so we stopped at a local crafts and souvenir shop to kill some time. I bought a black polo shirt (embossed with the Iguacu National Park logo), which I wore during our farewell dinner on the last night of the tour.

We arrived at the *Parque Nacional do Iguacu* (National Park of Iguazu) just minutes before it opened and went straight to the *Caminho das Cataratas* (Path of the Falls Trail). This trail extends along the Iguazu River for about 2 miles. It originates in front of the fabulous 5-star Hotel Das Cataratas, the only hotel on the Brazilian side of the park. It was easy to navigate; the pathway was cemented and paved, with ramps, railings and plenty of observation decks in which to stop, gawk and photograph the numerous waterfalls on the other side of the river.

We slowly made our way south on the trail, the lower Iguazu River to our right, jungle hillside to our left. Mathias told us the tree species on the Brazilian side of the park tended to grow taller, making for more shade and allowing for distinct species of flora to flourish beneath the dense jungle

canopy. From across the river, on the Argentinean side, we could see the various waterfalls leading towards the Devil's Throat Canyon. These were the same falls we'd witnessed the previous day, only now we could really appreciate the length of this natural water chain. In certain areas the waterfalls dropped twice, from the upper canyons to the lower ones, before cascading down another cliff to the river below.

As we approached the bend of the Devil's Throat Canyon, the river became a frenzied swirl of rapids as hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of water crashed down upon it every single second from above. The trail, at one point, became a narrow pedestrian bridge that meandered over segments of this fast-moving river. The path ended in front of the Devil's Throat Canyon, a large observation area offering what I thought was the best view of the Iguazu Waterfalls. From this vantage point I could see downstream quite a ways and the impressive series of falls covering the canyon edges on the Argentinean side. But directly in front of us, and to the left, was the curve of the Devil's Throat Canyon with its massive waterfalls, a spectacular three-sided array of vertical cliffs hundreds of feet tall, releasing gigantic walls of water. My heart raced from the sight and sound of it, I stood humbled and awed by the power of Mother Nature. And I had to thank Debbie for this moment. During the planning stages of this trip I originally wanted to take another tour that focused more on the Patagonia region; she was the one who insisted on seeing Iguazu Falls. I'm glad I acquiesced. (Although, don't get me wrong, I would gladly go back to see more of Patagonia).

When we finished our sightseeing and picture taking, our group ascended to the main road via elevators that connected visitors to a gift shop/restaurant just above the falls. After using the restrooms, we boarded our awaiting tour bus on Macuco Safari Road and headed straight to the Foz do Iguacu International Airport a relatively short distance away. Our next and final destination on the tour was Rio de Janeiro. At the airport, Debbie was provided a wheelchair. Once again, we were assigned front row seats and allowed to board the plane first. The flight lasted just under two hours. We flew east approximately 739 miles (1189 kilometers) to Rio de Janeiro, touching down around 3:30pm.

The RIOgaleao-Antonio Carlos Jobim International Airport in Rio de Janeiro is the fourth busiest airport in the country. It is also the largest in terms of land space. The airport is situated on Govenador Island, the biggest island within Guanabara Bay just east of the city; it shares some of its

facilities with the Brazilian Air Force. After our luggage was collected, we exited the terminal building and boarded a large tour bus for the ride to our hotel in the Copacabana district.

Our new local guide was Arnaldo, a super friendly and fiercely proud *Carioca* (the local term for people from Rio de Janeiro). He was very knowledgeable about the city and delighted in answering our questions, always offering advice on what to do in our spare time. The bus driver, Batista, was also very friendly and accommodating, a trait that seemed almost synonymous with the people here: *Cariocas*, for the most part, are a laid back, fun-loving bunch.

After leaving the airport, we headed south on the *Linha Vermelha* (Red Line) Expressway, a major highway connecting the northern commuter town of Sao Joao de Meriti to Rio de Janeiro. One section of this expressway took us over the waters of Guanabara Bay before hugging the eastern coastline of the city, passing several famous *favelas*. A *favela* is the name given to a slum or shantytown in Brazil. Over the course of a century, these favelas – (which are prominent in other Brazilian cities, as well) – sprang up in an impromptu fashion, rising into the hillsides and throughout the city, coming to house more than 22 percent of the total urban population of Rio de Janeiro. There are currently over 700 favelas in the city, and nearly 95 percent of the inhabitants who live in them are poor. When someone on the bus asked about them, Arnaldo acknowledged that the favelas have a bad reputation, not only in Brazil but also throughout the world. But he defended them, too, saying that some of them are quite nice. At first glance, though, at least from the expressway, these brightly colored and very crowded shantytowns – (from a distance, the homes appeared stacked on top of each other) – did not look very inviting. In fact, the Linha Vermelha Expressway is lined with concrete barriers that, in my opinion, try to block the view of these communities when you first enter the city.

Most of the dire warnings issued to travelers about Rio de Janeiro stem from the criminal activity originating in these favelas. But Arnaldo, a true Carioca, dismissed this stereotypical view, and said things have changed dramatically in the past fifteen years or so. He gave us a brief history of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro on the drive into the city:

The first favela in Rio de Janeiro began to form in the late 1800s when soldiers arrived in the city after the conclusion of the War of Canudos (1895-

98), the deadliest civil war in Brazilian history. The soldiers had been promised payment for their services during the war by the government, and filed into Rio de Janeiro to collect. But they were never paid. Many of these soldiers – without funds or resources – ended up settling into makeshift shanties in a hilly city neighborhood called *Morro de Favela. Morro* translates into 'hilltop', and *favela* is the name of a tree species in the Bahia region where the War of the Canudos was fought. The formation of the *Morro de Favela* eventually helped propagate a new urban culture within Brazilian society.

During the early part of the 1900s, as these favelas proliferated, academicians from the social sciences studied the people living in them, and terrible stereotypes emerged: the residents were labeled poor, uneducated, living in unsanitary conditions, in a highly sexualized environment that caused unwanted pregnancies. Crime and addiction was rampant. This 'view' of the favela continues even till this day, highlighting the discrepancies between the rich and poor in Brazil. Resentment against the favelas in Brazilian society was two-fold. Regular citizens decried the increased crime rates stemming from these shantytowns, while the government or the upper classes saw them as an impediment to urban development. The situation became worse during the 1940s when a nationwide recession forced mass migrations to Rio de Janeiro by poor people looking for work. And like the soldiers before them, these unemployed laborers settled into shantytowns, spreading favelas throughout the city. In the 1960s, attempts to eradicate the favelas by moving hundreds of thousands of residents into housing developments failed miserably, having the unintended consequence of creating even *more* favelas.

By the 1980s, when the drug cartels of South America began branching out, the absence of good infrastructure and the lack of adequate government services made the favelas ripe for the narcotics trade. Drug gangs and powerful drug lords emerged, making some of these favelas very dangerous, with violence routinely spilling over into the general population. In 2008, fed up with the soaring crime rates in the city – and, I imagine, with an eye on their bids to hold both the World Cup matches and Summer Olympics in Brazil – the government formed special police units called UPP (Police Pacification Units) that were set up in the more criminally active favelas. Initially, this led to violent confrontations between police and drug gangs, which, in some cases, amounted to a mini-civil war being waged within the more notorious neighborhoods. For a period, violent crime actually

increased, and summary executions of gang members and criminals by the police have been well documented.

In the end, according to Arnaldo, the more dangerous favelas were stabilized, and today they are *much* safer. He mentioned that some favelas have even morphed into middle-class residential neighborhoods and that tourists can now visit some of them without fear…*Well, let me stop here and offer my humble 'grain of salt'*. I doubt tourists are lining up to visit the favelas, since the average warning for international visitors to Rio de Janeiro strongly admonishes them to avoid these neighborhoods, especially at night. But despite its reputation for crime, Rio de Janeiro *is* safer today than in the past. In fact, we would spend the next three days here and travel throughout much of the city – and I walked around quite a bit by myself in some areas – without incident. There were many well-armed police personnel present, and the touristy areas along the beachfront were, in my opinion, as safe as anything back home in Miami. I loved my stay here, and would gladly go back.

Arnaldo told us the population of Rio de Janeiro was roughly 7 million people, with another 4 million if you include the towns and villages ringing the city's outskirts. He spoke briefly about the unique geographical makeup of the city. Rio de Janeiro was founded on a strip of shoreline located in Guanabara Bay along Brazil's Atlantic coast. The dramatic Sugar Loaf Mountain (*Pao de Acucar*) marks the entrance into this bay. Rio de Janeiro is divided into various zones. A large portion of the city is in the North (*Norte*) Zone, which extends to the northwest along plains and hillsides. This is where you'll find most of the favelas. The Center (*Centro*) Zone is the business district of the city, located in the central plains off the western shoreline of Guanabara Bay. The South (*Sul*) Zone extends all the way to Rio de Janeiro's legendary beaches along the Atlantic coastline. The South Zone is cut off from the rest of the city by coastal mountains that are part of the *Serra do Mar* (Sea Ridge) mountain chain.

The Western (*Oeste*) Zone has approximately fifty percent of the city's land space. This section of Rio de Janeiro is also separated in part by mountains from the rest of the city and contains some interesting remnants from the country's colonial past. Because of its size, the Western Zone is an area of constant expansion and economic development, with many of the newer industries situated within its borders, including a large steel mill operated by Ternium Brasil, a subsidiary of one of the world's largest steel

conglomerates. The Western Zone is also considered the city's green zone, containing the Pedra Branca State Park, one of the biggest urban nature parks on the planet. This preserve includes a section of the Atlantic Forests, a large swath of wilderness with varying ecoregions that extends along Brazil's Atlantic coastline. The highest peak in the city, the Pico da Pedra Branca, is located within this park. In addition, the Western Zone houses some of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods.

