FATHOM
WAY TO GO

Everything You Need to Know Have a Perfect Beach Vacation in Jose Ignacio, Uruguay

The beach party at Playa Vik. Photo courtesy of Playa Vik.

While Jose Ignacio is hardly a travel secret anymore, it's still low-key enough to feel like an insider's destination. Contributing editor Christina Ohly reveals everything Fathom readers could ever need to know about how to have a perfect beach trip to Uruguay.

JOSE IGNACIO, Uruguay – Old Montauk meets Malibu in Jose Ignacio and the coastal towns surrounding Punta del Este in Southeastern Uruguay. Here you'll find everything from surf shacks to gauchos in traditional garb, not to mention delicious communal *asados* (barbecues) set on wide Atlantic beaches. Punta del Este serves as an entry point to a series of lovely fishing villages and quieter inland destinations such as Garzón, the Deco throwback set amongst verdant, rolling hills that is home to famed Argentine chef Francis Mallman's hotel and restaurant, Garzon.

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THE SCENE

For beach chic with an artisanal vibe, this area is impossible to beat. Jose Ignacio is hardly a travel secret anymore, but the destination is only going to get more and more popular. So magical is the entire scene that you should just book your trip *now*.

And although this gets tossed around like a bad travel brochure cliche, there truly is something for everyone in this part of the world. For the avid, athletic types, there's horseback riding, biking, and invigorating swims. For the chaise lounger, there's poolside *capriroskas* (a cocktail borrowed from neighboring Brazil), endless massages, and long lunches at La Huella (as seen in Michelle Lehman's Just Back from Jose Ignacio, and I agree wholeheartedly with her ringing endorsement of this special spot by the sea).

Kids of all ages are enchanted, too, by the rugged mix of cowboy culture (horseback riding is accessible to all), polo ponies (in the high season which lasts the few, short weeks between Christmas and mid-January), and swims in the 20-meter Absolute Nero stone pools that have twinkling under water "constellations" (an added bonus at all Vik hotels.)

Lunch at Fish Market. Photo by Christina Ohly.

LAY OF THE LAND

After landing in either Montevideo or Punta del Este, head straight for the laid-back village of **Jose Ignacio**. You'll pass the picturesque 1877 lighthouse and the stunningly simple mid-century modern beach homes owned by the likes of Shakira and Argentine hotelier Alan Faena.

Drive along the coastline (preferably in an open-top Jeep) through the villages of La Barra, El Chorro, Punta Pedras, and Manantiales. Plan on spending a few hours in **Manantiales** to visit Atchugarry Foundation, the workshop of master sculptor/local hero Pablo Atchugarry and also to stock up on beach gear at the many great surf stores in the area and house décor with playful prints at Roberta Roller Rabbit. Try to come hungry, so you can have delicately fried cod sandwiches and fresh gazpacho on the whitewashed patio at stylish **Fish Market** (Ruta 10, km 163.5; +598-42-774-431).

Word to the wise: Before you set off on any expedition, you should know that there aren't many petrol stations or cash machines in this part of the world. You'll want to stock up on gas and pesos at the Ancap at the roundabout in Jose Ignacio before heading too far off the beaten path.

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Ride on. Photo courtesy of Estancia Vik.

IF YOU ONLY DO ONE THING

Go Horseback Riding

I hadn't been on a horse in 20+ years and had no interest in saddling up again. Yet the charming gauchos (who smile sweetly and speak no English) and the spectacular scenery made this a memorable activity for our entire family — my husband, myself, and my tween son and daughter.

An excursion is easy to arrange because riding is included at many hotels — Estancia Vik, Casa Suaya, and Garzon among them. Horses are typically kept on property and thus don't have to be booked days in advance. The docile breed of Uruguayan horses seem comfortable with riders of all (read: zero) ability, which made for relaxing trail rides through diverse, meadow-filled terrain.

WHAT TO DO

Go to the Beach

For swimming, sunning, and some of the best people watching on the planet, hit any one of a number of these area beaches:

Playa Brava – Supermodels, Brazilian tycoons, children of all ages, and the odd, pale gawker (me) all converge on this starry strip of sand in Jose Ignacio. The water is refreshing, as is the *clerico* (white sangria) at beachside La Huella.

Playa Mansa – Located on the western edge of Jose Ignacio's peninsula, the beach is on the low-key side and is a spectacular spot to watch the sunset. Mellow vibe notwithstanding, impossibly small string bikinis are still de rigueur.

