

The job of post office and travel agent

Tony Leon puts his skills as a raconteur to good use writing about his time as SA's ambassador to Argentina, writes Sue Grant-Marshall

MENTION Argentina and up pops Evita, Diego Maradona, the best beef in the world and Pope Francis. Into that heady mixture we can now stir Tony Leon's hilarious, pertinent and thoughtful insights into the life of an ambassador in a country so volatile that SA pales by comparison.

I am struggling to acclimatise to the sight of the former leader of the official opposition sitting on our chosen restaurant's hard benches instead of hectoring the African National Congress from the parliamentary ones.

We exchange pleasantries about the launch of *The Accidental Ambassador* (Picador Africa) the night before, when a long line of guests, clutching books for signing, wound out of Hyde Park's Exclusive Books long before the speeches began.

Yet, it was with a jaundiced approach that I opened the former ambassador's Argentinian memoir, sighing at the prospect of some heavy reading. I needn't have worried for, by the end of the first chapter, I was chortling at Leon's witty repartee and fascinating stories.

One of the first people he met on taking up his post in Buenos Aires was the country's Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis. "We had a bit of a chat, nice guy," Leon says, an opinion not shared by Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

All ambassadors are expected to attend an annual religious ceremony held around Argentina's April Independence Day celebrations. "But the Te Deum was never held where the president was because the cardinal was so critical of her. She made it quite clear that she would never set foot in the cardinal's cathedral, which happens to be directly over the road from her palace."

So the ambassadors were flown at vast expense to the Argentinian taxpayer to some other spot in that huge country. But, when he became pope, "in the most Argentine way, instead of crossing the street to his cathedral, she flew all the way from Buenos Aires to Rome to attend his investiture and shake his hand. So, there you have it in a nutshell, some of the contradictions of Argentine-style politics."

You won't find that story in his book as the pope was chosen well after he had penned his last



DON'T CRY FOR ME: Former opposition leader Tony Leon in Argentina, where he spent three years.

word. But there are many others, equally amusingly told by the former Democratic Alliance leader and ambassador, who landed in the latter job after a casual conversation on the 2009 election campaign trail with President Jacob Zuma.

Leon had decided he had "done my national service" in Parliament and mentioned to Zuma that he intended leaving politics. Some time later, he found himself having a job interview with Zuma.

He wrote his book because "I needed to reflect how we actually do this job if you come from the opposition ranks — how do you remain true to yourself and to SA?"

He thinks you can do both,

and hopes he has managed this. "One of the reasons I accepted Argentina was I felt I could do the job of pushing South African trade, building up our exports and pushing tourism from that

“I needed to reflect on how to do this job coming from the opposition

country to ours, without having to violate my principles." He succeeded, for tourism grew by 120% in 2010, the year of the Fifa Soccer World Cup, and trade increased by 80%.

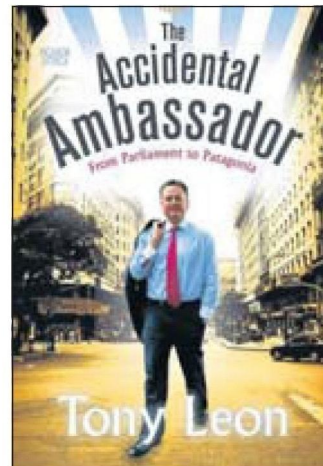
Leon believes that if SA spent more time building up its

trade offices and less time sending its politicians around the world, "we would create a lot more jobs here".

But it wasn't all lengthy *asado* (braais), jaunts to wealthy ranches and exquisite wine estates with the cream of Argentinian society.

He struggled to learn Spanish, couldn't adjust to dinners that started after 10pm, disliked the hectic traffic and found the "constant feeling of crisis in Argentina quite a challenge. At least here at home, there is less crisis and I can do it in my own language."

He recounts a story of a South African fruit-juice company that couldn't move its product out of the Argentinian



customs house "because the trade minister would phone the supermarkets and ask why they were selling our juices so cheaply".

The minister's advice was: "I suggest you get them off your shelves, and if you don't, then we'll find some reason to come and deal with you."

Leon recalls it being like "a Mafia shakedown, the guy looked like an extra from *The Sopranos*, which perhaps just reinforced the prejudice I had about the way they operated".

Leon is an excellent writer and raconteur. His description of the drowning of one of his two beloved dachshunds in a park over the road from the ambassadorial apartment, their anguish and his resolve to find another, is eloquent and heartwarming.

He and his wife drove to a breeder's home in a dodgy suburb, "a ramshackle ruin of a structure, but inside was a dachshund lover's heaven, with all manner, types and colours of the hound running about".

They settled for a tiny puppy with the colouring of a Nguni cow, which they dubbed Argentino Julio Leon.

During their three-year stint in Argentina, the Leons travelled extensively throughout South America, visiting Brazil, the Galapagos Islands and "the Boers at the End of the World in Patagonia".

Three ships took 800 families there at the end of the Anglo-Boer War, so it is not surprising they hardly speak Afrikaans any more and answer to names such as Juan van der Merwe.

Leon doesn't pull his punches about an embassy today being "a sort of glorified combination of post office and travel agent".

Nor does he spare his words in describing how his minister, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, spent R235,000 for a single flight from Norway to Bulgaria, "when she refused to have her handbag searched at Oslo airport and chartered a private jet". He estimates the cost "of this one junket was equivalent to my embassy's entire annual budget for public diplomacy projects to promote SA".

During his time there, Leon hosted, among others, author JM Coetzee, Lindiwe Sisulu, FW de Klerk, Tokyo Sexwale, the Springbok rugby team and Joost van der Westhuizen. Now in a wheelchair, Van der Westhuizen attended the book launch at Leon's invitation.

When Leon arrived in Argentina, he was told the definition of an ambassador is "someone who thinks twice before he says nothing. But I was not that sort of ambassador. I had a few things to say and a few things that I should not have said".

And now that he is no longer an ambassador, you can read his sometimes undiplomatic but always insightful comments about his accidental job in his book. You will not be bored.