

Travel report - Research on Italian immigration in Argentina

It might not be immediately obvious why a student reading Italian should travel all the way to Buenos Aires to find material for an essay. However, a look at the statistics shows that over 60% of



View from Palacio Barolo - building inspired by the Divine Comedy

the Argentinian population has at least some roots in Italy. In fact, after the weeks I spent in Buenos Aires, I struggle to think of a country in which the influence of Italian immigration on the local culture could be stronger. Thanks to the £1150 I received from the Santander Travel Grant, I was able to experience this very closely this summer, when I traveled to Buenos Aires to do research for my extended essay.

For anyone visiting Buenos Aires it would be difficult to miss the connections to Italy. There are clues hidden everywhere: in people's surnames, the street signs, the gelato shops and in the melody of Argentinian Spanish. Within the first few

days, I walked past the big Garibaldi statue on Plaza Italia, noticed Italian films playing at the cinema, saw many Italian authors on display in the bookshops and eventually stopped counting the abundance of Italian restaurants, bakeries and other shops. It was clear that there was a lot to discover; the question was just where to begin. The first important address was the the Center for Latin American Migration Studies (CEMLA), where I was very kindly welcomed by the librarian. She gave me plenty of general historical material on the Italian immigration, which helped me to gain a good overview. I realized that in order to make the most of my time in Buenos Aires, I would have to decide on a more specific topic to do more targeted research. Therefore, I decided to focus on language and literature, the two topics which are most relevant to my course. The impact of the Italian immigration between 1800 and 1900 on the language spoken in the region around Buenos Aires is very interesting. It created a distinctive mixture between Spanish and Italian, which the Argentinians call *Cocoliche*, and contributed to the *Lunfardo*, a dialect which was mainly spoken by the lower social classes until it became a tool for one of the most important practices of Argentine culture - the Tango. In fact, many lyrics of Argentine Tango are written in Lunfardo. Today, many italianisms are part of the day to day conversations of the porteños (the Argentinians in Buenos Aires) and can even be found in some of the most important works of Argentinian literature. To give two examples, everyone will understand you if you order a *birra* instead of a *cerveza* in Buenos Aires, and Jorge Luís Borges uses the word *arribo* (italian: *arrivo* - arrival) instead of the Spanish *llegada*.



The conventillos in Buenos Aires were the first homes for many immigrants. Today they are a tourist attraction.

The influence of the Italian immigration on Argentinian literature, on the other hand, is not quite so obvious and there is certainly much less written about it. I found this particularly interesting, because I assumed that the arrival of millions of Italians must have left a significant trace in the

Argentinian literary landscape. Therefore, I decided to keep looking for connections between the immigration and Argentinian literature and collected material from the CEMLA as well as the Istituto italiano di cultura. The latter is in possession of another very well-stocked library with works on the Italian immigration. Again I was received very warmly and granted access to the library even on days when it was closed to the public. Between the CEMLA and the Istituto italiano I was able to find some interesting sources on the topic and noticed that especially “theatre“ was a term that was often associated with the Italian immigration. Many writers emphasized the importance of the Italian immigrants for the Argentinian *sainete* (farce), which became popular towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Those short, humorous plays often portrayed the life of the immigrants in the *conventillos*, the communal houses in which most immigrants from Europe found their first home in Buenos Aires. In fact, the protagonist of the *sainete* usually is the European immigrant in search of an Argentinian identity.



Image of one of the ships that brought Italians from Genova to Buenos Aires

Another connection between Italian and Argentinian literature I came across during my research, is the great importance of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for the works of Borges. While this may not be a direct effect of the Italian immigration, it would be another very interesting topic to explore in an essay.

Other places I visited in Buenos Aires included the *Museo de la inmigración* and *Palacio Barolo*.



In the Museum of Immigration: Reconstruction of a room in the *Hotel de los inmigrantes*, where the immigrants often stayed for a few nights right after their arrival

The former is located at the port where the ships from Europe arrived and where the immigrants first set foot on Argentinian soil. The museum had a very interesting general exhibition on immigration to Argentina and a part which was specifically dedicated to the Italian and Spanish immigration. There I was able to watch interviews, read old letters, newspapers, see passports, registers and many other documents and things brought by the immigrants. *Palacio Barolo*, meanwhile, is a beautiful office building, commissioned by the Italian immigrant Luis Barolo and inspired by Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Visitors enter on the ground floor which symbolizes hell and are then taken 21 floors up through purgatory and the first cycles of paradise, until they

reach the divine light and a spectacular panorama of Buenos Aires on the 22nd floor. This building, as well as Borges’ admiration for Dante are only two examples of a wider phenomenon. The impression I have after my time in Buenos Aires is that today the Argentinians, and especially the people in Buenos Aires, are proud of their heritage. Italian culture and literature are cherished and kept alive in this beautiful, remote country.

Summing up, I had a wonderful time in Buenos Aires. Not only did I come back to Europe with plenty of material and ideas for my extended essay, but I was also able to get to know this vibrant city with its bookshops at every corner, the tango dancers in the streets, the artisan fairs, the

exceptional art galleries, the romantic French buildings and the immense diversity of cultural events happening every day. I am very thankful for this beautiful experience and I will miss Argentina very much.

Some impressions of Buenos Aires

