

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF TOURISM IN ARGENTINA



From March to December 2020 traveling to Argentina was impossible, and from its reopening until today, trips have slowly resumed, although with restrictions and minor lockdowns. Aldo Elías, vice president of the Argentine Chamber of Tourism (CAT) says that “the industry is going through difficult times. Tourism in Argentina was one of the most affected industries since the beginning of the pandemic. After the reopening in December, restrictive measures were reintroduced at the last minute, without any kind of notice or joint work to minimize negative impacts.”

The information that the CAT has is that the industry has around 60,000 companies and generates more than 1 million jobs. During the pandemic in Argentina, 11,000 businesses closed and 150,000 jobs were lost.

Fabián Tommarello, president of the Association of Tourist Guides of the city of Buenos Aires (AGUITBA), says that “the industry never finished reactivated,” adding that “In the city of Buenos Aires, 98% of the guides have not returned to work since March of 2020, that is, for 16 months the majority have been out of work”. Tommarello explains that the city is a special destination for tourist guides: “Buenos Aires is not like other places in the country where tourists need a guide. The city offers many options within the reach of anyone; we lived mostly from foreign or educational tourism.”

The new COVID-19 variants forced the government to close international borders once again. “We are working to reopen the borders in mid-August,” said Elías.

Another destination that patiently waits for the return of international tourists is the Perito Moreno National Park. Catalina Martínez, a park ranger and supervisor of the park, says: “In the last season, we had 270 visitors, when before we were used to welcoming 1,200”. The Perito Moreno National Park is located in the province of Santa Cruz, 220 kilometers from the town of Gobernador Gregores.

Martínez explains that it is an interesting destination to visit due to its accessibility and weather: “When we opened in December, we adhered to the protocols established by the province: social distancing, use of face masks, entry of vehicles limited to five people, cleaning of bathrooms, etc. However, not being able to guarantee disinfection, what we still could not open then were the shelters, those places where tourists used to rest in a closed and warm place, where they could sometimes spend the night”. Regarding the guides, Martínez comments that “of the 19 qualified guides, none have been able to come back to work yet.”

Argentine news agency ANCCOM spoke with Ángel Palma, president of the Iguazú Tourism Guides Association (AGUIATY): “Puerto Iguazú lives exclusively from tourism. For us, it means 90% of the local economy. We found ourselves in a very particular situation, from one day to the next we stopped working, we were not prepared for that. We had to help colleagues psychologically; it took a toll on our mental health”. Regarding the economic impact, Palma says that the Ministry of Tourism listened to their demands and provided financial and food relief. “There was some financial assistance for colleagues,” says Palma.

Tommarello considers that the government of the city of Buenos Aires did not listen to their needs: "When we asked for financial relief, they rejected it. We also asked for a tax cut, but did not get any answers. From Nación, we were included in different programs, but not all guides were able to receive help. We are not satisfied with the measures they are taking". While there was also food relief, Tommarello says that at first guides did not need that kind of help. However, nowadays, the situation became much worse: "Many guides are having a hard time and they cannot afford rent or services."

Faced with a difficult economic situation, "guides had to reinvent themselves," shares Palma, saying that they "organized four fairs. Guides made handicrafts, pastries, bakeries, and blacksmithing. Luckily, the open-air fairs had constant visitors and with the protocols, they worked very well". However, Tommarello says that guides in Buenos Aires had to live off savings and many tried to unsuccessfully work in other areas: "What happens is that guides know about history, art, geography, languages, but many of us do not know about computer systems enough to transfer ourselves into an office setting."

For several months, the vaccination campaign has been steadily moving forward. "Having the majority of the industry [workers] vaccinated, we can say that we are seeing a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel," admits Palma. The vice president of CAT agrees, saying that "everything depends on vaccination. If we can vaccinate all Argentines, the recovery of the industry will be much faster."

In Puerto Iguazú, the Association of Tourist Guides had to fight in order to get workers vaccinated. "We pushed an initiative to have tourist workers vaccinated; not only guides, but also those in a hotel, food, transport... and it is being fulfilled, of course, without affecting the rate of vaccination in the province," explains Palma. In addition, their goal is that Puerto Iguazú is considered a safe destination: "We know that this is not the end of the pandemic, but according to experts, with the majority of the population vaccinated, the risk of spreading the virus among tourists is low."

Both in the city of Buenos Aires and in the Buenos Aires Province, the winter holidays are scheduled between July 19 and 31. "Last year we were closed at this point, so traveling is going to be much better than what we saw last winter. Likewise, we believe that it will not surpass 40% of the occupation compared to previous years," says Elías.

In summer, Puerto Iguazú opened its doors and while it only welcomed 10% of the visitors compared to previous years, they were able to work: "Before the pandemic, we had around 60,000 visitors per day. Last summer we had an average of 1,800 visitors per day, and we worked more on carnival and Easter weekends, where we reached 3,000 visitors," says Palma, adding that the winter holidays are going to be a good time to revive the industry: "We already have tickets reserved for the winter season; we think we are going to do well."

However, in the city of Buenos Aires expectations are not the same. "We do not have any kind of hope in the winter holidays. There are more and more restrictions in domestic flights, mandatory quarantines and other measures," recalls Tommarello. In addition, he explains that most of the guides in the city of Buenos Aires are hired by travel agencies, but no one has called them to work for the holidays. "We have hopes for the last months of the year, but everything changes every day," he added.

The Perito Moreno National Park opens its doors from October to May, so it remains closed during winter. "We expect to have the park fully open by the next season 2021/2022, including shelters," says Martínez, but at the same time, he agrees with Tommarello that "in the face of a health emergency, everything can change."

“We believe that there are a number of people who were able to keep their jobs and even profited and were able to save, so many will want to spend in travel,” explains Palma.
“Hopefully it will be like that for the good of everyone; for those of us who need work and for those who want to travel.”

“We have excellent measures to handle COVID-19,” emphasizes Elías, adding that an important part lies in “individual and social responsibility. You can have the best protocols, but if the person does not want to take care of themselves and not follow them, there is not much we can do. It’s up to each one.”

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