

Commuting in city

Saturday, May 7, 2016

Bats out of hell



Controversial colectivos are almost as iconic of BA City as the Obelisk is. --

By Thomas Manning
For the Herald

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Buenos Aires City's bus services, the ubiquitous 'colectivos', in their coverage, frequency and even after recent fare hikes, low cost are without peer in Latin America.

Astoundingly there is nowhere in Buenos Aires' vast conurbation that you cannot take a bus, at most two or three blocks from where you wish to embark, and alight, again at most two or three blocks from your destination if indeed you are not picked-up and delivered even closer than that.

Until recently the intricacies of the bus routes, which are mind-bogglingly complex in their diversity and interconnection, were known only to locals who were inculcated in their arcane mysteries from birth and it was impracticable for visitors and tourists to use buses to get around Buenos Aires unless they were guided by an initiate.

All that has changed with the advent of an interconnected world in which, with a smartphone or any Internet-connected device, you can use the City of Buenos Aires' interactive website 'CómoLlego' (How can I arrive) to plot your journey and you will instantaneously be advised of the closest bus stops and the most convenient routes to choose from.

Over the last decade comfortable, emission-controlled and in a growing incidence, air-conditioned buses have replaced a decrepit fleet of horrendously noisy 1950s snub-nosed, exhaust-belching clunkers which, their undoubted utility aside, were an aesthetic canker on Buenos Aires' glorious visage.

The introduction of electronic ticketing with the Sube Card was a masterstroke which makes paying fares a speedy, effortless process compared to the coin-gobbling ticket-machines of yore which caused such widespread coin shortages in Buenos Aires that bus patrons had to beg in shops for change or hunt down the back of couches to gather the wherewithal to board a bus.

Life has taught me there's always a fly in the ointment and in the case of Buenos Aires' bus services its Achilles Heel is a pernicious minority of testosterone-fuelled, 'macho' drivers uniformly decked-out in leather clothes, wrap-around sunglasses, shaved heads, an excess of piercings & garish jewellery who speak, if at all, in surly grunts and who drive like bats out of Hell with no regard for passenger safety.

Brazilian writer Paul Coelho said "Life moves very fast. It rushes from Heaven to Hell in a matter of seconds" and he has hit the nail on the head as far as Buenos Aires' transport Heaven is concerned as it can turn to Hell in an instant if you fall into the hands of one of the rancorous minority of bellicose bus drivers.

The white-knuckle ride starts when the bus aggressively explodes away from the bus stop the instant the last unfortunate comes aboard and the passengers are thrown about grasping frantically at the support poles to stay upright.

The bus next maniacally careens through traffic weaving, braking, accelerating, braking again all in quick succession all the while sounding its horn in urgent staccato blasts.

I have christened these rogue drivers "Terminators" for not only do they uncannily resemble the evil killing-machine played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Hollywood movies of the same name but they also terminate lives with the same implacable insensitivity as a cyborg and the tragedy is that the mayhem they cause is not movie make-believe but painfully real.

Considering the thousands of buses circulating in the city at any one time there are relatively few accidents and Buenos Aires' buses are very safe on a statistical basis.

Despite the statistical safety people do get gravely injured and die in bus accidents from time to time and I can attest that in the several fatal accidents I have witnessed over the years there has been, without exception, a Terminator-type at the wheel whose dangerous overtaking or running a red light has caused the accident.

I allow the Terminators to continue on their dangerous ways if one presents when I'm catching a bus (they are easy to spot due to their aforementioned uniform) as nothing, but nothing will possess me to put my corporal wellbeing or life itself into their callous hands.

Waiting for the next bus means, unless you have very bad luck and another Terminator arrives, you will be driven by one of the vast majority of drivers who are very professional and a credit to what is a world-class public transport system notwithstanding its rotten core of Terminators who need urgent retraining in both customer service and defensive driving or ideally, in the Schwarzenegger tradition, sent packing with his ironic signature dismissal "Hasta la vista, baby".