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Beyond Buenos Aires:

Tripping Over the Crisis in the Patagonia and Gender Lessons In the Argentine Northwest

By Martha Farmelo

APRIL 20, 2002

BUENOS AIRES–This past Easter Sunday I woke up at 8:10 a.m., trapped in a pitch-dark hotel room in the small city of Bariloche by my three-year-old son who was asleep—for the moment—in a portable single bed right next to the door. I was ready to get up but instead rolled on to my back, folded my pillow under my head and shoulders, draped an arm over my snoozing partner, Alan, and heaved a slow, silent, heavy, first-thing-in-the-morning kind-of sigh.

We had come to the central-eastern Argentine Patagonia (near the Chilean border) to explore spectacular, clear, blue lakes surrounded by rugged Andean mountains. I had especially longed to escape the commotion of Buenos Aires and the constant, ominous signs of the ever-deepening crisis (for an update, see page 14)—things like adults and kids rifling through huge bags of garbage on the street late at night, gobbling remnants of Big Macs and McNuggets that had been discarded hours before.

As I lay there in the warm bed, my mind wandered back over our recent days

The view from Campanario Mountain just outside of Bariloche. I went to Patagonia in part to escape the commotion of Buenos Aires and the ominous signs of the financial crisis.


J U J U Y
Humahuaca
Tilcara
Pumamarca
Maimará
San Salvador Jujuy
Salta
S A L T A
A R G E N T I N A
CALCHAQUI VALLEYS
Cafayate
QUILMES RUINS
T U C U M Á N
SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO
Tafi de Valle
San Miguel de Tucumán
CATAMARCA
Acheral
0 20km
0 20mi
BOLIVIA
Sucre
BRAZIL
PARAGUAY
La Quiaca
JUJUY
San Salvador de Jujuy
Salta
SALTA
TUCUMAN
San Miguel de Tucumán
FOMOSA
Asuncion
Formosa
CHACO
Resistencia
Corrientes
MISONES
Posadas
CATAMARCA
Catamarca
Santiago del Estero
SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO
CORRIENTES
La Rioja
LA RIOJA
SANTA FE
SAN JUAN
San Juan
Córdoba
Santa Fé
Paraná
ENTRE RIOS
CORDOBA
URUGUAY
Pacific
Ocean
Santiago
Mendosa
San Luis
Montevideo
MENDOSA
SAN LUIS
Buenos Aires
Río de la Plata
CHILE
LA PAMPA
BUENOS AIRES
NEUQUEN
Santa Rosa
Neuquén
RÍO NEGRO
Bariloche
Viedma
Gulf of San Matias
Isla Grande de Chiloe
Rawson
ARGENTINA
Atlantic
CHUBUT
Ocean
Gulf of San Jorge
SANTA CRUZ
FALKLAND ISLANDS
Río Gallegos
Port Stanley
Strait of Magellan
Tierra Del Fuego
Ushuaia
0 500 mi
0 500 km

The author atop Cathedral Mountain.

in Bariloche and then back to a trip I made last November to the Argentine northwest. First off, my thoughts went back to just days earlier. I had left my family napping in the hotel and spent the afternoon riding a cable car and chairlift up to explore Cathedral Mountain, a 2,388-meter peak that affords an absolutely magnificent view of the surrounding area.

Riding the tour bus to the mountain's base, I sat next to a grandmother who had come alone from Buenos Aires to spend the holiday in Bariloche. "My daughter thought I was crazy to come by myself, but I told her I wouldn't be alone, and I'm not. Look, right now I'm talking with you," she said, smiling. "And besides, I don't mind traveling alone."

What a contrast to women's spheres in many other countries! After reading recent newsletters on the status of women by ICWA fellows Leena Kahn in Pakistan and Curt Gabrielson in East Timor, I have been especially cognizant of the myriad freedoms most Argentine women take for granted.

As we chatted away about her daughter and two grandchildren, this pleasant, brown-and-gray-haired woman mentioned that her son-in-law is unemployed, has zero job prospects and is somewhat depressed. "My daughter says it's really hard for him, that he doesn't feel like he's fulfilling his role as the man of the house." My heart sank as I heard this story for what felt like the billionth time.

In fact, I think I must have "crisis fatigue." I felt as if my glorious trip to the mountains had suddenly been tainted, and I felt remorse at how little inclination I had to listen to her story or express sympathy.

So much for escaping the crisis—a lost cause anyway. As I lay in the hotel bed, my mind wandered to the half-dozen or so local parents who the day before had stopped the minivan carrying us along the two-lane road out of town that cuts through an old forest of evergreens. A rotund, bearded father stepped up to the driver's window and handed us a fistful of flyers expressing their demands that the government of the province of Río Negro resolve the current education crisis.

"The schools have not opened yet," said the bearded dad. Absolutely intrigued, I leaned toward the window and strained to not miss a word. Teachers are owed months of back pay and the schools are in deplorable condition, he told us. I was shocked. The school year began on March 4 and our son had already been in pre-school for four full weeks. What is the future of a child, a family or a country when schools are closed indefinitely?

