

Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango!: A rollicking memoir of Argentina (Love Letters to Argentina Book 1)

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Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango! A rollicking memoir of Argentina Helen
Wilkie

All the sketches in this book were created by the author.

Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango!

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Praise for "Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango!"

"We have had the unique honour of being Helen's friends, part-time readers and travelling companions. We've been lost together, wandered the streets of her favourite neighbourhoods in her second home and savoured many a fine steak with the very best Malbec Argentina has to offer. In her newest book she regales us with story after story of her adventures — she elegantly takes us back to the times we shared with her in this extraordinary country." — *Susan and Michael, Fellow Travellers*

"Can a city really be magical? That's the feeling you get when you read *Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango!* Helen Wilkie paints a picture of the vivacious people, spectacular landscape and quirky culture that captured her heart. I've never been to Buenos Aires, Argentina, but this book has awakened my interest. It's beautifully written, with each chapter focusing on one amusing anecdote, including some sketches by the author herself. It could be a travel guide for anyone who

wants to visit, but you don't even need to book an airline ticket. Just sit back (perhaps with a glass of red wine), read the book, and imagine you're already there. Then, if the feeling takes hold of you, book your ticket and prepare to kick up your heels with hot tango. This book takes you to Buenos Aires, whichever path you choose." — *Lynda Goldman*

"Expressively written, Helen's book paints word pictures akin to her watercolours. I am there with her during her adventures, feeling the atmosphere, seeing the scene, hearing the music. Argentina owes her a debt!" — *Sharon Chandler*

To Susan Birkenshaw and Lois Ferguson, my Butt Kickers. It's thanks to their encouragement and support that I have now finished this, my 9th and favourite book, as well as all the others.

To all my friends in Buenos Aires, those who are mentioned in the book and those who are simply part of the reason I love Argentina so much.

Gracias a todos!

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Introduction

In January 2014, at an age when I thought such notions well behind me, I fell in love. Deeply, madly and forever.

Not with a person, but with a place.

The object of my affection, my desire, my love is the beautiful, quirky, maddening, magical city of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The love affair grew over several visits, each longer than the last, each one deepening my passion. Now, I spend several months of every year in Buenos Aires.

Now Buenos Aires is mine for life!

How is it possible to fall in love with a place? Especially a big, bustling, busy city?

I don't know. I only know I did from the moment I set foot on Argentine soil.

Buenos Aires has been on my bucket list for so long I don't even know how it started. I think it might be something to do with the name itself. *Buenos Aires*. It's a delicious name, isn't it? It means "good air", which is apparently how it struck Spanish explorer Pedro de Mendoza when he landed here in 1536. Like any other big city, its air is nothing special now, but it's not about the meaning — it's about the sound of the words.

Have you ever noticed how a lover's name feels on your tongue? That warm, soft sensation? That's how I feel about the name *Buenos Aires*, because that's what I feel for this city: love.

Attending a conference a few months before my first visit, I met a couple of women who had both recently been in Argentina, and the more they talked the more I wanted to see it for myself. I finally asked myself why I didn't just go, and came up with no good reason. So in January 2014 I simply booked a flight and a hotel and came.

Although I came by myself, I wasn't completely without resources. My speaker colleague Jeanne Martinson had been here on a trip, and she put me in touch with Cecilia, a local guide. She was lovely. On that first trip I was her client, but we have since become fast friends, and she features in a number of the stories in this book — or, as Cecilia calls them, *aventuras*!

Eleanore is a friend of my youth in Scotland, whom I see when I visit my family there. She expressed an interest in coming to Argentina in November 2014 if I would come back and meet her here. At first that seemed a bit over-ambitious, but after being here two days, I emailed her, "I'm in! Let's do it!" So I had two two-week vacations here in one year!

But even then I knew vacations would't be enough. I didn't want to be a tourist here — I wanted more. I was smitten, and I couldn't get enough of Buenos Aires.

For months after that second visit, back in Canada — where I have lots of friends and a very good life — all I could think of was how soon I could come back and how long I could stay.

