

BRITISH AIRWAYS

nighlife

BAHIGHLIFE.COM
APRIL 2009

INSIDE
Your movie, tv
and audio guide
Page 103

The joy of Mex

Take a tasty tour of Mexico's fine dining and sizzling street food

Buzzing Berlin

Why Germany's capital is the new European hot spot

From islands to Highlands

Get your kicks in Mauritius and get away from it all in Scotland

JOHN SIMPSON

Letter from Buenos Aires

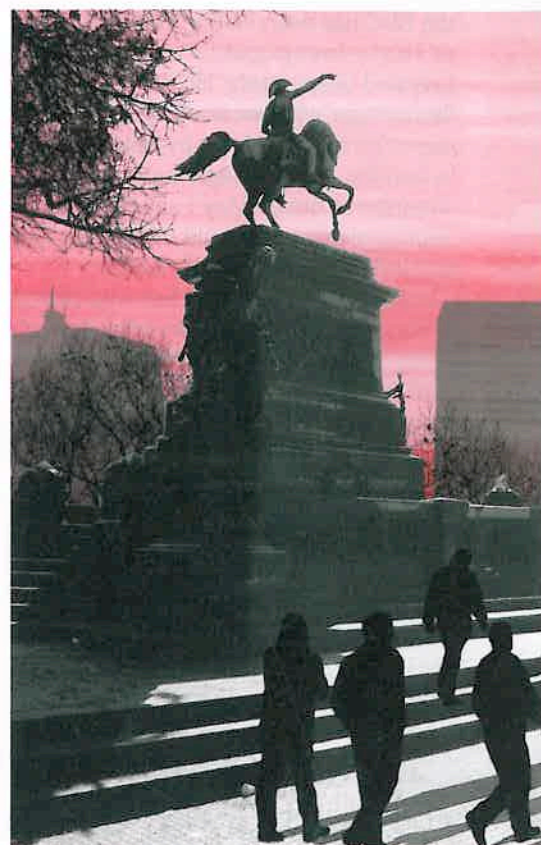
It was almost two in the morning, and the six of us – Robin, Ben, Tim, Simon, Helen and I – were heading back to our hotel through the gradually thinning crowds in Florida Street. Buenos Aires is, as all the world knows, a delightfully late-night city. We had just finished a long, celebratory dinner at El Palacio de la Papa Frita, by no means the most elegant place to eat, but one of the most typical. We had had chorizo, vast steaks, the eponymous little potato soufflés for which El Palacio is famous, and industrial quantities of good red wine; and some of us had ended up with *dulce de leche*, Argentina's almost unbearably sweet dessert.

Now we were strolling home. All of us except Simon, but including Helen, were smoking the big, satisfying H Upmann cigars that a charming man at the Davidoff shop in St James's Street in London had donated to our expedition.

Life seemed very good. We had just got back from sailing round Cape Horn in a 48ft boat called *Pelagic*. It was part of a forthcoming series for BBC television, in which the greatest of modern round-the-world sailors, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, and the greatest of modern explorers, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, joined me in a threefold adventure: travelling in Afghanistan, rounding the Horn, and man-hauling sledges in the Arctic. Quite why three gents in their 60s, two of them titled, would want to do such a variety of uncomfortable things would need a psychiatrist to explain, but we had enjoyed ourselves hugely. The others filmed us as Ran and I crewed for Robin, watched over by the legendary Cape Horn sailor Skip Novak.

Going round the Horn the traditional way entitles you to various privileges, including wearing a gold earring and putting your elbows on the table when you eat. The BBC would probably object if I adopted an earring at this stage in my career, and I've been putting my elbows on the table for most of my life, but it's nice to know I can now do it officially.

The only member of our team who wasn't with us that night in Buenos Aires was Ran Fiennes. He had a book to finish



against a tight deadline, and had stayed in the hotel to write. He and I had forged a close alliance aboard the *Pelagic*, since neither of us had the slightest idea about sailing, and we found it baffling and intimidating. But, under Robin's and Skip's guidance, we just about got away with it.

And there was another personal link between us: when my son was born in 2006, I asked Ran's permission to name him Ranulph. Eventually, since it was a big mouthful for someone only a foot long, we called him Rafe for short, and it has stuck; but his birth certificate and his much-used passport say Ranulph, so that's his real name.