The previous afternoon while wandering around Bariloche's picturesque main square, or *Centro Cívico*, as they call it, I had seen a man pushing a stroller with a pudgy baby in it. A hand-written sign taped between the stroller's handles announced his commitment to defend his kid's right to an education.

As I remembered these moments, I folded my arms back toward the pillow and slipped my hands under my head. I was thinking about how involved the fathers seem to be in the local struggle around the schools. Their participation exploded the vision of the female-dominated, Argentine "PTA" I had conjured up.

Later in the square, Alan had chatted with a mother handing out flyers about the education crisis. She told him that not only were public schools still closed more than a month after they should have opened, but justice and health workers were on strike for lack of pay and medical supplies and those systems were essentially shut down as well.

"Basically, nothing in this province works," she told him.

No wonder the half-dozen or so clowns in the main square who juggled marvelously, spit fire, rode on unicycles and generally goofed around made so many political references during their act—jokes about things like dollars, bank deposits and corruption. Another day, the male partner in a couple dancing tango for the crowd announced that they would end their performance with a piece by the late Osvaldo Pugliese. The dancer's reason: Pugliese was both a master tango pianist *and* an example of someone with great political ideals who lived his life consistent with them.

Osvaldo Pugliese

(Pugliese was a member of the Argentine commu-

nist party often blacklisted and persecuted because of it. When he was in jail, his orchestra would perform without him and band members always lay a red rose over the piano to indicate his absence. He died in 1995.)

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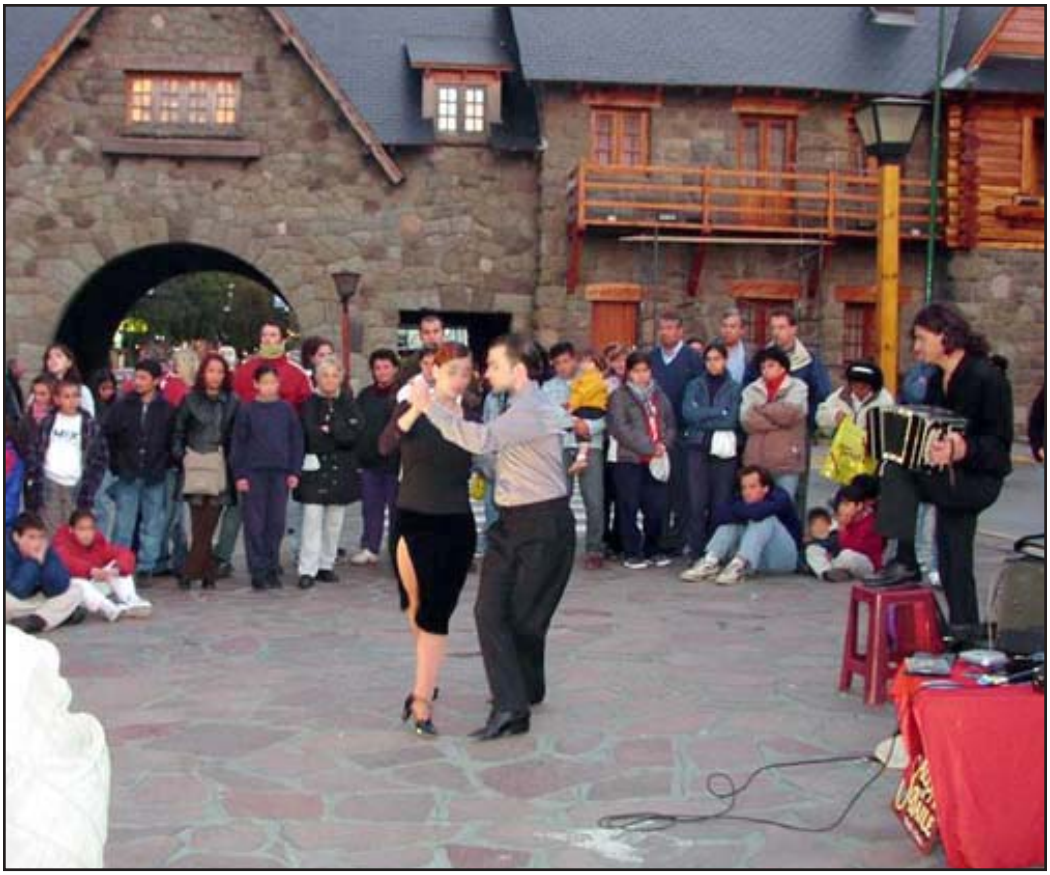
The national media in Argentina are markedly Buenos-Aires-centric and internationally focused. Between us Alan and I read at least two newspapers every day, yet we had neither read nor heard anything about the conflicts and crises in Río Negro. In fact, most of the time that I am in Buenos Aires I have little sense of what is happening in the provinces.



The dancers at the civic center in Bariloche ended their show with a piece by the late Osvaldo Pugliese, a master tango pianist and member of the Argentine communist party, remembered by the dancers for his faithfulness to his political ideals.