On the way to our hotel we crossed many parts of Rio de Janeiro. To our right, as we drove through the North Zone we passed *Mare*, a large sprawling hillside neighborhood made up of different favelas and housing communities. A bit further south we crossed the old working-class neighborhood of *Caju,* and then the historical district of *Sao Cristovao*, home to a stately palace that once served as the imperial residence of the Portuguese royal family after they fled Napoleon's invading army in 1808. The Portuguese monarchy was forced to set up shop temporarily in the city, returning to Portugal in 1821, making Rio de Janeiro – if only for a brief period – the only European capital *outside* of Europe. Today, the former royal palace has been transformed into the National Museum of Brazil. As we continued south we also passed the *Centro* (the Central Zone) on our left and its adjacent neighborhoods near the bay front area, forming the heart of the city's business district.

We drove through the Central Zone community of *Rio Comprido* and continued into *Cosme Velho*, one of the most elegant residential neighborhoods in the city, situated on the slopes of the Corcovado Mountain. On top of this mountain stands the Christ the Redeemer statue, perhaps the most iconic image in all of Brazil. We would visit the statue the following morning, but for now we had to strain our necks trying to catch a glimpse of it from the bus windows.

In *Cosme Velho* we entered the Andre Reboucas Tunnel, built underneath the Corcovado Mountain, and exited the tunnel in another affluent neighborhood in the South Zone called *Lagoa*, named after the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon, a sizeable body of water within the city, surrounded by beautiful parks with jogging and cycling trails. Our driver went around the lagoon and made his way through the traffic-filled streets near the Ipanema Beach area before connecting to Avenida Atlantica (Atlantic Avenue) in the Copacabana beach district. Atlantic Avenue runs the length of the crescent-shaped Copacabana Beach, and even at this late afternoon hour the long,

white sandy beaches and the unique mosaic-tiled promenades lining the avenue were filled with people. We arrived at our hotel, the Windsor Excelsior, around 4:45pm. Adjacent to our hotel on Atlantic Avenue was the legendary 5-star Copacabana Palace Hotel.

As Paola attended to our check-in, the group took the incredibly slow elevators up to the hotel's rooftop bar/restaurant for a welcome drink. Trays of *caipirinha*, Brazil's national cocktail, were waiting for us. This refreshing drink is made by mixing three ingredients: lime, sugar and *cachaca* (a hard liquor distilled from sugarcane). I do not drink alcohol, so I settled for a cherry soda, instead. But everyone seemed to enjoy the *caipirinha*, especially since they were quite strong. I took some excellent photographs of Copacabana Beach from the rooftop bar area. By 5:30pm I was in my room, a little upset that the porters still hadn't arrived with my luggage. Although the Windsor Excelsior was a very nice hotel, I wasn't impressed with the staff service.

At 6:00pm a group of us met Paola in the lobby. She took us on a short walk around the vicinity, taking us to a popular local supermarket and suggesting restaurants in the area we might want to consider for dinner that evening. A hobbled Debbie stayed put in her room. We walked north along R. Fernando Mendes Street from Atlantic Avenue, turning left on Avenida Nossa Senhora de Copacabana, a very busy boulevard lined with shops and eateries. We strolled for several blocks, the whole while Paola kept pointing at one restaurant or another, telling us about their culinary specialties. Once we reached the supermarket, the group split up. Johnny and I went inside the store and stocked up on all sorts of goodies and snacks. I may have picked something up for Debbie, as well, but I'm not certain. Trying to get out of the supermarket proved to be a nightmare. The lines were long and the employees moved at the same speed as my hotel staff. It took us over 30 minutes before we reached the cashier. And then it dawned on me…perhaps these Cariocas are *too* laid back!

It was nearly 8:00pm by the time we returned to the hotel. After putting away my goodies I went outside again and crossed Atlantic Avenue to witness and photograph the lively crowds and revelry along the beachfront promenade. Afterwards, I walked next door to check out the super swanky 5-star Copacabana Palace Hotel. Before retiring for the evening, I stopped by to see how Debbie was doing. Back in my room I was thoroughly exhausted. Since waking that morning more than seventeen hours had

passed. I put the TV on and tried to watch a soccer match, nibbling on one of the bags of chips I bought at the supermarket. I don't think I lasted more than fifteen minutes before I fell into a deep sleep.

Day Thirteen

As tired as I had been the previous evening I was only able to sleep six and a half hours. I was wide-awake by 3:30am. After a quick shower I made coffee and wrote in my journal and then killed some time watching a nature show on TV. At 6:00am I joined Debbie and Johnny in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. We had nearly five hours of sightseeing scheduled for that morning. Our first stop was to visit the famous Christ the Redeemer statue. But it was also Saturday, October 12th, a holiday weekend. Brazilians were celebrating Feast Day of our Lady of the Apparition, the country's patron saint. Approximately two-thirds of Brazil's population is Catholic, so this was a big deal. In addition, it was the 88th anniversary of the Christ the Redeemer statue and large crowds were expected at the site. To avoid the congestion, according to local guide Arnaldo, it was necessary to begin our city tour earlier than usual.

We left the hotel at 7:15am. Even at that early hour traffic was already starting to get hectic. It took more than thirty minutes to reach the base entrance to the Christ the Redeemer statue, which is perched atop Corcovado ('Hunchback') Mountain inside the Tijuca National Forest Park located in the center of the city. On the drive over, Arnaldo enlightened us on the statue's history.

I can't think of a more iconic symbol for Rio de Janeiro than the open-armed statue of Jesus overlooking the city. In 2007, it was voted one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, and has attracted millions of visitors since its inauguration in 1931. The idea of building a Christian monument on the 2,329-ft high granite peak of Corcovado Mountain had been floating around since before the country became a republic in 1889. Plans were nixed, though, once a new constitution was adopted separating church and

state. But by the early 1920s, a movement spearheaded by the Catholic faithful raised donations to build a statue on the summit of Corcovado. The main reason was the perceived rise of atheism in Rio de Janeiro. *Hmmmm*. If the statue could talk, I would be curious to hear its opinion on all the half-naked revelry going on annually during Mardi Gras, which has become just as synonymous with Rio de Janeiro as Christ the Redeemer.

The statue is really something to behold, visible from many areas of the city. It measures 125 feet tall from the base of the pedestal. The open-arm length is 92 feet wide. The statue was designed in a simple Art Deco style by French sculptor Paul Landowski. He commissioned Gheorghe Leonida, a Romanian sculptor living in Paris, to create the statue's head. Brazilian engineer Heitor da Silva Costa, in collaboration with the famous French engineer Albert Caquot, oversaw construction of Christ the Redeemer between 1922 and 1931. Reinforced concrete made from soapstone, a type of metamorphic rock, was used for the statue's outer layer. The whole thing weighs about 635 metric tons. It was inaugurated, with much fanfare, on October 12, 1931.

In 2003, a series of elevators, escalators and walkways were built near the train terminus at the top of the mountain to help facilitate access to the platform that holds the base of the statue. The panoramic views of Rio de Janeiro from this platform alone are worth the trip up there, believe me. On the statue's 75th anniversary (in 2006) a small chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Apparition was added to the base of the monument, allowing Catholics to have baptisms and weddings up there. On several occasions lightening has damaged parts of the statue, requiring repair work. And in recent years the statue has undergone a massive restoration project, which entailed cleaning and weather-proofing the entire thing and replacing worn soapstone and mortar on the exterior, as well as reinforcing the ironwork in the interior structure.

To access the summit, visitors can do one of three things. For the more athletically inclined, they can hike to the top along a trail that begins in *Parque Lage,* a park situated near the lagoon at the foot of Corcovado Mountain along its south side. There is also a narrow winding road, which can be used to drive to the top. But for the overwhelming number of visitors to Christ the Redeemer, the preferred way to reach the summit is to take the 2.4-mile Corcovado Rack Railway. Surprisingly, this railway – which once ran on steam engines – was originally built back in 1884 under the last royal

ruler of Brazil, Emperor Dom Pedro II. The railway system was later electrified in 1910, and has since been further modernized in recent years with newer multi-unit carriages. The track is a narrow gauge railway using a Riggenbach rack system, which is essentially a fixed ladder rack utilizing steel plates connected to wheels of metal cogs that interlock and propel the train forward or backward. Rack railway systems are usually used in mountainous areas where there is an incline deviation of more than 10 percent. The incline for Corcovado Mountain is 30 percent. During normal operations, the train departs every twenty minutes or so and can transport up to 540 people per hour.

Although we arrived just as they opened the site, the crowds were already sizeable and we had to wait for the second train. It took approximately twenty minutes to reach the train terminus at the top of the mountain; from there, most of us took the escalators situated in back of the enormous statue to the summit platform. But visitors can also use the elevators (a very long wait) or take the stairs (all 223 of them) to the top. The pedestal of the statue rests on a large viewing platform that offers a 360-degree view of the city.

I must admit, religious or not, it is an impressive moment when you stand at the base of the statue and stare up at this gigantic Jesus with his arms spread wide. Surrounding us were incredible vistas. To the south was a panoramic view of the famed white beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema along the Atlantic coastline. At the foot of the Corcovado Mountain we could see the lagoon, *Lagao Rodrigo de Frietas*, which connects to the Atlantic Ocean via a canal. To the north, behind the statue, were many of the city's larger favelas rising colorfully up through the hillsides. To the east was the downtown business district, and just beyond it the Guanabara Bay. And off to the west were the mountains and green spaces that characterize so much of the Western Zone.

