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TRAVEL

Sewage, slums and a tourist attraction

Tourists are flocking to the posh parts of Buenos Aires, but there's a grittier side to this city. **ANDE WANDERER** discovers the latest tourist attraction: the villa.

With nearly 30,000 residents on 28 city blocks, most of Villa 20 is accessible only by narrow passageways in the maze-like inner core. (AP Photo/Ande Wanderer)

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

Francisco Balbuena lives in a one-room shanty with a dirt floor. A seatless toilet sits in the middle of the room. When it rains, the house becomes inundated with sewage. The smell never really goes away.

Children play in courtyards, where they are still within earshot of home. (AP Photo/Ande Wanderer)

And yet, for \$60 -- \$10 more than his monthly income -- a tour bus will show you where he lives.

A woman walks on the main street of Villa 20. Single mothers head many of the families here. (AP Photo/Ande Wanderer)

It can be easy to forget while wandering around upscale neighborhoods with names such as "Palermo Hollywood" that in some corners of this city, people live in houses constructed of scrap, the air smells of burning garbage and children have little more to play with than soccer balls made out of plastic bags.

Night falls on Villa 20, lit with electricity tapped from city lines. (AP Photo/Ande Wanderer)

Now that Argentina has stabilized considerably after its 2001 economic collapse, tourism has exploded in the capital known for offering "European elegance at Latin American prices." Visitors come for sultry tango, succulent steaks, a bit of liposuction perhaps.

A train that rumbles past Villa 20 is used by the estimated 20 percent of residents who work as cartoneros, or garbage scavengers. (AP Photo/Ande Wanderer)

The average visitor -- and even most Argentines -- never visits the villas miserias, or "misery villages." But one tour offers a glimpse into how five percent of the city's poorest citizens live.

THE OTHER HALF

"You haven't been to Buenos Aires until you've been to a villa," says Martín Roisi, a film and TV producer who started the tour that takes visitors to the city's largest slum, Villa 20.

Other capitals such as Río de Janeiro and Nairobi already have thriving and controversial slum tour businesses. In Buenos Aires, only a few dozen people have taken the trip with Roisi's group, Tour Experience.

The tours have received considerable criticism from sociology students and local bloggers who say they are degrading for residents and exploiting a morbid streak in rich tourists.

To Roisi, that criticism is missing the point. He says most of his critics have never set foot in a villa, and insists his aims are altruistic.

"The idea isn't to put poverty on display," he says. "The idea is to share the culture of the neighborhood."

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Nearly 30,000 people live in Villa 20, in crowded shacks packed onto its 28 blocks. Roisi became acquainted with the area four years ago when he organized a casting here. He was already a fan of cumbia, the simple music with witty, explicit lyrics that pumps throughout the neighborhood.

He put up a Web page offering tours, and says all the income goes toward a soup kitchen and creative projects in the villa.

MIXING CULTURES

At the end of every tour, tourists interact excitedly with residents at a "working man's barbecue" of sausage and beer.

One of the regulars is Silvana Peredo Días, a 32 year-old mother who earns \$50 a month caring for disabled residents in their homes. She lives with her common-law husband, four kids and niece in a two-bedroom apartment at the periphery of the villa. The massive housing complexes are part of the city's urbanization plan for the area.

"I like meeting people from other places and that they come here to learn about us. It's like an intercultural exchange," Días says.

"Here it's normal to get together every weekend and have a barbecue. One German who came here told me that it's not as common for them to do that. She said we're more sentimental. It's interesting to learn things like that. They learn from us and we learn from them."

Balbuena, meanwhile, sits outside his house smoking and drinking soda pop.

A few yards away is a "car graveyard" that leaks poisonous fluid, is a breeding ground for rats and serves as a de-facto playground. Beyond that, a white tower rises up from the city's now defunct theme park across the road, a sort of totem for the people who live here.

MAKING DO

After taking the tour last year, New York-based filmmaker Kathleen Lingo returned to make a documentary.

"We were inspired by what a great place it was," she says. "From the outside it seems sad and disenfranchised, but the social aspect of the villa is great. Not to paint it with a rosy lens. It's life -- in all its horror and beauty just like anywhere else."

Lingo's documentary is being made in conjunction with Project Odisea 20, a non-governmental organization that helps villa residents create and sell music, books and art. Villa residents were hired to work on the film.

Odisea 20 made a local celebrity of Días after it published her book, "Twins," which interweaves the adolescent journals of her deceased twin sister and herself.

"We're not millionaires or anything but we're doing OK," she says. "This is home."

For Heike Thelen, a German native and 6-year resident of Argentina, it's not home, but a reality check. She visits the villa every week with her 3-year-old son to lead the children's art workshop.

"My kid is a villa kid," she says. "I want him to experience life here."

"Look around," she says waving toward a group of children constructing something out of rocks. "The ground is full of broken glass, it's totally contaminated, the kids have no toys, but they're happy."

asap contributor Ande Wanderer is a photographer and writer based in Buenos Aires.

Find it online:

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