

Student report: Buenos Aires

During the first and second blocks of this academic year, I studied in Argentina at the University of Buenos Aires. The decision to go to Buenos Aires was a right one: I had a great time and can only recommend going there.

Preparation

After you have been selected by the ESE to go to Buenos Aires, you must still formally apply to the University of Buenos Aires itself. To do so, you need various documents, which you can find in the factsheet published under the 'University of Buenos Aires' page on the website of the ESE. Depending on your Spanish level, the most difficult document to obtain is the B2 Certificate of Advanced Spanish Knowledge. Note that the University of Buenos Aires is not that strict with this language requirement, but in case your Spanish is not at B2 level it does expect you to undertake some steps to improve it before classes start, such as a language course. Though I already spoke Spanish quite well before leaving for Buenos Aires, I took a one-week language course at a Spanish school called CEDIC before classes started. I found this very useful, in particular to get used to the Argentinian way of Spanish. Also note that it is definitely important to have at least a basic level of Spanish before arriving to Buenos Aires. Do not expect the Argentinian population to speak English, speaking at least some Spanish is going to make your life a lot easier.

With regards to accommodation, I would not worry about that too much before arriving in Buenos Aires. Finding a place to stay in Buenos Aires is not very difficult, but in order to secure a good room I would recommend arriving relatively early, and definitely before classes start.

If you are an EU citizen, you do not need to prepare anything for obtaining a temporary 90-day visa when arriving in Buenos Aires, except for being able to provide the immigration service an address where you will spend your first night. I would therefore recommend booking a hostel before coming to Buenos Aires, providing the immigration service an address of the hostel suffices.

Arrival

Based on advice of my predecessors, I booked a few nights at the Milhouse Hostel to spend my first days in Buenos Aires. I do not advise this hostel myself however: they insisted on payment for all nights upon arrival, and it is far away from Palermo, which is the district for going out. There are many other hostels in Buenos Aires that are located better and more flexible regarding payment. To find a room, you should ask around, keep an eye on Facebook (there is for instance a Facebook group for all exchange students at economic faculty of the University of Buenos Aires, to which you will be invited to), and use websites as Craigslist. I lived in Almagro, a neighbourhood that is located south of Palermo, which was definitely an enjoyable neighbourhood to live in. Other neighbourhoods I recommend are Palermo, where most exchange students live, and Recoleta.

Make sure to get yourself an Argentinian SIM-card as well as a SUBE card (a public transportation card) the first few days after you arrive. You can get the SIM-card at most kiosks and the SUBE card at any subway station.

Courses

The way of teaching at the University of Buenos Aires is very different from that of Erasmus University. Though the university is huge (over 300,000 students), the classes are relatively small. In general, there are about 30-70 students in a class. There is no system of lectures and tutorials. Instead, the classes resemble secondary school, with the teacher explaining, writing on a board, and students asking questions. Facilities are not great: teachers must often carry projectors to class, computers that are available are very old and slow, and there are few study spaces.

The University of Buenos Aires is a public university, and is accessible to anybody who passed high school. Though there are definitely some bright students in the class, you will find that the average academic capacity lies lower than at Erasmus University. Also, do not be surprised if some students in class are older than the teacher.

Many Argentinian students work throughout their studies. Therefore, many classes take place very early (the earliest start at 7:00) or very late (the latest finish at 23:00). However, there are plenty of classes throughout the day as well, so do not worry if you do not look forward to having classes at these unconventional hours.

The courses offered at the University of Buenos Aires are quite different from those offered at Erasmus University. There is far less emphasis on finance, for instance. Most courses have a strong social aspect. I took two courses: Crecimiento Economico (Economic Growth) and Desarrollo Economico (Economic Development). Both were worth 12 ECTS, and I used both of them to incorporate into my elective space. Crecimiento Economico dealt with economic growth models, and was generally taught with a particular emphasis on Latin America. Desarrollo Economico dealt with issues of development economics, and focused more on the case of Argentina. The level of both courses is slightly below that of an average Economics course at Erasmus University, but in keep in mind that they are completely in Spanish, which puts you at a disadvantage if you are a non-fluent Spanish speaker.

Both courses were taught well, with teachers using a projector and explaining the subject matter clearly. Coming from the Netherlands, the teachers often asked for my opinion on the subject matter, to provoke some discussion in class. During the classes of Crecimiento Economico, the attitude towards the Western world was 'this is how it should be', whereas in Desarrollo Economico, the attitude was quite hostile. You will encounter this ambivalent attitude towards Westerners more frequently in Argentina: most people are very friendly and open, but others may be more unwelcoming.

Finances

Argentina is cheaper than the Netherlands, but inflation has been very high recently. In fact, prices were noticeably higher at the time I left than when I arrived. I paid about 350 Euros for my room, depending on the exchange rate. This is an average price for Buenos Aires.

Groceries are on average the same price as in the Netherlands, though some products are remarkably cheaper (e.g. beef), whereas others are remarkably more expensive (e.g. chocolate). Transport (around 50 Eurocents for a subway/bus ride, five Euros for an average taxi ride) as well as mobile phone costs (around 10 Eurocents per minute of prepaid calling) are much lower than in the Netherlands, but are on the rise. In general, going out is also cheaper than in the Netherlands, though this is also highly dependent on which bar/club you go to. Imported goods, such as clothing and electronics, are expensive in Buenos Aires, so you should consider buying these such items before your departure.

Daily life

The Argentinian way of life is more laid back than the Dutch. People tend to be late. This pertains to both going out as to formal appointments. The city itself is very large and diverse, so there will always be something new to discover. Public transport is incredibly crowded during peak hours: you often have to see a few subways pass by before you have an opportunity to enter one.

Argentina, as well as the rest of South America, has many interesting places to visit. I would recommend to buy a travel guide and have a close read, as there are so many places that you will probably not have time/money to visit all of them.

With regards to safety, Buenos Aires is not particularly unsafe, but keep in mind that it is not the Netherlands. Make sure not to walk alone in neighbourhoods as La Boca or Retiro at night. I have a typical Western appearance and therefore often stood out from the crowd, and this did lead to some unpleasant situations now and then. In the end, however, the only thing that happened was that I got robbed of my phone once. Do not let the crime rate hold you back from choosing Buenos Aires as exchange destination!

All in all, going to Buenos Aires for my exchange was a great decision. It has been an incredible experience and I can only recommend it to you.