

**Country for the project**

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Degree programme

Industrial Engineering and Management, DTOI

Hyperinflation, Friendly Locals, and a “Shitty” Project: A KTH Field Study in Argentina

Before departure

We both wanted to travel during our studies and writing our bachelor’s thesis abroad seemed like the perfect opportunity for just that. We started by looking at all the countries we could go to given the limit set by the KTH Field Study grant, crossing off the ones we for some reason weren’t interested in going to or that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised against. Once this was done, we sent emails to all the Swedish Embassies and consulates in the countries that remained and asked if they had any contacts for us or knew of any possible projects. This method yielded very few responses. Out of 71 emails sent out, we received only 8 replies, several of which said they could not help us or stopped replying after the next email. Luckily, we got in touch with the Embassy of Sweden in Buenos Aires and got help to get in touch with Agua y Saneamientos Argentinos (AySA), where we carried out the degree project. We were lucky enough to have had previous KTH students in contact with the embassy, making t

Before our departure, there wasn’t much to arrange. We took the recommended vaccines for an extended stay in Argentina and booked an apartment to stay in for the duration of our trip, following the advice of our contact person, who suggested Airbnb. We thought it was a good idea to have our accommodation secured before arriving.

Upon arrival

We arrived in Buenos Aires on a Saturday and spent the weekend exploring the city and the area we were staying in. Also, we had sent money with Western Union and were trying to find a place to withdrawal the money, which was easier said than done as it was Sunday. Either it was closed or had run out of cash. The following Monday, we had our first meeting at AySA with the international group. We introduced ourselves and our project to and they introduced themselves, the company and gave us plenty of tips and recommendations on things to during out stay. In addition, we also met up with our contact person at the embassy and introduced ourselves and project to him as well.

During the next five weeks we did most of the project. We developed the platform, conducted interviews and wrote the majority of the report. This was our plan as we wanted to have two to three weeks to travel freely. The entire trip was eight weeks in total.



Financials

A lot happened from the time we applied and when we travelled to Argentina. The presidential election in November brought in a new president who made several decisions that affected the country's economic situation. We had spoken with two students who did MFS in Argentina the year before us, and they talked about how cheap everything was. But when we arrived, it was a completely different story. We arrived to an Argentina with almost 290% inflation, and prices that were becoming more comparable to those in Sweden. Using Western Union to exchange money helped a bit with getting a better exchange rate than the official state-sanctioned one, but the problem was that the government couldn't keep up with the inflation issuing higher denominations of bills. So to pay for a meal, you'd have to carry around large bundles of cash. The first time we withdrew money, we ended up with almost 600,000 pesos, which was equivalent to about 6,000 SEK in 500-peso bills. We just filled up our backpacks and walked home.



Hopefully, the economy will stabilize, and things will get more affordable again. To save money, you can do the same things as back home—make your own meals instead of eating out or try to find cheap or even free activities. The country also has very high taxes and tariffs on imported goods, while local products are much cheaper, so using those can help you save some money as well.

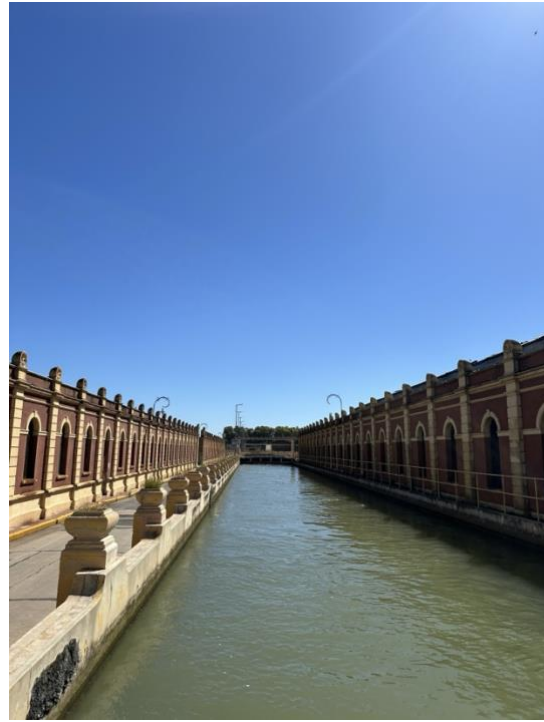
Accommodation

As mentioned earlier, our contact person recommended Airbnb for finding accommodation since it was a relatively short stay. He also suggested that we looked for a place in Recoleta or Palermo, since these are the safest areas in to live in. We found an apartment in Recoleta, which cost about 12 000 SEK per month for the two of us. This was a little bit more than when we did our budgeting, but all the apartments in the area were similarly priced and we really wanted to stay in an area that felt safe. Unfortunately, we ran into quite a few problems with our host. The agent didn't actually own the apartments she rented out, but rather was acting as an intermediary for others. The first apartment we booked was then sold, as was the replacement-apartment we received. She was in charge of several apartments in the area and after some turns back and forth, we managed to get upgraded to a substantially better apartment. This apartment was located in Palermo, and for the same price we got a really nice apartment in a building with a spa, pool and gym.

Project

The project was a comparative analysis of two platform we developed for AySA's water treatment facilities (Hence the "shitty" aspect of the project) to track, analyze and follow up their environmental data from a human-computer interaction perspective. Essentially, there were two stages in the project process. The first tree to four weeks went into designing and develop the platforms, and during this time we were at AySA office from 9 to 17 almost every day. And, after this was completed, we spent about two weeks going between the office and one of the water plants conducting interviews with various employees and writing the report. After finishing the project, we presented the results to the international department at AySA and to the Embassy of Sweden.