For this reason, last November I traveled to Tucumán, Salta and Jujuy, three provinces in the Argentine northwest. After having drafted MJF-2 on issues of diversity and homogeneity, I was left with a strong feeling of need to see some of Argentina outside of the cosmopolitan capital, and wanted to visit the most traditional, even indigenous part of the country. My dear friend Karen Plafker, a public-health specialist and program officer at George Soros' Open Society Institute, flew here from New York to make the trip with me. We had no gender-related agenda, but—perhaps not surprisingly—our journey was full of what we spontaneously dubbed "gender lessons." As I lay in bed in Bariloche, I found myself retracing our days in the northwest.

On Sunday evening, November 11, Karen and I flew about two hours to San Miguel de Tucumán (capital of the province of Tucumán) the only city in the northwest with a significant immigrant population (mostly Jewish, Italian and Syrian). Tucumán is also the birthplace of legendary folksinger Mercedes Sosa.

Mercedes Sosa

At the small airport, we hurried over to the square Hertz Rent-a-Car booth. There a friendly and efficient young guy named Agustín was waiting for us. I confess that as we filled out the paperwork, and despite hearty reassurances to my mother-in-law and friends that we would be fine, I was feeling nervous about driving on those winding, desolate mountain roads. What would we do if we got lost? What if the car broke down?

So, as the three of us bantered and worked out the

At Parque los Menhires, just south of Cafayate, we wandered among more than 80 aboriginal granite monuments of human and animal forms.

numerous extra fees, I asked, "What is the fee for your cell-phone number?"

"*Aguantame*" ["Hold on"], Agustín replied. He then flipped over the contract, wrote down his name and cell-phone number as well as a 24-hour cell-phone contact for the Hertz office in Tucumán. I was embarrassed. If I had known about this round-the-clock service, I wouldn't have asked (only half in jest) for his number.

After Karen and I had exited the airport parking lot and were on the road (we got lost on the way out but were soon back on our way), Karen said,

"Gender lesson number one: *it never hurts to flirt a little, does it?"*

"Who, me?," I said, rather indignant. I do *not* like to think of myself as someone who flirts to get what I need. Yet I must admit that when I have traveled internationally (in Argentina and other countries), I have sometimes done just that.

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The next morning, we drove south to the town of Acheral and then northwest through Tucumán's lush, emerald, tropical valleys up to and beyond Tafí del Valle. We made hairpin-turn after hairpin-turn, tipping our noses downward to assess the precipitous drop-offs just a yard or so from the road. We were right where military and para-military forces had massacred members of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (Revolutionary People's Army, or ERP) in the mid-1970s. It was hard to imagine anyone finding refuge, killing another person, or even moving from here to there in such deep, dense foliage.

Dry, windy, deserted El Infiernillo, about fifteen miles north of Tafí del Valle.

The precipitous changes in terrain were astounding. About 15 miles north of Tafí del Valle, we passed through a dry, windy, absolutely desolate area known as El Infiernillo (Little Hell). Like most of our time on the road during this trip, we saw signs for little towns but not a road, house, animal or shack—and not a soul.

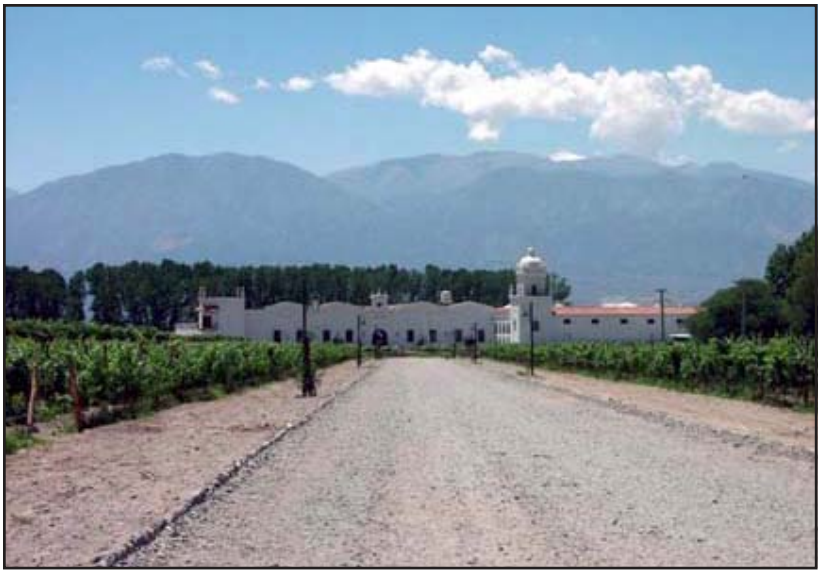
A series of small museums we visited stripped me of the misconception that Argentina's indigenous population existed essentially in a relatively small pocket near the Bolivian border. In reality, myriad indigenous groups dominated large expanses of Argentine territory, and not only in the north.

On November 12, we saw TV images of the crash of an American Airlines jet in Queens, NY while we were visiting the archeological ruins at Quilmes, one of Argentina's most important indigenous sites.

