

A RORDEAL – A HOLIDAY ABRIDGED

by David Christian and Sally Weedon

A Day to Forget

Late afternoon, Saturday March 14, 2020, the moment when our holiday and honeymoon, two years in the planning, went pear-shaped.

We had departed Australia on Wednesday March 4 for Argentina before any incidence of coronavirus had been reported there. Nevertheless, we took along 10 of the best (N95) masks, lots of sanitizer and disinfectant wipes plus other items to combat any potential occurrence, enough to fill a small suitcase, in fact.

Our holiday started perfectly. A day in Buenos Aires and then a trip to look at the amazing Iguazu Falls on the Brazilian border (pictured right), before heading way down south to El Calafate near the Andes and the magnificent Perito Moreno Glacier. We were enjoying ourselves so much that I was inspired to put a photo of us in front of the glacier on FaceBook, only my fifth posting in as many years!



A few days later we reached Ushuaia at the southernmost tip of South America and enjoyed a day out on a 4WD tour with an American and an English couple. It turned out that we were all booked next day on the same 4-day cruise of the Magellan Straits, disembarking in Puerto Arenas, Chile and we all talked excitedly about meeting up again on-board.



That afternoon the two of us were looking over the Port of Ushuaia from the lounge of our hotel set in the hills when we received the fateful phone call that was to turn the succeeding month, which was to feature wonderful adventures and experiences in Chile, Peru and the Amazon, into nearly two months of stagnation, with at best, short periods of hope and, at worst, moments of alarm and long periods of tedium and uncertainty.

Cruising goes viral

We were advised that our cruise had been cancelled because the Port of Ushuaia had not allowed passengers from the incoming cruise from Chile to disembark. We also found out that the Argentinian President had issued an edict the previous day that flights from USA, Europe, Japan, China and Iran would be suspended for 30 days. We were still unclear how fast the pandemic was spreading and wondered whether to continue on our itinerary to Chile by bus. This idea was scotched fairly quickly in favour of cancelling our holiday and returning home as quickly as we could. Just as well we made that decision because Chile closed all its National Parks and closed its borders within a few days and prevented many cruise ships from disembarking passengers.

One hundred Australian doctors and dentists on the *Roald Amundsen* were repatriated from the Falkland Islands on Friday March 27 after being refused disembarkation in Puerto Arenas. There were also 130 Australians on the *Ocean Atlantic* who were repatriated from Uruguay by the company that chartered her, Chimu Adventures, on Wednesday April 1 after not being allowed to disembark in Puerto Madryn. The *Zaandam* cruise with 1,200 passengers, including 133 Australians, which departed Buenos Aires on Saturday March 7, was originally scheduled to end in Valparaiso on Saturday March 21. It soldiered on to Panama and ultimately Florida from where Australians were eventually repatriated on Tuesday April 7.

Leaving local misadventures like the Ruby Princess aside, perhaps the worst cruising incident in South America was the *Greg Mortimer* which left Ushuaia for Antarctica on Sunday March 15, the very day our cruise was cancelled. This ship ended up in the Port of Montevideo, Uruguay, on Friday March 27 and at that stage there were just a few cases of infection. However, the majority of healthy passengers were not allowed to disembark and join the Chimu Adventures repatriation flight that departed four days later. They were left stranded until Easter Sunday (April 12), by which time about half of the passengers were affected. The majority of them (133) were then repatriated on a charter flight organized by the tour organizer and ship owner, Aurora Expeditions. This necessitated a plane that had been specially adapted for the purpose and allegedly at a cost to each passenger of \$15,000, dwarfing the \$5,000 cost of the Chimu Adventures flight. The matter is not over as it is reported that some of the passengers are suing the company. We met a Melbourne couple flying with us from El Calafate to Ushuaia who were also going cruising but they said that they were on an Antarctic cruise rather than our one. Unfortunately, we suspect that they were joining the *Greg Mortimer*.

