

A Nun, an Alpaca, and the Villa Miseria:
One Student's Postcard
from Buenos Aires



Stephanie Pitts is a great example of the way that study abroad programs make a difference in students' lives—and the lives of the people they meet. Originally from Cedar Park, Texas, Pitts is a senior at the University of Texas majoring in Plan II and Latin American Studies.



HELLO FROM BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA! I AM IN MY SECOND SEMESTER of an IES (International Education of Students) study abroad program, and I am currently taking classes at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) and at the Social Museum University of Argentina (UMSA). I have been so lucky to receive the Teresa Lozano Long Travel Scholarship for my two semesters abroad here.

I arrived in Buenos Aires in July of 2005. This was my first time to travel in South America, although I had previously been to Mexico and Guatemala. I came to Argentina because I wanted to improve my Spanish, and I have always felt that complete immersion is the best way to learn a language. As a Latin American Studies major, I wanted the opportunity to live in Latin America to experience the culture rather than merely study it.

I lived in a family home-stay my first semester in Buenos Aires, which was a great experience because I had help practicing my Spanish and navigating the daily traumas of living in a new place. Fighting language barriers and being away from home so long have been tough sometimes, but in the end, it has definitely been worth it.

After my first semester here, I took the summer (December–February, since the seasons are opposite in the southern hemisphere) to travel around Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Bolivia. I came back to Buenos Aires for another amazing semester in March. At that point, I was comfortable enough with the city that I wanted a little more independence, so a friend and I moved into an apartment.

I have so many favorite experiences here in Buenos Aires, including a print-making class I took at UMSA and making a documentary about graffiti in Buenos Aires. But the most special experience in

the city has been volunteering for the daycare in the villa miseria (villa miseria is what the Argentineans call the shantytowns or favelas that surround the city). I took a social services theory class at UMSA during my first semester here, and in class I met a nun named Anita. Anita spoke very good English and was very friendly and outgoing, so she helped me in the class when I was completely lost. She told me about a project she was doing in this daycare, and I decided that when I got back from the summer break, I would like to work with her.

The experience has been so great. The children are so caring and loving, and although their poverty breaks my heart, their joy and sweetness warms it. Our job is very simple: we come to the daycare to sing songs, teach lessons, and play with the children. Additionally, our group raises money to make repairs on the building—tile the floor, paint the walls, etc. Since I want to work in social services and social policy in Latin America, this experience has been perfect for me.

After I finish up this semester, I'll head off to the Bolivian Amazon to volunteer for a community-owned preservation project and ecological lodge in the jungle. I'll be there for six weeks translating and teaching English before I finally head home to Austin. My travel experiences have been an incredible adventure, and they have truly shaped my future goals in terms of my education and career. ✨