In addition to the statue and the wonderful observation points, large festive crowds had gathered at the foot of Christ the Redeemer. There was a band playing music, and some kind of religious service going on near the chapel. In one section around the pedestal a series of tables were set up, displaying dozens of cakes donated by the public to mark the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of the Apparition *and* the statue's 88th anniversary. It was all pretty exciting to witness. We must have spent over an hour up there before rendezvousing near the train terminus for the ride back down. *What else can I say*? Going to Rio de Janeiro and *not* visiting Christ the Redeemer

would be tantamount to visiting New York City for the first time and not seeing the Statue of Liberty. In other words, this is a 'must see' endeavor, folks.

We continued our tour of the city that morning by driving through the quaint, upper-middle class neighborhood of *Laranjeiras*, located in the South Zone just east of Corcovado Mountain. This district is one of the oldest in the city, established in the late 1700s. Although it is primarily a residential neighborhood, there are several important government and cultural sites situated within its borders. We saw the *Palacio Guanabara*, the 19th century palace designed in a combination of neoclassical and eclectic styles that was once the residence of Princess Isabel. Today, Palacio Guanabara serves as the seat of government for the State of Rio de Janeiro. Adjacent to it on Pinheiro Machado Street is one of the oldest soccer stadiums in Brazil, the 1905 Manoel Schwartz Stadium. It was built – and still owned – by the Fluminense Football Club of Laranjeiras.

Just further north along Pinheiro Machado Street we drove by the *Palacio Laranjeiras*, another neoclassical palace that serves as the residence for the governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro (his office is just down the street at the Palacio Guanabara). This elegant home was built by one of Brazil's wealthiest families in the early 1900s, and is situated within a large, beautifully landscaped garden area that is now known as the Eduardo Guinle Public Park. The palace was so spectacular it was purchased by the federal government during the 1940s for the purpose of hosting foreign dignitaries. During that period, Rio de Janeiro was still the capital of Brazil. (In 1960, the capital was switched to Brasilia in the center-western region of the country).

We left Laranjeiras and took the Andre Reboucas Tunnel in the Cosme Velho district – going underneath Corcovado Mountain – and ended up on Borges de Medeiros Avenue in the upscale neighborhood of *Lagoa*. This avenue hugs the northwestern rim of Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon. The lagoon is surrounded by parks and cycling trails, and has been used for rowing and canoeing competitions like the 2007 Pan Am Games and the 2016 Olympics. We traveled westward on Borges de Medeiros Avenue and continued as it curved south and turned into Mario Ribeiro Street. On our right, just west of the lagoon, we passed the elegant Jockey Club Brasileiro (also referred to as the *Hipodrom*o *da Gavea*) – an 80,000-capacity crowd horseracing track built in the 1920s in the fashionable *Gavea* district.

We drove westward on Mario Ribeiro Street as it morphed into Padre Leonel Franca Avenue, traversing Gavea, which is popular for its stylish mall and trendy bars and cafes. We entered a series of tunnels near the twin peak *Dois Irmaos* (Two Brothers) Mountain, and emerged in the neighborhood of *Rocinha*, the largest favela in the country with a population estimated between 100,000 and 200,000 people. This favela – which fits within a square-mile radius – rises dramatically up into the surrounding hillside. As we exited the Zuzu Angel tunnel, the image of Rocinha on our right was almost spellbinding. It appeared as if every inch of hillside was stacked with square, colorful concrete and brick dwellings. In the past, Arnaldo told us, clashes between the police and street gangs here were often fierce and deadly, but today the favela is considered relatively safe. In fact, it is one of the better off in the city, with basic sanitation, running water and electricity in most of the homes. He said that in recent years, tourism-related businesses centering on nightclubs, youth hostels and guided tours have sprung up in Rocinha, giving hope that other favelas might follow suit, helping to ease their economic hardships.

The road we were traveling on turned into Engineer Fernando Mac Dowell Highway, a major thoroughfare that connects the districts of *Gavea* and *Barra da Tijuca* (a sprawling upper class suburb in the Western Zone situated along the scenic Barra Beach area). We passed the beautiful Gavea Golf and Country Club on our right hand-side, its demanding course offering magnificent views of the surrounding mountains and the Atlantic Ocean. We exited the highway in the district of *Sao Conrado*, a seaside enclave famous for its beaches and upscale condominiums and shopping areas. This particular neighborhood is hemmed in by several impressive mountain peaks, most notably the twin peaks of the Two Brothers Mountain and the awe-inspiring monolithic Pedra de Gavea mountaintop. The bus dropped us off at the southwestern end of Mendes de Morias Avenue, a street that runs the length of the Sao Conrado beachfront.

Arnaldo took us on a short stroll in the Pepino ('Cucumber') Beach area. This clean strip of white-sanded beach is located on the southern tip of the wider Sao Conrado Beach, rounding off into a picturesque cove with lush vegetation and the granite walls of the Pedra de Gavea and Pedra Bonita Mountains in back of it. When we arrived, there weren't many sunbathers here because this section of the beach is very breezy and attracts hang gliders and para gliders. With nerves – (*and balls*) – of steel, adrenaline

junkies jump off a platform on nearby Pedra Bonita Mountain and glide down onto the sand. While we were there we actually witnessed several people doing this; it was quite remarkable, really, considering the height of the mountain platform. The promenade fronting the beach was designed with mosaic tiles. Arnaldo told us these mosaic sidewalks are referred to as *Portuguese Stone*, which date back to the 1940s and 50s when they were all the rage in Portugal. Most of the beach areas of Rio de Janeiro have sidewalks decorated with mosaic tiles, although in some sections they are worn or have broken and missing pieces.

Someone in the group asked Arnaldo why this section was called Pepino Beach? He pointed to the east and said, "It's because the length of it resembles a cucumber." There were two old ladies traveling together in our group, and I overheard one of them say, as she nudged her friend and nodded in the direction of two mulatto lifeguards*: "I think that's why they call it Pepino Beach*." Curious about her comment, I followed her gaze and observed the two skinny, twenty-something year old lifeguards. They were both leaning back against a railing, wearing nothing but tight, very revealing Speedos. I kid you not, both appeared to be packing oversized 'cucumbers' in their bathing trunks. I actually laughed out loud. Old ladies, they don't miss a thing…!

As we walked along the promenade, Arnaldo mentioned that many *Cariocas* (the residents of Rio de Janeiro) are into playing outdoor sports on the city's beaches. In fact, during *my* walks around Copacabana, I observed beachgoers playing tennis, soccer, volleyball and a favorite pastime here called Frescobol, or beach paddleball. Body surfing is also quite popular. Arnaldo said a majority of the city's male population will also try to get in some gym time. Laughing, he referred to it as vanity time, explaining that if you go to the beaches in Rio de Janeiro you'll notice how older adult males are usually not in the water, but sitting on the sand showing off their physiques or checking out the competition.

It was already noon as we headed back to our hotel. A group of us had signed up for an optional afternoon excursion called *Carnival Experience*, a behind-the-scenes look at the preparations involved for the annual Rio Carnival parade competition that takes place during Mardi Gras. Because of the religious aspect of Mardi Gras, Arnaldo felt compelled to talk briefly about religion in Rio de Janeiro. Cariocas, for the most part, are tolerant of all religions. Arnaldo told us he was Jewish, and that approximately two-

thirds of all Brazilians identify as Catholic. There is also a great smattering of African religion mixed in with mainstream belief systems here. And in more recent years Brazil has seen a rise in Evangelical Protestantism, with some prominent members from that community holding top positions in the current conservative administration running the country. This, according to Arnaldo, has led to some kind of political or social dilemma within the nation, but he would not elaborate. If the right-wing Christian groups in my country are any indication, though, I'm certain it has something to do with blocking abortion or gay rights, or some other form of intoleration. The average Carioca, Arnaldo insisted, will celebrate *any* religious deity during their given holiday. He said this was steeped in two local beliefs: first, a celebration is a celebration (and Cariocas seldom need an excuse to party), and secondly, it never hurts to have as many deities in your corner as possible. Arnaldo grinned sheepishly and added, "Think of it as *mojo* insurance."

We arrived at our hotel around 12:30pm. The rest of the day was at leisure for us to explore Rio de Janeiro on our own. Debbie and I had lunch at an Italian restaurant called La Tattoria, which was next to our hotel. Paola recommended the place. We each ordered the pasta. The food wasn't spectacular, but the establishment was convenient, being close enough to the hotel that Debbie was able to walk to it with her injured ankle. Afterwards, Debbie returned to her room saying she was tired and wanted to rest. We had each booked the afternoon *Carnival Experience* excursion prior to the trip, but Debbie called my room just minutes before I went downstairs to the lobby to inform me she was not feeling well and would have to cancel on me. I felt really bad for her because this side trip had initially been her idea and she had already missed so many interesting parts of the tour due to her injury. The rest of us who booked this optional excursion (including Johnny) boarded the bus at 2:00pm. We headed towards the city's Central Zone for what turned out to be a fun and informative late afternoon jaunt. Both Paola and Arnaldo accompanied us.

As we drove towards the northeast, through the various communities of the South and Central Zones, Arnaldo spoke about the origins of the famous Rio Carnival, which officially begins on the Friday before Lent and ends on Ash Wednesday every year. I always assumed the original inspiration behind the festival was a purely Catholic one in nature; after all, it is celebrated at the onset of Lent, a solemn Christian observance commemorating the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert before he began his public ministry,

when he was being tempted by Satan. But today, the driving force behind this massive citywide festival seems more rooted in the rhythmic samba music made popular by former African slaves.