Just before crossing the border into the province of Salta, we stopped at the archeological ruins at Quilmes, one of Argentina's most important indigenous sites. We did things kind-of backwards, stopping in the huge gift shop first. After a few minutes, I called over, "Hey, Karen, come here. A plane crashed in New York."

It was November 12 and the shop attendant was watching non-stop television coverage of the crash of the Santo Domingo-bound American Airlines flight in Queens. Karen's parents live in Queens. We decided not to panic, to take a quick look at the ruins and then find a place to make an international phone call as quickly as possible.

As we finished up walking through the ruins, we were suddenly surrounded on all sides by motionless, staring llamas. That was



On our way out of Cafayate, we took a guided tour of the Michel Torino winery.

it. We were out of there. Within an hour, Karen had spoken to an aunt and learned that everyone was fine.

Just after crossing the border into the province of Salta, we spent the night at a motel run by the Argentine Automobile Club in Cafayate. This quiet and attractive town of 10,000 inhabitants was built around a traditional, tree-filled square flanked by a Catholic church. Cafayate is known for its warm, sunny climate, ideal for growing grapes. It's signature product is the dry, fruity, white *torrontés* wine I first tasted at my in-laws' home in the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires.

At my father-in-law's suggestion, we stopped by for a guided tour of the Michel Torino winery before leaving

Painting one of the massive holding tanks in the Michel Torino winery.

town. Little did we know we were about to be wowed by the captivating presence of a petite, young woman.

As soon as we appeared in the main office, we were approached by Cintia (pronounced "SEEN-tee-ah," with the accent on the first syllable), who walked crisply and seemed to materialize from nowhere. She was no more than five feet tall with incredibly luminous, brown eyes, dark, curly, shoulder-length hair and a buoyant smile. In Spanish she asked, "Are you here for the guided tour?"

"*Sí*," we smiled back.

As we walked through the impeccably clean facilities, Cintia gave us a remarkably clear technical explanation of how wine is produced. As we gazed at the few remaining massive, oak barrels for aging wine, she told us that in just the last year or so their production had shifted from 80 percent white (the signature *torrontés*) and 20 percent red to only 40 percent white and 60 percent red. Some famous Argentine doctor had been quoted widely in the press asserting the health benefits of moderate red wine consumption, which spurred something of a fad in that direction.

"We pay a lot of attention to women, since women tend to be the ones who most follow fads," she said.

Our guide, Cintia, was so smart, articulate and enjoyable to be with that I steered the conversation toward her, rather than wine production.

In fact, they created a new red wine called *tinto jóven* (literally, young red wine) especially for women. "It's not as *grueso* [thick] or *áspero* [harsh] as the wines aged for a long time in wood, or even those aged a short time in wood. It's lighter." Of their current production, the 60 percent that is red breaks down into 40 percent *tinto jóven* and 20 percent traditional red wine.

Do that many women buy wine? "Oh, yes," she said. "Women know a lot about wine, at least what's on the market, and what is popular and good. And women buy much more wine than men." I remembered that unlike in the US, most wine in Argentina is purchased at the grocery store, and women still do most of the food shopping.

As we followed Cintia to the bottling machine, Karen

The new bottling machine requires five rather than fifteen employees, but no one was fired. "This is not a company that fires people," Cintia told us.

and I looked at each other, smiled widely, tipped our heads toward her back and raised our eyebrows as if to say, "Check her out!" Cintia was so smart, so articulate and so enjoyable to be with that I was determined to steer the conversation toward her, rather than wine production.

"How long have you worked here?," I asked.

"I've worked here for one year," she said. "*Pero hasta que sea gerente, ¡no me sacan de aquí!* But until I become manager, I'm not leaving! That's what I told the manager when he first interviewed me. He asked me about my aspirations and expectations. I told him 'I'm not leaving until I have your job.'"

"*Ah, ¿si?*," we asked.

"I started out washing wine glasses, and saw how the wine-tasting worked. Then I learned about the harvest [of grapes], just because I was interested and I wanted to know. I learned about the planting and growing of grapes, and how to harvest them," she said. "Then I became a guide, and then a marketing representative for the *zona de los valles* [the valley zone], from Tafí to Salta." She changed the subject back to the machinery and told us that the old bottling and corking machine used to require fifteen employees and the new one we were seeing needed only five. "But there are still fifteen people working in this sector."

"Why?," I asked.

"*Porque esta no es una empresa que echa gente.*" "Because this is not a company that fires people," she said.

I wanted to inquire if she's experienced sexual harassment. Showing off my new-found skills at indirectness, I asked, "So how do the men treat the women?"

"I've always been treated properly, with respect. The treatment is friendly, but formal." Showing us her two palms in front of her chest, fingers pointing straight up, she added, " It's important for one to say, '*hasta aquí llegamos.*'" [roughly, "here is the limit."] She didn't use the word, but in addition to describing the process of commanding respect and setting limits, I felt she was talking about simple professionalism.

"There are only three other women working here, out of 150 employees, and 350 during harvest time. One is in administration, one is in the laboratory and one is in public relations. The one in public relations knows English and she earns a lot more as a result," she said.

"Outside things are different. We joke, we say bad words, we talk about soccer. Most everyone inside the factory knows each other. Lots of your co-workers have known you since you were a kid."

