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“Las Madres Takes on a New Meaning for Bemidji State University Students Who Travel to Argentina,” April Larson, BSU

It has been ten months since my colleague, Dr. Blanca Rivera, and I accompanied five Bemidji State University students to Argentina for a J-Term Study Abroad. I think that I speak for all of us when I say that we will never think of penguins, Buenos Aires, the tango, filete porteño, New Year’s Eve, asado a la parilla, and—especially—Las Madres, in the same way again.

The students who took part in this adventure were studying different subjects: Art, Spanish, English, Social Studies and Elementary Education and ranged from 19 to 37 years of age. Their Spanish speaking abilities were from no experience to third year university level. They did selected readings prior to the trip related to Argentine history, politics, culture, economics, geography and eco-systems. That became increasingly valuable once they became immersed in Argentine culture and the Spanish language. They also kept daily journals while traveling and did a research paper on a topic of their interest (everything from the history of tango or filete porteño art to Argentine politics during the 80s).

Students participated in an art workshop in the home/studio with filete porteño artist Carlos M. Santos. They visited the Recoleta Cemetery, an artesan fair, La Boca and San Telmo districts of Buenos Aires and went to the Museum of Modern Art.

They flew to Puerto Madryn (in the Patagonia Region) where they all saw (for the first time) Magellanic penguins, sea lions, seal elephants and countless native species of flora and fauna, such as guanacos, lladues, maras carpinches and birds of prey.
In Mendoza, a city in the heart of Argentine wine country, where they went to museums, rafted whitewater rivers, rode horse in the foothills of the Andes, visited the best Argentine wine cellars (they were the only "Americans on the bus"), and toured the Aconcagua mountain area.

In the Welsh settlement of Gaiman, students lunched at a Welsh tea house, visited the first school of the area, and got a guided tour of the Museum of Paleontology "Erigdio Feruglio" in Trewlew where the world’s largest dinosaur bones have recently been put on display.

Near the end of December, the group stayed at an authentic estancia (ranch), Los Dos Hermanos. They rode horse through the "pampas" and celebrated New Year’s Eve at a small town near the estancia where they were guests of a family who lights paper lanterns and throws them from their rooftop annually.

The day before returning to the U.S. the group went by antique subway ("subte"—the oldest subway system in Latin America, dating to 1913)

Celebrating New Year’s Eve bilingually Argentine-style in the home of identical twins to the headquarters of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo to visit with them about Argentina’s political nightmare of the 80s when more than 30,000 people (including family members of the Las Madres) were "disappeared" by the hands of political assassins. Students received a translated version of what Las Madres shared about how they started the human rights organization and some of their personal experiences during that time. Las Madres also informed the group about what kinds of political activism they are currently engaged in. It was sobering to hear about Las Madre’s version of what part the U.S. played in their descriptive factual recounting of personal memory and testimony. They continue to march every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo to remind their government and the world about the need to remember and correct past injustices.

Among the many topics students discussed with Argentinians, that of the Iraq war and President Bush were at the top. These people did not have qualms about speaking their opinions about U.S. politics. It was quite humbling. But they were not angry with our academic group. They were just being culturally correct: it is everyone’s responsibility to vigorously debate global political realities.