As a writer, I am fortunate in the work that I do. I have clients in several countries — professionals whose books I help write or even ghostwrite — so I can work anywhere. So why not beautiful Buenos Aires? My plans came together in late 2015.

My friends Susan and Michael had been spending six months of every year in Cuenca, Ecuador for years, so I decided to spend Christmas and New Year with them and then fly to Buenos Aires in early January 2016.

I would be here for three months. No tourist I this time — now I was an Honorary Porteña! (Natives of Buenos Aires are called Porteños, because they are people of the port city. Although I wasn't born here, I happily claim honorary status.)

During A3 (as Susan called my third Argentine adventure), I travelled and saw some other parts of this fascinating country and met many of its people — these trips feature in some of the stories in the book.

My Swiss friend Claudia, whom I met during A3, emailed me the day before leaving to go home to Zurich. She said she felt like a carrot being pulled out of the ground, she so wanted to stay. Obviously, the Buenos Aires mystique pulls on many others besides me.

As a matter of fact, quite a few of my expat friends came here on vacation and loved it so much they just stayed on. The day before I left to come back to Toronto at the end of A3, my friend Venetia took me out to breakfast. She asked me why I was going home. I said it was because my three months were up, to which she replied, "I know, but you don't want to go. Why don't you just stay?"

Oh my, how tempting was that?

But I knew I couldn't just stay. I had to go back to Toronto and consider this carefully, far from the seductive influence of tango and silky smooth Malbec — far from Buenos Aires.

I did seriously consider it. "Why not?" I asked myself. Why not just pack up and move to Argentina? After all, I'd done that once before, when I moved from my native Scotland to Canada.

In the end, though, I chose a different route. I'm happily and proudly Canadian, and I love Canada. I didn't want to give it up. So I decided to follow Susan and Michael's pattern — half the year in Canada and almost half in Argentina and its neighbouring countries.

As I write this, it's my first half-year term (A4). I've exchanged Canadian winter for Argentine summer. As long as I'm fit and healthy, I plan to do this for many years to come — as my old American boss used to say, "The good Lord willin' and the creek don't rise."

The stories in this book come from the various trips, hopefully supplemented by those that will happen during A4 and future "A"s. I hope they'll give you a taste of *mi Buenos Aires Querido* as tango legend Carlos Gardel called it — my beloved Buenos Aires — and maybe you'll decide to visit. Be warned though — it gets under your skin and into your heart.

It was my first visit to Buenos Aires. I'd been here for a couple of weeks, and my holiday was winding down. My plan for this particular day was to go to the *Microcentro* (downtown) and have a last lazy wander around shops and cafes.

As usual on that trip, I hopped in a taxi. My Spanish was improving but still tentative, and I always took any opportunity to practise. The driver was surprised and pleased at my efforts, and immediately engaged me in conversation. He introduced himself as Julio and asked me the usual first question, "Where are you from?" So we were on first-name terms right away, and within minutes I knew all about Julio. A short, round man with white hair, he looked a bit like Santa Claus. He was in his sixties, a widower with grown children who lived in another city.

He asked me my purpose in going to the *Micro*, and I made the mistake of mentioning shopping. He immediately asked if I was interested in leather.

Argentina is justly famous for its leather — a byproduct of all that beef — and leather jackets are usually high on any tourist's list. I had, in fact, already bought a great leather vest that delighted me and wasn't in the market for more. But that didn't faze Julio.

Calle Murillo is a street with one leather store after another, and that's where I had bought my vest. When I told Julio this, however, he made the Spanish equivalent of "pshaw!" With a disgusted look, he told me that wasn't the place to go. "They don't have any style there — just leather." With that I realized why I hadn't liked many of the jackets I'd tried there — he was right, they had none of the style I'd seen in the more fashionable (and expensive) downtown stores.