A Disastrous Renegé

Air New Zealand was our carrier and our return trip had been booked for Monday April 13. We found out on March 15 from a NZ newspaper (rather than being contacted directly) that their flights from Buenos Aires were suspended from March 31. We spent two days trying to get hold of Air New Zealand via their local offices in order to reschedule. We also tried via Australian office with the assistance of family. Despite repeated calls we could not make contact so we flew back to Buenos Aires on the morning of Monday March 16.

We finally managed to make contact by phone with the Air New Zealand office in Buenos Aires by midday but were put onto a NZ toll free customer services line, one that was never answered after 1¼ hours waiting on the phone.

We then took a taxi to the office in the afternoon and when we arrived, we were amazed to see that the office was closed. Fortunately, someone saw this “elderly” couple looking dejected in the corridor and let us in. The manager was very helpful, cancelled the \$5,000 (for two) contingency fare that we had booked on-line and secured a refund, and rescheduled us using our original booking and fare for Wednesday March 25, giving us 6 days of grace. Didn’t we feel smug! We went back to our hotel, boasted of our success to others and treated ourselves to a nice dinner. Don’t they say “Many a Slip between Cup and Lip”? Well we had a slip, more like a landslide right ahead of us. Over the next couple of days, while we were waiting patiently in our hotel for our flight home, others were scrambling desperately to find themselves a commercial flight back. In some cases, this involved repeated trips to the airport at \$40 each way. The last laugh was on them because some of them got away, whereas Air New Zealand, abruptly and without warning, decided to terminate all their flights from March 18 and we were now in trouble.

We dashed out to the airport ourselves on Thursday March 19. LATAM (a South American airline) was the only office open there and they had nothing to offer other than the worrying comment that it was possible that the airport would be closed. We noticed a long line of people getting on an Air Canada flight so contacted one of our family who booked a flight via Santiago, Toronto and Vancouver back to Brisbane on the following Wednesday nearly a week later. Over the next few days, we closely monitored the Air Canada flights leaving prior to ours. Two out of three departed successfully and then there were three more, including ours, which were next in-line. However, three days before the flight, the Canadian government shut down the Santiago to Toronto leg and our flight was cancelled. The family member then had Air Canada rebook us on an alternative flight for the following Saturday which basically used LATAM and flew from Santiago to Sydney. This was also cancelled almost immediately, when Ethiopian Airlines who would have carried us on the first leg from Buenos Aires to Sao Paulo in Brazil cancelled. Finally, we had expressed interest in another charter flight organized by Chimu Adventures out of Argentina but the government never approved this. The cost again was a heady \$10,000 for both of us.

As a last resort, we headed back out to the airport on that Wednesday, hoping to pick up an earlier Ethiopian Airways flight, with stopover in Sao Paulo, and pick up the rest of the rescheduled Air Canada flight two days later. This was a very different trip to the airport with police road blocks all over the place but we managed to get there because we had a free passage document from the Australian Embassy that enabled us to be taken to the airport. We joined the queue waiting outside the Terminal but that night's flight never arrived and we were not allowed entry. It transpired that the Ethiopian flights on the two previous nights had not arrived either.

Getting back to the apartment from the airport was more difficult than getting there because the government didn't want people returning from the airport but with the help of our taxi driver who advised that our flight was cancelled and that we had never entered the terminal, we got back. Of course, we didn't actually have a flight booked for that evening, so were lucky to get back without further ordeal.

The following day (Thursday March 26), the Argentinian government closed the airport to all commercial flights, meaning that we were now well and truly stranded. Repatriation of Argentinian nationals continued after this for some weeks. There were also occasional unannounced repatriation flights by other countries such as to the USA, France and Holland if you were nimble enough to find about them in time, say through the embassies, and booked what seats remained after the nationals had all been catered for, and then pack and get out to the airport smartly. This was possible if you were in Buenos Aires but virtually impossible if you were locked down in the more far flung provinces.

