Twitter Thread by Shaun Lawson



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Here's a thread for you. Why Uruguay's not so hot.

I tweet about this country regularly. I love it very deeply - please bear that in mind throughout this thread. It's just that, like all places, it has its issues: plenty of them. And they're not well known outside the country.

A bit like how Uruguay isn't well known outside the country - meaning that tourist guidebooks, expat websites etc completely miss much of what I'm about to set out. In a globalised world, it's amazing how much isn't commonly known about this place: good and bad.

1. Cost.

Picture the scene. In 2012, I was wandering through Montevideo's old city between classes, doing some maths in my head. Via currency conversions, I was working out how much I was spending in Uruguay compared with my former life in the UK.

Then, I stopped dead.

Because I'd realised I was somehow paying MORE here than there - despite salaries being half of those in the UK at best. I kept checking and rechecking: surely this couldn't be correct? But it *was* correct. Uruguay is an insanely expensive country to live in.

It has only 3.5m people: much of which are either pensioners or kids. Many of those of working age leave for better opportunities in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, the USA, Europe or Australia. Because they just can't earn enough to make real steps forward.

That results in a brain drain: a chronic one at times. And for those who stay? What you make here, you eat. And I'm not exaggerating. Your financial position just stays the same for what seems like forever: it's like being a hamster in a wheel.

From birth onwards, Uruguayans learn how to scrimp and save on almost anything: on things which Westerners like me take for granted. If something breaks, it's best to fix it 'con alambrica': ie. make do and mend as best you can.

The most expensive things here, relative to the rest of the world, are as follows:

- Food

- Electricity (the cost of which has improved a bit since I started here)

- Mattresses and beds

- All technological items

The reason is that Uruguay makes very little by itself.

The exceptions to that are beef, soya, milk (and therefore dulce de leche), and famously, footballers.

But this leaves it needing to import massively - while still protecting its farmers and producers. As a result, there's a 60% import tax. SIXTY PER CENT.

If you move here, for heaven's sake, bring all the electrical appliances you need with you if you can. My old laptop broke on Day 1 of my life in Uruguay. My new one, mid-range, cost 600 US dollars. It would've been close to half that in the US, about 60% of that in the UK.

I've bought two since then, ie. a new one about every 4 years (as you'll have gathered, I use my laptop much more than most people). Each time, the cost was about 600 USD for a mid-range one.

Another issue around all this is dollarisation.

The more expensive products here are priced in dollars. Which was 19 to the Uruguayan peso when I arrived almost 9 years ago, and is now 43 to the peso.

If you're paid in dollars - which not many are - you're having a ball. If, like most, you're not... then yikes.

Especially given that inflation has run between 8% and 10% throughout my time here. As I said: what you make here, you eat. That's despite Uruguay having the highest minimum wage compared with dollars in the whole region.

So what do people do if they need an appliance?

They buy it on credit, with interest-free monthly instalments. Credit cards which people use to pay in 'cuotas' are a must for the middle class here. I often worry just how vulnerable Uruguay must be to a credit crunch; paying in instalments is embedded in the culture here.

Just in case you think I'm exaggerating at all: a 40g Twix bar costs about one pound twenty (and sometimes a bit more) here. A 2.25l bottle of Diet Coke costs about two pounds fifty. A bottle of cough medicine, about eight pounds.

If you want to rent a furnished apartment in a decent area of Montevideo, the average salary here will barely cover it. Rent prices are so crazy that huge numbers of young people live with their parents until they get married.

Again, dollarisation plays its part here. Many property owners live abroad so want to be paid in dollars. Rent prices go up 7% a year - including if they're in dollars. And even before you move into a place, you'll need:

- A month's rent in advance
- A month's commission for estate agent
- FIVE MONTHS' rent for a deposit

The latter doesn't happen in every case but it does in most. The deposit is held securely at the Banco Hipotecario (Mortgage Bank). But who can afford 7 months' rent in one go?!

But yes, that's the biggest problem. Sometimes you'll meet Uruguayans who genuinely believe theirs is the most expensive country on Earth. It's not of course - but the expat websites' figures on cost of living are quite laughably wrong, and provide a totally false picture.

