

At home in ARGENTINA

*From the barrios of Buenos Aires to Iguazú Falls and surreal Irish links, **YVONNE GORDON** tips a bucket list trip for 2016*



The sound of water gets louder as we get near. We're in a rib dinghy, about to get a dunking under a waterfall. Suddenly, everyone is scrambling to put their cameras in the communal waterproof bag. As the boat heads under the falls, it feels like a bucket of cold water is being poured over my head. I can't help laughing. It's part fun, part sheer terror.

I'm taking a Great Adventure boat tour at Iguazú Falls, a staggering set of waterfalls in northern Argentina. Stretching for a distance of 1.7 miles, right on the border with Brazil, this is where the Iguazú River thunders over the cliffs in up to 300 separate falls. My first proper look was from a viewpoint called the Devil's Throat, a U-shaped chasm where many of the waterfalls converge. The air was full of spray as we walked along the platform, crossing wide sections of river to reach the viewing balcony. Here, we watched the water plunging down hundreds of feet (in flood season, it can fall at up to 6,500 cubic metres per second). It's hard not to just stand and stare at the torrents — and the rainbows they create.

Part of the fun of visiting the falls is their setting in thousands of hectares of sub-tropical rainforest. As we walk along the jungle pathways, butterflies swoop and circle around us and the dense forest

teems with wildlife. Vines hang down and we see strangling figs. On the ground, curious coatis — little raccoon-type coaimundis — eye us up for the possibility of food. On the trail, we spot four toucans sitting at the top of a tree. I'd seen these comical birds on old Guinness ads over the years, but never knew where they lived or even if there were still many in the wild. It's surreal to see them in real life. There are tapirs and jaguars in the forest too.

I'm in Argentina on a week-long adventure with Say Hueque, a Buenos-Aires-based travel company which arranges tailor-made itineraries for independent travellers. For three nights, we're based at a hotel just outside Puerto Iguazú town. Rooms are in wooden lodges, each window looking directly into thick jungle. The path through the trees to breakfast is alive with jungle sounds — birds in trees, crickets singing and more butterflies.

The adventure started in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. This was my first visit to South America, which had long been on my list, and I was excited. How different would it be? Would I love it? Would the Spanish they speak be very different from Spain? Even though it seemed far, I felt at home as soon as I arrived. It was raining when I left Dublin, travelling with Air France via Paris (a handy overnight flight that lands at 8am). It was raining

when I landed. At my hotel, the managing director left a note saying 'Welcome Home'. Her name was Patricia O'Shea, and it turned out that her grandfather was from Dingle.

Irish links with Argentina run deep. Up to a million people here are of Irish descent. Mayo-born William Brown, who founded the Argentine navy, is a national hero, with hundreds of streets named after him. On my first day, perusing a local newspaper in a café, I read that Irish author John Banville is in town on a book tour. I drop him a line and he tells me it's his first visit too and he's greatly enjoying the city's stylishness and sophistication.

"It seems to me an extraordinary amalgam of Paris, Manhattan and London, with a dash of San Francisco in the 1960s thrown in," he says. "On the other hand I know a man here who is third-generation Irish — his grandparents were from Leitrim — who speaks English with an accent exactly like John McGahern's."

Exploring Buenos Aires, I find a different feel in each of the city's barrios. The cobbled San Telmo area is home to a lively Sunday market full of antiques and crafts. There are tango dancers on the streets. Parrilla grills add the smell of steak and sausages to the air. San Telmo is one of the birthplaces of tango, along with another colourful barrio, La Boca, which is also

the home of soccer here. A former sailor's neighbourhood, houses are painted bright red, blue and green. In contrast, Recoleta is an elegant area of parks, boulevards, gardens and mansions.

The streets in the city centre do have a strangely Parisian feel — apparently the Argentinians sent their architects to Paris in the late 1800s to copy the exact style of the buildings. Another thing I notice is the bookshops. They are everywhere. One of the most splendid is El Ateneo, set in a former theatre. There are frescoes on the ceiling, theatre boxes filled with customers having a read, a café draped by huge wine-coloured curtains on the stage. I spot books by Banville, his alter ego Benjamin Black and Marian Keyes, on sale in Spanish translation.

The Palermo barrio is the hub of café culture and nightlife; its colonial-style buildings full of small galleries, studios and boutique hotels. Dog walkers stroll with up to 14 pooches at a time. Cafés have themes. One is black and white, another focused on blueberries. There's so much going on; so much colour on the streets. As I browse in yet another cool bookshop, this one with a café and bar, it's hard not to think of starting a novel of one's own...



WHAT TO PACK

Insect repellent and a waterproof jacket or poncho for Iguazú Falls are essential — there's lots of spray at viewing points and for the boat trip, you'll need a full change of clothes. Don't wear expensive watches and jewellery around Buenos Aires, but do take cash to convert at the 'blue dollar' exchange rate.

Discover the Walled City

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This spectacular Walled City is bursting at the seams with artistic, musical and creative brilliance.

Book a hotel and a walking tour of the famous 17th century walls, marvel at Europe's largest collection of cannons, see the famous murals and visit the beautifully restored Guildhall and St. Columb's Cathedral.

After something lively? Spend your evenings being entertained at the Millennium Forum or the Waterside Theatre. Get swept up in the atmosphere of one of the city's famous pubs with live music sessions. Before you go, take a roadtrip into the Sperrin Mountains or explore the coastline from Derry~Londonderry to Coleraine — a route praised by Michael Palin for its idyllic train journey.

The autumn events

Walled City Market

3rd October & 7th November

Harvest & Country Fair at Springhill

4th October

City of Derry International Choral Festival

21st - 25th October

Hallowe'en Carnival

29th October - 1st November

Guildhall Craft Fair

13th - 15th November

Foyle Film Festival

18th - 22nd November

Christmas Lights Switch On

19th November

Festive Time

3rd - 20th December

Hotel deals - 2 nights B&B

Lodge Hotel	★★★	from £79pps
Drummond Hotel	★★★	from £89pps
Best Western Plus White Horse Hotel	★★★★	from £89pps
City Hotel	★★★★	from £89pps
Hastings Everglades Hotel	★★★★	from £89pps
Maldron Hotel	★★★★	from £89pps
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GETTING THERE

Yvonne flew to Argentina with Air France (airfrance.ie). Return fares to Buenos Aires from Dublin start from €1,075pp, including taxes and fees. The airline operates daily flights and the fare includes one check-in bag of up to 23kg per person.



WHERE TO STAY

A six-day trip to Buenos Aires and Iguazú Falls with Say Hueque (sayhueque.com) costs from \$900/€800pp including accommodation, guided tours and transfers. Yvonne's stays included a boutique hotel in Buenos Aires' hip Palermo area, and an atmospheric jungle hotel in Puerto Iguazú.

Peace Bridge, Derry~Londonderry