Ride Horses

Preferably at Estancia Vik, where the dramatic scenery and friendly gauchos make even the most equine-averse feel competent.

Visit the Lighthouse and Plaza in Jose Ignacio

The sweet, brilliant white beacon is accessible by beach or by road. Interesting art galleries and design shops dot the neighboring streets.

The impressive architecture at Playa Vik. Photos by Christina Ohly.

WHERE TO STAY

You'll notice a lot of Vik hotels in this list. For good reason: Team Vik excels at creating innovative, cool, stunning places you'll never want to leave.

Estancia Vik

Camino Eugenio Sainz Martínez; +598-94-60-5212 / +598-94-60-5314

Set on 4,000 stunning acres of pasture and gently rolling hills, this is a house stay unlike any other. Each of the 12 suites were designed by a contemporary Uruguayan artist, giving the estancia the feel a modern museum housed in a stunning, authentic villa. No detail is overlooked, and the kind staff — including the resident gauchos — look after restaurant bookings, trail rides, and spa treatments. An eco-friendly emphasis and a killer Saturday night asado are but a few of the many lovely bonuses.

Playa Vik

Calle Los Cisnes and Calle Los Horneros; +598-94-60-5212 / +598-94-60-5314

The Vik group's original beach property has an extremely modernist feel, all glass facades, fire pits, and artwork, most notably a James Turrell light installation and a Zaha Hadid-designed table in the main house. Especially impressive is the 75-meter cantilevered swimming pool that seems to jut out over the sea, to say nothing for the grass-topped villas designed by starchitect Carlos Ott. In other words, the entire place is nothing if not striking and unique.

Bahia Vik

+598-94-60-5212 / +598-94-60-5314

Set to open in winter 2014 in time for high season, the hotel features contemporary Uruguayan art, separate swimming pools for kids and adults, and environmentally friendly casitas that are understated yet luxurious at the same time. Located directly on the beach, Bahia guests can horseback ride at the nearby Estancia property or stroll down the dunes for a perfectly grilled hamburger or fresh sushi at the Vik's **La Susana** restaurant.

Lunch is served at La Susana. Photos courtesy of La Susana.

WHERE TO EAT

The question is where *not* to eat, as the food – all kinds of cuisines and at all price points – is just so good.

La Caracola
Address emailed after booking; +598-94-223-015
A beach club on a small island from the folks behind local favorite La Huella. You have to take a private boat to get here, and your just rewards are wonderful snacks, light seafood meals, and *cleric*, a white wine sangria. The fee is $180 per day, and you need to book well in advance.

Marismo
Ruta 10, km 185; +598-42-486-2273
A special, candle-lit spot that can be difficult to find in the dark but is worth the journey for braised lamb and the grilled catch of the day. The atmosphere is magical. Book well in advance.

La Susana
Ruta 10, km 182.5; +598-44-862-823 / +598-95-192-555
A casual beach club and restaurant that serves everything from grilled snapper and pizzas to Norwegian vodka produced by the Vik family. A festive bamboo bar in the sand draws all kinds. Children frolick freely, larger groups spread out, and the party lasts well into the night.

La Olada
Ruta 10, km 181.5; +598-44-862-745 / +598-99-337-908
Soft candlelight sets the stage for a delicious meal of fresh salads, pastas, and grilled meats at this quiet spot inland. Ubiquitous wood-fired pizzas make for delicious appetizers, and the whole place feel very homey in the best possible way. (Those are the owner's dog and cat meandering about.)

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La Huella
Calle de Los Cisnes; +598-44-862-279
Widely regarded as a gastronomic mecca, the beachside spot deserves its reputation and should be everyone's first stop. The setting is magical — soft music, neutral colored wood decks, and candlelight set the scene by night — as are the crispy octopus and line-caught sea bass. Creative sushi dishes, wood-fired pizzas, and housemade dulce de leche ice cream were other consistent winners And I should know, because I literally ate seven meals in a row here.

Almacen el Palmar
Plaza de Jose Ignacio; +598-44-862-102
One of my favorite meals in Uruguay. From delicious poppy seed rolls with tapenade to perfectly grilled fish and Provençal pastas by gregarious chef Jean Paul Bondoux, who wanders freely around the patio and dining room. Almacen is an all-day affair, with freshly baked croissants and breads available in the morning and wonderful cheeses in the adjacent deli throughout the day. Dinner, served indoors on the lovely, canopied outdoor patio, is a must.

