



**Megan Barrow is a junior at the University of Richmond studying at the Universidad Católica Argentina in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has been selected by the Office of International Education as one of this semester's Foreign Correspondents. The following are articles about her experience.**

*If you are interested in becoming a foreign correspondent for future semesters contact Catherine Orr [corr@richmond.edu](mailto:corr@richmond.edu)*

### **Lessons on the Road in Buenos Aires February 19, 2007**

I am attending a three-week pre-semester language course with three other Richmond students at the Universidad Católica Argentina, located in an expensively redeveloped port and business district in downtown Buenos Aires. UCA has no on-campus housing, so learning to commute to class is quite a change from running sleepily across the parking lot from the Richmond side dorms over to Jepson or Weinstein (for which I was continually late, by the way, and now have no excuse).

Adjusting to life in this sprawling home of 14 million citizens is, at least at first, about getting the details right. A helpful *porteño*, a resident of Buenos Aires, may explain the extensive system of independently contracted buses and instruct you in using the Bible of city transportation, the Guía "T" to navigate, but will forget to mention that you must tell the bus driver what fare you wish to pay as you step up. Or he or she may forget to let you know that the bus driver will hardly wait for you to get on or off the vehicle, and that it is better to push – politely, of course – twist and hop your way on and off so as not to lose a limb in the doorways.

Once onboard, it is also good practice to hold on to the nearest solid object and shut your eyes. Buenos Aires drivers both commercial and private are notorious for speeding mercilessly, cutting off other vehicles and ignoring any and all traffic laws, including lane markers, which may as well not even exist. As the bus abruptly accelerates and brakes, the impact of lurching is mitigated by the approximately five thousand people crowded into the aisle and seats around you; not even New Yorkers pack themselves into small areas quite like this. Nothing destroys American love of personal space like spending 40 minutes on the subway staring into someone's armpit or inadvertently sniffing the sweat on his upper back – and as February temperatures average 83 degrees Fahrenheit, there is undoubtedly sweat forming on the backs of daily commuters.

Despite the swaying and perspiration, Buenos Aires' collective transportation system can bring to you practically any corner in the city and provides a fascinating, if a bit shaky, view of the lush plazas and European architecture that color in the spaces between the wide *avenidas*.

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### **Uno, Dos, Tres February 23, 2007**

#### **¿Qué tiempo hace?**

I'm not particularly math-y, which presents a bit of a problem when traveling anywhere outside the US. When I arrived three weeks ago, sorely lacking in Spanish-language confidence, by default I began to talk with my host mom about the weather. She told me with wide-eyed emphasis that

this has been an unusually hot summer; temperatures have been rising to 37 degrees on some days.

Um...what?

I hadn't prepared myself for conversions. Ok, so back to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade science class -- 9/5 of 37 plus 32 equals Fahrenheit, right? -- but I couldn't guarantee that that formula was correct and anyway, I couldn't calculate it fast enough. So I faked it. "Whoa, *de veras? Qué calor!* (Whoa, really? That's hot!)"

### ¿Qué hora es?

Argentines certainly know how to make the most of 24 hours. The days begin like normal, with work rush peaking around 9 a.m. However, most Argentines only have coffee or tea in the afternoon and serve dinner at about 22:00, which is 10pm. Ordinarily, I'd be in the shower or settling in to write a paper, but here it is a different story. Attempting to go to dinner as early as 7 p.m. is nearly futile and it is common to see young children trailing behind parents on the street around 11.

### ¿Cuánto cuesta?

At the end of an impromptu trip to Uruguay last weekend, some friends and I stopped at a café to have a snack before boarding a ferry to return to Buenos Aires. When the bill came, I realized that my wallet contained zero Uruguayan pesos, 80 Argentine cents, and 95 US cents that I had forgotten to change into local currency. I had only ordered water, but to the chagrin of my penny-pinching soul water is bottled and therefore not free at any restaurant.

This particular bottle cost 35 *pesos uruguayos*. The exchange rate between US dollars and local currency is 24 to 1; dollars to *pesos argentinos* is approximately 3 to 1, and 7 to 1 between Argentine and Uruguayan money. How much did my water cost, and could I afford it? I had neither a full dollar nor a full Argentine peso, the restaurant probably wouldn't accept my American money, and neither of my friends had any use for it. I dumped all the coins on the table, shoved them across the table and said "Count this." My friend Kelly laughed and paid for my water (\$1.50).

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## Taking it All In February 25, 2007



Regular classes are almost upon us here in Buenos Aires. For three weeks Peter, Andrew, Santos and I took a daily four-hour Spanish course that incorporated cultural events as well: a bike and bus tour of the city, a museum visit, kayaking, and lessons about traditional card games and food. Since it only lasted from 9:00 until 1:00, the course also allowed us plenty of free time -- Andrew just recovered from a pretty nasty sunburn that he got during a trip to Uruguay last weekend.

In Uruguay I explored open-air markets, plazas and historical sites in Montevideo with Char and Kelly, two students from American University that have become good friends of mine here. The next day we rode a bus to Punta del Este, a premier summer hotspot, where we hung out on the beach, watched the sun set below the Rio de la Plata at dinner, and caught an outdoor *capoeira* demonstration on the boardwalk that Kelly and Char loved. (I first learned about *capoeira* at Richmond -- ask Jess Loman about seeing a show or going to a workshop!) While lying out on the beach we met a student from California and another from Turkey who were studying in Buenos Aires like we are; you never know who you'll come across in your travels.

