

In Macho Argentina, a New Beacon for Gay Tourists

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[BUENOS AIRES](#) — Home to the sexy tango and strapping meat-eaters, this South American capital has long been thought of as a bastion of macho attitudes. But a new hotel here is adding to the city's growing image as a bastion of gay-friendliness.

The Axel Hotel, a Spanish import that opened in November, has come to symbolize Buenos Aires's increasingly aggressive effort to court gay dollars and euros. It is Latin America's first luxury hotel built exclusively with gay customers in mind.

That Buenos Aires would be chosen for such a marketing experiment is a result of a marked change over the past several years in the acceptance of gay men and lesbians in Argentine society. This city of three million people has come a long way from the years of military dictatorship, when being openly gay could lead to jail. Five years ago this was the first major Latin American city to legalize same-sex unions, and this summer it was host to a World Cup for gay soccer players, a first in the region.

"There is so much more freedom these days," said Mauricio Urbides, a 28-year-old fashion designer, who sipped red wine with two male friends at the hotel recently. "You see gays on television here, in government. Just 15 years ago it was a completely different situation."

The three friends were among a mixed crowd of homosexuals and heterosexuals who laughed as Kyra and Sharon, drag queens from Barcelona, Spain, poked fun at Argentina's president-elect, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and sang a [Marilyn Monroe](#)-inspired "Happy Birthday to You" to a male guest.

In other parts of the world, like the Castro district in San Francisco, gay people have struggled recently to maintain a cultural presence in the face of gentrification. Buenos Aires has no traditional gay neighborhood, but acceptance of gay people has slowly grown. The first gay bar here opened in 1983. In 1992 President Carlos Menem signed a decree promising equal legal protection for gay men and women.

Argentine social mores began loosening in the 1990s, when the pegging of the peso to the dollar gave Argentines more spending power, allowing many to travel abroad. "People traveled and found there were other ways of living that were completely different than what they were used to," Mr. Urbides said.

After Argentina plunged into economic chaos in late 2001, discrimination based on sexual orientation seemed to many like a petty concern. "When people are eating out of garbage cans it really doesn't matter if you are gay or not," said Osvaldo Bazán, a journalist and the author of "History of Homosexuality in Argentina From the Conquest of America to the 21st Century."

The devalued currency made Buenos Aires a relative bargain for Western tourists, including many who are gay and like the city's European sophistication. In recent years marketers have more aggressively sought to promote the city as a gay tourist destination. Gay tango bars and wine shops have sprouted up, and a new "friendly card" helps travelers and local residents alike to get discounts at gay-friendly shops and restaurants.

Travel industry experts estimate that about 20 percent of the tourists here are gay — 300,000 a year — and they spend \$600 million here annually.

Even as tourism has been flourishing, so, too, has local gay activism. It was young gay rights advocates who successfully pushed to legalize same-sex unions, despite resistance from the [Roman Catholic Church](#). At the end of November the lower house of Congress in Uruguay, Argentina's neighbor, legalized homosexual unions there, too. If the Senate approves the law, Uruguay would be one of only six countries with such a law. Advocates in Argentina, meanwhile, are pushing Congress to extend health benefits to gay couples.

Argentina's more liberal treatment of sexual orientation on television has also stoked acceptance. Florencia de la Vega, who is [transsexual](#), made a splash when she played a transvestite in the 2004 soap opera "Los Roldán." In 2005 the dating show "12 Corazones — Especial" featured gay men who kissed on camera.

Yet some visitors still complain of homophobic treatment, said Marcelo Suntheim, secretary of the Community of Homosexuals in Argentina, an activist group. He said the group received three complaints this year from gay couples who said hotel concierges in Buenos Aires "asked them not to kiss in the lobby because children were present."

So some local residents say they hope that the Axel will offer another place where same-sex couples can feel more comfortable. The hotel, which has billed itself as "hetero-friendly," is the second gay-themed hotel to be built by Juan Juliá, an entrepreneur from Barcelona, where the first Axel opened three years ago.

The 48-room Axel promotes itself as a place for fun, complete with a glass-bottomed rooftop pool, and free condoms. "We provide everything for you to have fun," Mr. Juliá said. "Be safe, but have fun."

He said he hoped the hotel became popular not only with tourists, but also with local Argentines who would see it as a place to socialize.

"The majority of the gay community is looking more and more for hetero-friendly places," instead of exclusively gay places, said Luciano Fus, a 29-year-old translator who watched the drag queen show. "But this will be another after-work spot."

Mr. Urbides said he would "definitely come back." He smiled. "Especially if the hotel brings Madonna back to Buenos Aires, or better yet, if it brings Cher here."