

The Captain's Choice of

SOUTH AMERICA: Part 1

Buenos Aires – Iguassu Falls – Rio – La Paz

(5 - 12 October 2007)



Text: John Biggs © 2007

Images: Catherine Tang © 2007

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Why South America of all places?

We'd read in our *Mercury* travel section a rave review of a trip to South America, organised by Australian firm, Captain's Choice: fantastic places, you'd never visit in a fit. We had a fit and decided to visit.

Check-in at Melbourne gives us the first indication of the massive inefficiencies of LAN Airlines. We had prepaid fares to Santiago: Qantas to Auckland, LAN from there onwards. I am given a boarding pass to Santiago, but Catherine is informed she has been bumped from the Auckland-Santiago leg. LAN regularly overfill their planes, we are told, someone has to go – and Catherine suspects that a Chinese surname did it for her.

Frantic calls to Captain's Choice, our Melbourne based tour, and we are assured that all will be well. Just proceed to Auckland and meet up with Giselle Kapp, our tour guide. We do just that, and Giselle promptly goes to the counter and returns with Catherine's Boarding Pass to

Santiago. Giselle was made for this trip: born in Buenos Aires of Spanish-German-Italian parentage and migrating to Australia aged eight, she is still perfectly fluent in Spanish. She is to broker some tricky negotiations. On this occasion, US dollars do not change hands.



Gordon Higman, our strapping tour manager, has a large wallet crammed with US currency that in country after country appears to buy us out of later

and frequent last-minute problems LAN is to foist on us. However, on our very last internal flight, that bulging wallet nearly saw Gordon thrown into a Peruvian slammer, as related below.

The tour doctor is Chet Pager, a dark-haired Australian-American born in Hawaii with both a medical and a legal practice in London. Intelligence spears from his eyes as he answers in detail questions on virtually any topic put to him. He also turns out to be a great photographer: we all see the same scene, but while we snap away at the obvious in the middle distance, his photographs reconstruct details in the near and far distances (it helps that he has a top digital with x12 zoom). He convinces, alas late in the day, that sticking to film for the quality shots is a lost cause.

Captain's Choice provided detailed notes on each country we visited: the political history of each one without exception was one of violence, instability, corruption and subsequent mismanagement of the very rich natural resources that each country had. No, I'm not talking about 21st Century Tasmania, but about a tradition started by the Spaniards in the 16th century who saw to it that these enormously rich resources were funnelled back to Spain. More

recently, they are controlled by a few powerful families: a theme with specific variations in each country right up to the present day.

Buenos Aires

Argentina's variation on this theme includes Juan Peron and his ex-prostitute mistress, Eva. However, there was a period early over 100 years ago when Argentina was in fact extremely rich and cultured – even today, the Teatro Colon is one of the world's best opera houses – but from 1930 corrupt military dictatorships soon ripped that cultural and material richness to shreds. One of the worst was Galtieri, whose attempt to snatch the Falklands in 1982 from Britain not only failed, but entrenched Maggie Thatcher's iron grip on British politics and consequently the rise of neo-conservatism throughout the Western worlds. Galtieri has more than Argentinian and British blood on his hands.



As late as 2004, Buenos Aires was known for poverty, civil unrest and violent crime, but Kirchner the current President put that down, and now Buenos Aires gives the impression of a rich and highly Westernised major city. Elections are ongoing while we are there with the result that Kirchner's wife is elected in his stead. Whether that will repeat the Peronist family cycle into benign dictatorship remains to be seen.

Our Four Seasons Hotel is a modernised version of a 19th century French design, when BA was at its height. Here, the English and Australian components of the tour come together. We surreptitiously weigh up the 33 people who are destined to be our constant companions over the next three weeks. I get off to a bad start: my ticket is in the name of 'Professor' John Biggs, which the local guide Mario reads out as we are shepherded into line on arrival at the airport. It sets the wrong tone, as the others, who are mainly farmers and businessmen and strong Coalition supporters, make clear in their body language and guarded comments to me. It goes like this:

'What are you a professor of?'
'Education.' (saying 'Psychology' would be worse)
'Oh'.