As if on cue, a man in a uniform who looked about 50 excused himself politely to us and silently, even formally, handed Cintia some computer printouts. "*Gracias,*" she said, smiling at him.

A few minutes later, as we stood on a metal platform looking out at fields of grape plants, she added, "I have a daughter who is five, Daniela. I'm 23. That jerk abandoned me, but I'm soon to be married to my boyfriend, Cristian."

What do your parents do? "My mother knits and crochets. She made this top," she said, using her fingertips to indicate her sleeveless, mint-green, crocheted sweater. "My father is a mechanic, and so is my boyfriend. I'm trying to teach myself French with a book and the radio.

Karen atop the tower of the Michel Torino winery, holding a cup of torrontés.

I listen to a French music station and try to practice whenever I can, especially when I'm cooking or washing the dishes. I'm planning on studying winery in [the province of] Mendoza," she said, Argentina's wine country. "I want to study English, too, but in Cafayate it is really expensive. It makes more sense to take an intensive course in Salta and I'm saving to do that," she said.

"But I love it here. I'm a real *Cafayateña.* You know, out of 365 days of the year, it is sunny 350 days. I look around this place and I think about my daughter. I want her to be able to enjoy life here."

Not sure if she was referring to Cafayate or the winery, I asked, "Would you like her to come work here with you?"

She paused before responding. "Who knows what she will want to do," she said tenderly.

And would her future husband go with her to Mendoza? "Of course!," she replied. "If he wants to be with me, he has to come, no?"

From the factory, Cintia led us to a small wine bar. After a quick tasting of some *torrontés,* the visit was over.

Gender lesson number two: *Sometimes gender boundaries are broken down by remarkable individuals exercising personal qualities such as poise, charm, inner strength, charisma, straightforwardness, clarity, determination and a positive outlook—independent of (explicitly) feminist ideology, organizations or public policies.*

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From Cafayate, we headed north into the Calchaquí valleys, one-time home to the Calchaquí Indians who are known for having put up some of the stiffest resistance to Spanish colonizers. At the outset, we spent a lot of time talking about our impressions of Cintia and how much she and we had packed into a 20-minute tour.

As through most of our trip, there was sparse traffic on the two-lane road. Eventually we rode for a long while in silence, until Karen made a comment about the truck drivers that flashed their lights, honked or even waved as they occasionally whooshed by.

"How the hell can they tell that we are women?," she asked.

Gender lesson number three: *Two young women traveling alone together in the Argentine northwest draw attention, and appear to evoke supernatural powers in passing drivers.*

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After visiting provincial capitals Salta and San Salvador de Jujuy, we headed up into the Humahuaca valley, often described as an artist's palette of colors. The last night of our trip we spent in the town of Tilcara (elevation 2461 meters, population 3,300). Tilcara is about 140 miles from La Quiaca, Argentina's northernmost city, on the Bolivian border.

Since we were traveling in the off-season, all of our destinations were practically tourist-free. The flip side of that coin is that many restaurants and shops were closed. Around 8:00 p.m. we walked into town in search of dinner, a bit too early, we later realized. A handful of places opened around 8:30 or 9:00.

The only place we found open was a plain, quaint little spot called El Patio. It is run by a woman from Buenos Aires named Mercedes who now lives with her two children in the nearby town of Maimará and rents the restaurant space in Tilcara.

We were waited on by her darling, timid, chubby 12-year-old son. As we had coffee and desert, Mercedes

The Botanical Garden next to Tilcara's pucará, *a pre-Colombian fortification.*

pulled up a chair and chatted. She's finishing up a PhD in Anthropology, looking especially at a group called the Kollas. I had always understood that "Kolla" is the name of an indigenous group, not unlike the Maya, Inca or Calchaquí. According to Mercedes, however, the Kolla are a mix of mestizo peoples who have adopted that name for themselves.

I tend to be impressed by the average Argentine's level of information and analysis about their country and the world. As our conversation turned to politics, I realized that even folks who live in the middle of nowhere are often remarkably well-informed. I no longer remember how we got on the subject of rape, but I think we were talking about crime and personal security in Buenos Aires.

"*Si me viola, que sea un tipo guapo*," Mercedes said,

laughing. "If I'm raped, let him be cute."

Karen and I chuckled almost imperceptibly. What else could we do?

Gender lesson number four: *Just because you're relatively young, female, well-educated and politically hip doesn't mean you're free of sexist attitudes or behavior.*

(Judging from the way I asked the Hertz employee in Tucumán for his cell phone number, shouldn't I have known that already?)

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The next morning we sipped *café con leche* (coffee with steamed milk) and ate cold cereal and fruit salad in the dining area of a family home converted into a hotel. The father of one of my son's classmates back in Buenos Aires had told me that the hotel's owner, Adrián, was recently divorced.

Adrián had arrived from Salta in the wee hours of that morning and had greeted us as we sat down to breakfast. As we munched cornflakes, I whispered to Karen, "I feel sorry for this guy, going through a divorce, living up here in the middle of nowhere."

