



Fundación PROA in the La Boca neighbourhood

# A BREATH OF FRESH AIR(ES)



Clockwise from top left: the Four Seasons pool; Tô owner Toufic Areda enjoying a cigar; Moreno's dining room; a dish at Cluny

Sick of steak or too tired to tango? No reason to skip Buenos Aires. Like all great cities, the Argentinean capital transcends its clichés while remaining true to its soul - and it's doing it better than ever, says **MATT CHESTERTON**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JUANJO VELANDIA**

**B**uenos Aires is a thrillingly incoherent city, charged with twists, turns and singular possibilities. Just ask Toufic Areda. Born in Ivory Coast to Lebanese parents, Toufic now owns a restaurant in the Argentinean capital that serves French-Japanese cuisine. Depending on how well you know the city, you will find this either very strange or, as Toufic says, sliding an aloe martini in my direction, “very Buenos Aires”. We’re seated at the bar in **Tô**, Areda’s “Frapanese” restaurant. It’s a low-lit, minutely engineered space with details ranging from Brazilian pine tables that slot together to form fish shapes to bespoke wastebaskets in the unisex bathrooms. The split-level dining room is dominated by a sushi conveyor belt – the first in Argentina. Creative fusion dishes involving Atlantic salmon and French foie gras orbit the sushi chefs. The doorman is Senegalese. Not for the first time during my eight years in

BA, I wonder whether I’ve walked into a restaurant or fallen down a rabbit hole. Areda is unfazed. “For me, Buenos Aires has something of all the world’s great cities,” he explains. “The architecture of Paris, the greenness of London, the adrenaline of Shanghai ... six months after I arrived here in 2008, I knew I could do great things in this city.” I’ve seen a number of great things in Buenos Aires since I moved here in 2002 in the wake of one of Argentina’s periodic economic convulsions. The currency had just been devalued; a tourism boom ensued; and the city’s traditional attractions – tango, steakhouses and Beaux-Arts architecture – began to share the limelight with more contemporary ones: fashion boutiques, design hotels, ethnic-food restaurants and modern art museums. The mother lode of such places was, and remains, Palermo Viejo, a sprawling neighbourhood of low buildings and tree-lined cobblestone streets. Within strolling distance of Tô, you can shop for brightly dyed cowhides and quirky knick-knacks at



Tegui's chic dining room



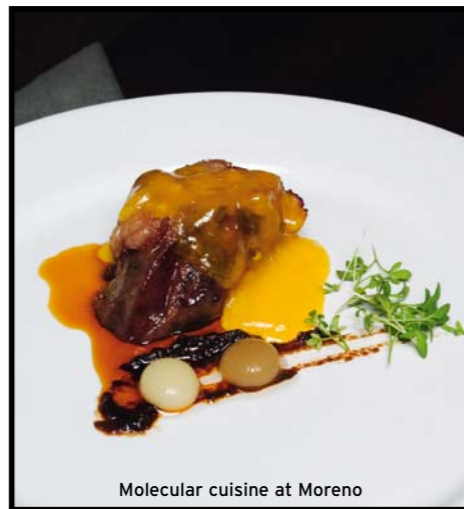
La Brigada steakhouse



The bar at Tô



Papelera Palermo



Molecular cuisine at Moreno



Behind the counter at Crizia



Sucre in the Belgrano barrio



Inside Algodon Mansion



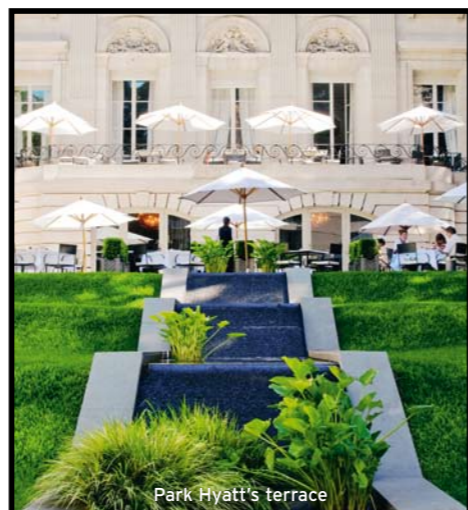
Textiles at Elementos Argentinos



Shopping at Calma Chicha



A sculpture in MALBA



Park Hyatt's terrace

**Calma Chicha**, wrap your gifts in vintage-style paper at trendy stationers **Papelera Palermo** and celebrate your toils with a watermelon margarita and some mod Lat-Am food within the sleek confines of **Tegui**, flagship property of Germán Martitegui, one of the city's top chefs. For something almost as sophisticated but less bleeding-edge, snag a table on the patio at **Cluny**. Or perhaps you're craving a plate of glisteningly fresh bivalves and a world-class Bloody Mary? Then roll up to the oyster bar at **Crizia**. The world's your ... well, you know.

This is just a snapshot of the ever-swelling Palermo scene. Start here – but don't stop here. To the north is the affluent Belgrano *barrio* where you'll find **Sucre**, the restaurant which blazed a trail for hip wining and dining in BA when it opened a decade ago. Or go south to Recoleta to rub shoulder pads with the old-money crowd, splendidly cocooned in their Parisian-style high-rises. Close to the world-famous cemetery are the city's best hotels: **Alvear Palace**, **Four Seasons**, **Park Hyatt** and **Algodon Mansion**. Going east you'll hit the muddy River Plate and the contrastingly shiny Puerto Madero dockside regeneration zone. Here is the priciest real estate in South America and the Philippe Starck-designed (or over-designed) **Faena Hotel + Universe**, the darling of the international style press when it opened in 2004 now relegated to just a stop on the city's bar-crawl trail.