According to Arnaldo, the *real* origins of the Rio Carnival can be traced back over a thousand years to when Europeans honored pagan gods in annual harvest festivals. One particularly popular harvest celebration was dedicated to the grape, from which wine is made, so there tended to be a lot of drinking and partying going on, a practice common with these carnivals today. The word "Mardi Gras' means *Fat Tuesday* in French, referring to the high-caloric feasting Christians would do on the day prior to the start of Lenten fasting. In Portugal this event is called the *Entrudo*, and its purpose is the same, to allow Christians a final round of gorging, if you will, before the start of Lent. Portuguese colonists introduced the custom to Brazil. By the 1840s the Rio Mardi Gras Festival began to include masquerades, with music taking center stage as polka and waltz dancing became very popular. But by the early 1900s, the Rio Festival morphed into a new kind of celebration, one influenced heavily by the music and dance of its black population.

Like in the United States, Brazilian slaves kept aspects of their culture alive during the country's slave period. At the end of the grueling workday, slaves would often gather on the farms and plantations to relax by dancing to traditional African music, referred to as *samba*. This sound was totally unique to the western world. Most western musical arrangements are designed with a beginning, a build-up and an end, Arnaldo said, but samba music has a cyclical rhythm, a repetitive percussive beat that doesn't let up. Even the dances were performed in a circle-like fashion, and the songs were usually about suffering, symbolizing the endless cycle of their hard lives under slavery. In other words, this was music with *soul*.

When slavery was abolished in 1888 in Brazil, the newly minted black citizens of the country found themselves discriminated against, looked down upon by their white counterparts. Samba, for the most part, was banned from mainstream white culture until the early part of the 1900s. Throughout this period, Arnaldo explained, many black musicians worked in the famous nightclub district of *Lapa* (a bohemian section located in the city's Central Zone), and while their music was becoming popular on the nightclub circuit, it didn't go mainstream until the release of a song called *Pelo Telefone* in 1917, an upbeat samba number that mixed a traditional samba beat with a

style of Brazilian tango called *maxixe*. This 'new' sound went viral, and by the 1930s samba music had evolved and branched out, fully embraced by the Brazilian elite, becoming not only the main music of the country's carnival celebrations, but also the universally recognized music at the forefront of Brazilian culture. In fact, during the *Estado Novo* ('New State') government of popular Social Democrat Getulio Vargas – who served both as a dictator and as a democratically elected president between 1930 and 1954 – samba, with its rural roots, become a proud cultural symbol of the new nationalism sweeping the country.

The Mardi Gras Festival – or Brazilian Carnival – that is celebrated today is therefore the result of a culture clash between white Portuguese and Black Brazilians. The whites introduced *Entrudo* (or the religious Mardi Gras festival) and Africans introduced their style of music and dancing. In the early days of the country, and in keeping with the festive nature of Mardi Gras, Black people were permitted three days to celebrate as they wished, and with time their practices intermingled with those of the white population. Over the ensuing years a mixed tradition was formed that morphed into this massive annual countrywide street party.

Arnaldo told us one of the fundamental concepts behind today's Rio Carnival is 'pretending'. This notion of dressing up in costumes and pretending to be someone else was an attempt to turn social conventions on its head. Once a year, for several days, Brazilians can escape their normal routines and dive headlong into revelry as anyone they choose to be. The poor can dress in expensive clothing like the rich, and the rich can mingle on the streets with the poor. Men can dress like woman, and vice-versa, or people can wear as little clothing as they wish with hardly any repercussions. Sensitive political issues like racism, poverty, crime, sexism, climate change and so on can be used as themes in the individual float parades. In short, Brazilians can really let themselves go or air their grievances in a playful manner during Carnival. And having fun is the order of the day. In Rio de Janeiro alone, there are over 300 block parties going on throughout the event. I hope one day I can come back here and experience it.

At the center of the Rio de Janeiro Carnival is the exciting parade competition between the city's *samba schools*. Rising out of the poor Afro-Brazilian neighborhoods of the 1920s, samba schools are actually dancing, marching and drumming clubs. And despite having the name 'school' in their title, these clubs are not associated with learning institutions; they are

primarily neighborhood groups devoted to practicing, promoting and exhibiting the music and dance of samba. But on a deeper level, Arnaldo told us, samba schools are an affirmation of the Afro-Brazilian heritage. They promote cultural values that sometimes run contrary to those taught in the conservative mainstream educational system, often courting the chagrin of the country's power structure. These samba schools afford the poor neighborhoods concentrated within the city's favelas a chance to assert their cultural independence and be proud of their traditions. And, as we would soon discover, the competition between these various schools is intense, not unlike the rivalry between soccer fans…or even neighborhood street gangs.

Throughout the year, especially the months leading up to the Mardi Gras parade competition, the samba schools – which can each have *thousands* of members – hold regular rehearsals and prepare their costumes, magnificent floats and dance numbers, usually with a secrecy that would make an intelligence officer proud. Large monetary prizes and scholarships await the winning school, not to mention the sheer pride and bragging rights of the local favela whose samba school wins the competition. Making sure other schools do not uncover the details of their upcoming parade presentation is part of the fun. The people who participate in these clubs take it all very, very seriously. In many instances, the samba school becomes a central part of a person's life in the favelas, giving purpose and meaning for someone living in poverty.

As Arnaldo was explaining the whole samba school competition to us, we actually passed the *Sambadrome Marques de Sapucai*, the specially built stadium where the competition is held annually. Situated next to the wide Trinta e um de Marco Avenue, the Sambadrome (as it is more commonly referred to) is quite the eye-catcher. Unlike other stadiums, which are usually round, the Sambadrome is a free-standing venue open on both ends, with a long corridor (a part of the Marques de Sapucai Street) running through it where the schools parade their floats, marching bands and dancers. When it's their turn, each school enters the stadium on one side and slowly exits on the other end of this long runway, which is painted a bright white color just days before the event and is nearly half a mile long and more than forty feet wide. On either side of this corridor are individual viewing stands called *sectors* that can accommodate up to 90,000 cheering spectators.

We continued driving north into the heart of the city's Central Zone, traveling through the *Gamboa* neighborhood until we reached the *Cidade do Samba Joaozinho Trinta*, a complex of warehouses known simply as Samba City. The Carnival Experience excursion we were embarking on was a behind-the-scenes tour inside one of these warehouses, which is where the top 13-14 samba schools in the city create their spectacular floats and costumes. Here, we would learn firsthand the preparation and planning involved in putting together an annual parade.

Our bus parked in the courtyard of this massive complex. All around us were remnants of last year's floats; a kind of surreal landscape of giant heads and fake creatures dozens of feet tall. A lovely, young black Brazilian woman named Cynthia greeted us in the parking lot. She welcomed us to Samba City, telling us she was a member of one of the largest samba schools in the city. Unfortunately, I do not recall which school she belonged to. Members of the individual samba schools represented within the complex carry out the guided tours of the warehouses. Rio de Janeiro has hundreds of samba schools, but only the top 13 or 14 schools actually have a warehouse within Samba City. These guided tours are a way for these schools to raise money for their annual presentation, and for education and other community needs.

Cynthia's English was excellent, and she had a flirtatious and funny way about her that endeared her to the entire group immediately. Each guide can only show you the warehouse where *their* school operates from, and this I think is done to keep the general public in the dark about what it is they will actually do on competition day. The rivalry between the samba schools is so intense they have armed security personnel guarding these warehouses to prevent 'outsiders' from having a look inside. Cynthia led us to a giant, multi-level building. In the center of this warehouse were hydraulic platforms on top of which floats were in the process of being built. She gave us some technical details on how the floats are gradually constructed in the months leading up to Mardi Gras. But, in keeping with the secrecy surrounding the event, she would not reveal what the floats were gong to be or even the theme of her school's next presentation. She jokingly added, "If I tell you, I'd have to kill you afterwards."

From here we took the stairs to the next level. This particular section contained the offices were the *serious* planning stages take place. Several outlandish costumes from the past were on display, along with drawings,

drafts, picture boards and blueprints depicting everything about the previous year's competition. One display board showed the rigid timeline maintained by these schools in order to put together their parade. This is a 12-month, never-ending project. As soon as Mardis Gras is over, Cynthia said, the people in charge of the samba schools go right back to work conjuring up ideas for next year's competition, organizing their members and making preparations. Monthly goal targets were outlined on the board. Each school has to come up with a main theme that has to be approved (I think) by the official governing body overseeing the competition. This overall theme has to be visually supported by 5-7 subgroups of floats, dancers and marching bands (called *alas*, or wings) with up to 500 people in each subgroup, requiring a synchronization of thousands of participants. It's an incredible undertaking. As Mardi Gras approaches, these schools go into overdrive, their members hard at work building floats, costumes and practicing their music and dance moves.

Cynthia then took us into a room where the walls were decorated with colorful pictures, posters and paintings of historical figures and events responsible for propagating the growth and popularity of samba. She also showed us a video of an actual parade competition. She went over the history of samba, speaking about the first samba school parade competition held in 1928 and how it all came about. Cynthia went over some of the judging details, how the judges are selected and from where, and the criteria they look for in each presentation. Participating samba schools have about 75 minutes to complete their parade march through the stadium. The entire competition is held over a three-day period.

From here we headed over to a dressing room where the staff picked out costumes for each of us to try on over our clothes. I was given a bejeweled king's robe and crown. As for Johnny, they dressed him up in a multi-colored robe and a black wig that stood at least a foot and half on top of his head with a little hat sticking out of the side – I'm not sure what he was 'supposed' to be, but with his natural Santa Claus beard flowing below that outrageous wig, he looked like a crazed mountain man. What a hoot this was! When everyone was costumed-up, we took turns taking pictures of one another and then posed for a group photo with Cynthia. Afterwards, with the help of several members from her samba school, we were given a little lesson on samba dancing. Um, I actually made an excuse to go to the bathroom at this time to avoid making a fool of myself.

