



Kids playing football in La Boca

ALL PHOTO COURTESY: SAMAI HAIDER

THE BARRIOS OF BUENOS AIRES LA BOCA & SAN TELMO

SAMAI HAIDER

The barrios of Buenos Aires has been split into three parts: Monserrat & City Centre, Palermo & Recoleta, and La Boca & San Telmo. This is the third instalment in the series.

Throughout my writings, I have focused on the *barrios* (neighbourhoods) where I had spent the most time during my stay in Buenos Aires. They also happen to be the most touristy. There are so many other neighbourhoods that remain unexplored. “Next time,” I placate myself. But for now, I have saved the most colourful for last—La Boca and San Telmo.

La Boca

Media reports suggest the neighbourhood of La Boca epitomises all the dangers of Latin America that mothers, and many tourist forums alike, warn you to stay away from—violent crimes, shabby, ghetto-like housing and tourist touts. However, it still draws in tourists in droves. La Boca plays host to El Caminito, a colourful and quirky strip of houses and cafes, and is also home to La Bombonera, the Boca Juniors’ stadium. While my husband was lured by their sporting glory, it held little appeal for me. However, once I got past the fearmongering (read: stopped reading about tourists being robbed at gunpoint on travel forums) and made my husband promise not to go wandering off the main tourist thoroughfare, I realised, deep down, I too wanted to visit this working



Quaint little empanada shop, San Telmo

class *barrio*, not just to check an item off the tourist checklist, but because I wanted to get a feel of what a real working class neighbourhood in Buenos Aires would be like.

As I stepped off the bus and I took in the rundown apartment blocks and shops with iron bars on the windows, I quickly realised we hadn’t quite disembarked at the tourist strip as recommended. Local

youth hung around street corners with cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths. My imagination went into overdrive. With mounting anxiety, I pushed my son’s stroller over rutted streets and past a desolate canal as my husband jauntily consulted his map and led us towards La Bombonera. It turned out to be the rear entrance and we were advised to take a different route to the



San Telmo by day

front. My nervousness escalated as I noted armed police stationed discreetly around the neighbourhood.

We were soon enveloped by a sea of blue and gold (or rather, yellow)—we’d reached the home of the Boca Juniors. Every house, café and shopfront within the vicinity of La Bombonera was painted in the team colours, only interrupted by the occasional football themed mural. The stadium itself, a mammoth block of concrete (also painted blue and yellow), wasn’t much to look at. But its sheer size, unusual layout and the neighbourhood, sure made the trip worth it. Shopkeepers, too, proudly wore their colours and helped us with recommendations for best lunch spots. We ended up in La Glorieta de Quique, an Argentinian grill just across from the stadium. Sporting the Boca hues and lined with Boca memorabilia in various stages of disrepair, the restaurant is popular with Boca fans. We were welcomed indoors with hearty slaps on our backs and seated promptly, my son in their trademark blue and yellow highchair. They served up a scrumptious *choripan* (local sausage sandwich) and plenty of football conversation.

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