

If we had a dirham for every time we heard the words "credit crunch" in recent months we would be able to bail out the banks and put the world back on a safer financial footing.

Economic doom and gloom is undeniably the topic du jour of conversation and speculation about how the world will look post-crunch is making most media headlines. But speculation may not be necessary.

Those interested in how a once financially prosperous and secure city will look in the aftermath of an economic crisis should take a peek at Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, which is recovering from its own economic crashes; the most recent, eight years ago.

Argentina was once one of the world's wealthiest nations. Rich in natural resources, its huge, flat plains also allow for excellent agriculture – rice, soya and cattle products – including what is regarded by many as the best steak in the world. However, along with north America and Europe, Argentina suffered from the Great Depression in 1929.

It has hauled itself up by its leather boot straps several times thereafter, but it has never managed to regain its prominence among the countries with which it had previously rubbed shoulders.

Boasting an educated middle-class population, Argentina's sophisticated, classy capital was testament to that.

Today Buenos Aires still looks like a European city. Wide, imposing buildings shadow several large main roads where cars and buses jostle; pollution and traffic jams being a testament to that.

Clusters of shops and cafes spill their customers onto the smaller side streets lined with trees, squares and parks, serving as lungs for the city.

DANCING IN THE STREETS

In our continuing series on world economic centres, Amber Melville-Brown delights in the slightly faded glory of the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires



MAKE SURE YOU QUICKSTEP TO ONE OF THE TOWN'S DANCE HALLS TO EXPERIENCE BUENOS AIRES' NATIONAL DANCE, THE TANGO

TANGO VIBRANCY

One expects Buenos Aires to be vibrant like Argentina's national dance, the tango. No doubt it once was, with flashes of colour, music pouring from windows flung open against the summer heat, while in the cool of the evening hot-blooded arguments followed by passionate embraces would be found at every corner.

But today it feels a little subdued, like a slightly aging tango dancer whose heels are sore and who has heard the tune once too often. Nevertheless, she still has the rhythm in her heart and falteringly attempts the steps with which once she stunned those who flocked to see her.

This October, people certainly did flock to Buenos Aires – 4,000 lawyers to be precise – not for the tango or the sights,

but for the International Bar Association's annual conference. Suited and booted they busied around the conference hall clutching their branded document bags tightly to their chests – perhaps the result of wild-fire-like rumours that they were likely to be robbed in what to many was a strange south American city. It certainly didn't help that many naively allowed name badges to swing in a care-free manner around their necks, serving to announce their legal (and potentially moneyed)

status to those in the streets of Buenos Aires.

There are many poor residents in the shanty towns that surround the city who, with children in tow, sell cheap jewellery or rummage through rubbish bins to find plastic bags to recycle, presumably for a fee.

But all work and no play makes Jack and Josephine rather dull lawyers and practitioners attending the IBA conference will have managed to find a few spare moments away from their seminars,

"ONE EXPECTS BUENOS AIRES TO BE VIBRANT LIKE ARGENTINA'S NATIONAL DANCE, THE TANGO, NO DOUBT ONCE IT WAS..."

BlackBerries and mobile phones. So, what was on offer for them in Argentina's "Big Apple"?

Meat. You can't escape it in Argentina. My vegetarian travelling companion tried, only to be forced to take refuge in plate after plate of chips and salad. Even the ubiquitous, steam-rolled cheese sandwiches have ham in them.

CARNIVORE'S DELIGHT

The menu in most of Buenos Aires' restaurants is extensive, but extensively carnivorous. Indeed, some menus don't just describe the cuts and the weight of the fare on offer, but provide graphic pictures of the meaty slabs lurking behind the smiling barbecue chef's back. All for a ridiculously small bill, steaks as big as your head can be consumed – if your stomach is proportionately large – while the fresh and colourful vegetable and salad accompaniments, just as enormous, are rarely eaten. A quaint local touch in most quality restaurants is to "amuse" the diner's "bouche" with what is in effect a small Cornish pasty; succulent pastry filled with ... meat. But there is plenty more for those who prefer something a little more cosmopolitan.

The new kid on the block is intriguingly a restaurant with no name in the quirky end of town called Palermo Soho, on the corner of Thames and Charcas streets – Buenos Aires' streets are largely on a grid, so even a restaurant with no name is relatively easy to find. Still unsure? Look out for baskets of huge, red tomatoes, bottles of sweet-smelling oil hanging from the ceiling and window boxes, not of flowers, but delicately scented herbs to whet the appetite before you look at the huge blackboard menus.

The chef is a native Argentinian, back in his home town after two years in London. There



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LUJAN CATHEDRAL; LA BOCA; EVA PERON GRAVESTONE

he worked for celebrated British chef Gary Rhodes at a restaurant that, during his time, achieved its first Michelin Star, so expectations are high.

The chef describes his fare modestly as "simple, well-cooked food," although with customers already flocking back for something a little different only two weeks after the restaurant's opening, this bijoux bolthole away from steak is likely to have a bright future.

It's not all about food. Argentina boasts a world-renowned wine region – Mendoza – producing good, great and spectacular wine. Parisian-style, high-ceiling bars jostle for position among the more formal restaurants. Plates of cheese and, you guessed it, cured meats are provided to

accompany a glass of wine or a cold beer or lemonade.

Café Tortoni in Avenida de Mayo is one of the oldest in town. On the left is a tango room, but those who have not booked in advance for the show can still hear the music seeping through the door beneath a thick red velvet curtain into the informal cafe, where white apron-sporting waiters serve cocktails and meals under stained-glass skylights onto marble topped tables. The cafe cocktail concoction of champagne, "yellow liquor" and sherry is unexpectedly good.