Despite our morning grogginess, in that absolutely direct and immediate way Karen has of responding (which I love), she said, "Forget Adrián. He's young. He's attractive. He has money. He must have women all over him. I'm worried about his wife." Somehow, for unknown reasons, I imagined that his wife was off in some big city doing fine.

As we got up from breakfast, it was impossible to miss catching a glimpse out the window of Adrián leaning against the waist-high wrought-iron fence around the terrace. He was embracing a young, slim, long-haired woman who had shown up while we were having breakfast. In fact, more than embracing her, he was caressing and smooching her. Naturally, he looked far from sad or lonely.

The entrance to Adrián's hotel, El Villar del Ala. The edifice used to be his grandfather's home.

"OK…OK," I told Karen.

Gender lesson number five: *Don't worry about Adrián. (Who knows how his wife is doing?)*

* * * * *

The next day, our last, was long and eventful. We spent the morning hiking above Tilcara to the *pucará*, a pre-Colombian fortification commanding marvelous views of the Humahuaca valley in practically all directions. We were scheduled to retrace our tracks back down the valley to San Salvador de Jujuy and further down to Salta, where early that evening we were to hand in our rental car and catch a flight back to Buenos Aires. We had left ourselves plenty of time and thought we would probably stop at the thermal baths at Termas de Reyes, have lunch and hopefully soak for a while in the warm pools.

Not a quarter mile out of Tilcara, we were held up by a protest by local piqueteros, *unemployed men and women who have become political players through their well-organized roadblocks and other demonstrations.*

We hadn't gone a quarter of a mile down the highway from Tilcara when we came upon a roadblock made of huge branches, a bunch of people, a small tent and a burning tire. Some of the men had on shirts with three

large C's painted across the front, representing the *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (literally, the Classist and Combative Current). The CCC is one of Argentina's largest groups of *piqueteros*—working class, now unemployed men and women who have become political players through their well-organized roadblocks and other protests.

I got out of the car and tried to identify the head honcho, who turned out to be a quiet, round-faced, indigenous-looking man in his mid-thirties or so.

A group of women from the CCC-Tilcara chat together at the piquete.

"Aren't you letting people through?," I asked.

"On the hour, every hour. We just let people through about a minute ago," he replied. It was about three minutes after eleven. "There's another *piquete* along the road into Salta," he added. "They are not letting people through that one."

"Look," I said. Exhibiting my powers of exaggeration and opportunism, I added, "We're totally with you. My husband and I are supporters of the CTA [a non-partisan labor confederation based in Buenos Aires with which the CCC works closely]. But my friend and I have a plane to catch. Surely it won't matter if you let us go. Is there any way you can let us through?"

"Look," he replied. "If we let you through, we have to let everyone through. We will let people through on the hour." I came back with a couple more attempts to rephrase my request, and he calmly and gently repeated the exact same answer each time.

As I reported my findings to Karen, I realized that from the CCC's point of view, to make the *piquete* worthwhile, he was right. I appreciated that he was both respectful and consistent. And, I thought, we're lucky they're letting people through. An hour isn't so long to wait. (Alas, this attitude toward time is brand new for me since living in Argentina).

Once I had given up on trying to bust the roadblock, I remembered that my partner Alan had told me that I should look at the *piquetero* movement sometime because women were playing a protagonistic role in the leadership. I'm not sure why, but I hadn't really believed him. This was a chance to find out.

I chatted for a while with the same guy I had spoken with before. He told me that while they had just organized a few months ago, this CCC chapter already had 180 members. He said they were fighting for *Planes Trabajar* (workfare positions that the government distributes as unemployment insurance). He also told me about some of the community projects they had organized such as collective gardens to grow food for hungry families and the local old folks' home.

I then listened with chagrin about my earlier request while our conversation was interrupted by a chain of people all wanting to get through the roadblock. Each individual's reason was weaker than the one before.

"We are teachers on our way to a meeting," said one. "How can you delay teachers?"

"I have materials that I'm taking to a museum and can't be late," said another.

But the really hilarious one came from an unpleasant *porteña* visiting from Buenos Aires. "I've come to see a friend and we have only a few hours to see Tilcara. Why don't you let us through?"

When he said no, she went on, "Listen, with all due respect, and I really am with you guys, do you think that these roadblocks are effective?," she asked. "All you do

is mess up the lives of those of us who support you."

She went on and on in this vein. Finally, she said, "Why don't you go protest in front of the town hall?"

Provoked by her tone and attitude, I wanted to slap her. Instead, I jumped in with words, objecting to her suggestion and opining that while they are hugely inconvenient, *piquetes* are often effective in securing work-fare positions and food aid, at least in the short run. The woman countered by saying, "But there's someone here who has a flight to catch!"

"*I'm* the one with the flight to catch!," I retorted. "I can speak for myself, thank you."

Later, I apologized to the CCC guy, since I was genuinely repentant for having inappropriately intervened in what was his conversation. In response he touched my arm and chuckled out loud. "Don't worry about it," he said. "It was fine."

