

South America 2009

Since we made 4 transatlantic crossings in 3 months in late 2007, we vowed to stay in our hemisphere for a while. In 2008 we went to Costa Rica, took a Columbia River Cruise, and visited Sedona and the Grand Canyon.

We planned to continue that into 2009 by taking a cruise from Rio to Buenos Aires on the same ship we cruised from Venice to Istanbul. One of the great natural wonders of South America is Iguassu Falls on the border between Argentina and Brazil. Kathy loves waterfalls, and I suggested we see if we could take a side trip there on the cruise.

I called our travel agent, and she said the cruise line offered a trip, but it was \$1200 per person extra, which we thought was out of line. We always have a Vantage Travel catalog handy, so I checked to see if they offered anything like that. We had traveled with Vantage before, and were quite happy with their arrangements. Also, we get a 5% rebate from each trip applied to our next trip.

Their brochure did list a South American land trip, and not only did it go to Iguassu Falls, but also to Santiago and Santa Cruz in Chile! I called our travel agent and cancelled the cruise and called Vantage Travel and made our reservations.

Vantage is very good about keeping its travelers informed, and sent us a "Fact Book" on all we were going to do and see. The only problem we had was the air arrangements. They had us leaving LAX for Miami on a 7 AM flight with a 6 hour layover in Miami. The return flight was Rio-Sao Paulo- DFW-LAX which was also grim. The worst part other than the layover was the fact we would have to leave the house at 4:30 AM for the 7 AM flight.

I called Vantage and told them that was unacceptable and to rebook us on something more reasonable. Well, they came through for us. We leave at 9 AM instead of 7 AM, and the return is Rio-Miami-LAX.

SANTIAGO, CHILE

Our flights from LAX to Miami and then to Santiago were uneventful, except LAN Chile's gates were in Concourse J, and American's were in Concourse D. It was a heck of a long hike, and we could not get one of the little carts to drive us there.

We ran into a Catch 22 situation-they would not take us to the LAN Chile terminal because we did not have boarding passes, but we had to get to LAN Chile to get the passes!

The overnight flight was rather comfortable, as we were in the last row and the seats DID recline. Kathy had been stuck on a flight years ago where the seats in the last row did not recline.

The first order of business was to pay the \$131 arrival tax before we could go through Immigration and Customs. The clerks were agonizingly slow and the line was long! Fortunately, we had brought our Travel chairs, which are folding tripod stools with a canvas seat. This made the wait a little easier.

After going through Immigration and Customs, we were escorted to our bus by our Tour Manager, Alex. We were all tired from the long 8 hr flight from Miami, and wanted to get to the hotel to freshen up. Unfortunately, despite warnings posted all over the airport, someone in our group decided to bring some fruit in their luggage.

We had to sit in the bus for 2 hours while the fine of \$200 was assessed and paid.

Because of this delay, we checked into our hotel and then embarked on a city tour.

One of the highlights was a trip up a funicular up San Cristobal Hill for a city view. At that point disaster struck! I had taken my camera for a couple of pictures, leaving my camera bag. I thought Kathy was watching it and she thought I was, so when we got on the bus I discovered it was missing! Fortunately, I had my camera, so I just had to replace all the things in the bag.



We went to dinner at a really great restaurant, which featured empanadas, a meat filled turnover. The highlight of the evening was when Kathy and Mary, one of our group were asked to go up to the bar to have a Pisco Sour contest.



In Chile it is made with Pisco, a local brandy, powdered sugar and lime juice. In Peru, it is made with the same ingredients, but the white of an egg is added. So they both whipped up a batch, and one of our group was asked to judge which was better. Kathy's Pisco Sour won, and we found the secret was to use powdered sugar rather than the granulated I was using at home. The next day, after getting a good night's sleep, we headed out on a City Tour. We visited the Cousino Palace, the Alameda and the colonial cathedral. We arrived at noon, and the cathedral bells rang out with the same chimes as Big Ben in England.



In the afternoon we went to a Pre Columbian Museum that was quite interesting. It seems that the person who collected the many objects did so with his eye to their artistic content rather than the archeological interest.

From there we went to local handicraft market where we had lunch. In passing on store, Kathy spotted a beautiful life sized hand carved wooden chicken sitting on a nest of shredded brown paper. Well, all the roosters in our kitchen were getting lonely, so we just HAD to have it. Kathy had brought a neat fold up wheeled bag, and we put the chicken in it for the entire trip. The chicken was well traveled, and we are putting flags of the countries it visited on the bottom!



