

A wide-angle, low-angle shot of the interior of a grand, ornate theater. The ceiling is a large dome with a central circular chandelier and several smaller chandeliers. The walls are covered in intricate gold leaf decorations and murals. The theater has multiple tiers of balconies, each with its own set of lights. The stage is visible at the bottom, with a red curtain and a red backdrop. The overall atmosphere is one of historical grandeur and elegance.

# HISTORY REPEATING

In Buenos Aires, where Belle-époque hotels, resplendent theatres and innovative restaurateurs are reviving the spirit of the city's golden age

**Words:** Joe Mortimer





Marais, the historic building, which was completely restored before it opened as a hotel in 2006, captures the spirit of those halcyon days, when riches flowed into the city.

Inside, Italian travertine marble, Baccarat chandeliers and oak panels from a 17th-century castle in Normandy ooze opulence, while modern touches in the guestrooms and the new \$95 million Posadas wing bring the majestic property into the 21st-century. Complete with one of the largest gardens in Recoleta, shaded by indigenous tipu and gomera trees, and a permanent modern art collection featuring pieces from artists including Guillermo Roux and Guerrero Medina, Palacio Duhau is among the best of the handful of luxury hotels in the city.

Four Seasons Buenos Aires and the classical Alvear Palace Hotel are located in the same neighbourhood, or barrio, as well as two luxury boutique hotels, HUB Porteño and Algodon Mansion, which occupy charismatic historical buildings.

Recoleta is the heart of old-money Buenos Aires, and legions of the city's deceased elite are found within the elaborate mausoleums and tombs of Recoleta Cemetery. Famous citizens, including Eva "Evita" Peron, former president Hipólito Yrigoyen and Carlos María de Alvear – after whom the neighbourhood's main street is named – are interred in permanent splendour in this vast city of the dead.

But today, other barrios are attracting new-money tourists and investors, and with them, big-name chefs, designer brands and entrepreneurial hoteliers.

One hundred years ago, Buenos Aires was the breadbasket of South America. Grain and cattle flowed from its ports in cargo ships bound for Europe; the same ships returned loaded with riches that allowed wealthy land owners to build ornate palaces in the burgeoning city, which sprawls along the banks of the Río de la Plata, separating Argentina and Uruguay.

The city's wealthiest citizens financed the construction of beautiful opera houses, wide boulevards and gaudy public buildings, all fashioned in the style of the European capitals from where much of the foreign wealth originated. Buenos Aires was justly known as the Paris of Latin America.

In the second half of the 20th century, Argentina's influence on the global grain and livestock trade waned, putting an end to its golden era, and Buenos Aires is now permeated with a nostalgic sense of faded

glory, haunted by the ghosts of more prosperous times.

But the city remains one of the most atmospheric and unforgettable urban landscapes in the world, and for the discerning luxury traveller, there is no shortage of luxury hotels, high-end restaurants and extravagant cultural experiences that epitomise its golden era.

#### PALATIAL DWELLINGS

Like many of Buenos Aires' wealthy citizens, Luis Duhau invested much of his wealth in property. The former Minister of Agriculture and president of the Rural Society of Argentina was inspired by the grand Château Le Marais in France when he commissioned French architect León Douge to build a palace on Avenida Alvear.

When it was completed in 1934, Palacio Duhau stood out as one of the most exclusive properties in the affluent neighbourhood of Recoleta, an accolade that it retains today as the Palacio Duhau - Park Hyatt Buenos Aires. An exact replica of Paris' Château du

#### Grand palace

The historic Palacio Duhau – Park Hyatt (above) hosts culinary extravaganzas like the Masters of Food & Wine (right)

(previous page)

The evocative old world glamour of Teatro Colon (Colon Theatre) which dates back to 1857







Colour and passion (above and below) Bold, stylish interiors by Philippe Starck at the atmospheric Faena Hotel Buenos Aires



#### BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY

To the southeast of the centre of Buenos Aires, the red-bricked warehouses of Puerto Madero were built in 1897 to accommodate ever-increasing volumes of cargo traffic going in and out of the city. By 1926, a new and bigger port facility opened, and Puerto Madero was quickly abandoned.

After more than 60 years of neglect and decay, a massive regeneration project has seen this forgotten corner of the city transformed into its most expensive neighbourhood, which is characterised by the dramatic contrast between gleaming glass skyscrapers and the original buildings and cranes of the old port.

Argentine entrepreneur Alan Faena was one of the first developers to cash in on the opportunities presented by the regeneration, buying up the old El Porteño wheat mill and, with the help of designer Philippe Starck, turning it into one of the most stylish and atmospheric hotels in the city – Faena Hotel Buenos Aires.