Before we left, Cynthia invited all of us to a lounge area for complimentary snacks, sodas, and *caipirinha* drinks. True to the spirit of the samba school, she refused to accept any personal tips and instead suggested we either make a donation to her school or buy an official Samba City T-shirt or other memorabilia (conveniently located in the lounge area) which she said not only assisted in the preparation costs but also helped pay for the members' continuing education. What a fun time we all had. I wholeheartedly recommend this little side trip to anyone visiting Rio de Janeiro who wants to learn more about the Rio Carnival.

We left Samba City around 5:00pm and headed east towards the waterfront area, driving through the old *Saude* neighborhood – (at one time the original port of Rio de Janeiro) – to visit Olympic Boulevard in the historic downtown *Centro* district along Guanabara Bay. The Centro district is the heart of the Center Zone area of the city, home to its bustling downtown section and port system. During the 2016 Olympics, a 3.5 kilometer promenade was constructed along a stretch of abandoned waterfront property here that was renamed Olympic Boulevard. The street was used for shows and other special events during the Olympics, including the lighting of one of the two cauldrons used to open the Olympic games

According to Arnaldo, this section of the waterfront was mostly neglected, and quite the eyesore. When the city announced plans to build Olympic Boulevard many in the city were skeptical about the location and considered the renovation a financial folly. But in the years since the 2016 Olympics, the area has become a popular destination for both locals and tourists alike. We began our walking tour on Olympic Boulevard in front of the gigantic mural painted by world-renowned street artist Eduardo Kobra. Growing up in the slums of Sao Paulo, Kobra made a name for himself as a talented graffiti artist, eventually displaying paintings and murals in 20 different countries across five continents. At the time of its completion, this 560-foot wide mural became the largest graffiti mural on record. It was painted on the brick walls of a series of connected buildings along Olympic Boulevard. The overall effect is quite striking.

The mural is called 'Ethnicities', and depicts representatives of the indigenous peoples from America, Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania: a Mursi woman from Ethiopia, a Supi man from Northern Europe, a Kayin woman from Thailand, a Huli man from Papua New Guinea, and a Tajapo boy from Brazil. All of them painted larger then life and side-by-side in

Kobra's colorful signature style. He originally named the work 'We Are One' because he wanted to show that humanity is descended from common ancestors. The mural extends along almost an entire city block. In order to really appreciate this enormous work of art – and to take it all in – you have to see it from across the street.

We headed west on Olympic Boulevard for several blocks – walking alongside the open tracks of the city's tramline (occasionally, a metro train would approach and we simply got out of its way). We arrived at the *Praca Maua Square* a few minutes later. This expansive, open square sits in the heart of the port region of the city, and was part of the newly revitalized waterfront. Just to the north of it are the piers along Guanabara Bay where commercial vessels and cruise ships dock. In the center of this enormous plaza – it measures nearly 25,000 sq meters – stands the tall, monumental statue of Irineu Evangelista de Sousa, the Baron of Maua. And if visitors think his statue towers over the plaza, that's nothing compared to the influence and impact he had over the nation.

Born to a family of small ranchers in 1813, Sousa would eventually become one of the richest men in the world, and definitely the richest in Brazil. In fact, by the 1880s, his wealth was estimated to be larger than the entire annual budget of the Brazilian Empire. During the monarchy period, he received the titles of baron and viscount. His contributions to the economic growth of Brazil were incredible. He built the country's first railway, and was the founder of the Bank of Brazil. By the end of the 19th century, his companies (and they were numerous) were at the forefront of Brazil's economy, financing everything from the shipping ports, to railways, to agriculture (especially coffee production). He was, in many ways, larger than life, so it's not surprising the square named in his honor is so big.

When we visited the Praca Maua Square, street vendors – (selling everything from coffee and pastries to artwork and souvenirs) – had set up shop in front of the statue, and the plaza was teeming with people. In back of the statue heading south is the beginning of Rio Branco Avenue, the financial district of Rio de Janeiro. Some of the notable buildings in the area include the Joseph Gire Building; a 1920s structure that, at 22 stories tall, was one of the first skyscrapers built in the city, and the first to be constructed out of reinforced concrete. It now serves as the headquarters for the Rio-based newspaper, *A Noite* (and is referred to as the A Noite

Building). Along Rodrigues Alves Avenue, on the eastern side of the plaza, are the military offices of Brazil's First Naval Command.

There are notable museums around the plaza, as well. On the western side of the square stands the Rio Museum of Art, which opened in 2013 as part of the waterfront revitalization project. The facility is actually two separate (but interconnected) buildings constructed in different styles. One of them resembles a neo-classical palace, while the other is a modernist glass structure with an unusual covering over the roof that looks like a giant bronze blanket shielding it from the sun. But an even more interesting design is the Museum of Tomorrow (*Museu do Amanha*) located on Pier Maua, which extends into the bay on the north side of the plaza. This white, two-story museum has a cantilevered roof and façade with moving elements. The roof arches upward on one end like an alien spacecraft getting ready to launch. Opened in 2015 (another waterfront revitalization project built for the 2016 Olympics) the Museum of Tomorrow is an applied sciences museum; their mission statement, according to their website, is to 'explore the challenges and opportunities facing humanity over the coming decades from the perspective of sustainability and conviviality'. Whew, that sounds like a tall order…I wish I had gone inside!

We had some free time to wander the plaza. I took plenty of photos and did some souvenir shopping among the row of street vendors. I purchased a coffee and pastry and just took in the scene. It was a lovely day. From the Praca Maua Square we walked towards Rio Branco Avenue where our tour bus was waiting on a side street to take us back to the hotel. We arrived shortly after 7:00pm. I called Debbie to see if she wanted to go to dinner, but she had ordered room service earlier and had already eaten. I told her all about the afternoon excursion and then decided to settle in for the evening. It had been another *long* day of sightseeing and I was too tired to go to a restaurant, especially by myself, so I ordered something light from room service and sat down to write the day's events in my journal. After eating, I watched a local soccer match on TV until sleep overcame me.

Days Fourteen and Fifteen

I was wide-awake by 4:00am. I did some stretching exercises and then shaved and showered. Over several cups of coffee I went through my journal notes and edited the previous day's photos. Since we were returning to the U.S. the following afternoon, I decided to re-sort and repack my luggage – (by now it was mostly dirty laundry anyway) – so I wouldn't have to do it later that night. At 6:00am I called Debbie's room to tell her I was heading downstairs for breakfast but got no answer. Johnny and I sat together and waited for her. Debbie showed up at 6:45am and was not in a particularly cheery mood. She told us she was anxious to get home already. I felt bad for her because I'm certain the pain, discomfort and limitations caused by her ankle injury had greatly hampered her ability to enjoy this tour.

We began our morning sightseeing at 8:00am sharp. The first stop of the day was at Sugarloaf Mountain (*Pao de Acucar*) for another awesome panoramic view of the city. We drove north on a busy thoroughfare called Princessa Isabel Avenue, going through the Marques Porto Tunnel, and then turned east towards Guanabara Bay along Venceslau Bras Avenue. A short distance later we made a right onto Pasteur Avenue and drove south along the bay towards Sugarloaf Mountain, passing several notable colleges and universities along the way, including the British International School, a mineralogy institute and several military academies.

On the drive, Arnaldo talked briefly about Brazilian history, or rather, how it is taught in the school system here. He told us the history of the country is divided into economic cycles. The first cycle was characterized by the *pau brasil* tree, also known as the brazilwood tree, from which the country got its name. The species is endemic to the Atlantic Forest chain of South America. The brazilwood tree became the major economic industry of the early Portuegese settlers to the New World. The species' heartwood produces a red dye similar – and in many ways superior – to that of the sappanwood trees of Asia and became highly prized in Europe. The trade in dye was so big at the time, and these trees dominated the forests in the area, that sailors began calling the Portuguese colony the *Terra do Brasil*, or Land of Brasil. The name was later shortened to just Brasil (Note: in Portuguese, the word *Brazil* is spelled 'Brasil'). The tree also produces a very strong timber that was useful not only in construction, but also to make bow instruments and hunting tools. Eventually, deforestation depleted the brazilwood and today the tree is listed as a threatened plant species

(although it is still highly coveted for making string instruments like the violin).

Sugarcane is another big industry that's been around since the 16th century. In the early 1500s, sugarcane and gold had almost the same value in Europe. The cultivation of sugarcane first started in Southeast Asia. When Portugal began establishing colonies in the New World, they introduced the sugarcane plant to the region in order to produce their own sugar and alcohol. Eventually, by the mid-17th century, Brazil became the largest producer of sugar in the world. And while the industry has gone back and forth globally, Brazil is still a large cultivator of sugarcane today.

The discovery of gold and precious gemstones in Brazil kicked off another strong economic cycle in the country, helping to shape its destiny. Although many countries in South America mine gemstones, Brazil is perhaps the most prolific source of quality gemstones on the continent. Everything from diamonds, emeralds, sapphires and rubies, to amethyst, topaz, aquamarine and quartz are mined here. The following morning, before we left for the airport, a group of us visited the museum of one of the largest jewelry stores in the country to learn a little more about the gemstone industry.

And then came *green* gold. The coffee bean. According to Arnaldo, the first coffee tree was planted in the state of *Para* in the northern part of the country in 1727, its cultivation spreading south to Rio de Janeiro by 1770. Back then, coffee was grown for local consumption, but by the 1800s coffee was in great demand in America and Europe. In the 1820s, coffee plantations began to proliferate in the states of Sao Paolo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro, producing twenty percent of all the world's coffee. The arabica plant thrives in the cooler, higher altitudes of the southeastern regions of the country. By the 1830s, the crop became Brazil's largest export. Coffee plantations in the country would eventually utilize as much land space as the size of Belgium, and by the 20th century Brazil controlled 80% of the global market. Today, Brazil is still the largest producer of coffee, growing approximately one third of the world's supply.