While on my way to a local market around the corner from our hotel, I saw a restaurant called "Miguel Torres-Vinos & Tapas". Their blackboard menu looked interesting, so we went there for dinner. We dined on the second floor balcony overlooking one of the main streets, so we could watch the passing parade of people.

Our waiter was named Bastian, and he came from Cologne, Germany. Since I had been there, we talked a little about the city and what he was doing in Chile. Needless to say the service was excellent, and the food and wine were also. In fact we decided to dine there the following night also. The funny thing was, in speaking to a couple of others in our group. They went to a TGIFridays! My thought was I did not fly 13 hours to eat at a place 5 miles from my house! The next morning I went to a camera store about a block from our hotel and bought a new charger, batteries, and a camera case. When I chose my camera, I insisted on one that ran on AA batteries as they are very common. One of the other people in our group left his battery and charger at a hotel, and had to replace the special and very expensive battery.

We went from Santiago to Valparaiso, the port city, and Vina del Mar, which included a nice but winding shoreline drive. We stopped to tour the Fonck Museum, which had a Moai from Easter Island in front of it. Inside, in the corner of one of the display cases, was the mummified remains of a young girl, found in the arid Atacama Desert. When Kathy saw the girl, she remarked what a shame it was that the girl wound up in the corner of a display case.



After we left the museum, we were supposed to go for lunch at a local restaurant. The bus drove around for about a half hour, and ended up 3 blocks from the museum! It seems the restaurant was not ready for our group, so we had to drive around until they were ready.

SANTA CRUZ

The next day we went by bus to the wine country of Santa Cruz. The south latitude of Santa Cruz is about the same as the north latitude of California, and we were struck by how much it looked like Southern California. We checked into the colonial style hotel, which had a big plaza across the street.

The hotel owners also owned the museum and the casino. The museum had a neat old steam engine, and a parlor/sleeping car.



Kathy's sons had given us a set of walkie talkies for Christmas, and we took this opportunity to find out how they worked. While I wandered the local streets to find a bathtub stopper and a replacement battery, Kathy visited the museum that was around the corner from the hotel. When I was on my way back to the hotel, I called her on the radio, and she responded that she was in the central plaza of the museum. That really worked for us, and we used them again in Buenos Aires. That night we went across the street to the plaza, and just people watched. A little stray dog came over to us, and I petted him. He looked up at me with those big brown eyes, and I told him I would bring him some sausage from breakfast the next morning. The dog then just walked around to the side of the bench and lay down, as if he understood me. Well the next morning, as I was heading for breakfast, I will be darned if the little dog was waiting for me! So after I had

breakfast, I grabbed some of the ham they had out, and fed it to him. That afternoon we were taken out to a winery for a tour, a tasting, and a sunset dinner. Kathy and I were struck with how much the vineyards and surrounding terrain looked just like Napa or Sonoma.



Before we went for the tasting, we were taken by tram up to a hill where there were representations of artifacts from some of the indigenous peoples. There was even an Easter Island moai that was sculpted from local stone, but carved by a native of Easter Island, as well as a representation of the Sun Gate



We were then taken to the winery for a tasting of both red and white wines. The white and rose were good but one of the reds had enough tannin in it to leave one with a fuzzy tongue! From there we were taken by van up the hill to the restaurant, where we were served chicken, beef and some great bratwurst, along with the wines we tasted earlier. It was a very pleasant way to have dinner among the vines.

BUENOS AIRES

The next morning we caught a flight from Santiago to Buenos Aires, which crossed over the Andes. Even though it was summer there, snow was still on some of the peaks. We were delayed in the airport because of an immigration problem with one of our party, so we got to the hotel rather late. We just had a snack at the hotel bar, which had some unusual decor. Our hotel was on the main street in Buenos Aires, which is 14 lanes wide and featured an obelisk



nce.



The following day we were taken on a city tour which included the Casa Rosada (pink house) which was the official residence of the President, and the Plaza de Mayo and the main cathedral.



From there we went to a great flea market where they had 2 guitarists playing. Kathy mentioned the music to one of the others in our party and she sneered-“I only listen to classical music”. When Kathy told me what she had said, I laughed, because they were playing a classical piece by Albeniz. We both went our separate ways in the market, and when it was close to time to leave, Kathy called me on the radio to tell me she was by the musicians!



We also went to the La Boca area, which was originally populated by Italians to do some shopping. They had some paper mache figures hanging from the balconies. I picked up a little souvenir for my curio cabinet, and Kathy got a refrigerator magnet. From there we were taken to Café Tortoni, which was over 150 years old, for lunch and a Tango lesson. We watched the demonstration, and watched as some of our group tried to do the Tango.