The second biggest problem? The weather. If you google Uruguay, you'll find that, according to the internet, it has a temperate climate, and winters which rarely drop below 10C. Except that... er, it doesn't.

a) It has a sub-tropical climate
b) Winters here are MISERABLE.

a) Means regular electrical storms, and occasional sub-tropical cyclones which can reach anywhere between 120 and 180 km/hr.

b) Is because of cold humidity: which goes right through your bones. As a general rule, winters FEEL 10C lower than the actual temperature.

Then add to that the constant wind blowing in off the River Plate... and frankly, winters in the UK feel considerably milder in most of the country.

It makes good heating and insulation essential - but too many buildings here are old and made with cement, which keeps nothing in

In 2012, when I experienced my first winter here, I was freezing on the bus. Then I got out and was freezing outside. Then I went into an apartment building to teach someone there, and was just as freezing there as well! No heating, no insulation - it was like nothing else.

The more modern buildings, built since 2000 say, don't have this issue. But it means that most Uruguayans rely on the fireplace or on gas heating. Electricity is prohibitively costly.

In the summer, mind you, this country is a completely different place. Lively, relaxed, happy.

But the long, looonnnggggg winters are why Uruguayans are famous for being full of melancholy. During the winter, I swear even the palm trees on the promenade look sad. And I know an Argentinian here who sends his kids back there every winter. He doesn't want them miserable!

Issue number 3: education. The state system here is a joke, outrageously awful. Most kids at state schools are only in school for 4 hours a day: a nightmare for working parents in such an expensive place (so grandparents become critical - but what if someone doesn't have them?).

Uruguay's PISA results get worse and worse. Teaching unions refuse point blank to move with the times. Facilities are poor; kids end up teaching teachers how to use computers.

The private system is very good - but of course, few Uruguayans can afford it.

So the gulf in life chances between those educated at public and private schools is massive, disastrous. And the university system is little better either. It's a choice between:

a) A very expensive private university (the most popular of which is the Universidad Catolica)

b) The one and only public university, UDELAR. Which is free during your time studying there - but you have to pay a tax afterwards, for life. And because most Uruguayans can't afford private university, UDELAR is quite absurdly over-subscribed.

This means that, at the start of the year, students have to get to lectures hours in advance just to get a seat. Otherwise, they end up watching on a tiny closed circuit TV outside. It means there's a handful of books to go around hundreds of students.

And it also means that the drop-out rate is terrifying. Staggering. UDELAR being so full means, in practice, distance learning for many - and a pretty phenomenal amount of self-discipline is required, almost equivalent to being on a PhD. Most young people can't handle that.

Education was a very big part of why the leftist government lost power here at the end of last year. The other big reason was crime.

Time was when Uruguay was a quite amazingly safe country: light years ahead of the rest of South America. Not any more.

In 2002, a massive economic crash here plunged huge numbers from the middle class into abject poverty - and threatened a completely lost generation without male role models or parents in work. Hence the left winning a landslide in 2004: to prevent that from happening.

But it didn't. On the crime and security front, it failed more or less totally. It failed to properly train or support the police; it regularly sided with criminals against the police; even murders by those under age 18 were not properly punished.

All this alongside a prison system which is an ongoing national disgrace, and plainly brutalises prisoners: turning them from low-level criminals into hardened ones.

As a result, murder and violent crime has soared here over the last decade.

And that's *despite* the former government's excellent work in reducing poverty and inequality. It had a constant blind spot on crime: probably because so many of its ministers had been tortured by the dictatorship in the 1970s.

Then we come to bureaucracy - and more specifically, the public sector. Which has been huge here for a century, but became positively elephantine under the left.

A while back, I asked a student: "If someone wants to become rich in Uruguay, what job should they do?"

I was expecting them to reply with "lawyer" or "estate agent" or "property developer". Their response? "Get a job working for the government!"

It cannot be overstated just how much contempt so much of the public holds the goverrnment sector in here.

And no, that's not because the public is right wing or anything like it. It's because their sizeable taxes go towards people who... well, how shall I explain this?

In 2012, I started my residency application here. I arranged an interview one day in July. So along I went.

I had the interview, where they explained various documentation I still needed and had my fingerprints taken. Then they took me outside. "Queue here", they said. So I did, got to the front, did something procedural, and was motioned to another queue. And then another. And another

Then it was "go outside, four blocks that way, then three blocks to the left, and go inside the building there". When I was cheerfully informed that as my residency process had begun, I wouldn't be able to leave the country without a specific form, I had a panic attack.