The Air Canada cost one-way Economy to Australia was \$8,200 for the two of us. Contrast that with the \$4,000 cost both ways on Premium Economy for the both of us originally booked with Air New Zealand which had reneged and been the root cause of our stranding. In all, we had six flight cancellations before we resigned ourselves to an indeterminate wait.

Lockdown

Argentina was put into the first of four successive two-week lockdowns (so far) by the government on Thursday March 19 and all hotels had to be vacated. Remember, this was only five days after we got warning of the first government intervention. Fortunately, we had befriended the manager of

our hotel through this period and he took pity on us and offered us the use of the studio apartment the hotel owned adjoining the hotel for a discounted price until our flight out.

The Hotel Manager informed the Apartment Building Manager and showed her that we had been in Argentina for more than 14 days without symptoms when we moved in. However, she did not inform all the residents, some of whom complained about the intrusion of these foreigners during lockdown who may be carrying the disease. Hence, our initial stay was a bit insecure until all interested parties were aware that we were disease-free and aware of our social distancing obligations. We were befriended by a man in the building who could speak English and with his advocacy and our photo of our coronavirus combat kit, things settled down over a few days. The Building Manager even had her daughter who could speak English talking to us on WhatsApp from Tennant Creek! She made sure we could understand all the rapidly changing restrictions concerning such things as social distancing, going out for food or toiletries only (not exercise) one at a time during the lockdown. Later we could Google the references to coronavirus in Argentina and make use of the English translation of the articles to keep up with the constantly changing regulations.

Policing of the lockdown was extremely strict. At one stage there were more people in prison for non-compliance than the number of people being treated in hospital according to a lady medico we came to know. There were also hundreds if not thousands of cars that had been impounded when they were pulled up at road blocks. When we visited the airport, we saw scores of them beside toll booths on the motorway ready to be towed away.

We were now effectively stuck in our studio apartment for 23½ hours a day, with nothing but unknown delays, ongoing accommodation costs and eventual further flight costs to look forward to.

We did at least have cooking facilities in our studio apartment, much-needed wi-fi and access to fresh food. We also had Netflix and about six English speaking channels to watch along with my Kindle, Sally's iPad, a pack of cards and a crossword book.

We were locked down in Buenos Aires for a total of six weeks, with virtually no time outdoors. We had each other but there were several people on their own and others with small children.

The social networks that were set up were both entertainment and a comfort to us particularly in terms of working together to try to lobby the Australian government to show some interest in our dilemma and perhaps organize a repatriation flight. We all noted the pro-activity of other governments in this regard when contrasted with the laggard approach of the Australian and New Zealand governments.

We were part of a "Stranded Australians in Argentina" Facebook group and also a similar WhatsApp group and the conversations on those helped to relieve the boredom of the days in lockdown even if they often reflected the frustration, anger and disillusionment that we all felt at times. From these social networks and the various embassy web sites, we were aware of the intermittent repatriation flights that occurred from Argentina during this period. Seats available on the occasional flights were few and far between and expensive, with durations of up to 50 hours, and one had to be very nimble to take advantage of them. One of our group stuck in Ushuaia managed to charter a small plane to Buenos Aires with others and then joined a Dutch repatriation flight to Amsterdam before taking a Qatar flight to Doha and waiting another 20 hours before taking the last leg to Sydney and quarantine. Another took a flight on Eastern Airlines to Miami and then via Dulles and San Francisco to Australia. In both cases, the flight were multi-days and cost around \$5,000 economy.

Saved by the Australia Government and Qantas eventually

It was Thursday March 19 when we first visited the Australian Embassy to try and register ourselves as stranded Australian citizens. We were not admitted and the guard merely pointed us to one notice of many stuck on the entrance that said to call an Australian number that dealt with holidays and visas. As one might have suspected this proved to be totally unhelpful and useless. We had also kept up with Smart Traveller but that no longer allowed one to register oneself either, rather only to be a subscriber to one of their publications of interest.

