

SNIPPETS FROM BUENOS AIRES

SHORT TEXT SNIPPETS FROM
THE YEAR 2000 IN RETROSPECTIVE

G.D. Leon

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*Two cities I've found very hard to leave in my life
were New York and Buenos Aires.*

—J.J. Feild

*You actually never leave Buenos Aires. There's a
part of you that remains behind and will always
stay there.*

—G.D. Leon

Introduction

Between 1993 and 2000, I visited Argentina often, and in 2000, I worked in Buenos Aires for several months. During that time, I started a webpage with short texts about this wonderful city and its unique inhabitants, the *porteños*, to let people at home participate in my adventure. Nowadays, you would call this compilation of short texts a blog.

This collection of snippets is translated from German to the best of my abilities. Also, I included, here and there, some of today's view. I am sure you forgive me; things look different in retrospective.

The Bus System of Buenos Aires

To get around in Buenos Aires, you have a multitude of options, walking for shorter distances, taking a cab or the bus. If you take the bus, be prepared for chaos, pure chaos. You almost have the impression to hearing a desperate 'let there be light' out of the sky.

However, it works. Somehow.

As a foreigner, arriving at Buenos Aires, you might look for maps and timetables, be it plans at bus stops, brochures in tourist offices, or online. Forget it. There are none, and I am even not sure if bus drivers have time tables. Probably, they just know when they have to leave in the morning and the rest is in God's hands. You can wait half an hour for a bus and then two or three arrive at the same time. Those situations usually ended up as races between the different buses of the same line. Under these circumstances, I gave up being at work on time, which anyway nobody expected in the first place.

And then again, I am always astonished how the Porteños are knowledgeable about this system. If you ask somebody how to get to a certain street at the other end of the

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city, they throw a dozen bus lines and street names at you, where to change or what alternative route you could take. Amazingly, they were right all the time.

After all that, would you still be surprised if I told you that certain lines change their route, depending on the time of the day?

Not really, right?

The Maze of Bureaucracy

In order to get a work permit or, at least, to clarify what documents I need for a permit, I had to go to the immigration office. For those among you who were born after 1990, back in the days, you did not have everything available on the internet, especially not a map through the maze of bureaucracy. The only thing available on the web were the opening hours, 7.30AM to 12PM, and a note that it was 'first come, first serve'.

4AM

I got up. Definitely too early, but, hey, what wouldn't you do for a dream. It was April, and Buenos Aires can be chilly in the morning hours. I skipped breakfast and coffee, and only little later, I was ready to hit the road, carrying a bunch of papers with me.

4.45AM

I was leaving the house toward the Retiro, where the immigration office is located. But where exactly? Remember, these were the days before interactive maps on smartphones, and the area wasn't great for a stroll at night. After 25 minutes wandering around (note: not all wanderers are lost, but I am sure whoever is lost wanders around), I

found the entrance, and after another 5 minutes, I reached the end of the line.

5.30AM

Finally, I was standing in line. Right in front of me, a woman carried a baby, and behind me, a young couple joined the line shortly afterwards.

6.30AM

In the meantime, I had reached the middle of the line. Not that I would have moved forward, but the line behind me got longer and longer. I started chatting with the young couple behind me. They had moved down from Bolivia four years ago, and now, finally, they got all their papers together to start the immigration process. It was the ninth time for them in line.

7.15AM

A boy of about twelve years started selling coffee, with limited success, as most people had brought their own coffee or mate tea or an entire breakfast. I got a cup. It tasted awful, but at least, my hands could hold something warm. The woman with the baby was joined by her entire family - her husband and another five kids.

7.30AM

Surprisingly, the doors opened on time. Actually, I did not see it, but the line started moving.

8AM

They had let batches of about fifty people in. Half an hour after opening, it was my group's turn. We were let into a hall and sorted out by immigration officers. "For medical examination and extension of residence permits to the right. For residence permit requests and general questions to the left. Everybody else follows me."

I went to the left, turned around the next corner, and had to wait in line again. The entire hallway was full of waiting and chatting people. The noise of a bee house was in the air.