Catherine is down as Dr. Tang and that provokes similar questioning.

'Ah, so you're a medical doctor?'
'No, not a medical doctor.'
'A doctor of what, then?'
'Education. I'm a staff developer.'
'Oh.'

On Hong Kong flights using your professional title it is a definite advantage, but not for tours like this one. I'll tell our travel agent that it is be 'Mr.' for future tours.

We sit down to a splendid dinner, the main course being a massive and very tender slab of Argentinian beefsteak. Beef turns out to be the increasingly resistible staple of all Argentinian meals, even breakfast if you so choose. Argentinians seem to be on a constant Atkins diet of beef and dairy products. Possibly the splendidly heavy Argentinian reds mitigate any damage.

Next day we start a city tour along the 9th of July Avenue that slices through the CBD with its 16 lanes. Buenos Airians have massive egos when it comes to death: Recoletto Cemetery is an elaborate necropolis where the rich, including Eva Peron, build their family vaults, often with glass panels so people can admire the richly ornamented furniture therein. There is a vast army of cats that sleep and preen themselves in the sun on the monuments. The food supply that can support so many animals doesn't bear thinking about.



Boca is the Italian Quarter, Italian no longer, on the River Plata, which at this point is as huge as the sea. The houses are mostly brilliantly painted galvanised



iron. New Orleans-type roving bands play jazz and tango music, while tarted-up girls in fishnet stockings will – for a price – dance a tango with you on the sidewalk – well, it *looks* like they are tangoing ... In the afternoon we take a boat trip up the lush and beautiful Prana River, where the rich have their wonderful residences and travel to work by boat. I am reminded of the Thousand Islands region of Ontario.

Jet-lagged as we are, the day has not yet started. Argentina is tango. We are to go to a tango theatre named after the Rudolf Valentino-cum-Frank Sinatra of Argentina, Carlos Gardel. The dinner-show lasts until midnight, interesting for a couple of hours when wide-awake, but not when jet-lagged. To bed at 1 a.m., to rise for the plane next day at 4.30 a.m. This is one of the few miscalculations of the Captain's choosing.

Iguassu Falls

Twenty years ago I saw the film 'The Mission' in which a Spanish missionary (unsuccessfully fought Portuguese brigands who were intent on killing off the Guarani Indians in the interests of commerce. The film has a powerful image of an unnamed missionary fixed to a cross tumbling down a massive waterfall. I immediately recognize the scene on seeing Iguassu – unfortunately minus the crucified missionary.

Iguassu Falls are second only to Victoria Falls in surface flow but in extent Iguassa Falls are much larger. They are also unique in that the water does not come from melting snows, but like every other river in Brazil, apart from the Amazon, from a vast water table. The water collects and flows into two large rivers that converge just above the Falls, with three countries fronting them: Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, with Argentina containing the largest area.

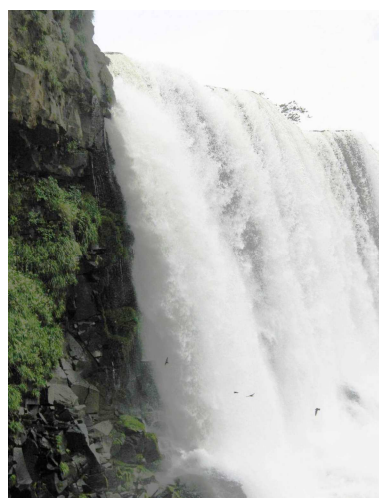


As we enter from the Argentinian side, we walk through a well kept park where a group of Machas Indian children are singing to a guitar, smooth skinned iguanas lie by the path – quite unlike the iguanas we are to see in the Galapagos – while cheeky coatis with long striped tails poke their long noses at your feet in search of food. The train that takes people to the falls is



full, so we walk, totally knackered after three hours' sleep. The highest and best expanse of falls is on the Argentinian side. Duckboards and walkways take us through the shallows at the top of the plateau to the Devil's Throat, where the waters converge in a huge U-shape: the drop is massive and you get very wet even some distance away.