Soon after, the former fashion designer opened Faena Art Center in another restored mill, Los Molinos, whose vast interior space is now used as a canvas for installations by a rotating line-up of artists.

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“PUERTO MADERO’S DOCKS, LINED WITH HIGH-END RESTAURANTS AND DESIGNER BOUTIQUES, PRESENT A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FROM OTHER BARRIOS”

More recently, he worked with Foster+Partners to launch the luxurious Faena Aleph Residences apartment building, heralding ‘starchitect’ Norman Foster’s debut in South America.

Strolling along the edge of Puerto Madero’s wide docks, which are now lined with high-end restaurants and designer boutiques, presents a very different experience from the crowded and somewhat edgy streets of other barrios, which is perhaps why it has become a magnet for foreign property investors and wealthy locals.

On the eastern side of the city, the once-quiet neighbourhood of Palermo has also been through a dramatic transformation in the last 20 years. The Palermo story echoes that of recently gentrified

neighbourhoods like New York’s Meatpacking district and London’s Shoreditch: rising rents in other parts of town forced low-income creative professionals into more affordable areas: namely, Palermo.

That concentration of creative talent – artists, designers, restaurateurs and, more recently, hoteliers – turned Palermo into a hub of creativity, and it is now the de rigueur haunt of any self-respecting upstart or upwardly mobile visitor.

Palermo’s low-rise aesthetic and sense of faded glamour are not in keeping with the style of many traditional luxury hotel brands; a fact which has nourished a thriving boutique hotel scene that is luring many young and affluent visitors away from classical Recoleta.

**Dockside glamour**

(above) Stroll along Puerto Madero for river views, restaurants and designer boutiques

**Playful dining**

(right) Irreverent Philippe Starck design meets modern gastronomy at Faena Hotel’s Bistro Sur

**FEEDING FRENZY**

You can’t walk more than a few metres in über-trendy Palermo without passing a bar, café or restaurant, and star chefs from across South America are flocking to the area. Notable among the many stand-out eateries is Germán Martitegui’s Tegui – recently voted number nine on the Latin America’s 50 Best Restaurants list – which offers an ever-changing molecular-style menu of eclectic Argentine and international dishes, and a soon-to-open branch of Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio’s highly successful La Mar chain.

Other contenders for Buenos Aires’ top restaurant can be found back in Recoleta at HUB Porteño’s Tarquino, a chic establishment which specialises in New Argentine Cuisine – characterised by innovative dishes combining traditional, regional ingredients with modern cooking techniques – and the exceptional Bistro Sur at Faena Hotel. At the latter, chef Rodrigo Vázquez’ delightful menu is complemented by some of Philippe Starck’s most playful designs. White unicorn heads with ruby-red eyes stare down from white walls, and sommeliers recommend vintages to match beautifully-presented dishes such as braised rabbit ravioli in mascarpone cheese sauce with thyme and lemon zest, or a wonderful white chocolate soufflé with raspberry ice cream, lemon and olive oil.

For classical Argentine cuisine done to perfection, Park Hyatt’s Duhau Restaurante & Vinoteca dishes up juicy steaks and delicate Patagonian fish, with a 3,500-strong wine cellar, weekly wine and cheese tasting evenings and tango classes.





## Buenos Aires

Few musical genres capture the spirit of a place as much as tango does in Buenos Aires. The sultry dance is at once passionate and nostalgic, much like the Porteños themselves: residents of this electric port city. If you like a bit of drama with your dinner, the intimate Rojo Tango show at Faena Hotel serves up a three-course dinner before a troupe of tango dancers perform a highly energised set, accompanied by a full tango orchestra who sit to the rear of the small, clubby space, creating a 360-degree experience.

Less intimate but equally as stirring, the performance at Esquina Carlos Gardel tells the history of tango in a belle époque style theatre, where black and white photos of the eponymous tango legend peer down from the walls. Book a table on the upper levels or in one of the boxes to the side and feast on a three-course dinner accompanied by Argentine wines, before the red curtain rises and the tale of tango unfolds. Nowhere else in the world do dining, drama and luxury combine so successfully as they do in Buenos Aires. If you haven't already experienced the real-life theatrical performance that is life in this vibrant South American city, do so now, and be prepared to go back again and again. ■

**Dinner and drama** (below) The Rojo Tango show at Faena Hotel includes a three-course dinner and a sultry performance of tango

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### THEGOLDENBOOK

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