



Mi Buenos Aires Querido

By Tony Beckwith ©1999

ONE OF ARGENTINA'S BEST-KNOWN tangos is *Mi Buenos Aires Querido*. The lyrics promise that all one's cares will evaporate upon returning to "My Beloved Buenos Aires," and all one's troubles will vanish in her welcoming womb. As one of her wandering children, it had been many years since I last trod that hallowed ground. I was returning now with Lillian on my arm and a tango in my heart.

Is it just my imagination, or is there a tango for every Argentine occasion, even my return? The lyrics to *Volver*, drenched in the deco melodrama of the thirties, reassure me that "life is fleeting, and twenty years is no time at all"—a mere twinkling of an eye. In La Boca, the area the guide-books call the "working-class" district, we strolled down Caminito and the tango of the same name was in the air, singing its sad story of shattered dreams. Tango is the street opera of Buenos Aires, evoking sharply defined black and white images expressed in deliberate, stylish poses. With music that can sound erotic even when you

can't understand the words, according to Lillian.

I used to be afraid of "BA." Soon after I was born there we moved across the river, and I spent most of my youth in Montevideo, which was a much smaller place. But I returned frequently to visit my grandparents, and later when I traveled on business. To me, BA was always the Big City, the metropolis. When you were downtown you had to look straight up to see the sky. It was a long train ride into town from my grandparents' homes in the suburbs. The streets were crowded with people walking shoulder-to-shoulder, jostling, moving, riding the subway, surging across an intersection when the lights

changed, speaking with their hands.... I was returning after a lifetime spent in other parts of the world, and found the city to be far less threatening than I remembered. It actually seemed oddly familiar because, as I now realized, it looked just like London or Paris or Madrid.

The Avenida 9 de Julio is the widest thoroughfare in the world. It has a daunting number of lanes going in each direction, divided by islands with trees and statues and bus stops. Calle Florida, the paved over "walking street," is the central artery of a section of the city that is like a gigantic open-air mall. As usual, the elegance of the Argentines is everywhere apparent. Window-shopping is a pleasure in Buenos Aires. So is people-watching from, let's say, a marble-topped table on the sidewalk outside the Petit Plaza café, where we sipped an espresso and nibbled on a buttery croissant, or *media luna*.

The food in BA was excellent. *Salpicón de ave* doesn't just sound better than chicken salad—it is. And the beef,

of course, is hard to describe unless you've tried it. Once you have, you simply know that it's the best-tasting meat in the world. A true gastronomic treat is an Argentine steak with a couple of fried eggs on top and a side of french fries, and a green salad tossed tableside with olive oil and vinegar. For those who don't eat meat, Lillian would suggest a chubby *empanada* filled with sweet Argentine corn. Followed by an *alfajor*, a delicious pastry filled with *dulce de leche*, which is the dangerously addictive "milk jam" spread.

Having local friends certainly helped get us off the beaten track. Watching a polo match from the sidelines on a sunny Thursday afternoon was magnificent. We stood on manicured grounds, green in every direction, engulfed by the sound of thundering hooves, and the creaking of saddles, and the heavy breathing of horses. There are tangos about fast horses, of course, and about gambling with love, and winning, and losing. We listened to dozens of them one night in the San Telmo district. And walking home on lamp-lit cobbled streets, still under the spell of the city, who could blame us for singing *Mi Buenos Aires Queriíííííido!* ★