Naturally, Julio had a much better alternative! I told him I didn't want any more leather, but he didn't give up easily. I knew that, like taxi drivers in many major cities with a big dependency on tourists, Julio would have a commission arrangement with certain establishments. Everybody has to make a living, so I have no quarrel with that as long as there's no coercion.

Julio knew of a leather factory a little outside the downtown area that he was certain a "fashionable lady like you" would love. He offered to take me there and bring me back downtown for a very reasonable flat fee.

Now when I told my friends back home this story, they were horrified. A strange driver, a strange factory in a strange area — what was I thinking? Well, I did think about it for a minute, but when you're travelling sometimes you just have to go with your gut. So I told Julio "*Dale!*" (let's go) and off we went. (As a precaution, I made sure he saw that I was following our route on the map.)

We had driven for maybe fifteen minutes, through areas I can only describe as "industrial", when we finally pulled up in a narrow street. I saw no sign of any shops, but the street was lined with taxis, which I took as a good sign.

There was no storefront, just a rollup door like a garage. Suddenly it opened, and a young family emerged, complete with two laughing kids and many shopping bags. Another good sign. I followed Julio inside. He said he would have a coffee at the back while I shopped, and after reassuring myself he was not going to abandon me there, I moved towards the racks of multi-coloured leather jackets and shelves of lovely, stylish leather bags. I already had my vest though, and I was definitely not going to buy anything.

It was the colour that did it. Out of the corner of my eye, something in a soft muted orange tone beckoned. It turned out to be a shirt made of the finest, softest kid I'd ever seen. If I ever saw something like this back in Toronto, the price would have been three times what it was here. They only had one and it was my size. Game over!

I knew I didn't have enough cash, so I happily handed over my debit card. A moment later, to my chagrin, it was declined! It took me only a moment to realize what had happened, so let me back up a little to explain.

To get pesos in Argentina, I use my debit card at the bank machines to withdraw directly from my bank account in Canada. This works, but the daily limit is quite low, and I had already withdrawn cash that morning. The shirt would have put it over the limit, so it didn't work.

I know what you're thinking — credit card, right? But so many people had given me dire warnings about street theft (which I have never actually seen) that I never carried it except when travelling. I could see my lovely kid shirt fading into a dream.

But wait — here came Julio, asking what was wrong. I explained. He asked how much the shirt cost. I told him.

"I can lend it to you," he said, to my amazement. Of course I said no, but he offered again. "I have money in my car. Wait here and I will get it." (I guess Julio could see his commission fading away with the shirt.) I explained the daily limit problem and said I wouldn't be able to get the money for him that day.

"No problem, Señora," he said. "You can give it to me tomorrow."

I couldn't believe my ears. Bear in mind, this man didn't know me from Adam, and as he had picked me up at the taxi stand he didn't even know where I was staying!

Anyway, off he went to his car. When he returned, he peeled exactly the right amount from a thick wad of pesos, and I happily took possession of my beautiful shirt.

We arranged to meet next day at the taxi stand, where I repaid him as promised.

OK, maybe I took a chance when I followed my gut and let Julio take me to the leather factory. But he certainly took a chance by lending a substantial sum of money to me, a total stranger in his country. I think there's a lesson in human relations there.

Anyway, I smile and think of Julio every time I put on my lovely kid shirt!

*

She checked Buenos Aires off her bucket list, so why does she keep going back?

On her own for six years after the death of her beloved husband, Helen Wilkie fulfills a long held dream to visit Buenos Aires, Argentina. Little does she know that in that short vacation the city will burrow its way into her heart so that she has to keep going back again and again!

In this lighthearted, humorous memoir, she shares quirky, fun stories ranging from negotiating the Buenos Aires bus system, to learning to dance tango, to a close encounter with a crocodile — and lots more along the way.

Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango! is the first book in Helen Wilkie's series of love letters to Argentina.

If you like personal stories of exotic cities and faraway places, you'll love Rare Steak, Red Wine, Hot Tango! Buy it now and join the adventure, but be warned; you may find yourself online booking your flight to irresistible Buenos Aires!

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