

# Revelations: Alfajores and the Blue Market

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I was captivated by Valparaiso from the first moment I arrived. I'm a sucker for graffiti-covered cities that feel tough and gritty but bohemian and welcoming. Laundry flaps around from windows and balconies in narrow streets and windows like Tibetan prayer flags. The city—a UNESCO world heritage site—is the breezy seaside yin to bustling Santiago's yang. The town was never meant to be its own entity but rather was erected to serve as a port for Santiago. As it often goes in Latin America, once a Catholic church was built, people started settling and the town (which is translated as “go to paradise” or a combination of the words “valley” and “paradise,” depending on who you ask) became a community in its own right.

Valparaiso is famous for its hills and colorful buildings, whose origins are steeped in mystery. One theory is that boozy sailors had their houses painted a certain color so they'd be able to locate the correct home when stumbling back from the pubs at night. As another more romantic story goes, sailors painted their boats to match their houses so that their shoreside wives would be able to see their husbands returning from sea. Another theory (perhaps most accurate) is that townspeople didn't have money to paint their houses so they would just use whatever was left over from whatever paint was used for the ships in the port.

The many winding staircases in the hills are perfect for surreptitiously drinking in public—which is banned every day of the year except New Year's Eve—and public urination, which I assume is illegal all year round. My favorite staircase is the one where my unstoppable *alfajor* (delicious pastries found in Chile, Argentina, and many other South American countries) obsession began. I started visiting this hidden-away staircase on a daily basis to ring the bell next to a tiny shop window from which an elderly man sells his tinfoil-wrapped treats for about 25 cents each.

After a few relaxing days by the sea, I returned to Santiago and headed for Argentina the next day. Two long and expensive bus rides later, I found myself in Cordoba, a city that left a lot to be desired. Fed up with city life and the general unpleasantness of staying in yet another hostel, I decided to splurge on a trip to the countryside after finding a last-minute deal on a hotel room in the lush little town of La Cumbrecita. On the way, I happened to meet a fellow American who was headed to the hills for many of the same reasons I was. We shared a few beers in the touristy German town of Valle General Belgrano while he explained how to buy Argentinian pesos for the informal blue rate as opposed to the devalued government-sanctioned rate. Sorry...what?

To put it bluntly, Argentina's financial and economic situation is complicated. It's the same story I hear pretty much time and time again in Latin America—corrupt government officials don't have general populace's interests at heart, and they pocket huge amounts of cash for themselves. As in Chile, once a president who favored social justice and decreasing the wage gap was elected (Juan Peron, in the case of Argentina), they were overthrown by the military government and a hideous amount of "communist sympathizers" were kidnapped and killed in subsequent years.

It's a generalization to say that the government has been consistently and unapologetically shady, and many Argentines have suffered economically because of it. I barely passed my college macroeconomics course so I am no expert, but from what I understand, the major problems began when the government bailed the national banks out of debt in the 1980s-90s and raised citizens' taxes to make up for the deficit. Since then, no one has really taken responsibility for the inflation that ensued as a result, and the country is still very much in debt.

To try and make up for this problem, the state has tried to retain the worth of the peso by putting restrictions on what the dollar is worth, as well as who can legally obtain dollars through the proper channels. Officially, my American dollars are worth somewhere between 9-10 Argentine pesos each. However, the actual market value is closer to about 14-15 pesos/dollar on the underground "blue market."

If you are like me and you've arrived to Argentina with neither zero American USD on hand nor knowledge of the blue market, you can easily download an app through Paypal that allows you to transfer money from your American bank account to a bevy of money pick-up locations in the country. You won't get the exact blue market rate like you would if you were to trade on the street, but it's still several pesos more than what you would get if you were to withdraw the same dollar equivalent from a local ATM.

Once you've done that, you make your way to the money pick-up location only to discover it's a *dia feriado* (holiday) and your 5,000 pesos will have to wait. You must also hope the system doesn't crash the next business day (it did), and the following day is not a Sunday—the Lord's Day, obviously—which guarantees the money pickup is closed (it was).

FINALLY, on Monday, you again make the pilgrimage to the seedy strip mall to get your treasure. Since inflation is plaguing the nation, you receive many, many bills which you must hide in your money belt under your skirt. This makes you look extremely well-endowed in the back such that you get more unwanted attention from men, but it's worth it because you know you've cheated the system and your *alfajor* addiction will be much cheaper to maintain from now on.

I've learned that Buenos Aires has a few economic, social and political skeletons in her closet and, personally, I'm glad my financial well-being is not at the mercy of Argentina's government. Even though there are some ways around it, it's upsetting that the country is in this predicament, and I feel for all Argentineans who are frustrated by the situation. Since I am but a backpacker with an ass full of cash for the time being, I will do what I can to help bolster the economy by continuing to buy *alfajores* like there's no tomorrow.