

News From Somewhere

By

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URUGUAY SPECIAL ISSUE



I left O'Hare on January 20 and came back from Uruguay on January 30. It is summertime in South America, and the

high was 88 degrees on one day, but most of the time it was in the low 80s with a mild ocean breeze. In Illinois and most of the US, those 10 days were the coldest of a very harsh winter. Champaign had about 8-9 inches of snow and many days of temperatures that hovered around zero degrees Fahrenheit. I had timed my vacation perfectly!

I had a very inexpensive fare via Copa Airlines (Panama's flagship carrier) for \$700 roundtrip. But arrival was late in the evening at Montevideo's Carrasco Airport. It was empty at 10 pm, so no problem with taxis, except there were no taxis! I tried Uber though and it worked perfectly. A nice young man picked me up in 10 minutes and took me to my hotel in central Montevideo. I asked him if he spoke English and he politely said "No señor", so I asked next "Habla Esperanto?" and he guffawed! Like so many other people I came across in the next nine days, he smiled easily and was naturally friendly.

I don't even remember crawling into bed, I was so tired. I slept right through the night without waking up once.

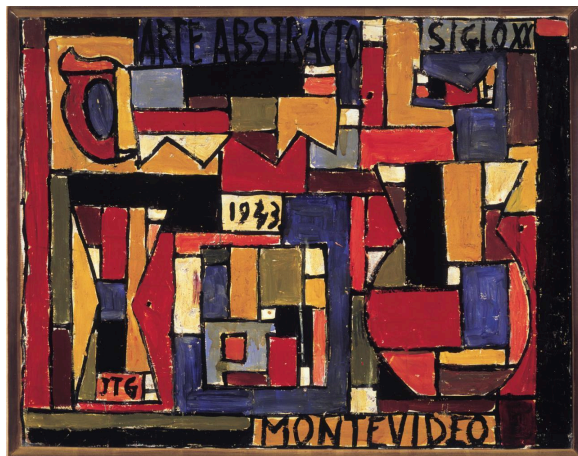
My hotel included a nice buffet breakfast, and I went right for a cup of coffee, strong and delicious. Lots of bread, cheese, ham, and salami, and even more cakes and pastries. It seems Uruguayans like a big choice of sweets with their morning coffee.

Then a leisurely walk around the city center at around 8 am. It was bustling with people arriving mostly by

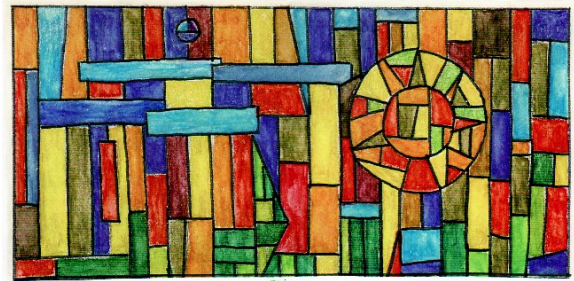
bus to their jobs. I even found a place to exchange some US\$ to UY pesos and it wasn't a terrible rate. Turns out though I didn't need a lot of cash. Paying with a credit card works very well throughout Uruguay.

At 11 am I met Vanya, my college friend from my Kentucky days, who was spending three months in Uruguay to get away from North America's winter and the endless poison of the trump regime's propaganda machine. He was enjoying the mild (so far) summer of South America, and was taking some conversational Spanish courses.

We walked to the pretty Ciudad Vieja and looked at the museum of Uruguay's most well-known artist, Joaquin Torres-Garcia. He had lived in Spain, France and New York City but moved in his last years back to Montevideo. His art is geometric and full of vibrant colors. I've loved his paintings for a long time, and we're kindred spirits in that he invented his own alphabet and "hieroglyphics"... which are featured in most of his artworks. He was quite eccentric that way, and Uruguayans are very fond of him!



His main disciple was a fellow Uruguayan: Jose Gurvich, of Jewish background who lived several years on a kibbutz, and died young while living in New York City. He has his own museum a few doors away from the Torres Garcia gallery. We visited that one later in the week. Also excellent.



(my own homage to Torres Garcia, painted in 2001).

Vanya and I had a great lunch in the chain restaurant called "La Pasiva", which specializes in Uruguayan dishes. I had the classic "chivito", a bit similar to a hamburger, but made with grilled sliced steak, and topped with mozzarella, lettuce, onion, tomato, and a fried egg. Served with fries, all for about \$11 US. Quite a bargain and the beef was so delicious and tender.