We strolled past the vast new shopping mall on Florida, and the sadly abandoned department store, which still bears the name Harrods. I showed the others the place where I was cornered by an angry crowd after the Falklands War and had to talk my way out of trouble (the only skill I have to compare to the far more serious abilities of Ran Fiennes and Robin Knox-Johnston). Then we stopped off at the Plaza Hotel to see if we could get a last drink.

Once, during a period of fierce anti-British feeling, some colleagues and I had checked in there, pretending to be from Australian television. 'Ah yes,' said the man behind the desk, 'you are from the BBC.' 'No, absolutely not,' I said, gesturing nervously to my colleagues. 'We're Irish. And American. And also Jamaican.' 'But >

the BBC has been calling you here.' 'One of those inexplicable coincidences,' I replied desperately. He went off to get the manager, while we stood there nervously, our cover entirely blown by leaky security in London. The manager understood the situation at once. 'May I say,' he smiled, 'what a pleasure it would have been, had you indeed been from the BBC?'

But tonight the Plaza's bar was closed to non-residents. We wandered on through Plaza San Martin, the fine park in the city centre, with the statue of the great general it's named after, and the famous, dominant 50ft high ombu tree. Then we crossed Calle Maipu and, from the corner, even in the darkness, I could see the doorway of number 900, with the sign announcing that this was where the sage of Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges, had once lived.

I always feel a pang when I think of him. He was blind and very elderly in 1982, when I first came to Buenos Aires, but he

“Going round the Horn the traditional way entitles you to wear a gold earring”

was mentally as sharp as ever, and enjoyed receiving visitors – especially from Britain. I had even been tipped off what to say when I met him: he would declaim from memory a passage in Anglo-Saxon, and ask you where it came from. If you answered *Beowulf*, he would be delighted, and would open up to you just a little of his wonderful literary knowledge and his acid-sharp understanding of the world.

But I never had time to see him and before my next trip to Argentina he had died. There have been plenty of other people I just missed meeting: Molotov, Stalin's henchman, for instance, or Cary Grant, or Henri Cartier-Bresson. But I feel worst about Borges. Ah well – *inutiles regrets*, as someone remarks in one of the intensely boring French tragedies I once had to study, and which Borges characteristically enjoyed. Pointless regrets.

Ahead lay our hotel, and the conversation had switched to the buying of leather jackets. I took a last puff from my celebratory cigar, and slowly the sadness ebbed and was replaced by a certain satisfaction. I might not have met Borges, but I had sailed round Cape Horn. The hard way. *John Simpson is the BBC's world affairs editor and can be seen around the globe on BBC World News, which is available in 200 countries and territories worldwide, and on selected British Airways flights.*

Notes from a traveller

COLIN FIRTH, ACTOR

I keep my preconceptions in check when travelling. The first time I went to Berlin I found that people never stopped laughing and joking. The service was also catastrophically inefficient and made Italy look like a well-oiled machine. Having decided that national reputations have no foundation, I immediately bumped into a strait-laced and efficient German. Travel routinely proves me wrong.

However, national stereotypes are inescapable. You only have to listen to the World Cup commentary with its 'passionate' Italians and 'optimistic' Africans to understand that. I married an Italian ten years ago [film producer Livia Giuggioli] and most Italians I meet think Brits are much like the characters I play: the stuffy 19th-century gent. But British men would rather identify with someone like John Lennon, wouldn't they?

I can still remember the revelation of my first American burger in 1972. I was on a road trip with my parents during the year that my father worked in Missouri. It was the size of my head and opulent in a way that would make me queasy now. But it bespoke the confidence of a great nation.

Strangers in the US offer hospitality with no expectations. We could all learn something from that. Drive off the major routes into small-town America and you will find strangers bursting with warmth and a willingness to help, especially if you have car trouble, as my family regularly did with our beaten-up Volkswagen in the 1970s.

What a misnomer the word desert is. Nothing could be more alive. I fell totally in love with the northern Sahara when filming *The English Patient*. It was magical, with every single light change or time of day shifting its contours. **I don't agree with those who say flying has to stop.** Economic development, conflict resolution and exposure to other cultures and experiences are all too richly rewarding.

Colin Firth stars in Genova, which is on general release, and Easy Virtue, which is showing on board.