One of only three panic attacks I've ever had in my life. The poor assistant who was with me had to leave; I was completely impossible for half an hour or so.

But later that day, I realised why there were all these queues. It's because the government gives 10 people a job which one person could and should be doing. The inefficiency that causes is mindblowing at times.

And inconvenience. Lots of it.

During my residency process, I had to queue up outside Immigration in the old city from 7.30am onwards, regardless of the weather. It opened at 9am, and only had 100 tickets to give out each day. And once you got a ticket... you had to wait til your number appeared. All day long.

I was able to cancel a day's classes when this happened. Heaven only knows how most people cope though. And then I needed to go to the Health Ministry because of medication I'd been sent - and it was only open to the public from 9am to 1pm!

See also, banks: only open in most places from 1pm to 5pm!

But I digress. These public departments (the most notorious of which is the Montevideo local council) will also regularly fail to inform the public that there's a strike.

So you make an appointment, take time off work... arrive, and are told "sorry, there's a strike today. Come back some other time".

In my case, this happened to me when I had the internet installed in my new apartment. I cancelled my classes and waited all day from 9 to 6.

Nobody showed up. I then went to Antel
(the state communications monopoly)'s main commercial centre here. "Cambiar la fecha?", she said to me. "Change the date?"

No apology, no "sorry, this isn't good enough" - just "let's do it some other time".

So we changed the date, I cancelled another day's classes, waited from 9 to 6... and again, nothing. And again, I was told "cambiar la fecha?"

The third time it happened, Antel workers had been on strike. Nobody had bothered to account for that when scheduling appointments.

This went on, and on, and on... ten times in total. Before my furious boss got Antel's backsides into gear by contacting someone very high up there. Her connections were what resolved it ultimately.

The public deals with stuff like this alarmingly often.

Uruguay is the only country I've ever known in which if you need to do some minor administrative task, you have no idea if it'll take 5 minutes... or 2 hours. I'm frequently baffled how this country operates at all given how slowly things move.

The staff in these places? Let's just say that customer service does not tend to be their priority. As people sit and wait interminably for their number to appear, the very well-paid staff will... chat with each other. Or go off for an extended lunch. Or sit idly doing nothing.

Hence the public's complete exasperation - but Uruguayans being Uruguayans, this means muttering under their breath and combusting on the inside. It does not pay to be angry or emotional here; passivity and diffidence are part of the culture too. Amusingly so very often.

Also part of the culture: GOSSIP. In a country with such a small population, it's not that everyone knows everyone exactly. It's more that everyone knows *something about* everyone - or rather, they think they do, because of Chinese whispers.

It's a very small town mentality.

A mentality in which anyone who sticks out - for being rich, for being poor, for dressing or acting differently - will be gossiped about. Uruguayans like people to be *in the middle*, ie. the same in more or less every way.

This can reach completely comical proportions when you ask people here what they do in their spare time and IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME ANSWER.

- Go to the beach
- Have an asado (barbecue) with my friends
- Play football
- Go to the shopping centre

Just as seemingly every Uruguayan under the sun is addicted to mate and dulce de leche. Buses in Montevideo can be incredibly crowded during rush hour - but you'll never see a Uruguayan drop their mate flask. They're surgically attached to it, I swear.

Oh yes, one other thing. Restaurants. These have improved quite considerably over the past decade: there's now far more places serving international cuisine in Montevideo and Punta del Este. Sushi bars seem all the rage, in particular.

But most restaurants all serve the exact same thing. It's ludicrous actually.

- Pizza (cheese and tomato thrown on top of a doughy base)
- Pasta
- Beef
- Empanadas (pasties)
- Milanesas (schnitzels)

All of which is reasonable. None of which is amazing. In the middle, again.

No wonder young people here get so bored: life here is just incredibly samey for so many. But then, it's precisely because it's so expensive that most Uruguayans live simple, natural lives - and have a lot to teach the rest of the world on that front.

Anyway, before a group of locals feel too insulted, that'll do for now I think!

Again: all the above pales in comparison with the very many fantastic things about Uruguay. But nowhere is perfect, even if this country is shaped uncannily like Thomas More's Utopia.

This country, more than anything, is a mass of contradictions and idiosyncracies. Uruguayans like it that way. And they especially like the world not knowing about its most beautiful elements... because that means they can keep it that way. Unspoilt and natural.

/TERMINADO