We walked a different route back to the city center, where preparations were intense...that night was the start of the Montevideo Carnival. The partying would be wild that night, and Carnival lasts forty days...it goes right through most of Lent! Quite a variation on the tradition elsewhere in the world, where carnival ends the day before Ash Wednesday. But Uruguayans are not very religious. They don't even celebrate Christmas as a legal state holiday. It's called instead "Dia de la Familia".

Church and state have been separate for more than 100 years already, and Uruguay is the most secularized country of Latin America. Probably even more so than officially atheist Cuba.

Day by day the pleasant weather continued, and my memories of what I did each day are already a little hazy...but I did enjoy exploring the city with Vanya and on my own, trying various dishes at inexpensive restaurants (never more than \$20 a meal plus something to drink, and usually less than that). Around the corner from my hotel was a small Chinese takeout! The staff was not Asian but the chef was. The price was super low at 525 pesos for 2kg of food from a buffet (about \$12.50 for 4 and a half pounds!) It was actually quite good if not at all spicy. I bought a little jar of a pepper sauce to liven up the meals, because I like to try Asian food wherever I visit. And completely UNLIKE Mexicans and Central Americans, Uruguayans are not that fond of spicy dishes!

I went over to Vanya's airbnb for lunch one day and then we took the bus to Parque Rodo, which has a museum of Uruguayan-only artists, including more paintings by Torres-Garcia. Vanya is staying in Buceo, very close to the Rambla, a miles long coastal park and series of beaches right on the sea (officially the fresh-water Rio de La Plata). Quite a lovely view from there.

One day we met my pen-pal Javier, who I found when I was reading up on expat life in Uruguay last year

around April. He wrote about his homeland on a reddit forum, and did it so well I contacted him directly. He turned out to be an excellent ambassador for Uruguay, and we kept in touch the last year, arranging for him to meet with Vanya when he arrived, and to meet with me when I got to Uruguay. In person he is very friendly and speaks fluent English, and is full of information about his country and living in Montevideo. He took us to a great small restaurant for steak in the Ciudad Vieja and then we chatted for a long time in a nearby cafe that was in a renovated old pharmacy, just beautifully restored with a cozy atmosphere.



On Sunday the weather was again beautiful and sunny, and I made my way from my hotel to the huge weekly flea market on Calle Tristan Narvaja. I was looking forward to this because I adore

outdoor (and indoor) flea markets, and this one in Uruguay is known as one of the biggest and most interesting there is anywhere. I got there about 9 am and wandered around slowly until close to 2, having some snacks at an area full of food trucks and stalls, and browsing book stalls on and on and on. For everyday shopping, Montevideo residents know they can get great produce and all kinds of other fresh food at prices much lower than the supermarkets, which specialize mostly in imports from elsewhere in Latin America or even Spain, Italy etc. They tend to be very expensive as a result. Also just about every item needed for the home is on sale at the flea market, new or used at bargain prices. And there's lots of junk too!



Without a doubt, this flea market was the highlight of my trip. I even found several book treasures that I had seen on the web for really inflated prices for next to nothing at the book stalls. The only place with flea markets that were as much fun as Montevideo's for me are the many indoor/outdoor versions of Berlin in Germany, especially because I like so much to come across old East German ephemera.

The next day was the warmest one during my stay, when it reached 88 degrees. I went 60 miles north to the town of San Jose de Mayo. It has about 30,000 people, but was incredibly quiet during my visit. Some people commute to Montevideo to work, others work at home, but very few people were out and about in the city center. The whole town is pretty, without the big city graffiti of the capital. All the houses and shops were very tidy. I had another chivito at a local restaurant, walked all around the center, and then took refuge in the local public library. Without the coastal sea breezes, San Jose was quite hot in the midday sun. The library also had wifi. I chatted in very broken Spanish with the librarian there, who was extremely sweet and friendly, especially when I told her I had worked "treinta y dos" (32) years as a librarian.

I had plans to visit a pretty seaside town created by a local wealthy utopian in the early 20th century called Piriapolis, about an hour and a half east of Montevideo, but alas, all my exploring caught up with me and I slept in the morning I planned to go. Instead I visited the large indoor Mercado Agrícola near the national legislature and had a pleasant lunch at a place called Hoy Cocina de la Abuela (Grandma's Kitchen). Quite good, but the most expensive meal I had in Uruguay, at about \$18 plus a cola. The market was full of great produce vendors and fresh meat stalls, along with more than a dozen restaurants. Love that kind of place!