We wistfully returned to the capital to focus on our Spanish skills, but class ended just a week later. To celebrate, Pedro, one of our Brazilian classmates who lives in Buenos Aires, had an *asado*, a barbeque, at his home. His mom, dad and younger sister are so sweet and their neighborhood on the outskirts of the city is beautiful. Pedro will be returning to school in Rio de Janeiro soon so we gave him an excellent sendoff.

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***Monedas Matter***  
**March 10, 2007**

There are four exits to four different corners from the Olleros *subte* (subway) station to one particular block in my neighborhood. I know my exit by the sight of the man who lies across the stairs there every morning and late afternoon. He asks for change, saying "*Monedas, chico?*" to each passer-by. A makeshift bandage covers one eye, and his cane and leg work together to block about half the entire stairwell. He holds what looks like a cigarette box up to subway riders. It always appears empty. When I see him, I know that I am walking up the correct staircase.

*Monedas* matter, and not just to those who are begging for them.

Buenos Aires' prime financial idiosyncrasy is its dependence on hard currency. There are an endless number of shops, restaurants and cafes that only accept *efectivo*, cash, as payment, a practice endlessly frustrating to someone who has functioned for nearly three years on a Spidercard and a Visa. Here, however, one must have cash at hand, and often that cash must be in low denominations in order to pay for meals and goods.

The devaluation of the Argentine peso in early 2002 from parity with the US dollar to a 3:1 peso-to-dollar ratio means that American citizens tend to withdraw large bills from the ATM, eliciting dirty looks from vendors who must produce sufficient change. The devaluation also means that tiny change, 1 *centavo* pieces, are worthless and rare, so totals are rounded to a multiple of 5. Bus fare must be paid with change only, and because everyone rides the bus, they're all hip to this frustrating coin-hunt.

Shopkeepers want hard currency in their pockets just as much as I do. There are endless numbers of handwritten signs hanging beside cash registers demanding a customer to *Abone con cambio*, pay with change. Caitlin, a junior from American University, said one kiosk owner she encountered asked pulled out three *monedas* from his drawer, insisting that those were the sum of his available change. If she couldn't pay with exact change then she couldn't buy the item, he said. One morning during orientation week, I lacked enough coins to get the bus to school. The banks were not yet open and I knew that no vendor would willingly exchange my paper bills – I had to run to the nearest pharmacy and hunt for an item that would give me back at least 80 cents for the fare.

Economic fluctuations have always seemed so distant to me as a young person with no real bills to pay and no deep interest in studying the subject. And although my fight to keep coins jangling in my pocket is superficial in the scheme of things, spending time in a country with such a recent fiscal crisis brings the subject closer to my field of vision. The homeless man in the subway is not alone. The preteen boys who accosted us for change outside a bar – after Caitlin denied one, he remarked offhand, "I bet if I took your wallet I'd find some change" – are not alone. Whether Argentines are homeless or running their own businesses, the weight of money is omnipresent.

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## **Observations**

### **March 26, 2007**

In Buenos Aires I have met people who are bi-, tri-, and sometimes quadrilingual. My host mom, for example, works at a hotel, so her proficiency in Spanish, English, German and Portuguese serves her well. (She's also learning Arabic.) The average man on the street speaks and understands a little bit of English, and boy, does one girl get to hear it. In-your-face flattery is a part of the culture here, a more extreme expression of the general Argentine sense of candor toward and open affection for other people, both known and unknown. An Argentine won't hesitate to ask about your marital status, natural hair color, or anything else you may be hiding, and they are always eager to know what visitors think of their country. The common greeting between friends and strangers alike is a kiss on the cheek, and couples old and young cuddle practically everywhere.

Citizens of Buenos Aires, called *porteños*, are unique and they are proud to let you know it. Unlike the rest of the nation's cities, Buenos Aires is composed primarily of European immigrants; the people maintain style, language and customs reminiscent of Madrid and Rome. Porteños use *chau* to say goodbye, for example, which is derived from the Italian *ciao*. That kiss on the cheek, given both going and coming to members of both sexes, is Italian, too. European influence is also clear in the local language; immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries developed slang words that have been incorporated into daily life and are unique to the Río de la Plata region. *Bondi*, for example, means bus, although I'm not exactly sure why.

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## **Anniversary of Argentine Coup D'etat**

### **March 26, 2007**

March 24, 2007 marked the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the coup d'etat that brought a dictatorship down on the Argentine people. Within seven years, state-sponsored violence saw an estimated 10,000 people illegally arrested, tortured, murdered or missing – *desaparecidos*, they're called – including activists, dissident college students and members of the press. My host mother told me that the reason that I so often hear American music from the 70s and 80s blaring over store loudspeakers today is because of the military junta's crackdown on local politically-tinged music. It's all she really got to hear during her teenage years.

As a young American coming into more mature political awareness, it is tough for me to imagine losing my right to dissent or being strongly discouraged from pursuing journalism. I look up and down the streets here, watching people stroll along Avenida Santa Fe or Calle Florida and wondering what their daily strolls were like 30 years ago. Exactly who were those men wearing uniforms in 1975? Did this man lose his son, his daughter, his wife back then? It's a sensitive subject, so I have yet to really probe the adults that I know about their experiences. However, there are plenty of books and movies from which to learn, such as *The Official Story (La historia oficial)*, which won the 1986 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

Today Argentines can laugh when they warn visiting foreigners of daily protests against various parts of the government. Most of the time protesters assemble in the city's main square, Plaza de Mayo, shouting in front of the presidential building. (The first meeting of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, mothers of disappeared children during the dictatorship, first took place here in 1977 and continued until last January.) Mass grumbling ensues when picketers who block the streets make traffic more horrific than it already is. However, that right to protest, no matter how inconvenient nowadays, came at the hands of years of suffering and an aftermath of fear. The people here have earned it.