

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Trip of a Lifetime

Earlier this month Pat and I returned from our trip of a lifetime – a two-week visit to South America, including highlights of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. We were on Tauck's *Essence of South America* tour with 30 other travelers from across the U.S., two from Canada, and one each from the U.K. and Israel.

Chile and Argentina were part of the Spanish Colonial Empire from the early 1500s to the early 1800s, before achieving independence. Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese beginning in 1500 and declared its independence in 1822. All three countries suffered a series of political upheavals, brutal dictatorships and economic crises before emerging in the 1980s and 1990s as stable constitutional republics.

Pat and I flew from Tucson to Dallas and from there had an 11-hour overnight flight to Santiago, Chile, where it was the middle of summer.

Chile

Chile is long and thin (2,700 x 109 miles average) with a total area about twice the size of Montana. The country is a model of financial and social progress. Many of its 17 million people are employed in copper mining, agriculture – including a rapidly growing wine industry, and salmon farming. Chile's capital city is Santiago, with a population of about five million people.

Santiago was the gathering place and kickoff city for our grand tour. Following a sumptuous welcome dinner, the next day we toured the city and a nearby winery. The next morning we flew down the coast to Puerto Mont in Patagonia's Lake District – a wonderland of lakes, mountains, glaciers, and fiords.

We spent the next few days crossing the Andes Mountains to Argentina. We traveled by bus, then boat, then bus, then boat ... across an incredible landscape of mountain lakes ringed by icy glaciers. The whole area is preserved as a National Park and our route was along a historic trail, that has awed travelers for over 100 years, including Teddy Roosevelt in 1916.

Pat and I got to take our first helicopter ride, flying over the beautiful lakes, and above and among the snowy, water-fall-filled glaciers. Pat used the articulated view finder on her camera to shoot photos through an open small window to achieve some of the best pictures of the trip.

My photography was suffering because after a dusty, four-wheel-drive excursion, the protective external shutter on my camera failed to fully open. For the rest of the trip, I had to remember to prompt the mechanism with my finger or a "Q" tip.

We successfully crossed the Andes to arrive at one of world's finest rest stops, the Llao-Llao Resort in western Argentina.

Argentina

With a population of about 41 million people, Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world – approximately the size of the US east of the Mississippi River. While livestock was the historical basis for Argentina’s wealth, primary contributors to Argentina’s economy today are manufacturing and agriculture, including growing wine production. Buenos Aires, with a population approaching three million people, is the capital of Argentina.

We spent a couple of days at the Llao-Llao Resort resting, hiking, and learning to tango. All agreed that this was a place to stay forever!

Reluctantly, we next bused to Bariloche, known for its fabulous chocolates, where Pat and I made the big purchase of our trip, a box of chocolates, and then flew from Bariloche to Buenos Aires. The next three days were filled with tours of the beautiful city, a visit to the neighborhood where the tango was born, a walk through a mausoleum-style cemetery containing the remains of the infamous Eva Perón, a tour of an historic ornately decorated opera house, and a very entertaining dinner tango show.

On Day 10 of our grand tour, we flew to breathtaking Iguazú Falls – noted by many as one of the seven natural wonders of the world and by any measure, the highlight of the trip. The falls are situated in the middle of a subtropical jungle, on a bend of the Iguazú River between Argentina and Brazil, along a 1.7-mile long cliff-face. There is actually an average of 275 individual falls (depending on water level) ranging from picturesque cascades to immense thundering cataracts plummeting over 200 feet. Iguazú Falls is higher than Niagara and wider than Victoria!

We spent a day on the Argentina side of the Falls, hiking along trails overlooking the grandeur, approaching the edge of the falls at several places on metal catwalks, and physically experiencing the power of the falls. At the largest of the drops, the famous Devil’s Throat, Pat and I got soaked from the frothing water while trying to take pictures.

But that was nothing compared to how wet I got later that day when I took an open-boat ride up to (and it seemed into) the bottom of one of the larger falls. It took days for my clothes to dry!

The next day we headed to the Brazil side of the falls.

Brazil

Brazil is the world’s fifth largest country – 10% bigger than the US’s lower 48 states – and is the economic powerhouse of Latin America with the world’s seventh largest economy. Its 194 million people are principally involved in manufacturing and agriculture. Brasilia is the capital; Rio de Janeiro is the second largest city, with a population approaching six and a half million people.

The panoramic views of Iguazú Falls from the Brazil side are absolutely spectacular. A single catwalk takes you right into the action at Devil’s Throat!

This was another place we hated to leave, but it was time to fly to the last destination on our tour, the fabulous city of Rio de Janeiro.

Rio is built among a group of mountains, a mix of old and new architecture, with a National Park right in the middle of the city – a very beautiful place. Our hotel was on Ipanema Beach, made famous by the well-known bossa nova song from the 1960s, “The Girl from Ipanema,” which our guide sang to us in Portuguese.