Each economic cycle – for better or for worse, Arnaldo said – impacted the growth and direction of the country. The trade in brasilwood, sugarcane and coffee meant taking over new lands for cultivation, and subsequently, indigenous peoples to work them. As the indigenous peoples adopted

Christianity, a new 'forced' labor source was introduced from Africa, and the population of the country not only expanded but also became more diversified. And today, he said, a new economic cycle was beginning to take shape in Brazil. What is this new source? *Black* gold. In 2010, a large oil reserve was discovered 114 miles off the shores of Rio de Janeiro that has the potential to produce billions of gallons of oil and gas. This discovery will help make Brazil one of the top oil exporters in the coming years. It'll be interesting to see how this future 'boom' will impact the country on a socio-economic level.

We arrived at a cable car station in the neighborhood of Babylon Hill (*Morro da Babilonia*), a section of the larger Leme district located inside the city's South Zone. Babylon Hill is connected to a peninsula that juts outward into the Atlantic Ocean at the mouth of Guanabara Bay, separating the beaches of Copacabana and Botoafogo. There are two mountain peaks on top of this peninsula, the Urca Hill (*Morro da Urca*) and the adjacent – and much taller – Sugarloaf Mountain. The two peaks form a protected national monument that became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2012. To reach the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain – (a cone-shaped granite peak 1,296 feet high) – we had to take a glass cable car up to Urca Hill first, and then switch to another cable car to continue the ascent to Sugarloaf.

This cable car system originally opened in 1912. At the time, according to Arnaldo, it was a first for the nation, and only the third such type of conveyance in the world. Those early cable cars were made of painted wood and used for more than 60 years before they got a real upgrade. Today, the modern Swiss-made bubble glass cars in use can hold up to 65 passengers and offer a 360-degree view of the surrounding city. (Note: At the Urca Hill station they have several older cable car models on display). The entire ride to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain takes only a few minutes, but the ascent is a mouth-opening experience. A marvelous thing about Rio de Janeiro is the amount of monolithic mountains that rise straight up from the water's edges around this unique city. There are no shortages of excellent – (and dramatic) – observation points here. Having said that, the view from the top of Sugarloaf Mountain was nothing short of spectacular.

During early colonial times, sugar was transported back to Europe in blocks of conically shaped mounds (which were molded in clay pots). Eventually, the similarity between the mountain peak and the shape of these sugar loaf blocks was noted, and the name 'Sugarloaf Mountain' stuck.

When Rio de Janeiro was founded in 1565, the peaks of Urca Hill and Sugarloaf were actually part of a separate island. By the end of the 1600s, a landfill connected the island to the mainland, forming the peninsula we see today. Because of its strategic position overlooking the entrance into Guanabara Bay, this hilly peninsula was used to protect the city from naval attacks and as an important signaling point. Once you reach the summit, you can see why. The view into the bay (or for that matter, the Atlantic Ocean) is unobstructed, making it impossible – (during colonial times, anyway) – to approach the city undetected, at least from the water.

Our guide wanted us to go up together as a group, so we waited until we could all board the same cable car. As we ascended to the top of Urca Hill, some 722 feet high, Arnaldo pointed out the nearby hillside favelas of *Morro da Babilonia* and *Chapeu Mangueira.* The Morro da Babilonia is one of the oldest in the city, and both favelas were part of the police pacification program enacted over recent years to try and steer these neighborhoods away from the violence and influence of drug gangs. Arnaldo told us both of these favelas were now popular among tourists for their hiking trails.

Once we reached the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain we had plenty of time to wander around on our own. From the various observation points we could see huge swaths of the city from different angles. To the south was the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. To the east was the entrance into Guanabara Bay. To the north we could see Christ the Redeemer on its mountain perch. But for me, the most dramatic thing about the view was the contrast between the natural landscape of Rio de Janeiro and how this city has risen all around it. Not only could I see the beautiful beaches along both the Atlantic coastline and within the bay, I could also see the sprawling neighborhoods within the coves, valleys and hillsides that make up the mountainous terrain enveloping Rio de Janeiro. It was quite an eye-opening view. I used up my iPhone battery taking pictures.

By 10:30am we were back on the bus heading towards the Center Zone for a more in-depth tour of the downtown area. We traveled north on Pasteur Avenue, the road morphing into a wider thoroughfare that continued to change names the further along the bay we went. We passed the compact Botafogo beachfront, and then drove through the residential districts of *Flamengo* and *Gloria* on Infante Dom Henrique Avenue. The two neighborhoods share a section of Flamengo Beach and the beautiful and popular park built alongside it called *Attero do Flamengo*. Arnaldo told us

this entire area was re-constructed during the previous century from reclaimed lands (from the bay area), profoundly impacting the shape and development of the downtown waterfront section. On the northern end of Flamengo Beach we came upon the Gloria Marina, its piers lined with private yachts.

In front of the Gloria Marina is a large, abstract monument dedicated to the Brazilian military personnel who lost their lives during World War II. Brazil was one of our allies during the war. But it almost didn't come to this. During the 1930s, social and political upheavals in the country led to the rise of populist social democrat Getulio Dornelles Vargas, who first came to power in a coup. Under his rule, a new 'nationalism' took shape that put a focus on industrialization and increasing the country's military power. To balance his country's relationship with the U.S., Vargas established closer ties to Germany, Italy and Japan prior to the onset of the war, much to the chagrin of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. One of the major obstacles the U.S. faced in garnering greater support for the war effort among Latin American countries was our continuing policy of meddling into the political and economic affairs of the Americas, hardly endearing us to our southern neighbors.

Social democratic leaders in South America were often sympathetic to the fascist regimes of Europe prior to WWII (and some continued to harbor close ties with them after the war broke out). A vast section of the continent's population came from countries like Spain, Italy and Germany, and ties to these prior homelands were very strong. In fact, many of the up-and-coming social democratic leaders of South America viewed the popular uprising of fascist parties in Western Europe as a positive thing, hoping to replicate such movements in their own countries. In order to offset this growing and alarming influence, the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt pursued a *new* diplomatic strategy of providing cultural and economic assistance (known as the 'Good Neighbor' approach) to the countries of Central and South America, and to good effect.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, both the U.S. and Brazil were neutral in the war. But as the somber reality of the early German victories in Western Europe began to sink in, President Roosevelt was worried that if Great Britain were to fall then German attacks on the Western Hemisphere would soon follow. He convinced the government of Brazil to increase American air bases in the country, providing over 100 million dollars in

Lend/Lease funding to help shore up their military. When the U.S. and Brazil eventually entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, these air bases in northeastern Brazil played an important role in the war effort, providing essential air transport support for the Allied Powers during the North African and Mediterranean military campaigns. From Brazilian ports, the American and Brazilian navies and their new submarine forces worked in unison to help stop German U-boat attacks along the South Atlantic. Brazil also supplied much-needed raw materials to the United States that was cut off when Japan began invading countries in Southeast Asia.

In addition, a Brazilian Expeditionary Force (BEF) was created with over 25,000 troops – placed under the command of the U.S. Fifth Army – and was used in the fierce military campaign to liberate Italy. The Brazilian forces distinguished themselves in battle, fighting valiantly and defeating elite German and Italian divisions, capturing over 20,000 Axis soldiers in the eight-month campaign and losing *fewer* than five hundred of their own men in the process. A remarkable feat considering the ferocity of the Italian campaign.

From the WWII memorial we turned westward and drove through the *Lapa* district, regarded as the bohemian quarter of the city. As we entered this neighborhood we passed the *Passeio Publico*, the oldest public park in Brazil and one of the oldest in all of the Americas. It was established in the late 1700s after Rio de Janeiro became the new colonial capital of Brazil. A few blocks from here we stopped briefly at the *Aqueduto da Carioca;* an 18th century Roman-style aqueduct that once provided fresh water to the city. The structure – consisting of two rows of arches stacked on top of one another – is considered a good example of colonial engineering. By the end of the 19th century, when more efficient water supply systems were designed, this aqueduct became obsolete. In 1896, the aqueduct was converted into a viaduct for a tramline connecting the hilly Santa Teresa district to the downtown area. Interesting to note, this historic Santa Teresa Tramway is still in operation today, a portion of its tracks running across the top of the aqueduct like a bridge.

We continued driving through the Lapa district, heading west on *Mem de Sa Avenue* and then making a right onto *Rua do Lavradio*, both streets lined with nightclubs and restaurants. The Lapa neighborhood has been famous for its nightlife for more than a century. It is here where Brazilian music – a

huge mix of various styles ranging from samba, bossa nova, choro, sertanejo, forro, maracatu, and so on – can be heard and danced to, along with more modern jazz, rock, and hip-hop trends. There are no shortages of musical venues in Rio de Janeiro, and Lapa seems to have the largest concentration of them.

We made another right-hand turn onto Republic of Chile Avenue and stopped to visit the famous Metropolitan Cathedral of St. Sebastian. This unique church serves as the seat of Rio de Janeiro's Roman Catholic Archdiocese. I have seen many Catholic cathedrals in my travels, but rarely one like this. The church was designed by Brazilian architect Edgar de Oliveira da Fonseca, and built between 1964 and 1979. With a height of 246 feet, it has a bizarre conical shape resembling a Mayan pyramid. But the most striking detail – for me, anyway – was on the inside: four series of rectilinear stained glass window panels that rise from the floor to the structure's ceiling at different intervals, bathing the inside of the cathedral in a kaleidoscope of colors. The interior measures 8,000-square feet and can seat 5,000 worshippers, with enough standing room for 20,000 more. In front of the cathedral entrance – on the opposite side of Republic of Chile Avenue – is a tall office structure called the Ventura Building. The glass-mirrored walls of this building reflect the image of the Metropolitan Cathedral, making for an unusual photo op.

