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Our trip to Uruguay

After attending Fidel Good and Berta Anderson's wedding in Waiuku in early April, we flew from Auckland to Santiago (13h flight) and then over the Andes another 3 hours to Montevideo. We arrived minus our luggage in a very modern airport. The next two days we had a good look around the capital, which houses half the Uruguayan population, around two million people. There seemed to be a hive of building activity, but on the outskirts there are also huge slum areas. We were quite disappointed by all the stray dogs that left smelly deposits around every corner or tree in otherwise charming and beautiful places.

Then we headed, by bus, towards New Helvetia, previously called Swiss Colony, where our friends and Othmar's relations from way back picked us up. Their hospitality was unbelievable; already the first evening Juan (Hans) played Swiss music on his piano accordion. Another evening they invited all their relatives and made an Uruguayan BBQ. Staying at Hodel's farm for a week gave us a good insight into the life and way of a Uruguayan dairy farm. They crop up to 70% of the farm to grow enough for the long hot summer and also the cold winter, no snow but a lot of frosts. It felt like dairy farming was an uphill battle, so no surprise that a lot of dairy farmers are selling up either all or just the cows and lease the land to the soya growers from Argentina, which pay a lot more in rent than they could ever make in farming. The NZ Farming System Uruguayan Farms do look a lot greener than the rest. How irrigation stacks up with unreliable workforce and not very reliable power supply, we don't know. As we travelled around we found the whole country rolling to flat, not many places you couldn't drive a tractor. And it seemed almost half the land grew soya crops. Our favourite place was New Helvetia. Here already around 1850 hundreds and hundreds of Swiss immigrated, a lot from Lucerne. As we looked around the cemetery around 80% of the names were Swiss, the 2nd grave was a gentleman from Buttisholz, Othmar's hometown. Everywhere you go one finds the Swiss influence, street names (Bernerstrasse, Vogelstrasse, etc.). You drive under a Swiss Chalet to get to the town, next is a tree with all the Swiss cantons on it, a lot of the houses have two "Kantonswappen" next to the main entrance of the house. You still find some who talk Swiss even though it's 5-6 generations since they left Switzerland. When you go to a bakery, you almost think you are in Switzerland. There is also a Swiss shooting range, a Swiss hotel, where Mr. Raeber greets you in Swiss and hanging on the wall is an alphorn that hadn't been used for 12 years. Othmar just had to dust it off. Next year on the 25th April the town will be celebrating 150 years of New Helvetia; we might be there.

Marlies Hebler

