

Hola! Buendia!

Off to the home of the erotic Tango, the exotic Mate tea, to where they boast three head of cattle for each human one, flew the 2007 NAS Concert Tour ensemble. Ahead: performances in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Montevideo and Puerto Colonia Sacramento in Uruguay – and *DANGER!*

The danger, fortunately, lay mostly in the *grande* amounts of beef (3 cattle for each inhabitant, remember) and *Dulce De Leche* – a thick caramel-flavored treat made from sweetened condensed milk and reduced to a pasty consistency or a solid mass, depending upon how long the milk is simmered. *Dulce De Leche* goes with everything. Except beef.

Then there was the cold. Leaving North America's torrid summer temperatures for South America's winter where for the first time in 90 years snow fell on Buenos Aires, coughs and sniffles were bound to bloom. Nonetheless the chorus always delivered performances not to be sneezed at (sorry).

Upon arrival in Buenos Aires our company of 29 (19 singers, including an Argentinean bass who met us there, 1 conductor, and 9 groupies) was embraced (almost literally) by Luiz, our merry, unflappable and very knowledgeable tour guide. Shaped somewhat like the Michelin Man, Luiz was fluent in several languages and spoke with an accent that might be described as Euro/British. Luiz was rarely without a smile, even after learning it was always best to refer to NAS schedule times as "-ish." He would sing snippets (sometimes lengthy) from opera or musical theatre, all in a lovely tenor voice all while sheepishly claiming he couldn't sing. It didn't stop him and we didn't mind.

Buenos Aires, being a big town like New York, people talk *fst!* We quickly adjusted from the traditional "Buenos Dias" to the local "Buendia." Here large, and I mean "grande" boulevards multi-multi lanes wide, cut through a grid-like pattern of small, old European-sized streets not quite adequate for the motor traffic, nor were sidewalks made for walking in anything but single file. But being old hands at navigating crowds, we had few collisions with the natives.

But we had a delightful close encounter of the first kind early in our stay when the group split into five to have a home-cooked meal with a local family eager to meet visitors from that other America to the north, to practice their English and simply extend a hand of friendship. Discomfort with the unfamiliar faded quickly on both sides. Art, economics, and politics were discussed and few disagreements could be found – at least in our group, a family of four in three generations: grandmother to teenaged girl. Grandmother's English was perfect, Mother's very good, teenager's understandable, a miracle given even an Argentinean teenager's proclivity to teen argot. Our Spanish was basically absent. The meal was delicious and included a dessert featuring... you guessed it.

The church of San Nicolas de Bari in Buenos Aires filled to near capacity to hear the Coro de Cámara de Morón, a local ensemble, and us. We performed a program of Sacred, American, Romantic, Argentine, and Spiritual pieces. As usual, André Guthman's rendering of "Ain't Got Time to Die" filled the house with enthusiastic, standing ovation applause. But what warms the heart doesn't necessarily chase the chill from the bones and both choruses eagerly departed for a local pizza parlor for hot food and anti-freeze of local wine.

La Plata, one hour outside of Buenos Aires to the Teatro Argentino which goes Lincoln Center one (or more) better by being a center for all the arts, not just the performing ones. The singing contingent was scheduled for a workshop with Oscar Escalada, Argentine composer, one of whose works they would perform.

The singing ensemble could not stop singing the praises of Mr. Escalada and his workshop, challenging the singers to go deeper into the words and music to add richer colors to their performing. As an outside observer, I can testify that after that workshop there was a significant improvement to the chorus's acting. Scout's honor.

Sunday and Gaucho country! Like our cowboys, gauchos were basically independent contractors who lived off the land and have since become romanticized – and tamed. But a barbecue for several hundred visitors (it's a little theme park-ish) is no mean trick and we tasted no fewer than three cuts of barbecued beef followed by a dessert flavored with – yep.

That night, an optional Tango Dinner at La Esquina Carlos Gardel. You eat – beef if you're still up to it – and after your dulce de leche dessert are enchanted and stimulated by a lusty and energetic singing/dancing Tango performance. Truly great fun. Much speculation was devoted to figuring how the women's beautiful tho' sparse and often transparent costumes remained on the women. Something about near-invisible plastic bands...