8.45AM

Somebody at the end of the hallway shouted something, but I couldn't really understand. The lady next to me was so nice to help me. For information, go to him, he had said. I bypassed the entire line and finally entered a room with five information desks and no other way out. Hence, I had to be right, but which desk should I take? The woman behind desk five looked the nicest, so I chose that one. It turned out to be the wrong one. I should have taken the first one.

9AM

Finally, I was standing in front of the right desk. If you thought the suffering had an end, you would be wrong. Guess which desk was unmanned? Right, mine. After a while, I asked the clerk at the desk next to it if there would be somebody coming.

"Sure, shortly," was his answer.

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Now, whoever is used to the Latin American 'shortly', knows what comes next; I waited and waited and waited.

10AM

I was still waiting in front of an empty desk when the clerk from the desk next to it took pity on me and moved over. Five minutes later, I was standing outside the office again with five brochures in my hand and the certainty I would be back several times.

The laconic comment of my Argentinean coworkers: Welcome to Argentina.

However, with some years' distance and more experience with bureaucracy, I have to admit this is the same in most countries I know.

TV in Argentina

Watching TV is similar to the US, and then again, different. You have about 70 channels of which, at least, 10 channels are sports only. If you expected these sport channels to bring current events, you are wrong. Only the big games are shown live. The rest of the time, they bring old documentations, such as Maradona's most beautiful goals or the world championship 1978 (when Argentina won the last time).

On the other channels, they show a lot of movies. Movies are great, but the synchronization is horrible. I guess they have only limited people who do the different voices. Switching between movies becomes funny, when Clint Eastwood sounds the same as Brad Pitt or Meg Ryan has the same voice as Angelina Jolie.

Here, I have to throw in a word for my Argentinean friends; most synchronizations are not made in Argentina, but in Spain. Luckily, the latest blockbusters are typically with subtitles, which is a relief from synchronization.

Another break from bad synchronization are Argentinean movies. They have a great movie industry with lots of crime thrillers or dramas. Particularly, I love movies like *The Journey (El Viaje)*, with its surreal irony and sarcasm on Latin

America, which ultimately turns into a declaration of love to the continent. *South (Sur)* is another movie I love. It is an early attempt to reconcile with the military dictatorship focusing on the despair and hopes of the families of the ones who disappeared without notice. Last but not least, *Burned Money (Plata Quemada)* is a great movie to learn about *Truco* and the Argentinean soul.

Then there are the local news channels, filled with every detail on the daily life of Buenos Aires, which bank was robbed last night, what were major car accidents, and the who is who of politics, economics, and show biz. Unlike in the US, Argentina is centrally organized; therefore, the TV coverage of the rest of Argentina is minimal. But there is something else in the local channels, the soap operas, especially *Champions (Campeones)*. It taught me a lot about Buenos Aires slang. I can't say I loved it, but it is addictive in a trashy way.

On a separate note, have you ever seen *Seinfeld* in Spanish. The characters are gaining something...

Random Laws

In Argentina, the Congress and the Senate handle law making, and the President has the authority to issue decrees, similar to other countries.

During the time I spent in Buenos Aires, I was able to witness special circumstances around the lawmaking process. After former president Menem couldn't be re-elected anymore, the government changed, and with it, a lot of laws were undone. This caused turbulence. Need examples? Here you go:

Change of time or Lawmaking by trial and error

In October 1999, the parliament introduced summer time, moving the clock one hour ahead on March 4th, 2000. So far, so good. However, on February 29th (note: 4 days before the implementation), the same parliament cancelled the law. Explanation? The switch would have caused higher use of electricity due to the earlier dusk. Sounds logical, however, I don't really understand why this was not thought of back in October 1999. It's not like the astronomical factors had changed in the mean-time.

Presidential Pension or Decisions for the Decision's Sake

Shortly after the end of his presidency, Menem applied for his pension. He didn't need it, but it was his right. Well,

unfortunately not; two years before, he had implemented a decree that presidents are not entitled for pension. Most other former presidents outside Argentina would swallow the bitter pill, but not Menem. He sued the government with the justification that the decree was against the constitution.

First World

During his second term, Menem decided by decree that Argentina is a First World country.