Namm
Ruta 10, km 185; +598-486-2526
I am ever the fan of Japanese food, and this place serves the freshest sushi (and grilled meats) I've had anywhere. The wooden bungalow setting adds to the overall experience.

Beach chic. Photo courtesy of El Canuto.

WHERE TO SHOP

Santas Negras
Camino Eugenio Saiz Martinez and Los Lobos; +598-44-862-262
The mid-century modern, two-story boutique just outside town has been lovingly curated by Paula Martini (wife of La Huella owner Martin Pittaluga) and Patricia Torres, who filled it with vintage furniture, decorative objects, featherweight cashmere sweaters, and playful jewelry that works well at the casual, evening barbecue parties they host out back. Don't miss the atmospheric café patio for delicious cappuccinos, capirinhinas, and panini.

Mutate
Café de la Place (in front of Plaza Jose Ignacio); +598-44-862-703
Stocks great vintage and designer clothing for men and women.

El Canuto
Calle de Los Cisnes; +598-44-862-028
The place for caftans, lingerie, and other beach basics.

Alium
Costa Jose Ignacio, Garzón; +598-99-128-672
A great design-led shop further inland in Garzón.

Talabarteria Benitez
Calle Maldonado and Calle 25 de Agosto, San Carlos; no phone.
The old-school gaucho supply shop in the village of San Carlos is *the* place to source a wide assortment of leather chaps and silver adornments.

The Jose Ignacio Supermarket
I love to go to the grocery store to take in the local color, and this one sells everything: beach basics (chips and salty snacks), refined deli fare, meats, cheeses, fruits, and vegetables.

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WHAT YOU'LL KNOW ON THE LAST DAY THAT YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN ON THE FIRST

Bring Cash — and Lots of It

This is not neighboring Argentina where everything is cheap. It's a relatively pricey area with very few cash machines. US dollars are generally welcome.

Pack Light — Really Light

Think haute-hippie hideaway, where high season temperatures can soar past 100 degrees and there is no need for anything fancy. I overpacked by a wide margin and could have made do with a bathing suit, sarong, T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers (mandatory for horseback riding).

Take Great Care When Booking Restaurants

You don't want to miss a meal in Uruguay. The restaurants and cafes are fantastic — at all price points. Area specialties include delicious grilled fish, sushi and ceviches, steak (of course), and housemade *helado* (ice cream). Places book well in advance — especially hotspots like La Huella, Garzon, and Marismo. Not that you're at risk of going hungry, considering how many under-the-radar gems you'll find everywhere. Among my favorites were La Olada, Parador al Almacen, Namm, and La Susana — all casual and festive, serving traditional, often wood-fired fare. This is the kind of food and drink that makes everyone happy, so book in advance if you can.

HOW TO GET THERE

It's very easy from the United States, with direct flights to **Buenos Aires International Airport (EZE)** on both American Airlines and Aerolineas Argentinas. You'll have to transfer to BA's smaller airport, **Jorge Newbery (AEP)**,which can be a pain, especially if there's traffic, to catch a flight to **Punta Del Este (PDE)** on Aerolineas Argentinas, Pluna, or Buquebus. The drive to Jose Ignacio from Punta Del Este is approximately 45 minutes.

Another option is flying into **Carrasco International Airport (MVD)** in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, via Miami on American Airlines. The drive to Jose Ignacio is approximately 90 minutes, and rental cars must be booked well in advance.

VISAS

While there are no visa requirements for either Argentina or Uruguay, you will need to pre-pay a reciprocity fee if you travel through Argentina.

WHEN TO GO

I can't imagine there is a wrong time to go to Uruguay, but spring and fall — shoulder seasons leading into winter and summer — are completely delightful. With bright blue skies, temperatures averaging in the mid-70s, and an absence of crowds, March and April are the perfect times to explore — and to secure bookings at all of the area's stellar restaurants.
The winter holidays bring throngs from Argentina and Brazil, but nothing feels over-run, as there are no glitzy mega hotels catering to the St. Tropez club set. That said, these people like to party — very late into the night — so it's all about invitations to house parties and elaborate asados feasts of local beef (the best I've ever tasted — period), assorted vegetables, and locally caught corvina negra (white drum fish).