We drove through what seemed like the entire Lapa district, heading at one point eastward towards the bay before turning around on Evaristo da Veiga Street and heading westward again. We passed the National Museum of Fine Arts, a large, elegant structure built during the early 1900s, containing an eclectic collection of both national and international artworks. Just down the street we stopped briefly for a photo op at the Municipal Theater of Rio de Janeiro (established in 1909), a beautiful Parisian-style theater offering classical music and ballet performances. We continued down Evaristo da Veiga Street until it intersected with Republic of Paraguay Avenue, and then turned south. A short distance later we crossed Mem de Sa Avenue again and were dropped off on a corner of Rua da Lapa (street), directly in front of the historic Catholic Church of Our Lady of Lapa in Exile (*Igreja Nossa Senhora do Carmo da Lapa do Desterro*). This gem of a small church (which also serves as a museum) is a colonial masterpiece built during the 1700s. It is considered an excellent example of catholic architecture from that period, designed in a Baroque style and decorated

with Portuguese tiles. Inside you'll find original sculptures and religious artwork from that era.

From here, Arnaldo led us on foot along a block-long narrow side street called *Rua Teotonio Regadas.* Large graffiti murals and paintings covered the walls of every single building on one side of this street; it was if we were walking through an open-air art gallery. Most of the depictions had to do with life in the surrounding favelas. The end of this street intersected with another narrow road called *Rua Joaquim Silva*, and just across from it was the object of our final sightseeing destination that morning. The famous Selaron Staircase of Rio de Janeiro.

Jorge Selaron was a Chilean-born Brazilian painter and ceramist who moved to the Lapa district during the 1980s. He lived in a house next to a long open stairway situated on the border between Lapa and the hilltop neighborhood of Santa Teresa. At the top of this stairway stands the 18th century Santa Teresa Convent – (considered the heart of the neighborhood) – its chapel dating back to the 1600s. In 1990, Selaron began decorating the 215 steps leading to the convent with painted ceramic tiles. Over a period of 20 years, with the help of friends and supporters from around the world who provided tiles and porcelain, Selaron transformed this staircase into a massive work of art. Rio de Janeiro recognized his accomplishment in 2005 by declaring the 'Selaron Staircase' a city landmark. In a tragic turn of events, Selaron was found burned to death at the top of his own staircase in 2013. Police would later rule his death a suicide based on reports from friends that he was suffering from depression, although homicide hasn't been entirely ruled out. His legacy, though, is now a permanent landmark destination in Rio de Janeiro, for no trip to the Central Zone is complete without a quick visit to see his 'masterpiece'.

We spent over thirty minutes here. I climbed to the very top taking plenty of photographs of the colorful ceramic tiles adorning the front of each step and along the concrete walls that enclose the staircase. It is a remarkable collection. More than 2,000 tiles, most of them donated over the years, are on display. Selaron painted more than 300 of the tiles himself, using the image of the same pregnant black woman, a character he used repeatedly throughout his career as an artist. Some of these tiles portray scenes or slogans concerning life in the favelas. But you'll also see a huge assortment of tiles from different parts of the world, ranging from flags and landscapes to historical or artistic figures. Selaron lived near the foot of the staircase,

and was constantly repairing and adding tiles until his death. Since then, according to Arnaldo, volunteers have been maintaining the staircase. He told us that a union of tour guides in the city has been continuously raising donations from tourists like us to help maintain this famous city landmark.

Our morning tour concluded, we re-boarded the bus and drove back to our hotel, arriving around 12:30pm. The afternoon was free for us to explore the city on our own. I recharged myself in my room with a cup of instant coffee and spent about an hour jotting down notes in my journal book. I wanted to explore the beachfront area and asked Johnny if he wanted to tag along, but he told me he was a little tired and politely declined. Debbie, of course, was out of the picture because of her ankle. I decided to start my walking tour at Fort Copacabana located on a small promontory jutting out over the Atlantic Ocean at the southern end of Copacabana Beach. I read that the fortress contained an interesting military museum, and offered an excellent view of the entire Copacabana beachfront.

At 1:30pm I hailed a taxi for what should have been a leisurely 15-minute (or less) drive along Atlantica Avenue to the fortress, but the street was only open to traffic one-way that day. I'm not sure if this was a routine Sunday traffic thing, or if the city was trying to accommodate the throngs of beachgoers on this popular holiday weekend. The taxi driver had to detour along Barata Ribeiro Street four blocks north of my hotel and traffic here was almost at a standstill. It seemed as if the entire population of Rio de Janeiro was heading towards the beaches. I reached the fortress entrance by 2:15pm.

On Sundays, Fort Copacabana is open from 10:00am to 8:00pm. There is a small entrance fee to go inside. The fortress was completed in 1914, and was designed to protect Copacabana Beach and the entrance into the harbor of Rio de Janeiro. The fort was deactivated in 1987 as a coastal artillery post, and today it serves more as a historical site, attracting both local and foreign tourists. There are two main attractions here. First, the Historical Military Museum (*Museu Historico do Exercito*), with several exhibition rooms outlining different periods and events surrounding the history of the Brazilian military. And secondly, the actual fortress itself, which sits on the end of the promontory, the part that juts out over the Atlantic Ocean. Along one side of the museum building is an open-air café with a wonderful view of the entire Copacabana Beach. Based on the amount of families I saw here,

this must be a popular spot for lunch or dinner, with its spectacular view overlooking the water.

I spent an hour and a half wandering around Fort Copacabana. The museum is laid out over three floors, covering different aspects of the country's military history. The first floor was devoted to aviation, and had both scale and *real* models of Brazil's first military prop aircrafts, along with a display of interesting gear like first-generation jet pilot helmets and pressure suits. Information boards detailed the history and development of the Brazilian Air Force over the past century.

The second floor contained various exhibits showcasing the military's growth from the late 1800s until the present. A lot of photos and medals from this period, including separate display cases featuring the Italian campaign during WWII and, in more recent years, the military's involvement in a United Nations huminitarian mission to Haiti following a host of natural disasters and political upheavals that seem to perennially upend that unfortunate island nation. One thing I found noticeably missing was any real mention of Brazil's role during World War I. In 1917, Brazil became the only country in Latin America to enter the war, its role limited mostly to naval patrols along the Atlantic Ocean. I do not recall seeing any displays concerning WWI at the museum. Hmmmm, interesting.

The third floor had exhibits and dioramas featuring the military's role during the early conquests of South America and the establishment of the first colonial settlements, including the pacification of native tribal peoples and armed conflicts with colonial rivals in the region. The most interesting exhibits were a series of dioramas showcasing weapons and uniforms from that era. When I concluded my tour of the military museum, I spent another thirty minutes exploring the actual fortress. I enjoyed this very much; it was like being transported back in time. Making my way down bunker-style narrow corridors, I was able to see most of the inside of the fort, each chamber or room looked as if it had been abandoned at one point in time and never disturbed. I saw armament rooms stacked with artillery casings, an infirmary, barracks and a command center resembling something out of an old black-and-white war movie. After touring the inside, I climbed an open staircase to the top of the fortress to check out the artillery placements and found two armored cupolas. One turret contained two 12-inch (305 mm) Krupp cannons, with a striking distance of 14 miles, and the other held two 7 ½ inch (190 mm) Krupp cannons capable of hitting distances 11 miles away.

In addition, retractable casements built along the building's flanks used to hold two smaller 3-inch (75 mm) rapid-fire guns – with a range of 4 miles – which have since been removed.

(Interesting note: During the *Tenenista Revolt* – a rebellion by mostly young lieutenants during the 1920s who were calling for political and military reforms in the country – a mutinous force took control of Fort Copacabana and turned the cannons inward towards the city. They were eventually forced to surrender when the Brazilian navy sent a destroyer and two battleships to attack the fort).

Before leaving, I stopped to photograph several artillery pieces from the late 19th and early 20th century that are also on display just outside the museum building as you head towards the fortress. These included three 75 mm French made Schneider M199 mountain guns, a 1918 British-made 6-inch Vickers-Armstrong Mark XIX artillery piece, and my personal favorite, the 1-½ inch Hotchkiss 5-barrel quick-fire mountain gun circa 1876, which looks like a Gatlin gun on steroids.

I left Fort Copacabana around 3:45pm and decided to walk all the way back to my hotel along the beachfront on Atlantica Avenue. Although it was late in the afternoon, the entire length of Copacabana Beach – (and for that matter, Ipamena Beach, which was visible from the top of the fortress when I looked out towards the west) – was mobbed with people. At that moment, I wished I had worn my bathing suit underneath my jeans. Normally, I'm not much of a beach person. Which is odd, considering I live in Miami. Truth be told, I used to love to go to the beach when I was a kid, but after 24 years working outdoors as a letter carrier in the sweltering heat and humidity of South Florida, I developed a healthy respect for the sun. So I rarely go to the beach, even back home.