We cross to the Brazilian side, where the ubiquitous bureaucracy requires that we have paid for our visas in advance and queue up to get them stamped at the border. We go to our hotel, which looked splendid from across the Falls, but inside it is rundown and musty, reminding me of the pousadas in Macau. We opt for a helicopter flight over the Falls while others go for a Zodiac ride that takes them under the Falls, but we think we've been wet enough for one day. By helicopter you get the picture of wetlands receding to the horizon and then all that water falls off the edge. We return to the hotel, which is at the head of a track that leads gradually down to the bottom of the Falls. At the



bottom of the Devil's Throat looking up is rather more dramatic than at the top looking down. You can see the swallows that live underneath the falls, feeding off all the insects that are attracted by the warmth and humidity. They dive through the falling water, and by peering behind the curtain of water, you can see them cling to the sheer wet rock like slugs.



A lavish BBQ at night, the food now definitely more S. American, with favela beans and other different vegetables and spices, and chicken and fish appearing on the menu alongside the ubiquitous beef. In the morning, we return to the

Falls but further along – and after a reasonable night's sleep, we are feeling more like a walk. A local entrepreneur with a video camera runs in and out of the group throughout the walk; he gets people to pose several times to ensure they'll buy a CD.

Rio



After a three hour flight to Rio, we arrive late afternoon. As we disembark I look for Christ the Redeemer: ah yes, way over there, a tiny doll on an anthill. Our guide, Marcello, talks and jokes a lot, and the initial impression is good – but it wears thin after a while, very thin indeed after three days. He tells us intimate details of his soccer team, sings us its war-cry, tells us the government is totally corrupt. That is hardly news, but what he means by corruption is taxing Marcello's hard-earned wages and handing it to those layabout poor, who come streaming into Rio from the countryside, millions of them, cramming into those filthy *favelas* like unwashed pigs on one dollar a day and yet demand more.

Marcello ensures that none of his dollars are so abused: he has registered his company off-shore in a tax haven. 'And if I didn't?' he demands in a voice shaking with righteousness, 'Wouldn't I then be skinned alive by this vicious gang of *comunistas* who run the country?' I hear grunts of agreement from our fellow travellers, but I object to this very strongly and tell Gordon so, who tells Marcello to knock off the politics. But Marcello explains that as we are foreigners we wouldn't understand what people like Marcello have to go through, so please, just try to be a little more culturally sensitive while we are here and be more understanding of the hell the Brazilian middle classes have to go through in order to make an honest dollar. I begin to understand why Latin American countries are in continuing cycles of revolution.

Our hotel is the splendid Sheraton with its own beach just up from Leblon beach. On arrival they treat us to the Brazilian traditional cocktail *caiparinha*, based on sugar and lime and *cachaca*, a strong sugarcane spirit. Similar but not as nice as the Peruvian drink, *pisco*, that Chile pinched from Peru. Tasty Brazilian food again – lots of beef but roasted on skewers the Brazilian way – and fish and beans and flavour. We have a nice room overlooking the swimming pool and Leblon beach in the distance. We are beginning to discern a rough pattern in up-market S. American meals. They are big on buffets, with more variety and flavour than in Argentina.

