Hey prospective UB students!

My name is J M and I have recently completed my degree abroad at the University of Belgrano in Buenos Aires. I am a joint Geography and Latin American Studies Major with a certificate in Spanish. On this program I was fulfilling credits for LAS. I have always been a very curious and adventurous person, having traveled a lot as a kid and adolescent with my parents, and later on doing field schools and work placements in West Africa and Mexico. I always wanted to have the “study abroad experience” because I consider it to be integral in broadening the scope of my lens. I chose Argentina (Buenos Aires in particular) because BA has always been a cultural icon of sorts in the Spanish speaking world. It has also been the scene of one of the most devastating economic collapses in the west (2001) and consequentially, the cradle of a plethora of innovative mechanisms of resistance. I should point out that I am fluent in Spanish and of South American parents though not (Argentine), these were probably big factors that influenced my experience in BA. I would like to emphasize that my advice and impressions are purely anecdotal and by no means seek to represent an objective understanding of the UB, Buenos Aires, Argentina, or Argentines.

Travel

In terms of getting to B.A from Vancouver, I actually flew in to Santiago, Chile first and spent some months there before heading to BA. There are direct flights from Toronto with Air Canada, but depending on what season you’re traveling, I think it might be worth checking out flights from Seattle. I saved a few hundred dollars doing this.
Financial Details

Argentina is a very inexpensive country. Buenos Aires is probably the best deal in the Southern Hemisphere. However, given that things are so cheap, it’s easy to splurge relentlessly. The most expensive component of BA is rent. Renting is extremely complicated, they have very strict procedures and it’s practically impossible to find prices that are not catered towards foreigners. They ask for ‘garantias’ which is like a security deposit that you won’t get back, on top of an agency fee and sometimes two to three months rent. The easiest way to get around this is to look for furnished apartments on craigslist.org or even through the university (even though they do charge a fee). Since most people want to rent to folks who are able to sign one year contracts or more, they will surcharge you. The rent for a furnished one bedroom apartment in the Belgrano area will probably be upwards of $400 US. I also noticed that the rent restrictions usually means that you will find similar prices in most parts of Capital as a foreigner.

If you have contacts in BA, make sure to ask them to give you a hand. Another option is the ‘residencias universitarias’, which are dorms for university students. They are much cheaper and they house many students from the interior of the country. Unfortunately most of them have pretty strict rules about having people over and some even have a
curfew. You can look for these online and make a reservation. Another option is to go with a host family. I never considered this, but most of the American students at Belgrano do stay in host families and it generally comes down to pure luck. If you are looking for an independent sort of experience, I wouldn’t recommend it. I ended up paying $250 for a bedroom and a bathroom in a lady’s apartment. I had my own entrance and had access to the kitchen. Living with strangers is always complicated though.

Food is pretty cheap, particularly eating out at restaurants. Another great thing is take-out, it’s everywhere and they do not charge you. You can eat a decent meal for $3 dollars at a restaurant in any part of the city. For groceries I would approximate that $50 should be enough for a month. Personally, I ate out most of the time so I wasn’t making many trips to the grocery store. Host families do provide you with breakfast and dinner in most cases though.

Transportation is very inexpensive in Buenos Aires. The Subway is like $.30 per trip and the taxis are very, very cheap. It is easy to fall into bad habits though, so I recommend you do try to take public transit, it’s way more fun and it’s safe as well.

Going out in BA is also comparatively inexpensive.

Again, being that it seems pretty cheap, if you add up expenditures for one night, it can get relatively expensive.
Traveling within the country is moderately cheap as well, depending on where you go and how you get there. I recommend traveling by bus and train. They are both good services and are quite inexpensive.

**UB details**

Belgrano is a private university in an affluent sector of the city. The program catered towards foreigners is called PEAL and it is very segregated. You will most likely end up in classes with mostly Americans and some Europeans. You do have the option of taking classes in regular faculties, but it really is dependent on your fluency in Spanish and the transferability of your credits. Since I was doing a Latin American Studies major, I could only afford to take PEAL (Programa de Estudios de America Latina) classes. You will be assessed the first day of school for your level of Spanish proficiency. It is a relatively simple and straightforward exam. The quality of the classes ranges quite a bit. By no means is it comparable to the workload expected at SFU (at least not in PEAL).

Generally, you will be expected to write one midterm and perhaps a final, rarely an essay. You can make the most of the classes, they do have interesting readings, it’s just that the conversations are not always stimulating because of the drastically differing levels of Spanish and knowledge of Latin America. That being said, I, as a Latin American Studies major did enjoy some of the literature classes (particularly Realismo Magico). I also opted for taking some classes (non-credit) at the Centro Cultural Rojas to keep my mind stimulated. I highly recommend this public institution, one of the best in the country.
All in all my impression of Belgrano is not very favourable because I found that it was a very elite school, with tons of privileged foreign students that were fairly segregated from most other sectors of Argentine society. The Argentine students are relatively friendly to people that take classes with them, but again, these are extremely bourgeois kids (personally not the type of relationships that I was seeking). I also noted that the structure of the classrooms is different. There was a lot of lecturing and not very much discussion. At Belgrano I did not feel that critical thinking was fostered all that much. I found it to be quite conservative in terms of politics and the professors wouldn’t necessarily open up the floor for dialogue. La Universidad de Buenos Aires is drastically different. Argentine society IS very critical, but you won’t find this here.

**Buenos Aires**

Buenos Aires is an incredible city. Everything about it is monumental. The academic experience at Belgrano takes a back seat to experiencing the city. It is so worth spending a semester just to have the opportunity to walk its streets, and sit in the cafes. It’s so easy to meet people and there is so much to see in Argentina, all of it being very accessible. BA is an intense place, it has so much nostalgia and passion and it is drastically different to Vancouver’s rhythm. BA has a very civilized urban culture in comparison to Vancouver, and its cultural scene is exceptional (you can go to the Opera every night for $4). I recommend reading up on the recent political history of the nation and really trying to understand the tragedy of the financial collapse of 2001. You might not notice it, but it has left a deep scar in Argentine society. Argentines are incredibly politicized and engaged people who are constantly questioning
their leaders and feel a great deal of solidarity with their communities but not so much for political parties. You might also find that people in Buenos Aires are very vain and obsessed with their body image. On the upside, it makes for a lot of eye candy for both sexes.

There are some pretty striking cultural differences when it comes gender roles and family dynamics. I think it’s pretty important to be very aware that we cannot claim to make ‘objective’ judgments on other cultures as Canadians. Simply play it by ear and ask lots of questions. Argentina is a society rooted in western values, but I would situate as being far more Mediterranean (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese), than Northern European.

Contact me for any further information. I recommend going to Argentina, I miss it terribly and would one day like to move back to Buenos Aires.

Regards,

J M
On Corrientes facing the Obelisk, the emblem of the city.
Amy at one of the city’s best known cafés on Avenida de Mayo.
My neighborhood. Parque Las Heras
San Telmo has a wonderful fair on the weekends, touristy but pleasant nonetheless.
Buenos Aires is extremely pedestrian friendly.
Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo are very well known and respected women that denounce the tragedies of the dictatorship. They demonstrate every week in front of the presidential palace, ‘La Casa Rosada.
Downtown Buenos Aires. Frenetic pace.