I initially thought it would take no more than thirty minutes to reach my hotel, but I misjudged the distance and ended up walking for more than an hour along the promenade fronting the beach, its white sand covered end-to-end with towels and umbrellas and an army of extended families. The shoreline was three deep in bathers, and further out people were body surfing. Kiosks lined the promenade selling snacks and caipirinha drinks to tourists and locals alike. I came across many groups of young people playing spirited volleyball matches on the beach. I also saw some *incredible* sand castles, but each time I tried to take a photograph of one I was asked for

a tip by the castle's 'architect'. I took to crossing the street and taking pictures of them from there using my camera's zoom lens. I'm not cheap, but, hey, the sand *is* free, after all…

Copacabana Beach spans roughly 4 kilometers, and the further I walked I could see the entire length of the beach due to the crescent shape of its shoreline. And the impression I got from my stroll, and pretty much from my entire visit to Rio de Janeiro, is that Cariocas take full advantage of their beautiful natural surroundings. It got me to thinking about the favelas. Poverty sucks no matter where you live, but if I had to be poor *somewhere*, I think this place definitely has an upside. I finally reached my hotel – thoroughly exhausted – just before 5:00pm. In the lobby, I ran into this elderly Japanese couple from my tour group. I mentioned I had just walked down from Fort Copacabana. The husband, who was well into his seventies, told me they had visited the fort the day before, and had walked the distance both ways. Suddenly, I was embarrassed to be so winded. To console myself, I went up to my room and took a short nap.

I woke up forty-five minutes later and took another shower. I donned the black polo shirt I purchased back in the frontier town of Foz de Iguacu when we first entered Brazil (it was the last *nice* clean shirt I had left). At 6:45pm I went downstairs to the lobby to join the group for our farewell dinner. Paola led us on foot two blocks to an establishment called the Churrascaria Palace, situated on Rodolfo Dantas Street facing the legendary Copacabana Palace Hotel. What a feast this turned out to be! A traditional churrascaria is a restaurant where meat is usually grilled in a rotisserie style and then served at the table by roving waiters who bring the meat over on large skewers and slowly carve it onto your plate. Brazilian churrascaria restaurants are becoming more and more popular in the United States, and for good reason. Once the meat starts arriving it doesn't end until you tell the waiters you're too full to eat anymore. And in a city famous for this kind of restaurant style, the nearly 70-year-old Churrascaria Palace was considered one of the best. It was a fitting way to end our trip.

The restaurant did not have a seating section large enough for the group to sit together, so we divided ourselves into smaller tables. Johnny and I sat with the elderly Japanese couple while Debbie elected to sit at a larger table. Before the waiters began serving the grilled meats, we were told to help ourselves to the salad bar. I must confess, I could have eaten my entire farewell dinner just from the items provided at the salad bar. Besides the

extensive variety of greens and vegetables and breads, there were sections for shelled seafood, from shrimp to clams to oysters. The cheese and deli station was better stocked than my neighborhood grocery store, with varieties I'd never seen before. Johnny and I nearly went hog-wild over the deliciously smoked thick bacon slices! Even the section with salad dressings and sauces was overwhelming, a huge collection of dressings, olive oils, balsamic vinaigrettes and specialty spreads to choose from. And when the parade of waiters came around with their skewers of grilled meats, well, Johnny and I couldn't stop grinning from ear to ear. Wave after wave of ribeye, sirloin, filet mignon, lamb, pork tenderloin and chicken. Thankfully, dessert was light – a creamy pudding with fruit cocktail. Afterwards, we waddled out of there and went back to our hotel where we gathered in the lobby for group hugs and photos and 'goodbyes' with our tour guides. Some of us exchanged emails and promised to keep in touch.

I returned to my room around 9:30pm, wiped out from that tremendous meal. I was surprised to discover a Portuguese telecast of the Sunday night Chargers – Steelers football game on TV. I am a huge football fan and, believe me, I tried my darndest to stay awake for it, but I fell into a stupor shortly after lying down on my bed, not waking again until my iPhone alarm went off the following morning.

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I was up at 5:00am and quickly shaved and showered, dressing in my last set of clean clothes. After editing my notes and photos I did my final packing and then joined Debbie for breakfast at 7:30am. Our departure for the airport was scheduled for 3:30pm, so we had some free time in the morning and early afternoon to do any last-minute shopping or sightseeing. A small group of us had signed up for a complimentary visit to the H. Stern headquarters on Garcia D'Avila Street near Ipanema Beach. Brazil is one of the largest producers of precious gemstones in the world and I wanted to learn a little more about the industry. H. Stern is Latin America's largest jewelry retailer, with over 150 stores worldwide. This privately held company was founded by a German-Jewish immigrant named Hans Stern back in the 1940s in Rio de Janeiro. Today, the business is still family-owned, and controls all of its handmade jewelry productions from their

headquarters in the city. The company offers free tours inside their jewelry-making facility, which includes an exhibition section explaining the history of the gemstone industry in Brazil.

Neither Debbie nor Johnny was game for this little outing. In fact, only about ten of us had signed up for it. A van provided by H. Stern picked us up around 10:30am. Twenty minutes later we arrived at their building headquarters and checked in. A company guide handed out headphone sets (for an audio explanation of the exhibits) and then led us upstairs to the exhibition/workshop area. Security was tight, as one can imagine in a building holding gosh-only-knows how many millions of dollars worth of precious gemstones.

We were taken down a dark glass corridor with maps, diagrams and information boards showing the areas of Brazil were the most common gemstones are found, in between these exhibits were windows looking into an enclosed workshop where skilled jewelers were either designing jewelry on draft tables or busy crafting rings and necklaces from diamonds and other precious stones. One exhibit showed how gemstones are cut and shaped, another showed how light is suppose to reflect through a properly cut diamond. The most interesting room was a display section with a huge mix of quartz and gemstones. My favorite exhibit stood in the middle of this room, a long display case featuring a collection of more than 1,000 rare tourmalines (a crystalline boron silicate mineral) that were gathered by Hans Stern himself throughout his lifetime. The cuts and varying colors of these beautiful stones were absolutely dazzling.

The tour ended, not surprisingly, in a jewelry showroom where one can purchase any of the gemstone pieces made in their workshop. The saleswomen were all young and dressed like fashion models. In one display case I observed this fabulous bracelet with numerous gemstones artfully arranged on it, and commented on how nice it looked. Immediately, a saleswoman removed it from its case and handed it to me for further inspection. I had no intention of buying anything but I now felt obligated to asked how much it cost. Her reply almost made me regurgitate the meal I had consumed the night before. This bracelet had a price tag equivalent to five years rent on my Miami duplex! I jokingly asked her if she had anything for a guy on a mailman's salary, she smiled curtly and then flashed me a look as if I had just crawled out of a favela, and promptly put the bracelet back (I guess before I could contaminate it any further).

I don't think we were there more than an hour. We were taken down to the lobby to wait for the van to bring us back to the hotel. The next scheduled pick-up, though, was almost an hour away so I decided to take a stroll to see Ipanema Beach, which was only three blocks down the street. This beach became very famous after the 1960s hit song 'The Girl From Ipanema' was released. I walked for about ten minutes along its promenade taking pictures, the whole while thinking: *It is Monday morning, a workday, and the beach is packed with people…God bless these marvelous Cariocas!*

We got back to the hotel before 1:00pm. Those of us who were leaving on the same flight waited in the lobby for the ride to the airport. I will not bore you with details of the trip home. Suffice it to say it was uneventful. Debbie and I took a LATAM flight to Lima, Peru and then boarded a connecting flight to Miami. When we touched down at Miami International Airport, an airline employee was on hand to push Debbie's wheelchair to her connecting terminal for her flight back to Tampa. I accompanied her as far as I could before bidding her farewell. Afterwards, with luggage in hand, I took a taxi home.

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As I type these words, more than two years have passed since I returned from this trip. I would first like to apologize to my readers for taking so long to finish and post this travelogue to my website. But in my defense, a lot has happened in the world since my tour of South America took place. In fact, the world seems almost unrecognizable today from the one we all lived in back then. A virus named Covid-19 (and its variants) spread quickly and dangerously across the globe, making us hostages in our own homes. We became a planet of mask-wearers overnight. Schools and businesses closed, public events and foreign travel were shut down in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus, which, to date, has claimed more than five million lives worldwide. Everything has been upended: the job market, supply chains, the travel and healthcare industries. Political differences between people widened, some would argue becoming *nastie*r, as one group called for vaccine mandates while the other side refused to be vaccinated, at all. Suspicions, conspiracy theories and paranoia have abounded. Depression and suicide rates shot up…and so did subscriptions to Netflix and other

streaming services, as we all became a nation of binge watchers. And even now, two years into the pandemic, all I can do is hope the worst will soon be behind us and the world can get back to normal (whatever *that* means).

I underwent personal life changes during this period, as well. In January of 2020 I retired from the United States Postal Service after serving as a letter carrier for more than 25 years. Officially, I am now a traveling ex-mailman! And like so many people who put themselves out to pasture in the state of Florida, I bought myself a condo in a retirement community. I was looking forward to traveling more frequently now… but that, of course, was a pre-Covid sentiment. Since my South America trip back in 2019, I haven't left the United States once. And not for a lack of trying, either. I have had seven tours cancelled on me, including two in recent months. Currently, I am booked for several trips to Europe later this year, and I am keeping my fingers (and vaccination card) crossed they will proceed as scheduled. If not, who knows how long it'll be before I write another travel journal.

As for my South America tour, notwithstanding what happened to Debbie, I had a *wonderful* time. From majestic natural sites to vibrant major cities, I learned so much in a span of just 15 days. And I would gladly go back to see more. In closing, let me thank Debbie, Johnny, Paola and the rest of the guides and tour members for their companionship. One of the advantages of taking so long to write this journal is that the trip has stayed alive in me all this time. So, as I say goodbye to my readers for now, I have to bid South America farewell, too. But, hopefully, not for long. Till next time…

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to South America was from September 30th to October 15, 2019)