Next morning we walk to Leblon Beach where we find that Brazilians are seriously into the body beautiful: playing beachball, netball, and running and cycling on or beside the beach. We are fascinated by the stylised life-sized cows on the beach, the work of



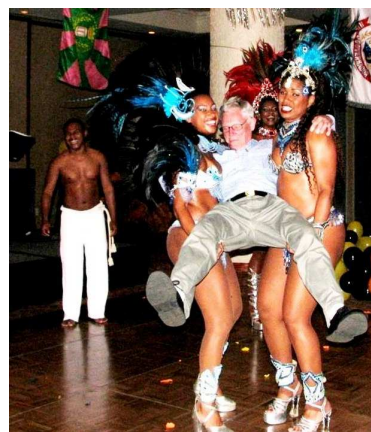
a local designer according to the plaque. I want to find out more about these whacky animals so I ask Marcello: twice, but each time get a garbled answer about a worldwide charity that doesn't gel at all with the sparse information on the plaque.

Christ the Redeemer is no doll at 40 m., Corcovado Mountain no anthill at 700 m; the views over the Bay are awe-inspiring, the complex suburbs and bays of Rio an intricate visual puzzle to sort out. A massive lunch follows in the best restaurant in Brazil, so we are told: Porcao Rio. Umpteen different cuts of beef, roasted on skewers, that the waiters mischievously slice off onto your plate when you are not watching. Gordon orders a liqueur;



the waiter stands on the table, and arm upstretched, pours from the bottle into Gordon's glass, two metres below, not spilling a drop. We board a schooner to digest our huge lunch and to view Rio and Guanabara Bay from the water. We go to Sugarloaf Mountain by cable car – fortunately, the cable has been repaired after Jaws had bitten it through in 1979 in *Moonraker*, despite Roger Moore's best efforts to stop him. The view from the summit is even more stupendous than that from Christ the Redeemer.

Then it is a 'special' evening: 'it drew complaints from the last Captain's Choice tour', we are told with a nudge and a wink. At a buffet dinner, a huge Negro in a pink suit brings on his Brazilianised-New-Orleans Jazz Band with male acrobats: then with a blast of his whistle, beautiful dark-chocolate girls appear, clad at first in brilliantly coloured feathered Carnivale costumes, looking like enormous peacocks' tails against a tropical sunset. Then the girls shed their plumage down to skimpy but ornate bras and thongs and, with rhythmically shuddering bums and gorgeously huge smiles, they haul us up on the dance floor. The climax is when two girls target John Biggs and carry him round the dance floor but instead of bearing him off to Paradise itself, they set him down when the music stops. It looks like it was all too much for him.



Two tours are available for next day: Petropolis, a royal retreat 65km from Rio in the mountains, and the *favelas*. Fortunately no-one is interested in the latter and it is cancelled. I am glad none of us wanted to derive enjoyment from gawping at the poorest of the poor in their dreadful shanty towns.

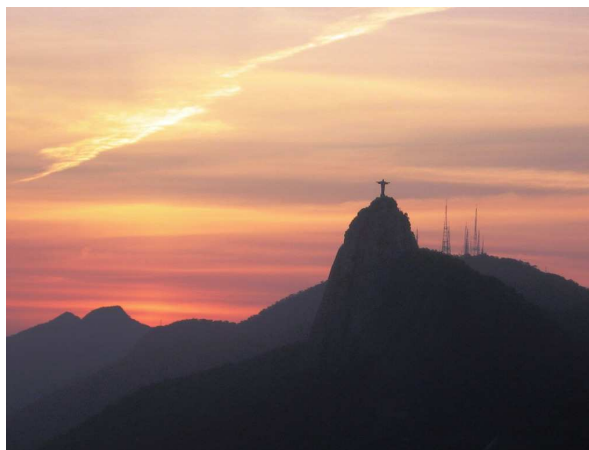


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Petropolis was built in the 1830s and used as a Royal residence by Peters I and II. Pedro I was known for two main things: he was installed by Portugal but declared Brazil an independent country with himself as monarch;

and he sired over a hundred children with numbers of women. Forced to abdicate in 1830 through his mismanagement of the economy, he installed Pedro II, aged five, as monarch who unlike his father was very sound and liberal; he learned Guarani, the native language, and reigned for 49 years in which time he moved to abolished slavery, his daughter Isabella finally signing the abolition edict in 1888. Isabella built a glass Crystal Palace, modelled on the one built for the London Exhibition, which she used for plants. The former Royal Summer Palace is now the Imperial Museum, which mostly contains mementoes of the Pedros and their families. Petropolis contains some beautiful houses, many of German design reflecting German immigration encouraged by Pedro II. We have yet another huge lunch in a cosy house featuring regional cooking.