That night we were taken out for dinner and a Tango show, which was great as far as the dancing. Also featured was a lady that had to be older than Sophie Tucker and two men playing instruments similar to accordions or concertinas. Most of our group agreed that those two acts were too long.



The next day we were taken out into the countryside to an estancia or ranch for lunch and a show of horsemanship. It was quite pleasant dining al fresco instead of in a restaurant. After lunch we were taken to a field where we were given a display of the gaucho horsemanship. The gaucho had the horse lie down and hide him, as they used to do when the Spanish soldiers were looking for them.



We were also taken to the Recoleta area of Buenos Aires to the cemetery where Eva Peron is buried. Her maiden name was Duarte, so she is buried with her family. There were many interesting mausoleums, some in great shape and others in disrepair.



Returning from the ranch, we went to Florida Street, a long pedestrian street of many blocks. We were taken to Silvia and Mario's, a famous leather workshop. Kathy and I both purchased custom-made leather jackets made from goatskin, and I was impressed by the feel and texture of the leather. At one time I had a faux leather jacket, which Kathy referred to as a "vinyl tablecloth", and I am almost embarrassed to admit I ever wore it!

I was also able to find a shop that sold the SD memory chips for my camera, and bought a replacement for the one I lost in my camera bag.

It was a very long walk back to our hotel from the leather factory, so we stopped at a sidewalk café and enjoyed a bottle of local wine while we watched the people passing by. We noticed a very ornate door on a building across the street, and found out it was a Naval Officer's club. In our travels along Florida Street, we also saw a couple dancing the tango.



On our last full day in Buenos Aires, we took a boat tour of the Tigre Delta, which was one of the rivers leading to the Rio de la Plata. It was Kathy's kind of tour- boat, water, etc.



We passed many nice homes and a floating grocery store that serviced the homes in the area. It was a lovely trip, and we stopped at a restaurant called the Gato Blanco, or White Cat. We had a nice lunch, accompanied by some local wine, and just enjoyed the scenery.



That evening we were to go to a home hosted dinner, but we had to pick up our leather jackets first. Mine fit OK, but Kathy's had to have the sleeves altered. While she was waiting she found a

shop next door that had beautiful leather purses with a floral design on them and bought one. We made it back to the hotel with about 10 minutes to spare.

There we 3 groups in our van, each group going to a different home. We found out later that one of the other groups got stuck in an elevator for an hour!! Our hostess was a very nice lady, who introduced her daughter, who was studying English, and a friend who was an attorney. She asked each one of us to say a little about ourselves. After that we sat down at a large table for dinner. Unfortunately, her air conditioner was broken, and it was extremely warm in the apartment with all the people there.



IGUASSU FALLS

70% of Iguassu Falls is located on Argentinean territory, but most of the falls face Brazil. For this reason we will see the falls from both the Brazilian and Argentinean sides. During our visit to the Brazilian side, we saw a lot of the falls, whose quantity always depends on the current volume of water. At some times during the year one can see as many as 275 separate waterfalls cascading along the edges of 1.6 miles) cliffs. The biggest attraction is "Devil's Throat" where the largest volume of water passes with a strong and impressive roar that can be heard several miles away. Eleanor Roosevelt, when seeing these falls, said, " Poor Niagara, compared to this, you look like a water spigot"

We had a very early departure from Buenos Aires the next morning, because we wanted to spend more time at the falls. We were taken to the main entrance to the Argentine side of the falls and transferred to a double decker bus. Our bus then proceeded to the hotel to drop off our luggage. We boarded a train that took us to a one-mile catwalk to see "Devil's Throat". Since words cannot adequately describe the experience, I will let the pictures speak. I also took some videos with sound of the falls, but cannot put them in this story.





The next day we were taken to the Brazilian side of the falls, first stopping at a large souvenir store that featured some fantastic pieces.



From there we were taken to a fantastic bird park that had a large number of flight cages and some of the most beautiful birds we have seen.





I was wearing my Crocs, which are open toed, and this toucan thought my big toe was edible, and started nibbling on it! That was a strange feeling!
From there we went to the Brazilian side of the falls, which were fantastic!





One of the optional excursions offered was the Macuco safari, which involved taking a trip through the jungle ending up at the dock where we would board a fast Zodiac for a trip upstream and under the falls. I asked Kathy if she was interested, but it had her favorite offering- fast boat, water, etc., so we booked it.

We were issued life preservers, and I had brought a big ziplock bag to protect my camera. It was an E ticket ride up to the falls!! We ran through rapids until we got to the base of the falls.