**IMI** any overviews of contemporary Buenos Aires end here, in the belief that the districts south of the city centre – the marvellous, mythical *Sur* – are impervious to modernity. But the city is evolving faster than popular perceptions of it. New money is flowing into old *barrios* such as Monserrat and San Telmo. Now you can find boutique lodgings and even molecular cuisine (at **Moreno Restaurant**) cheek by jowl with corner dives and diminutive, family-owned stores. And the deeper you push into the city's neighbourhoods, the starker the contrasts. There's **Fundación PROA**, for example, an award-winning modern art gallery in picturesque-but-edgy La Boca – the cradle of tango and home to the internationally renowned Boca Juniors football team.

Indeed, the cultural heft of present-day Buenos Aires owes much to the city's contemporary art scene. There's no MOMA or Tate Modern, but there's **MALBA**, the strikingly angular museum

## THE WEEKEND ESCAPE



**BUENOS AIRES, WHEN DONE PROPERLY**, should leave you nicely frazzled. To unwind, book a couple of nights at the **Four Seasons Resort Carmelo** on the Uruguayan side of the Río de la Plata, a 30-minute plane ride from BA. Set among pines and eucalyptuses, the resort offers bungalows and split-level suites whose East-meets-West appointments include lapacho beds, hand-woven local textiles, lots of natural wood and stone and outdoor showers. On-site amenities include a spa, large pool, private beach, kids' club, two restaurants and a (very good) 18-hole golf course; further afield are wineries, *estancias* and the historic town of Colonia. If you're a Four Seasons regular, you'll know what kind of service to expect. If not, you'll enjoy finding out. *Rooms from \$250 a night; fourseasons.com/carmelo.* **MC**

opened in 2001 to house the private collection of Eduardo Costantini. And there's **arteBA**, the annual art fair held in June that has become the biggest event of its kind in South America. Facundo Gómez Minujín, arteBA's president, links the fair's success to the heterogeneity of the city that hosts it. "Our city combines the architectural beauty of an opulent past, the exciting nightlife of a cosmopolitan metropolis and the sensuality of our Latin roots," he says. "Our success as a cultural event derives from our ability to draw on all those energies."

Energy – it's the *mot juste* when describing Buenos Aires. *Porteños* (as the inhabitants of this port city are known) are adept at seizing the day with both hands and not letting go until the following dawn. They throng the city's *parrillas* (or steakhouses) where slabs of Argentina's legendary beef are served fresh off the grill. At **La Brigada**, where the walls are wreathed in signed football pennants and even the toothpick holders are monogrammed with the restaurant's cow icon, the waiters cut the *lomo* (tenderloin) with a dessert spoon – a savoury spectacle you can witness until long after midnight.

It's tempting to view Buenos Aires in terms of the push and pull between old and new: the soothing rituals of La Brigada versus the conceptual daring of Tô. But some of the city's most interesting ventures defy easy categorisation. Take, for example, **Elementos Argentinos**, which is making its name selling the most traditional of wares – hand-woven textiles from Argentina's northern provinces – to a demanding and trend-conscious local and international clientele. EA's owners, Fernando Bach and Pablo Mendivil, show me around their Palermo Viejo

boutique. It's piled high with one-of-a-kind rugs, shawls and cushions, many of which were made from wool sheared from the weavers' own sheep. "It's a creative collision between our weavers' ancestral knowledge and the design perspective we have in a big city like Buenos Aires," Bach explains. "They need us, and we need them." This is fair trade with no trade-offs – chic, sustainable and astutely marketed – and it doesn't surprise me to learn that EA is looking to move into a larger store.

I leave Elementos and walk home, passing, in rapid succession, a flashy Peruvian restaurant I'd never noticed before, four or five steakhouses, a MacStore, a policeman trying to bum a cigarette from a stranger, a shantytown, several award-winning fashion boutiques and a *churro* factory. It's very Buenos Aires. **D**

## ADDRESS BOOK

**HOTELS** Algodon Mansion, from \$800 a night; [algodonmansion.com](http://algodonmansion.com); Alvear Palace, from \$380 a night; [alvearpalace.com](http://alvearpalace.com); Faena Hotel + Universe, from \$440 a night; [faenahotelanduniverse.com](http://faenahotelanduniverse.com); Four Seasons, from \$445 a night; [fourseasons.com/buenosaires](http://fourseasons.com/buenosaires); Park Hyatt, from \$405 a night; [buenosaires.park.hyatt.com](http://buenosaires.park.hyatt.com)

**RESTAURANTS** Cluny, [cluny.com.ar](http://cluny.com.ar); Crizia, [crizia.com.ar/crizia](http://crizia.com.ar/crizia); La Brigada, [labrigada.com](http://labrigada.com); Moreno, [morenobuenosaires.com](http://morenobuenosaires.com); Sucre, [sucrerestaurant.com.ar](http://sucrerestaurant.com.ar); Tegui, [tegui.com.ar](http://tegui.com.ar); Tô, [torestaurant.com](http://torestaurant.com)

**SHOPPING** Calma Chicha, [calmachicha.com](http://calmachicha.com); Elementos Argentinos, [elementosargentinos.com.ar](http://elementosargentinos.com.ar); Papelera Palermo, [papeleralpalermo.com.ar](http://papeleralpalermo.com.ar)

**CULTURE** arteBA, [arteba.com](http://arteba.com); Fundación PROA, [proa.org](http://proa.org); MALBA, [malba.org/ar](http://malba.org/ar)