



STUDY ABROAD: BUENOS AIRES

The Ohio State travelers toured Club Atlético de Boca Juniors' (CABJ) stadium, located in the old port of Buenos Aires. CABJ is the most well-known Argentine soccer club.

Led by Professor Margaret Newell, the 2015 May Session study abroad program in Argentina explored one of the global hotspots of the Early Modern World, Buenos Aires — a city still known for its cultural diversity. A group of 19 students visited the city, which has a population of 13 million, and is the second largest metro area in South America.

By Margaret Newell

I specialize in Colonial and Revolutionary U.S. History, and one of my interests is a comparative history — the similarities and differences between colonial British America and Spanish America. One key question for comparative historians is why the post-independence trajectory of both regions has been so different, considering the wealth, infrastructure and human potential many regions of colonial Latin America had on the eve of independence.

Argentina is a great case-study for comparison with the U.S. The English were much more interested in their Caribbean colonies and India, and the Spanish privileged Mexico and northern South America, so Boston, New York and Buenos Aires shared the experience of being economic backwaters until the late 18th century. The American Revolution strongly influenced Argentina's independence movement, and Argentina encouraged immigration in the 19th century in an effort to be more like the U.S. Both countries pursued violent wars against their indigenous populations, and both experienced civil war and regional tensions. Argentina's economy was in the top 10 globally in 1900 but political stability, shared prosperity and sustained development remained elusive, "why?" is the question.

As resident director, I really liked the students' camaraderie and positive group dynamic. I appreciated their commitment, intelligence and zest for everything we did. I loved all of the excursions. Some could only have taken place in Argentina, like our trip to a ranch in the pampas, riding a boat on the Rio Parana delta, attending the national independence celebrations and presidential speech at the Plaza de Mayo with 70,000 banner-waving Argentinians right down the street from our hotel, and visiting the Boca neighborhood. We attended a soccer game, where we saw how central fútbol is to the Argentine psyche! Other experiences could have occurred in any major world city — participating in a piece of performance art at the MALBA, going on a synagogue tour, wandering through an archaeological dig that revealed an 18th-century mansion turned immigrant tenement — but still made a huge impression on the students because these were "firsts" for many of them.

These programs serve a real educational purpose — they are not just vacations. We encourage students to dig deep and understand the complex history behind the present-day realities. We had class meetings almost every day in which we explored the colonial and revolutionary history of Argentina. We went to the National Archives to do research, and each student completed a research project. We attended a class at the University of Buenos Aires and had another session with a political scientist who talked to the students about Peronism, the era of the Dirty War and dictatorship, and about the administration of Cristina Kirchner and politics of the presidential elections (in which Kirchner's party suffered a stunning loss).

Buenos Aires is a great world city with fantastic parks, bookstores, arts, public transportation, entertainment and other amenities — it was a fun and easy place to visit. But, observing the differences between modern Argentina and the U.S., and considering the historical roots of these differences, was really a transformative experience. Students considered many of these issues in their projects. Conflicts that pitted Buenos Aires against the interior and caused civil war and strong-man rule in the 18th and 19th century still affect Argentina today. Argentines love to talk politics, but there is a sense that democracy is fragile. Watching the now-elderly Mothers of the Plaza march (as they do every week) in memory of the thousands of people murdered by the military junta in the 1970s, and seeing artillery damage on government buildings dating from the coup that ushered in the dictatorship, brought home the consequences of political instability.

Argentina has a strong social safety net — college is free, they noticed! — but there is constant economic worry and inflation. There is a national myth of "whiteness" and a stress on European antecedents, especially in Buenos Aires, but the country is also grappling with the place of indigenous people and Africans in its present and its history — every museum and historical site we visited was either installing a new exhibit or changing their tours to reflect this. ●