At that point I had to put my camera away, but there was a guide in the bow of the boat taking videos with a waterproof camera! Kathy and I were sitting amidships, so we were featured in most of the video. We were carrying on like kids, and demanded we go back under the falls again! I had been on the Maid of the Mist that got near the falls in Niagara Falls, but it does not hold a candle to the experience here! We were totally soaked, but since it was so hot there, it was a welcome experience. We dried off at the dock, and headed back to the hotel.

RIO DE JANEIRO

The weather so far on our trip was beautiful, but as I believe in the balance of nature, when got to the airport for our flight to Rio, the heavens opened! There was thunder and lightning, and they had to close the airport. The upshot was our flight was cancelled, and our tour director had to make other arrangement with the airline.

The airline told him there was only room for half of our group on the next direct flight, and the rest would have to wait until the next day. That was totally unacceptable, so we ended up flying from Iguassu to Curitiba, which I called cubabooba, and that cracked Kathy up. From there we flew from there into Rio, getting in rather late.

Because of our late arrival, our tour manager and the local guide rearranged our schedule so we would not be totally exhausted by the end of the day.

Our first stop was Corcovado (hunchback) Mountain, which has a 270 foot statue of Christ the Redeemer on top of it. The view of Rio from there is spectacular- you could clearly see the race track, the lagoon, and the surrounding mountains covered with clouds.



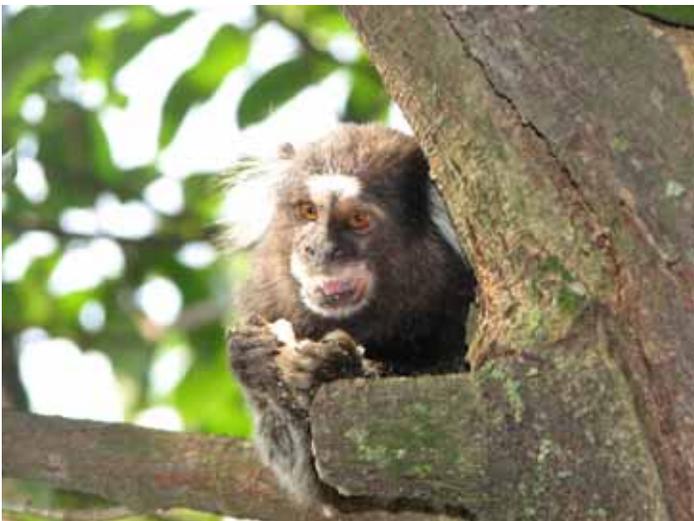
From there we went to Sugar Loaf Mountain, which resembled the old loaves of sugar that were sold before we could buy them in a box in the market. There were 2 separate cable cars to get to the top, with a shopping and eating area on the lower hill. There were clouds halfway up the mountain, so when the cable car appeared it came out of the cloud like it was from the Twilight Zone!



The view from there was fantastic, as we could see beaches on the other side of Rio, as well as an old fort that used to protect the harbor.



There were also some cute little monkeys in the trees around the intermediate landing site



Our next to last night in Rio was to be a gala affair, with dinner at a Churrasco, which is a Brazilian way of roasting meat and serving it on swords. Unfortunately, 14 of our group were vegetarians, so accommodations were made for them. To compound the problem, the restaurant had fired most of the waiters that day for showing up drunk. The service was spotty at best, but we got through it.

From there we went to a Samba show, which had fantastic costumes.





For our final day in Rio, we took a Guanabara Bay boat tour around Rio. It was a beautiful day, and we were served Caipirinhas, which is the national drink of Brazil. It is made from sugar cane liquor, lime and sugar with ice. It was very refreshing, but it could sneak up on you!



On the other side of the bay, the building looking like a flying saucer is a museum of modern art. On our way back, we passed an old customs house that had a Moorish design.



On our final day in Rio,

We were taken to the airport for our flight to Miami. The flight was uneventful, and quite comfortable, being only half full. When we got off the plane, there is this horrendous long walk through a special passage to get to Customs and Immigration. We claimed our luggage, went through customs, and rechecked our bags for the flight to Los Angeles.

I realized we would have to go through Security again, and that we had bought two bottles of the sugar cane liquor in Rio. Fortunately, I had my large carry on, and the chicken gave up some of its foam wrapping so I could wrap the bottles and check the bag.

The 5-hour flight to LA was also not full, so we could get some rest.

In summary, this was a fantastic trip. There is nothing that can really describe the feelings we had standing over the falls at Iguassu Falls. Of the cities we visited, we liked Buenos Aires the best, as it was the most cosmopolitan and was the easiest to get around.

This is the first trip we have taken after I retired, and it is a pleasure not to try to go to work the next day with jet lag.

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