



WHERE HOT SPOT



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PLAYA NICE

Uruguay's Punta del Este has long been a glamorous jet-set destination. But the country also boasts a decidedly laid-back, rustic-chic beach scene. Christopher Bagley checks it out.

IN THE PANTHEON OF ETERNAL UNDERDOGS, there will always be a special place for Uruguay, the small, flat, and mostly featureless country that's known mainly for lacking the world-class attractions of its nearest neighbors, Argentina and Brazil. In lieu of the dazzling peaks of Patagonia or the sexy charms of Rio de Janeiro, Uruguay offers some larger than average sand dunes and picturesque cow fields. Even the country's major resort, the summer colony of Punta del Este, often disappoints: A condostrewn playground for wealthy South Americans, it's mostly overbuilt, overcrowded, and overbranded, with corporate logos festooned on seemingly every awning, umbrella, and deck chair.

But in the past few years, in an area east of Punta del Este, a savvy crowd has been discovering that Uruguay actually has plenty to boast about. Along a rural stretch of coastline in and around the province of Rocha is a diverse array of enticements, from the understated glamour of the tiny fishing village of José Ignacio to the Wild West rusticity of Cabo Polonio. Still, the region's subtle appeal remains difficult to characterize, and among new arrivals a common pastime is trying to articulate what's so special about it. "Uruguay is maybe the most undramatic place imaginable, but people get here and they find themselves hanging around," says Diego Sanchez, a

Montevideo-born model-turned-energy healer who spends summers surfing with his family in the eastern village of La Pedrera. "They don't really know why, but they stay."

José Ignacio has been a favorite of the Gulfstream crowd for the past decade or so. With its 19th-century lighthouse, hand-painted signs, and dirt roads that somehow don't seem dirty, it manages to exude a vibe that's equal parts Montana and Saint-Tropez. At the edge of the dunes on the main beach is an inconspicuous bungalow, Parador La Huella, that happens to be the most exclusive restaurant in the country. Over a late-morning coffee in the breezy bar area, co-owner Martín Pittaluga (a cousin of Isabel Fonseca, the Uruguayan-American writer who often spends time here with her English novelist husband, Martin Amis) acknowledges that his boho-chic tavern has played a big role in turning José Ignacio into a hot spot—"for better and for worse," he says. "Now people are coming too much." During its brief high season every January, which is summer in Uruguay, José Ignacio shifts into social overdrive, as massive house parties and corporate-sponsored events draw Argentine stars, socialites, and hangers-on. Wally Diamante—the Buenos Aires PR czar who camps out for the period in nearby Manantiales with his team of 20 employees—tells me he's been offered bribes of \$15,000 for an invitation to, say, the Lacoste party. Of course, for every vacationer desperate for an invite, there's a longtime homeowner who insists he'd rather stay in with friends. "I never go out," says Alan Faena, the Argentine hotelier and developer, who owns a stunning beachside property.

Many of José Ignacio's best nightlife options revolve around food, thanks in large part to the celebrity chef Francis Mallmann, who opened the town's first real restaurant, La Posada del Mar, back in 1978. One weeknight, I stop by the seasonal opening party at insider hangout Marismo, nestled in a pine grove at the end of an unmarked sand track. The restaurant's chef-owner, Federico Desseno—also a carpenter—built the tables by hand from trees on the property. As he cooks pizzas in his homemade clay oven, an uncommonly gorgeous assortment of young Europeans

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1. A view of Cabo Polonio from the lighthouse. 2. A house in Cabo Polonio. 3. Sunset in La Pedrera. 4. A rocky beach in La Pedrera. 5. An ocean view, Cabo Polonio. 6. The Graft shop facade, Cabo Polonio. 7. Cabo Polonio homes and lighthouse. 8. A sign in Cabo Polonio. 9. A horse in Cabo Polonio.

and South Americans flirt around a fire pit. Desseno tells me that when Alice Waters came by for dinner and visited the kitchen afterward, she was moved to tears; he suspects her reaction had less to do with his slow-roasted lamb than with Marismo's handmade authenticity and strong sense of place. "One night a customer was looking around and said, 'The owner must have smoked a lot of pot,'" Desseno says, laughing. "Well, I have! And this place is a reflection of it."

Joining me at the Marismo party is the statuesque New Yorker Isabella Channing, who's in José Ignacio to open the Shack Yoga, a seasonal outpost of her Hamptons studio. Channing, who is half-Uruguayan, drives around town in a vintage Mercedes-Benz convertible adorned with the studio logo. She tells me she feels a bit guilty for charging \$30 for a single class, but the classes are almost always full, mostly with visiting Americans and Europeans. "Even five years ago, when I would tell people I was going to Uruguay for the summer, many would say, 'Um, where's that again?'" Channing tells me. "Now they say, 'Oh, I'm going too—I'll see you there.'"

