



Montevideo Musings

What we'd thought would be a breezy two-hour bus ride from the coastal town of Colonia del Sacramento to the capital of Uruguay, Montevideo, quickly turned into a four-hour affair. We were less than 50 kilometres from town when our bus stopped by the side of the road, where we remained fidgeting in our seats, simultaneously trying to guess the cause of the delay and bouncing a groggy toddler back to sleep. We failed spectacularly at both our endeavours. The rest of the passengers, however, seemed completely unperturbed, nonchalantly sipping their mate (a South American herbal drink) and smoking. After what seemed like an eternity, we were shepherded onto another bus which hurtled down largely nondescript freeways, stopping infrequently to let passengers on and off.

Late night wanderings

We reached Montevideo late on Friday and checked into our hotel, which hinted at having had a more glamorous past, but regrettably hadn't managed to retain either the splendour, or the care. After relieving ourselves of both our heavy packs and bursting bladders, we set out to explore the city that in all honesty was never really on our tourist radar. The trip was a spur of the moment decision we'd taken while we were based in Buenos Aires.

We made our way towards the only patch of green we spotted on the map—a promised playground for our travel-weary toddler. Despite the late hour and the shuttered shopfronts, the square was alive and pumping. Diners mulled over their meals while children raced around an elaborate fountain, turning a deaf ear to their parents as they ran through the frigid spray.

Couples sat entwined under trees as more gregarious groups of friends spread out over park benches. All conversations were centred around the communal mate, as friends shared their gourd around, topping up from steaming thermoses of hot water. We followed the thumping beats of live music to find a group of octogenarians, their faces sallow under the street lamps, but expressions vivid, demurely doing the tango. It was tango danced like I'd never seen before. Groups of onlookers cheered and some even joined in. And in that instant, I was utterly captivated.

Roaming the Old Town

The charm, however, was short-lived as the next morning dawned cold, wet, and abysmally grey. It was also deathly quiet. Montevideo is supposedly home to over half the Uruguayan population, a statistic I found hard to believe as we walked the empty streets of the capital,

lined with cafes and shops, all of which remained firmly shut well into the afternoon.

We wound up at Plaza

Independencia, bound by a larger than life statue of Uruguay's founding father, José Gervasio Artigas, on one side and the phallic features of Palacio Salvo on the other. Designed by the same architect behind Palacio Barolo in Buenos Aires, Palacio Salvo seems to defy engineering and artistic rigour, its towers looming over the surrounding buildings. Looking up at it from the spartan expanse of Plaza Independencia, it seemed almost fantastical, like something out of Dr. Seuss. Its intricate architecture set the tone for the day as we ducked down cobbled streets towards Ciudad Vieja, or Old Town. En route, my head swivelled from side to side, akin to watching a tennis match, as I frantically tried to absorb the grandiose architecture on display—offices with art deco facades, churches with colonial



A warren of stakehouses

pasts and apartments that wouldn't be out of place in classical Paris. It made me want to walk while staring up at the buildings and not pay heed to where I was stepping. Which is how I found myself stepping in steaming mounds of dog poop; on not one but three separate instances.

We passed the leafy quadrangle of Plaza Matriz inlaid by yet another elaborate fountain, and headed towards the Mercado del Puerto, the old portside market. A meat-lover's dream, the market is a veritable warren of stalls that sell a variety of traditional *asados* or barbecued meat. We came to know during our mid-morning saunter that the market only opened for lunch—knowledge that made us rue our hearty breakfast at the



An artist sets up in front of Mercado del Puerto

PHOTOS: SAMAI HAIDER

hotel. Upon entering through the iron gates, we were greeted with rows of *parilla* (traditional grills placed directly over a fire), each bedecked with a mind-boggling variety of steaks and sausages. Boisterous waiters, some waving menus while others brandished tea cloths, tried to steer us in the direction of their respective restaurants in a manner that isn't unlike the shopkeepers in Dhaka's Chadni Chawk market.

Dining in Montevideo

Our experience of food in Uruguay has taught us not to judge a book by its cover. Uruguayan food is not always pretty, but it is certainly hearty and delicious! We stumbled upon some unexpected gems during our stay. Gnocchi, or *ñoqui* as they call it in Uruguay, is a beloved dish. It is so loved that they have an entire day dedicated to eating *ñoqui*. On the 29th of each month, it is considered good luck to eat *ñoqui*. Restaurants introduce special menus for the day and grandmothers toil over the kitchen table, hand rolling each delectable bite. That's how we found ourselves in Ruffinato, an Italian restaurant across the street from our hotel. It came highly recommended and given what we'd learnt about *ñoqui*, we just had to try it. And it delivered. The *ñoqui* was melt-in-your-mouth delicious. The *tomato y herbasauc* (tomato and herbs for those of us more familiar with Dolmio's bottled sauces) was silky smooth. There was something magical in its simplicity, pure and exquisite. We'd even ordered a basic spaghetti Bolognese for

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