We also got the opportunity to visit two of the plants for a guided tour. First, we got to see the water treatment plant “Planta Potabilizadora General San Martín” where they treat water from Rio de la Plata to obtain drinking water. Secondly, we went to the sanitation plant a bit outside of Buenos Aires in Tigre. “Planta Depuradora Norte”, however, cleans sanitation water before it’s released into the ocean again.



Country

Beside the international department at AySA, there weren’t a lot of who spoke English. If you are traveling here, be prepared to speak, or learn, Spanish as this is the only way to get around. At restaurants, taxis, stores etc. Spanish is the way to go. We both have studied Spanish in school, so these phrases came back quite fast. And a lot of people are very willing to help you and speak to you even if you don’t know the language that well.



Even though Argentina is one of the safest countries in South America you should still be aware of your surroundings. Pickpocketing is quite common, and it’s recommended that you don’t wear expensive jewellery or watches and keep an eye on your bag. This is especially common in tourist areas such as La Boca, San Telmo Market and Retiro. There are also certain areas in which you should be extra attentive and avoid visiting at night.

We were fortunate enough to not have had any major incidents like these. However, one time we were stopped on our way home in a cab and pressured to give a bribe to someone who at least posed as a police officer to simply pass through a rougher part of Buenos Aires. However, this was easily diverted by just claiming that we didn’t carry any cash.

We spent a lot of time at the AySA office and discovered that the Argentinian corporate culture differs a lot from the Swedish one. There is a strong hierarchy within the company, and the over-subordinate relations are tangible, which at the beginning felt a bit different from what we are used to. However, we were essentially on the outside of this as we didn’t technically “work” for the company and, hence, didn’t really experience it ourselves.

Leisure and social activities

In the beginning of our trip, we were lucky to meet a lot of friendly people, locals and expats alike. During our first week, we were asked by the Embassy to represent Sweden at a European Study-Abroad-fair. We did this together with some other students who had studied abroad in Sweden, and Swedish students who studied in Argentina – people we later came to spend quite a bit of time with. We got invited to events and parties at the local university by the Argentinian students. The Swedish students (who had spent considerably more time in Buenos Aires than we had) brought us to their favourite restaurants and some events we wouldn't have found otherwise. One of our favourites was a live band playing traditional Portuguese music in a living room-turned-music studio on top of a local speakeasy. Hundreds of people crammed themselves into this place and just danced and vibed with the live music – it was incredible!



Some other activities we found during our stay was BRESH which is a music festival that runs every single Saturday during the southern hemisphere's summer months. We also got invited to a larger running club that runs every Tuesday and that ends with a "post-run-beer" at a local bar. Unfortunately, we never found the time to go to the latter. A lot of similar events hosted for international students are run by an organisation called "BAIS Argentina". You can check out their websites, and see which events are happening a certain week. They also organise trips around South America which we've heard great things about.

Worth noting is also that there is a Swedish Organisation (Club Sueco) in Buenos Aires that hosts a Swedish restaurant in the city. We went there for our Easter Celebration, and though it wasn't as good as Swedish food cooked in Sweden, it was well on its way there!

Saving the best to last, there was an event that we consecutively went to every week called "MundoLingo". It is best described as a language-exchange event, but fun! Basically, the concept is that you meet at a bar and get stickers of different countries flags. They represent which languages you speak or are currently learning. You then put these on your shirt ranking them from "Native Language" to "I'm new to learning this language". Hence, other people can see which languages you know (to get help for themselves) and what you are learning (to help you in your progress). You then grab some beers and talk the night away! Everyone kind of goes there to meet new people, so it's very easy to approach new people, and people will also approach you to learn more about Sweden and practice their English-skills. The group mainly consists of 20-something-year olds either studying or working in Buenos Aires, and I would say that there are as many internationals as there are locals at these events. It takes some time getting used to the culture shock that is speaking to random people, but once you get over it, it might be one of the best events in Buenos Aires.



We also went travelling for the last few weeks of the trip. We went to Montevideo and Colonia in Uruguay; visited some historical sites and Vinyards in Cordroba and Mendoza; and lastly, we also went hiking in El Calafate/El Chaltén in Patagonia. These were all incredible in their own unique way, and we recommend travelling around as much as the time there allows you to.



Sustainability

Unfortunately, there aren't many sustainable ways to travel to Argentina, as it is on a different hemisphere... Hence, flying was the only practical option. However, as we travelled around the country, we mainly travelled by night-buses. They were very comfortable, convenient and cheap! The simplest way for booking them was through a website called "BusBud". We wouldn't recommend travelling with the low-cost Argentinian airline "FlyBondi" even though they might be cheaper as they often cancel flights last minute (~12% of all departures).

The research conducted aligns with several UN social development goals, especially SDG6, SDG9, and SDG12. SDG6 regards clean water and sanitation, which are vital for a sustainable and safe standard of living. It is a basic requirement for any populous and an important component in the production of food. Since the aim was to create a platform tracking environmental metrics that contributes to AySA's work, it is itself a contribution to increasing access to water and sanitation in the Buenos Aires region. However, water sanitation is not exempt from its environmental impact, and hence the research aimed to improve efficiency in the arbitrary quotient of water produced vis-à-vis its environmental impact, aligning with SDG9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) and SDG12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). All of which in different ways relate to the further development and environmental efficiency increase needed to shift the water sanitation industry into a more sustainable practice. As AySA is a multi-sector company, an increased focus on sustainability can yield improvements in several sectors of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Other recommendations and observations

Argentina is currently a country under great change. The government is introducing changes never seen before. Hence, this travel report will most likely be outdated by the time future students arrive in Buenos Aires. So be sure to read up as much as possible before arriving, and if you want any other contacts in Argentina or have any questions, feel free to reach out to us on i.e. Facebook or similar!

Good luck with your Field Study project!

/Max and Josefin