José Ignacio's \$1,000-plus per-night room rates in high season don't seem to be much of a deterrent. This fall, the Norwegian entrepreneur and art collector Alexander Vik opened his fourth property in town, Bahía Vik José Ignacio, with 11 multi-bedroom bungalows spread over 10 acres of dunes. Longtime locals, as they watch all of this happen, like to point out that José Ignacio has had electricity only since 1984, and running water since 1994. "Ten or 15 years ago," recalls the real estate agent Antonio Diaz, "you could get away with wearing the same two pairs of shorts all summer."

Such a wardrobe remains entirely permissible 50 miles up the coast, in La Pedrera. Although it sometimes gets billed as the next José Ignacio, La Pedrera maintains its own kind of low-key magic. With a rocky bluff overlooking a fine surf break, a handful of restaurants and galleries on a single main street, and an ever growing number of stylish ex-urbanites tucked away in their own properties, it feels very upstate New York—sur—page.

Among the poster children for La Pedrera's new crowd are the Argentine artists Leandro Erlich and Luna Paiva, who two years ago built their family retreat—a minimalist box made of glass, concrete, and corrugated metal—in the hills north of town. Erlich, when not obsessing about his fledgling grove of olive trees, bounces between projects and exhibitions in places like Seoul and Tel Aviv; Paris-born Paiva does commissions for

Hermès and is designing sets for an opera in Buenos Aires. But it's La Pedrera, the couple says, that exerts the strongest pull on them and their friends.

"Something is definitely happening around here," says Paiva in her kitchen, offering me some fresh blueberries from a farm down the road. One key to Rocha's appeal, Paiva says, is its healthy distance from the social vortex of Punta del Este. "People who come here don't need to be entertained, because they have their own interesting things going on," she says. "Another draw of the whole region, Erlich says, is a kind of raw simplicity that's increasingly hard to find elsewhere. "Uruguay arrived to the 21st century without having made the mistakes of many industrialized countries," he says. Safer than Brazil, more stable and less corrupt than Argentina, the country offers a rare mix of tranquility and vast potential. Paiva adds, "And you know what? Uruguay just smells good. When the door opens at the airport, you inhale this incredible mix of oxygen, salt, and grass."

Paiva's mother is Teresa de Anchorena, the elegant Argentine gallerist and former secretary of culture for Buenos Aires, who has been summering in Rocha for decades. Over lunch in her whitewashed cottage in La Pedrera village, Anchorena gives me the lowdown on my next and final stop: Cabo Polonio, a hippie hamlet 25 miles farther up the coast. In the early '80s, she was vacationing there when a builder offered to help her construct a house for \$400 on any beachside parcel that captured her fancy. Anchorena marked her property's borders the old-fashioned way, with four stakes in the ground. It was only after she'd built her house that she learned it was actually on public land. The transaction provided a fine introduction to the ways of Cabo Polonio, where standard rules rarely apply.

As I discover the next day, arriving in Cabo Polonio still feels like entering another dimension—and not just because the place is devoid of cars, ATMs, and running water. The only electrical lines are used to power the lighthouse, so most residents rely on candles. There's no road access, so

everyone leaves their cars in a parking lot on the outskirts and climbs into massive Jeeps for a 30-minute ride across the dunes. As we approach the village, small huts start appearing in the fields of tall grass. Some are rickety squatters' shacks, hand-built from recycled materials; others are well-kept, winterized cottages that wouldn't look out of place on Majorca.

A tiny fishing village, José Ignacio manages to exude a vibe that's equal parts Montana and Saint-Tropez.

With its pristine beaches, thriving bird life, and smartphone-stifling lack of electricity, Cabo Polonio offers a uniquely unfiltered dose of nature—not unlike the José Ignacio of old, many say. Summer renters are often surprised at how quickly they begin waxing mystical. One architect from Spain is on the verge of tears when

telling me about stargazing the previous evening. ("I never knew how many stars there were in the sky," he says.) But even this edge-of-the-earth utopia is not immune to the effects of Rocha's increasing popularity. During January, Cabo Polonio is often jammed with groups of party-primed day trippers. Many locals who were originally enticed by the town's renegade, anarchic spirit now see an overabundance of government regulation, particularly since 2009, when the area was declared a national park.

Still, change is relative, especially in a place where most residents receive daily deliveries of ice because they have no refrigerators. Preparing a simple dinner can still take several hours, but nobody minds because there's not much else to do. At night, from the patio of virtually any house in town, one can watch a mesmerizing show of distant flames, accompanied by a soundtrack of soft laughter, as families and groups of friends venture to the beach, lighting their way with homemade lanterns fashioned from recycled plastic bottles.

On my last morning in Cabo Polonio, I get up early to walk along the beach, which is home to a protected cluster of sand dunes. It's only when I actually try to climb one that I realize they're more than 100 feet high—among the highest in South America. From the top, the view of gently rolling waves stretches for miles. Is it permissible to use the word "spectacular" in modest little Uruguay? Aside from two nude women at the shoreline dancing to music that only they can hear, I don't see a single other person, nor any man-made objects. Take that, Búzios and Southampton.

"We don't need to sell Uruguay," Martín Pittaluga told me at La Huella. "We don't want to sell it. Some people come here and say, 'Hm, it's nice, but we prefer Ibiza.' Well, enjoy Ibiza." ♦