DANCE

Tango is the national pastime of Argentina. Dancers do not throng the streets as perhaps they once did, but dance halls

are still popular around the country. At 6am one morning, having travelled nine-and-a-half hours on an overnight coach up country, my bleary eyes met the bleary eyes of the youth of Mercedes as they stumbled – not drunk but happily exhausted – out of the town's dance hall after a Saturday night of revelry.

Visitors to Buenos Aires have several tango options to choose from. The young Eva Duarte, as portrayed in the Rice-Lloyd-Webber musical, tantalises Buenos Aires that she offers the city "just a little touch of star quality" as she arrives in the capital. And star quality is what we were treated to at Tango Pasaje Carlos Gardel.

Taken up to our balcony table, we looked down over well-set places and a dozen or so handsomely clad waiters standing in a row in front of the opulent, curtained stage, hands behind their backs, waiting to spring into action. Service was excellent, as was the meal. Prices for the dinner and show are inclusive and the house wine or champagne will flow all night if you let it. The menu boasts a good choice – including steaks, of course – of beautifully executed and delightfully presented food.

The show starts a little cheesily with a promotional video of Argentina on a large screen over the stage. But all is forgiven once the show starts.

Taking the audience through tango history, it is entertainingly choreographed and excellently performed by artists in stunning dress.

If you go to Buenos Aires you'd be a fool to miss the tango. And if you go to the tango, you'd be wise to go to Tango Pasaje Carlos Gardel.

OUTSIDE THE CITY

Argentina is a large country and having completed a business trip, those with a hankering for

a little more than what the city has to offer may want to explore areas away from the concrete and brick. Given the country's size and location, you can include a trip to Patagonia, on the southern tip, to watch huge chunks of ice carve off the blue glaciers, or visit Peninsular Valdez, where whales and elephant seals form massive crèches at sea and on land for their giant offspring. To the east, the wine country of Mendoza tempts those with a nose for the fruits of the land, while on the border with Brazil at the north-east, the adventurer can see one of the natural wonders of the world the Iguazu falls.

Less suited and booted businessman are alarmed at the prospect of an unadulterated overdose of nature; it should be pointed out that set within or near the national park, hotels, including the Sheraton Resort & Spa and the Grand Hotel & Casino, offer all the usual luxuries. Those looking for something a little more rustic might opt for La Aleda de la Selva, a new establishment set in the rainforest. Work, however, is still ongoing and one of the first sounds to meet my ears – not ideal in the rainforest – was a chainsaw. I was relieved to hear that it came not from loggers, but the forthcoming spa.

From any of these establishments the falls are easily accessible. If possible, plan a visit to coincide with the full moon. Once a month the park is opened to visitors enabling a lucky few to take a guided walk – after a short ride on an “ecotrain” – to the spectacular Devil's Throat waterfall. Walking silently over platforms across the dark, shiny water, the sound of the falls fill your ears. And then you see it or to be more precise, you feel it.

Standing at the top and mouth of the falls, you feel the rumble of the water as it speeds beneath



THE EYE-WATERING IGUAZA FALLS

and crashes downwards, soaking you in a white curtain of spray that infiltrates even the best waterproof. Screams of delight add to the delight of being so close to one of nature's mighty forces.

Nature, however, doesn't have to shout to be impressive. The image in my mind's eye of riding a horse through Argentina's pampas grasses was only surpassed by the reality. This is possible on a day trip out of Buenos Aires. There are a number of ranches easily accessible where you can simply enjoy a sunny brunch or learn to play polo.

PAMPAS PLEASURES

My equestrianism indulgence was experienced far out of the city, in the wetlands of Corrientes at the Esteros de Ibera. This is a vast watershed

surrounded by pampas. And those who really do need to relax and unwind away from the office should seek out the “corner of help” that is Lo Rincon del Socorro. The “estancia” is a 30,000-acre former cattle ranch beautifully transformed into a small, eco-tourist lodging for guests in the midst of a private nature reserve that aims to “give guests a good understanding of the local ecosystem and an appreciation for the importance of wetlands and savannah landscapes”.

With only a few rooms, guests are made to feel part of the family – and indeed it is a family affair.

Impeccably run by Valeria and Leslie Cook, the staff includes another married, local couple – he tends the organic garden while she turns his produce into fresh, wholesome

dishes to accompany the authentic free-range Argentinian barbecue.

All the children are taught in a tiny school next to the tack room in the stables. When lessons are over, they splash about in a pool that is sporadically dive-bombed by multi-coloured birds or paraded past by dignified looking rheas.

From the peaceful, colonial-style affluence of the osteria, guests can take nature walks guided by the charming and knowledgeable Rosio, who will introduce them to the neighbourly multitude of birds and comical capybaras, the world's largest – and mostly aquatic – rodent. The area also used to be home to the magnificent jaguar, although it has now not been seen here since the 1930s.

That may change. Lo Roncon is not just a hideaway for the discerning businessman. It is also home to a small team of researchers and biologists – headed by the expert and tireless Sofia Heinomen – whose 20-year mission is to restore the wetlands to their former glory, having been damaged by overgrazing of the cattle that feed the nation's bellies and their pockets. This is no mean feat, lawyers will appreciate the legal hoops to be leapt through and disputes arising with local cattle ranchers, eager to protect their livelihoods.

Nevertheless, Sofia Heinomen is confident that she and her colleagues will succeed in the plan masterminded by the owners of the reserve.

For the time being, it's suffice to say that if the exciting project of reintroducing the native anteater into the region – a creature who looks really too bizarre to be real – is anything to go by, the biologists and conservationists are at least on their way to achieving their goal. ●

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