Drink and Drive

Argentina is a vast country, with 29% of its population in 0.14% of its space. The rest of the country is nearly empty (Province Santa Cruz has more sheep than inhabitants) and so are the streets. Usually, you don't need highways with two lanes outside the larger cities. There is always enough space to pass.

Most people drink *mate* while they drive - similar to people drinking coffee on a road trip in the US. But here is the snag; for *mate*, you need both hands, at least to refill the cup. For those how don't know *mate*, it is a shrub and the *mate yerba* (=herb) is the ground and dried leaves. Here is a mate recipe for beginners:

1. Put the *mate yerba* into a special, wooden cup until the cup is filled about 2/3.
2. Boil water and pour it into a thermos flask.
3. Take the *bombilla*, which is a metal straw with a tea strainer at the end, and put it all the way into the herb in the cup.
4. Fill the cup with hot water.
5. Sip the mate through the *bombilla*.
6. Refill the cup with hot water and continue sipping.

Some refer to it as a tea, but no Argentinean ever would. It's mate.

Now, you might imagine why it is difficult to drink mate while driving; *Mate*, thermos flask, and steering wheel = 3, hands = 2. Drinking *mate* while driving is an art, and I am surprised it hasn't been banned yet. Well, probably, because the cops do it as well.

Okay, one last thing; drinking mate while driving only works outside Buenos Aires. In the city, you would not get far.

The Way to a Man's Heart is through his Stomach

I love Argentinean food. Argentina is meat heaven, and I love meat. The first time I went into a grocery store, I noticed meat is less expensive than salad or vegetables. I also noticed the rawer cuts are more common than the smoother meat. They typically use the filet part for ground beef I got explained. Meat is omnipresent, and the relationship with the animal is deeply grounded in the country's culture.

However, meat is not the only specialty. Practically on every corner, you can find street cars or delis selling *empañadas*, large dumplings either baked or fried. They are filled with anything you can imagine, from seasoned ground beef, cheese and onions to vegetables, you name it. There are even some sweet ones, with chocolate or *dulce de leche*. There is one for everybody. You have to love it.

Speaking of *dulce de leche*, I didn't really embrace it when I first arrived in Argentina. It was simply too sweet for my taste. For those who don't know it, *dulce de leche* is basically a viscous caramel. Argentineans love it, be it spoon by spoon directly out of the cup or as *alfajores*, which is *dul-*

ce de leche between two sugar cookies. My love grew eventually, and now, I am kind of addicted.

Last but not least, I have to admit that Argentina spoiled me in some ways. I will never drink orange juice again, except maybe freshly squeezed at a plantation. A friend has a connection to an orange plantation, and regularly, he gets a large gunny sack of ripe oranges for a decent price. The oranges are too ripe for export, but perfect for direct consumption. We make orange juice out of them, and never before, and I never again, have I had orange juice as rich and sweet as this one.

Truco

It takes time to learn to play *Truco*, but not because of the rules. The rules are not complicated; it is because of the cheating. But first, a glance of the rules - you have a set of cards with the ace of sword as the highest and the ace of clubs as the second highest. Every time you win, you get a point, but you can kind of bet to win by saying *Truco*, which makes the point worth two. If the other player says '*retruco*', it means he actually thinks he wins, and with the phrase 'I want it to be four' you can counter that one. It is not only about who has the better cards, but the best players make you think they have the better cards and cheat, without been caught.

Truco is, like *mate*, omnipresent in Argentina and played anytime at any place. Last week, we played at a friend's house - the entire day. We started at eleven in the morning and didn't stop until past midnight. Obviously, we had the whole Argentinean culinary experience, from *mate* to *dulce de leche* and from *empanadas* to Malbec. However, the best experience was two days ago. I was sitting with a friend at the shore of the river Paraná, and close by, there were two random guys playing guitar. We chatted, and soon after, we played *Truco*, using the guitar as a table; and we only stopped when we could not see the cards anymore.

The Sports

Argentinean love to bike. On a nice weekend, the streets of Buenos Aires are full of bikes doing a tour around the city. Sunday is probably the safest day on a bike in the city. Other sports that are popular include Basketball, Tennis, Polo, and horse races etc. Who doesn't remember Gabriela Sabatini or hasn't heard of Juan Manuel Fangio.