With his permission, I took some pictures of the men and women *piqueteros.* I then wandered back to ask him how their local chapter is governed and about the participation of women. He explained that they have a governing commission of six persons. At that moment, four positions were occupied by women. "We [men] are happy to give the women a space in this movement," he said.

"Interesting language," I thought. "Why?," I asked.

He gave two main reasons. First, the women tend to function as a shield against violence by police during roadblocks. Second, in their meetings, the men tend to be hotheaded while the women are far more level-headed (a real gender-bender). The men rely on the women to help them make better, more strategic decisions, he said.

I then saw some men drag some branches to the side of the road, said a quick goodbye and went running back to our car.

Gender lesson number six: *Pay attention to Alan's observations. His information and instincts on gender issues are usually right on.*

Gender lesson seven and eight: *Keep an open mind about women's roles in working-class social movements, and make a point to look more closely at the* piquetero *movement.*

* * * * *

Given the news about the *piquete* in Salta, we decided to skip the hot springs. During the early afternoon, still north of Jujuy, we were driving through a steady rain on an unpaved, rut-filled detour off the highway. Somehow I had a sense that we were likely to get a flat tire. Boom! A minute later, we did.

Karen was not happy. I now know that she had never changed a tire before. I had, but I also knew that it would take me about five times longer than the average Argentine male who might pass by and want to help. (It never crossed my mind to seek assistance from a woman.) I announced to Karen that there was no reason to worry, but that if "someone" offered to help, I was planning to accept.

Gender lesson number nine: *See lesson four (page 9).*

I had unloaded the spare and was working on putting together the jack when a guy in a diminutive pick-up truck slowed up and looked over, making the thumbs-up and then thumbs-down sign as if to inquire if we were OK. I made a quick, repetitive scooping motion toward my chest that prompted him to pull over just ahead of us, step out into the rain and take over the tire-changing operation. I stepped out of his way.

"So where are you from?," he asked.

"Well," we paused, "we're from the U.S."

"Hey, I'm not bin Laden," he said. "I'm Syrian, but I'm no bin Laden."

In about four or five minutes he was done, accepted our thanks, ran back to his truck and was off.

When we were back on our way, I learned that Karen had missed the hand signals that transpired between us

The man in charge of dealing with anxious motorists indicates to the annoying visitor from Buenos Aires how much longer until they would let cars through the piquete.

and had instinctively panicked when this man stopped and got out of his vehicle (see lessons four and nine). In contrast, I had the clear sense that he had left the decision of whether or not he would get out of his truck entirely up to us, and as a result, was not afraid.

The hills behind the town of Maimará, home to Mercedes, the proprietor of El Patio in Tilcara.

However, I had my chance to be totally paranoid about another male good samaritan later in the day. It turned out that, indeed, no one was being allowed through the *piquete* blocking the main highway into Salta, so we had to make a long detour and got lost. Once outside of the city on the way to the airport, we saw no signs to assure us we were going the right way. Karen pulled up at a red light next to a man and a woman in a tiny, run-down, cream-colored Fiat. The woman in the passenger seat told us that yes, we were going the right way and to follow them, since they were on their way to her mother's near the airport.

After a few miles, I was certain that we were going to end up at the guy's mother-in-law's rather than the airport. I was also convinced that he was no longer aware of us or guiding us. At each stop sign, I leaned out the window and tried to ask someone for help and Karen told me to be quiet.

She was right. After another mile or so, he pulled over and waited for us to pull up next to him. "I bet you think I was leading you somewhere really dangerous," he said with a smile. "Not so," he went on. "From here just go up a ways to the first traffic circle, bear left and the airport is about one kilometer down the road. Here is where we turn off. Good luck," he said.

"OK…OK," I said to Karen.

Gender lesson ten: *There are extremely decent, generous-hearted men out there who sincerely just want to help. Trust your gut about these guys, and when you're feeling suspicious but your dear girlfriend is not, trust her gut.*

* * * * *

The town of Pumamarca in the Humahauca valley is home to the "hills of seven colors."

Before I left for the northwest, I had believed that Argentina is different outside of Buenos Aires, and wanted to get a sense of that difference. After the trip, I was also aware that ***Buenos Aires does not define Argentina***. It is perilously easy for me and for all *porteños* (residents of the capital) to slip into the feeling that Buenos Aires somehow represents the entire country.

The day after I returned to the capital, thousands of teachers and others mobilized to take the 2001 national population and housing census. Up in the northwest, many of the census-takers had to hike or ride on horseback, often for hours. At 9:00 on a Saturday morning, two sweet, middle-aged, female educators rang our tenth floor doorbell and told me not to worry about my being in pajamas. It took about an hour for us to answer their questions and for them

The city of Salta, capital of the province of the same name.

to pencil in all the proper little circles.

"Let's see, two bathrooms… and the principal construction material is brick," said one. "You really don't have a microwave?," asked the other. We were excited and honored to participate.

When I read the census results, I was shocked that the city of Buenos Aires represents only 7.6 percent of the country's population. I thought it was closer to half! Even the huge province of Buenos Aires, the most populated of all by a long shot, is home to only one third of the country's inhabitants. I think my perception is skewed in part by all the time I used to spend in Montevideo, which is home to nearly half of Uruguay's 3 million citizens. I think it is also skewed by life—including the media—in Buenos Aires.

