

For A-lister's vacation, head to the Miami of Uruguay

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JOSE IGNACIO, Uruguay — The former home of artist Carlos Paez Vilaro, now a labyrinthine museum and hotel called Casapueblo, has a way of confusing visitors. Perhaps it's the Gaudi-esque architecture and Santorini color palette that make you believe, for a fleeting moment, that you're far away on some Mediterranean shore when you're really in Uruguay.

This stretch of the Uruguayan coast from Punta Ballena to Jose Ignacio often confounds those who expect South America to be undeveloped, underprivileged or troubled. Here, it's none of those things.

I've lived in South America for half a decade and, over the years, heard countless tales of the ritzy beaches that curve along the Atlantic east of Uruguay's capital, Montevideo. Why, I wondered, had so many South Americans made the continent's second-smallest nation their summer playground? And why were an increasing number of U.S. celebrities following suit? I booked a flight to see for myself.

The road east of Casapueblo skirts an endless gold-sand beach all the way to the coast's largest resort town, Punta del Este, where even the Trump Organization is aiming to get in on the action in 2020 with a 25-story, 156-condominium Trump Tower.

With pulsing beach bars and glassine apartment blocks fronting the emerald sea, it's easy to see why Punta del Este has built a reputation as the Miami of South America. Its star power is so strong that Brazilian supermodels and Argentine movie stars flock here as much to relax in their seafront condos as to be captured by paparazzi doing so.

There are a handful of chic galleries set back from the sea that come alive each year during Este Arte, one of South America's top international art fairs. Yet the most popular attraction is a piece of public art from Chilean sculptor Mario Irarrazabal, which depicts a hand partially rising out of the sands of Brava Beach.

I stop for a quick lunch not far from its jumbo-sized fingers at l'marangatu, one of the see-and-be-seen restaurants, where I dine on grilled octopus and fresh mussels from Isla de Lobos, an island visible on the horizon that's home to the largest sea lion colony in the Western Hemisphere.

La Barra, with its white-washed homes draped in bougainvilleas, is the next resort as I continue eastward. Thirty years ago, this coastline had little more than a few humble fishing villages. Now, thanks to new bridges that leapfrog its myriad lagoons, development has crept ever farther from Montevideo, with investors capitalizing on Uruguay's perennial stability in a rocky region. Nowhere is this development more apparent than Jose Ignacio, where beachfront properties sell in the millions of dollars.



Bahia Vik is the newest of three Vik Retreats properties in Jose Ignacio. (Mark Johanson/Chicago Tribune/TNS)

Jose Ignacio manages to be moneyed without ever feeling snobby or staid. Shabby chic is the overarching aesthetic. There are no shopping malls, nightclubs or condos. The roads are largely unpaved, the cottages are unassuming, and it's perfectly fine to walk barefoot into the town's most popular eatery, La Huella — that is, assuming you've made your reservation weeks in advance.

This air of carefree elegance has led stars such as Shakira to purchase a home here, while big-name U.S. visitors include Mark Zuckerberg, Leonardo DiCaprio and Katy Perry, who can stroll the wind-whipped beach in relative obscurity.

If there's one person responsible for placing Jose Ignacio on the international tourist map it's Norwegian-Uruguayan businessman Alexander Vik and his American wife, Carrie.

The pair has opened three design hotels in and around Jose Ignacio. Estancia Vik, the oldest, caters to polo players and gaucho wannabes hoping to live the life promulgated by Ralph Lauren ads. Sleek Playa Vik, the second property, lies beneath a "living roof" of native plants on a knoll at the edge of town, while the themed bungalows of Bahia Vik take advantage of their prime setting along Jose Ignacio's calmest stretch of sand.

All Vik properties share a common theme: contemporary Uruguayan art. They showcase the works of luminaries such as sculptor Pablo Atchugarry and painter Carlos Musso in a way few museums in the country could afford to do.

From the patios of the Vik properties to the open-air cafes such as Solera in town, everyone in Jose Ignacio seems to be dressed in flowing white linen and tossing back glasses of rose as if to coax the setting sun into lingering a few minutes longer. Turns out, all that wine comes from just 11 miles away at Bodega Garzon.

This winery, I learn the next morning, is nothing if not ambitious. Owner Alejandro Bulgheroni essentially created his own 524-acre wine region in a part of Uruguay where few would've dared to grow grapes.

Now, some 20,000 tourists each year flock to Garzon to tour the striking facility and taste bottles that are changing perceptions of Uruguayan wine.

Sure, Punta del Este may have been a bit flashy, but on the whole, this moneyed Uruguayan coast managed to temper its good fortune in such a way that even a humble freelance journalist could feel welcomed to the party. And isn't that what we all crave? To feel like a celebrity even when we're driving barefoot down dirt roads covered in sand.

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