On to Uruguay! Pronounced "Uruway" by the way. The "g" seems to become an "h" or "w" sound here. Even Argentina is pronounced "Arwhentina." Maybe a version of the Castilian's "th" substitution for "s?"

Crossing the border by high-speed ferry we alighted in Colonia del Sacramento, one of the oldest colonies in Uruguay founded in 1680 by Portuguese sailors and, for too long, a site of territorial dispute between Brazil and Uruguay. Today it is a small and quiet village of cobble-stoned streets, rich in history and hoping to be Uruguay's "Williamsburg." It's too nice for that, if anyone asked me. But if you want to know a real good restaurant, do ask me. At the exchange rate of 24 pesos to the dollar, a grand meal can be had for no damage to your IRA.

Later in the Basilica del Santisimo Sacramento, in response to plummeting temperatures and pleas from deeply chilled singers, Conductor Clara Longstreth was heard to say, "Do what you need to do to survive." Instantly, jewel-colored blouses were swathed with

sweaters, vests, jackets, and scarves, and Clara herself conducted in her long coat. In the Basilica, a spare but resonant house of worship, our chorus shared the stage and a standing ovation with the Coro Municipal de Colonia. All the warmth exuded by the audience was welcomed by our chorus whose ranks were already diminished by one voice-crippling cold. No time to cry. Montevideo waits!

Home to 50% of Uruguay's population, Montevideo is a small Rio with a Rio-like curving sandy beach nestled on what appears to be a sea, but is in fact a river, the Rio de la Plata. Combining Deco, Italian, and Spanish architecture, the town is a famed summer resort. But in all seasons the crowds can be found in the Old City with its restaurants and art galleries. Unfortunately, a slight air of danger can be found there as well. One evening, a gentleman of our party was accosted by a trio of local anti-socials seeking immediate re-distribution of the wealth. But -- get ready for it -- were foiled and trounced by a duet of an alto and a soprano.

For our final concert, we shared the Montevideo spotlight with two other groups at the Santa Elena Chapel, the largest venue of the tour: the Santa Elena Youth Choir and the Santa Elena Polyphonic Choir. Once again the chill was driven away by more than 200 attendees rising to their feet and applauding happily at the close, prompting an encore with the other two choruses.

The most important performance came later at the farewell dinner when the Groupies Chorus sang Gail Duncan's parody to Bernstein's "Somewhere," summarizing as usual the lighter darker side of the tour. The evening ended early for those heading off for the Iguazu (Eeewhazu) Falls at dawn, but the celebration went on. And on. And on.... (I'm told.)

All in all, an adventurous and pleasurable journey, and special huzzahs and hallelujahs to the new Travel Co-Chairs, Paul Parsekian and Ellen Stark! Well done!

The Iguazu Seven.

Who would want to miss experiencing 2.5 miles of 275 individual cascades plummeting close to 300 feet into a gorge below? Sadly, only seven NASers (actually nine, but two were traveling separately from the seven) snapped up the opportunity.

You can see the photos, watch the videos, but there is nothing like being in the presence of one of Nature's most magnificent creations. Watching peaceful water moving ever faster toward the abyss, becoming suddenly furious as it races in a roar over the edge is both hypnotic and thrilling. Magnify that by 275 cascades and you have a visual and audio experience second to none, along with the heart-pounding excitement you feel just for the joy of being alive and there to witness it all.

As if we were not already wet enough from the mist and rain, we were also treated to a speed boat ride to the foot of the falls. The captain at first teasingly dodged the falling

water, building his suspense. But then, as if on malicious impulse, boldly turned into the torrents of water, emerging and tilting the boat sufficiently for the additional emotional charge of a potential capsizing. Thrilled screams sound pretty much the same in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. Delighted.

Unforgettable? You bet. If you missed it. You really missed something.

Downside? The only downside for me is the fitful sleep and repeated nightmare of Michael Chertoff of Homeland Security pounding on my door demanding I show my Uruguay boat pass. (Inside joke. You'll have to ask one of the Iguazu Seven.)

Buendia and Saludos Amigos from Señor Ed Schultz, Groupie 2nd Class!