* * * * *

After more than 45 minutes of lying still in that dark hotel room in Bariloche, my final train of thought became fairly clear. The "gender lessons" I stumbled upon in the northwest make me more aware of my biases and preconceptions, which in turn aids in my task of understanding gender dynamics in Argentina. And above and beyond the gender lessons, what I learned in the northwest about what does and doesn't define Argentina was reinforced in Bariloche and is directly relevant to my understanding of gender issues here. How to stay more cognizant of this reality without constantly leaving the capital? To start, I was anxious to get home and write all this down. My fingers felt itchy and anxious to type.

I didn't even hear him get up, but suddenly a little boy with a supple, brown teddy bear under his arm was climbing up onto our bed, or, rather, onto me. It was time for us to snuggle, get up, have some breakfast and catch a plane back to bustling, chaotic Buenos Aires. ❑

My partner Alan and our son Camilo throwing rocks into Lake Nahuel Haupi, a few blocks from our hotel in Bariloche.

The Crisis Deepens: Argentina Unravels Yet Life Goes On

May 15, 2002

As the economic crisis worsens, I have the strong sense that Argentina is coming apart at the seams—and unquestionably it is. Yet at the same time, with scattered exceptions, things are eerily quiet and daily life marches on. The effect is surreal.

The dollar is way up at about 3.3 pesos. Argentina's 2002 budget is based on 14 percent inflation, but by April 30 prices had risen 21 percent and experts are now projecting annual inflation at anywhere from 50 to 90 percent. Each time our friends buy food, diapers, shoes or other goods, they are inevitably appalled at and frightened by the price increases.

The long-standing recessive vicious circle is still in full swing: tax revenues are down, the government is broke, the financial system is not functional, economic activity is ever-slowing, so tax revenues are down, and so on. Already many people are newly poor, even indigent and hungry. More than 500,000 people in the ring of suburbs around Buenos Aires slipped below the poverty line in the last six months alone. The government decreed that all unemployed heads of household are entitled to a small subsidy, but so far delivery of this benefit has been slow.

Meanwhile, the financial system continues to teeter on the brink of collapse. In mid-April, the Central Bank closed the large, local subsidiary of Scotiabank (where our son's school has its accounts) for lack of liquidity. Because Supreme Court rulings against the bank withdrawal limits known as *el corralito* have resulted in large extractions of cash, on April 22 the government shut down all banking and exchange activity for a week. Banks were to reopen after Congressional approval of a plan to convert most deposits into five- or ten-year government bonds—basically a government bail-out of the banking system. ATMs were virtually empty, leaving thousands of Argentines and ourselves with no source of cash.

Initially, angry Argentines surrounded the Congress, which is now protected by huge security fences and dozens of cops. Deputies and Senators ran in and out of the building protected by police and clearly frightened. Unemployed *piqueteros* continue to mount numerous roadblocks to demand food and jobs. Still, there have been no significant *cacerolazos*, the predominantly middle-class, pot-banging protests that helped tumble two Presidents last December. No one I've consulted is quite sure why.

In this context, the Congress rejected the "Plan Bonex 02" (a replay of the Plan Bonex of 1990, except this time the government is broke). On April 24, Economy Minister Jorge Remes Lenicov resigned, leaving President Eduardo Duhalde with no economic plan. After talk of pegging the peso to the dollar once again and of negotiating (yes, negotiating) a solution to *el corralito* with the Supreme Court, the government decided to reopen the banks and let the dollar float. President Duhalde is still struggling to come up with some solution to the liquidity crisis, and rarely mentions economic reactivation.

The President seems to have bought himself time with signals of support from the Peronist governors and several new cabinet members, though it is not entirely clear why. He recently suggested the government use public real estate and other goods in disuse as a means of returning depositors' funds. He also held a press conference in which he expelled all but the TV film crews, spoke briefly, asked the empty hall for questions, then called it a day.

The Duhalde administration has placed all bets on fresh money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which won't come through before June, if at all. For weeks, Argentines have followed Congressional maneuverings on the modification of two laws, an IMF pre-condition for new loans. Despite US and IMF condemnation of corruption in Argentina, one law would make it more difficult to prosecute "economic subversion" (a type of white-collar crime) by bankers and businesspersons. Another would make it easier for foreign creditors to take possession of bankrupt businesses. Congress approved changes in this law in mid-May — after five months of debate. The IMF is also requiring that each province sign an agreement to reduce its budget deficit by 60 percent. So far only a handful have signed, and few believe the cuts are attainable.

It is unclear how much longer Duhalde can hold on, nor what exactly will happen if he falls. Although many Argentines believe there is no solution without the IMF, it seems the majority believe its conditionality will only exacerbate the recession and increase poverty. In any case, the combination of entirely fragile political institutions and the severity of the economic crisis is a volatile one and promises a rocky ride.

We're buckling our seat belts just in case.

Fellows and Their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, is focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Andrew D. Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Musevene. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six

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