On the way back, we are dropped off at Ipanema Beach at Stern jewellery house, where they show you how their jewellery is made, regale you with *caiparinhas*, and then sit you down one-to-one with a salesperson who softens you up by asking you about your pet dog, before putting in their own bite. We tell her we left our non-existent dogs in a dog-hotel and thanks but no thanks to the jewels and the hard sell. We look at Amsterdam's next door, which is a little cheaper – but only a little. Adrian a farmer from WA bought his wife the very top range of imperial topaz, which sets him back nine grand, while Lyn parts with ten grand with the purchase of a gold-mounted ruby, which all the girls crowd round and *ooh* and *aah* over. I then realise that the name of the game for most of the women on the tour isn't sight-seeing after all: it is *shopping* literally on the 'grand' scale. Catherine's success as a jeweller is thus of some interest to them, but when they learn she deals only with semi-precious stones, while these people deal with extremely precious stones, their interest wanes. For men, the game is competitive boasting about the most expensive tours they have been on. We have been on some interesting tours, especially in China, but we keep quiet about that. They were very cheap so our fellow travellers would not have been interested.



On the way to Rio airport next morning, the bus is stopped by City Council inspectors. They search the windscreen and find that a particular licence, issued last week, isn't displayed: the bus, sadly, cannot proceed. The driver explains, laughing and smiling, that his firm hadn't known about the new licence. The inspectors also laugh and smile but regret the bus cannot proceed. They are unmoved with the explanation that these visitors from overseas must catch their flight ... but, if the fine were paid on the spot, then perhaps an exception might be made ... \$180 dollars changes hands and our bus proceeds. It is our first insight into the way business is done in South America. Our second insight occurs inside the terminal less than an hour later at group check-in. Sadly, three boarding passes and passports seem to have vanished somewhere in the system: Gordon's large wallet saves the day. Other problems are sheer inefficiency: twice it is discovered after boarding that a few duplicate boarding passes

had been issued, double-booking the seats concerned. It creates some loudly expressed concern – and an interesting problem for the hostesses to deal with.

La Paz

La Paz airport is in El Alto, over 4,000 m. above sea level, on the rim of a huge volcanic basin: we descend by bus on a narrow winding road 500 m. to La Paz, which lies at the bottom of the basin, yet it is still the highest capital city in the world, we are told. We are later to be told that Quito is, but with La Paz at 3,660 m. and Quito at 2,850 m., La Paz wins.

Chet advises us not to take Diamox for altitude sickness in advance as there are side effects; if we feel *really* affected then that is the time to take it. Walking from the plane to terminal we do feel a little breathless. That night, I wake to a bad headache but nothing Panadol doesn't fix – and keep on waking up as a strong need to take a deep breath periodically hits me. I have to get up to urinate six or seven times during the night. That is my reaction to altitude, but as Diamox is also a diuretic, it is just as well I didn't take it. Sleeplessness haunts me for the next few days. Catherine is luckier, she only has the occasional headache.

Bolivia is in dire economic straits, La Paz primitive, despite being a country rich with natural resources. Ownership of the tin mines is a major problem. They used to be owned by three Spain-based families, but several revolutions later democracy has come to Bolivia: ownership is now shared between eight families, as Ivan our pleasantly cynical guide tells us. He says things are so bad in Bolivia that if you don't laugh you would cry. The miners were mostly imported slaves and enslaved



Indians who worked 18 hours a day in insufferably hot conditions

and on little food; they could only do this by chewing coca leaves which dulled the discomfort but had the unfortunate effect of them dying in their early forties from malnutrition and fatigue.

