



Why Uruguay is South America's best-kept secret

Often overlooked in favour of its big-hitting neighbours Brazil and Argentina, **Sarah Gilbert** finds Uruguay's rural wine regions, laid-back beach resorts and easy-to-navigate roads make for a memorable self-drive holiday.

Squeezed between Argentina and Brazil, diminutive Uruguay is often overlooked by travellers to Latin America but it's slowly stepping out of the shadow of its far larger neighbours and becoming an increasingly popular destination in its own right.

Dubbed the 'Switzerland of South America', Uruguay is one of the safest countries on the continent and a paragon of political and economic stability. It has a year round mild climate with no extreme temperatures and surprisingly stylish accommodation, from luxurious estancias (estates) and wine lodges to city boutiques and beach retreats.

It may lack the stunning scenery of Patagonia or the flamboyance of Rio, but with a landscape dotted with grazing cattle – it's home to more cows than people – and a pristine coastline, it is a place to slow down and relax, providing an easy introduction to Latin America.

And, unlike its neighbours, the country is perfect for a self-driving tour, with well-maintained and signposted roads, generally respectful drivers and often very little traffic – aside from the peak summer holiday season from mid-December to February.

Escape to nature

I drive another 174 miles east, parallel to the coastline before taking a left at the surfer-chic enclave of La Barra to reach Estancia Vik perched on a hilltop surrounded by serene grasslands.

This sprawling white building was designed to resemble a colonial-era ranch but inside it's distinctly different. Twenty of Uruguay's leading artists were enlisted to work on the interiors, and each of the 12 suites is an original masterpiece, from Carlos Mussa's vibrant figures to the neutral-toned textiles of Lacy Duarte.

For two days, I explore the vast estate by bike, kayak along the tranquil river and horse-ride with a gaucho guide to a nearby olive oil plantation or to spot the wetlands' abundant birdlife. You can even have a polo lesson with a former pro or just relax by the pool.

I couldn't visit Uruguay without trying a traditional asado barbecue, and Estancia Vik regularly fires up the log-fired grill in the unique dining area with its graffiti-covered corrugated iron walls.

After feasting on steak, ribs and sausages – vegetarians are catered for too – under a star-filled sky, I lounge by the open fire in the vast living room and marvel at the metres-high amethyst geodes (rocks filled with crystals) and the ceiling covered with a painting inspired by Uruguay on Google Earth.

Boho beach



It's just a 15-minute drive to my final stop, Bahia Vik in Jose Ignacio, Estancia Vik's equally art-filled beachfront sibling, along with Playa Vik.

If glitzy Punta del Este is a mini-Miami and the playground of the super-rich in summer who guzzle Cristal and dance to star DJs, then Jose Ignacio, just a 30-minute drive east, is its boho little brother – more reminiscent of Trancoso in Brazil or Portugal's Comporta.

There are no high-rise resorts, nightclubs or shopping malls, just endless beaches lined with exclusive houses. Every summer it becomes an under-the-radar celebrity haunt, thanks to its laid-back charm, undiminished by the upscale boutiques, galleries and restaurants from celebrity chefs that pop up in high season.

I sit, toes in the sand and caipiroska cocktail in hand at La Susana restaurant, a beach club also part of the Vik portfolio. As the jaw-dropping sunset streaks the Atlantic ocean pink and gold, I feel as though I've been let in on South America's secret.