Before leaving, I met again with Javier for a nice supper at an Italian restaurant in Pocitos, a seaside neighborhood. On the 29th of each month, it's a tradition for Uruguayans to have gnocchi for dinner. We were one day early, but it was on the menu, so we had it. Potatoes AND pasta! A great combo 😊

The day after my Mercado Agrícola visit, it was time for me to go home. I started early in the day from Carrasco Airport. It only has eight gates, so it wasn't very complicated to check in and go through security and passport control. The flight had plenty of room, I had a whole 3 seat row to myself. I was even able to nap for about two hours...which is very unusual for me. There was a 4 hour layover in Panama City, which has the most expensive junk food of any airport I've ever been in, so I settled on a Nathan's hotdog, fries, and a cola for \$15. A total ripoff! 😊

Arrival back in Chicago was at midnight. I was expecting a hassle from the customs and border control gestapo, but I aroused no suspicions and was waved right through. I suddenly was outside in a taxi shed in a long line. The temperature was 2 degrees Fahrenheit. Well, that was the most unpleasant part of the whole trip! It was a 20 minute wait for a cab. And then we got stuck in a boondoggle traffic jam on the road out of the airport. My taxi driver muttered "To hell with this!" and went into the shoulder/emergency lane, speeding past thousands of cars stuck in traffic. Definitely illegal and dangerous, but now

and then it is important to just go with the flow...or against it! I saved a lot of money in extra waiting time on the taxi fare, and I was just so tired I think I fell asleep for a few minutes as we made our way to the Loop...suddenly we were already at my hotel. I slept well.

Next morning, I was on the 8:15 train to Champaign, and soon was piled into bed with Pushkin. He was happy but surprised to see me! He'd been loved and fed by a new catsitter while I was away. Lucky Pushkin 😊



Bolthole Tourism

Part of the reason I went to Uruguay was to see if it could be a Bolthole for me. What is a Bolthole Destination? It's an escape hatch.

If I get to that day when I conclude about living where I do: "That's it! I'm out of here!"...then a bolthole would be a helpful place to go to. Off the top of my head, there aren't a lot of

places I CAN go to. Most of them would be impossible because they would not accept me. I don't have a genealogy passport, meaning I have no ancestors that could provide me with foreign residency. My ancestors came to the US from the UK and Germany way too soon!

And other countries that I like wouldn't have me because they actively discourage retirement immigrants: Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands come to mind. Almost impossible for an American to settle down there, although the super-rich can always do anything they want...but I have very, very little money.

Uruguay wouldn't mind having me at all. They don't have a whole lot of restrictions that would make it nearly impossible for me to get permanent residency there. There is a certain amount of bureaucracy involved, and a bit of money that would need to be spent, but I could pass the hurdles and even be able to afford to move there.

But would I want to do it? The people I came across in Uruguay were relaxed and sweet, and that's important. It is a real democracy and not one in danger, unlike what is happening in the US right now. Some 53 years ago, Uruguay became a dictatorship and it lasted for 12 years: from 1973 to 1985. It was a nasty time, and about 10 percent of Uruguayans left the country then, a very high number of people. After that low point in their history, Uruguayans seem to have learned a valuable lesson: democracy is better

than a dictatorship...ALWAYS! Since then, they have done a very good job keeping their country from developing a far right, and its far left is just a small part of it leftist coalition of parties.

But Uruguay is not utopian. It has problems of poverty and crime (neither is extreme, but there is more of both than there should be). It has a genuine decency though that I like, it has a lot of people of good will, and Uruguayans would rather have a good time than quarrel to the point of ruining the life they have. Nearby Argentina and Brazil have a lot more problems with extremism, both political and economic.

At this point, I already live in what is probably the most appropriate place for me in the USA: Champaign, Illinois. The national scene is dreadful under trump, and I am not very confident that the opposition Democrats can "save" the constitutional liberal democracy of the USA. As long as that DOES hold though, I am fairly safe in CU, IL. If that all goes down the drain, I'll reassess. It might be too late...but I'm just not going to pack up all my books, my little wonder cat, and me and emigrate right now.

I did however thoroughly enjoy visiting Uruguay for 9 days. One of the best vacations I've ever had, and I've had some GREAT ONES in my time.

Comments always welcome at
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