The airport was closed on Thursday March 26. There was no hope of us getting out on a commercial flight and there was no sign that our government was going to rescue us. For the more than 100 members of our group, the first encouraging sign came over a week later, on Friday April 3. The Foreign Minister confirmed that repatriation flights were to take place from certain hubs like London, Los Angeles and Hong Kong and she mentioned in an Alan Jones interview that discussions with Argentina were underway. Following that, the next Thursday there was in an announcement that repatriation flights were to take place from Peru and later South Africa and Argentina.

This was a very long period for people to wait without any degree of certainty but by early April the Australian Embassy was, at least, collecting a list of names of Australians in Argentina wanting to get home. Consequently, there was a great deal of activity by the stranded Australians to raise our profile and try to get the government to take some action and to take it earlier rather than later. MPs were lobbied. The news media was contacted. Penny Wong was very supportive in her comments in the Senate.

Amid all this uncertainty, we were most fortunate to have direct contact with the Australian Ambassador in Buenos Aires who took personal interest in our welfare. One of our bridge partners is married to a former diplomat. Following their very welcome intervention, we were contacted directly by the Ambassador and he kept in contact with us throughout those final few weeks of uncertainty as negotiations, approvals and complex arrangements took place until that momentous day on ANZAC Day, April 25, when we finally flew out on a Qantas repatriation flight to Melbourne. Pictured at the airport are Australasian ambassadors and embassy staff, Qantas pilots and some of the passengers.



It did take a very long time to organize the repatriation flight but the cautiousness of the Argentine government was probably a factor as was the nearly 100,000 kilometres of travel and provincial approvals that the Embassy had to organize to extricate us from all corners of the country and to have those in the provinces meeting the government's requirement to arrive not more than 24 hours before the flight departure.

What a wonderful day the 25th was, with six buses lining up outside the Embassy to take us to the airport. No roadblocks in sight, and once we had passed our medicals, we were ushered smartly through baggage checks and immigration. Our fellow passengers were all eagerly awaiting the flight out on the plane with a kangaroo on its tail within full view, the first time Qantas had been to Buenos Aires since 2012.

We basically took our own food with us on the 16 hour direct flight and had to wear our masks the whole way, but what a blessing it was to land in Melbourne even if it was to be bussed off to quarantine under police guard.

Quarantine in Melbourne

This was strict and in the case of our hotel, the food was poor. We smiled when we saw a news clip on TV showing pasta being dolled out to the poor in a soup kitchen because that, maybe with some mushrooms or a few slivers of meat together with a green salad, was what we got for dinner. (Pictured, a day's food for one.)



We had the option of ordering hotel food such as burgers at hotel room service prices or ordering in Uber Eats which was found to be nearly cold by the time it had been vetted by security but nobody minded too much. We were on the home stretch. We did get to go for a 15 minute walk around a small area with a guard twice in the 14 days for our exercise! We were also phoned every day to ensure that we remained in good health, if not totally in good spirits. Speaking of spirits, you could order wine from the hotel, at hotel prices. Eventually Sunday May 10 arrived, and we were discharged. We were given a taxi ride to the airport where we stayed overnight in order to catch our direct flight to Brisbane the next day and it WASN'T CANCELLED.

Insurance

We had prepaid our holiday and our flights. Since we only enjoyed one quarter of our trip, most of it had to be cancelled. To date, we have managed to recover about half of our unused costs and we are still working on that.

Fortunately, our travel is insured through the ABF with TBIB because we complied with their provisions for making a claim. (For example, we did pay for the trip before the pandemic was announced and before Smart Traveller recommended against going to those countries).

The biggest cost issues are the flight cancellations. The airlines are very reluctant to refund even the exorbitant pricing levied during the period when countries were closing their borders. We would like a refund rather than a credit because, after this experience, we don't see ourselves leaving our native soil again anytime soon!