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The Making of the President

By Nick Marnell



Cafe in the trendy Palermo district Photos
Nick Marnell

A few issues ago I wrote about my online dating experiences. What Lamorinda readers do not know is that my terrestrial dating experiences have spanned both hemispheres. In fact, I once traveled to Argentina to ask its president, Cristina Fernandez, for a date. I was bored in Moraga, she was newly single and she seemed like a lot of fun, so I bought a plane ticket, rented an apartment in Buenos Aires for a month, and I flew there.

It was the first time I tried international apartment living. I always stayed at hostels or guest houses, and at those, a front desk person will help you, or fellow travelers will guide you. Even the time I rolled off of a boat and stumbled into a snake farm in Nicaragua, the owner at least told me what snakes to avoid as I walked to my quarters. Here, I was on my own, totally dependent upon strangers.

First, I sent Madame Presidente a Christmas card. Since she was all by herself, maybe lonely during the holidays, I asked her to take a break from the madness of her job and meet me for coffee. I enclosed my contact information and mailed her the card and hit the Buenos Aires streets.

My first observation: Forget that "dressed to kill" myth about Argentina. Young people, texting away on their iPhones, wore American clothes, usually T-shirts, tennis shoes, even flip flops. The late hours required an adjustment. A 10:30 p.m. dinner was routine, and the bars picked up around midnight, at the earliest. Victor, a bouncer, told me that the ladies in Buenos Aires love to practice their English so I shouldn't get too carried away with learning Spanish.

Most of the folks whom I told about my plan for coffee with the president thought I was out of my mind. Justina, a tough, tiny, opinionated lady who worked in the import-export business, did not speak kindly of her leader. "Everyone knows she was having an affair with one of the senators," she said.

Neither was Maria, an attorney, amused by my attempt to go on a date with Ms. Fernandez. She hated her; nearly everybody I talked to hated her. "The educated people do not like her," said Maria. "Those who are lazy, and want handouts, they love her;" which was how I felt she had marginalized me. Maria did give me her phone number, but I wasn't sure if it was for social reasons, or if she thought I might need her legal representation while I was in the country.

Christmas approached and as my hopes to meet the president faded, I did learn plenty about the culture. Christmas feels like a minor holiday in Argentina. The neighborhoods hang no lights, no wreaths, there are no trees. Not only did I see no bell-ringing Santa Claus, I found only one Christmas display in a mall. The season was refreshingly non-commercial.

On Christmas Eve people scampered about in the 90 degree heat, but not as panicked as Lamorindans looking for a spot in the Diablo Foods parking lot. I ate a ham and cheese sandwich and walked around my neighborhood, but by sunset everybody had vanished, because Argentines spend Christmas Eve at home, with family. At midnight, fireworks went off and folks hit the streets. The celebration lasted a half hour, and the people returned to their homes.

About the only thing to do on hot, silent Christmas Day was to visit La Recoleta Cemetery and see Eva Peron's tomb. By late afternoon, the bars reopened, and the partying resumed.

Christmas Eve at home with family was not hard to grasp. But New Year's Eve, too? That was

a culture shock. The streets were deserted by mid-afternoon. A cafe cooked me a pizza to forget, I worked a Sudoku puzzle and I tried to translate the Buenos Aires newspaper into English until the sun went down.

Alone near midnight, I was so desperate that I walked to a tourist bar, one of a handful open in the city. I sat with a tall, lonesome, long-haired lady from Paraguay and we split a small bottle of champagne and between her limited English and my even more limited Spanish, we probably communicated three comprehensive thoughts in an hour. She was meeting a "friend" so we hugged and went our separate ways, equally mystified at the turn of events here.

The firecrackers and the cherry bombs exploded at midnight followed by yelling and hollering in the streets, but it all died down after about 20 minutes and the family parties continued indoors through the night. New Year's Day was just as quiet, about the same as a typical day in Orinda.

So while I did not accomplish my original goal, I experienced the most radical and least commercial holiday season of my life.

And you never know. Ms. Fernandez, after she steps down next year, may track me down and meet me for lunch at Home/Made Kitchen Café in Moraga.



Iconic, pastel-splashed La Boca neighborhood



Typical street scene, on any night but New Year's Eve.

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