The British worked in the mines a century ago and they were reasonably popular. When they left, Bolivian women took to wearing bowler hats as a tribute to the Brits. The bowlers have now acquired a culture of their own. Of different colours, their degree of tilt denotes marital status: square on top, married. Next morning we walk the street slowly, taking pictures where we can, but one old beggar-



woman (unmarried by the look of her hat), into whose bowl we drop some coins, shrieks her outrage when we try to photograph her. We are told she would have believed she had three souls and a photograph would steal one of them (the woman on the right did not object – either she didn't believe it or she had lost her soul already).



Children on the other hand clamoured for their photograph to be taken at one *silo* (20c) a pop. Even souls have their price, which Giselle found to be heftier than it would seem. On a devastated building site overlooking one of the poorer areas of town, she is cuddling two little girls and asking them about themselves in Spanish. 'Where is your mother?' she asks. 'There somewhere,' the older replies, pointing to a dense conglomeration of drab little houses piled on top of each other. They are quite happy that Giselle and a few others nearby photograph them. Later, Giselle discovers a wallet containing US \$100 had been taken from her zipped-up coat

pocket. She blames a journey to a museum in a small alleyway where old Alois had his walking stick nicked by a couple of kids. I couldn't see how she could easily have been pickpocketed there, but I could see how one of the kids could have done so during the warm cuddles. Catherine thought I'd better not share that disillusioning observation with Giselle.

Our guide takes us through La Florida, where the rich of La Paz live. In La Paz, the almost universal rule of real estate is reversed: the poor live high up in El Alto, the rich outside the city in lower altitudes. Ivan explained that in La Paz and particularly in El Alto, we would see, as indeed we had, that the middle-aged to elderly had red faces: this is due to vaso-dilation, an effect of altitude, that leads to premature circulatory problems and an early death. The rich therefore build their houses in lower altitudes. Frequently they build first and for the record ask permission afterwards, any problems arising from that order of events are fixed with retrospective payments to the relevant officials.

Moon Valley is a tortured landscape beyond La Florida, utterly barren with steep moonscape hills on the very top of one of which a Bolivian in broad hat and red poncho stands like Batman, while another plays mournful pipe music. But we spend too long there and in the city square, where the buildings are still scarred by bullets of the last revolution – not two years ago – and so we miss San Francisco Church and can only drive through the Witchdoctor's Market, where the ingredients for black magic are for sale: jaguar skins, shrunk heads, and dried and pickled other bits of wild animals, not to mention indescribable herbs and potions .



We visit one of La Paz's top restaurants, which tries and fails to be gourmet western – the llama steak is like any steak served with chips, enlivened with a very acceptable Bolivian red. The locals put on a cultural evening of dancing to the usual band of panpipes, flutes, drums and guitar but while the costumes are dazzling, the band is too loud and the dances monotonously the same, yet we were told beforehand that each dance is symbolic of key elements in folk history. This is embarrassing because they are trying to entertain us with their culture but without explaining anything, while at the same time trying to be with-it western-style.

La Paz redeems itself with a farewell drink of *pisco*, and one of the best of many *piscos* we are to taste in Peru and Chile – and equal to that in Tasmania, for we find that Tasmanian pepperberry vodka is an excellent substitute for the grappa-type spirit base that with egg-white, lime-juice and sugar, shaken not stirred, constitutes this sweet-sour cocktail.

Thus fortified, we drive out of the basin floor 500 metres higher to El Alto Airport. Our next stop is Cusco, gateway to one of the main reasons why we are on this trip: Machu Picchu.

Continued in *The Captain's Choice of South America: Part 2*.