Early in the morning of our first day in Rio, we traveled to the most visited tourist site in South America, the Christ the Redeemer statue, atop 2,300-foot Corcovado Mountain, reachable by cogwheel train. Unfortunately, the over 100-foot statue was shrouded by fog during most of that visit.

Later that morning, we stopped at a samba school (a dancing club that traditionally supports celebrations) to see a parade float being prepared for Rio de Janeiro’s famous annual pre Lent Carnival to be held the next weekend. (This is the largest carnival in the world with two million people lining the streets daily.) A special surprise was a performance by an enthusiastic samba dance group.

A fitting end to the touring on this trip was a visit to 4,290-foot Sugar Loaf, a granite block rising from Guanabara Bay, reachable by Italian made bubble cars suspended on cables. It’s an awe-inspiring ride with fantastic views from the top of the city of Rio, and its harbors and beaches.

Our final event, the farewell dinner, was held at a harbor-side restaurant that served grilled meats of every conceivable variety on skewers that were continuously brought to the table. What a feast!

Pat and I had a relaxing final day in Rio, where we watched a “warm-up” beach-side Carnival parade and frolicking sunbathers. Brazilians really know how to party!

We flew back to Tucson on another overnight flight – happy to be home.

Odds and Ends

We had perfect weather for the whole trip, though in some places it was hot and humid.

Contrary to pre-trip warnings, we were not bothered by bugs anywhere.

Everywhere we went, we could drink the water, eat the food, and flush the toilets – our definition of developed countries.

We were surprised at the late dinner hour in Latin America, doorbells on hotel doors, and almost constant internet connectivity.

We appreciated nature’s wonders more than the terrific cities we visited – a constant theme seemed to be water – rivers, lakes, glaciers, harbors, and oceans - plentiful and beautiful.

This trip didn’t meet our expectations – it exceeded them!

Thanks to our new fellow traveler friends for helping make our trip so memorable and to our first rate tour director who coincidentally lives here in Tucson when he's not touring.

Special thanks to Pat who took pictures with two cameras and 37 pages of notes on the trip to enable this article!



Our South American tour included Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. (Courtesy Arizona Daily Star)



Helicopter view of a cloud-tipped glacier in the Chilean Andes. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



We had a 360-degree view of Argentina's "Tiger Island" National Park from a site reached by chair-lift. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



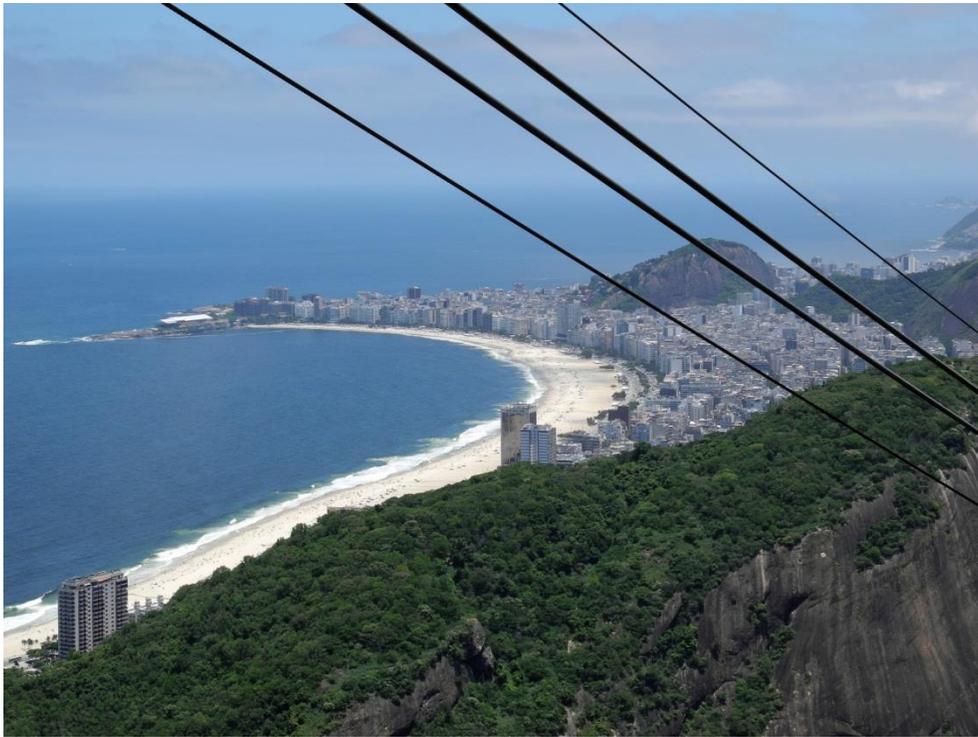
Spectacular panorama of Iguazu Falls from the Brazilian side. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



Bob took a boat ride like this "under" one of the Iguazu Falls cataracts. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



We're getting soaked while standing on a cat-walk in front of thundering Iguazu Falls.
(Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach from a cable car nearing the top of Sugar Loaf Mountain.
(Courtesy of Bob Ring)