However, nothing compares to soccer. Argentina is crazy for soccer.

Soccer is when an archbishop explains passionately and wildly gesticulates about how Argentina won the soccer world cup in 1978. Soccer is when every Argentinean freely admits it was Maradona's hand and adds with a wink and a grin that it is like playing *Truco*, "...if they don't catch you..." Soccer is when a country is divided between Boca and River, the two major teams of Buenos Aires. Sadly, soccer is also when you can't go to a live game anymore, because there is so much violence that people get killed.

Eventually, they all unite when the national team is playing. Soccer is omnipresent in Argentina and, following the example of Maradona, for a lot of poor kids, the hope to do better.

Tango

I always considered tango to be the most erotic dance, more than samba or salsa. Don't get me wrong; they both are hot, but tango has this notion of love and battle, of conquer and resistance. There are probably a thousand books about tango, and it will be hard for me to add something substantial.

But here is this: Yesterday, I went for a stroll in San Telmo, one of the older quarters that kept its colonial style. The sun and the warm weather invited to discover, and on one of the squares, there was a couple dancing Tango. I've been to Tango shows before, but that was different. Soon after they started, a small crowd had built a ring around them, creating a small stage. At some point, they invited people to try it too. Well, the man invited and some women tried it. Some were a little clumsy, but most did it well. The woman was waiting on the side, and when I asked her, she explained that the man must lead, and the better the woman can follow, the better it looks. She added, with a smile, this guy was an awesome leader, and I should try it too. I must have looked a little puzzled as her smile turned mischievous. Finally, she solved the mystery; men used to learn tango dancing with men as there were not enough women around in the early days of the immigration. In Argentina, nobody would think

something wrong when a man was dancing tango with a man.

They were dancing in one of the many tango shows in the city, and these gigs in the streets of San Telmo were just additional income. I asked what they were feeling when they were dancing and if they were a couple. This question caused them to burst into laughter. When they had calmed down again, she revealed they were siblings and dancing felt like the fights they had when they were kids. Now, I had to laugh.

We sat there for another twenty minutes, chatting about Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata, where they originally came from, tango, empanadas, and wine, before they got up again for another round of dances. I watched a little longer and continued with my stroll through the quarter, heading for the Puerto Madero around the corner.

They added a new angle to tango for me. It can also be brotherly love and fight amongst siblings. Tango is so much more than we see in it and different for each and every one.

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More from G.D. Leon:

THE FRIGORIFICO

A dying town. A family on the rocks. Can Ruben break the cycle of destruction before he loses it all?

Ruben and the entire town of Santa Rita, Argentina depend on the Frigorifico, a major factory and the town's main source of work. When the factory closes down, Ruben must make a choice: hope for a reopening or start over somewhere else. After deciding to move, Ruben must do so without any of his family or loved ones.

As he makes a new life for himself in Buenos Aires, he watches the situation in Santa Rita deteriorate. The most disturbing part is that his brother, Frede, is immersed in the violence that continues to spread. And as a result, everyone Ruben loves has drifted into harm's way.

When tragedy strikes, despite his best efforts, Ruben must come to terms with the past, the present, and what will become of the future.

The Frigorifico is a work of literary fiction for the 99%. If you like powerful storytelling, real characters, and literature that peels back the curtain of today's society, then you'll love G.D. Leon's chilling look back into a bygone era.

Release date is August 21st, 2016 and will be available at all major retailers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G.D. Leon is a novelist with roots in the German language.

Gilbert David Leon's journey brought him from Zurich, where he grew up, to the greater New York area, where he lives with his beautiful wife. Stations on his journey included Berlin and Buenos Aires, leaving impressions that remain until today; even though it has been more than a decade since he left Buenos Aires, he still enjoys drinking mate, playing Truco, or listening to Argentinian music, from Tango to folk music.

He has a Bachelor in Business Administration from the University of Applied Science, Zurich, a Master's degree in MIS/IT from the University of Wales, and a Master in Business Administration from the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, Collage Park.

Outside writing, sports, and reading have given spots on Gilbert's agenda, and he loves to travel the US and the world. Other hobbies include old books and book sales. He can spend hours hunting treasures, and usually, he ends up with one or two boxes of used books.

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