







Solera was just a tapas bar, I'd been told, but I won't forget those tapas: giant anchovies netted offshore and cured salty-sweet, with delicate quail's eggs; grilled polenta with caramelly mushrooms and sharp tomatoes balanced on top; a bloody strip of tenderloin that proved why even Argentinians import Uruguayan steak. Yet sweeter than the food was anglophile Sole, bouncing from table to table, giving us impromptu flights of local wine (she has a list of 350) and joining me to chat as if I were one of her regulars. "It's a real community here — rich people sitting beside someone who works in a bar," she said. By lam the tourists had been joined by locals, coming off shift from the posh restaurants to toast each other with the local tannat.

Wine is big here now, although it wasn't always. Uruguay's star grape is tannat, known for its high acidity and tongue-stripping tannin levels. When I first visited José Ignacio, six years ago, I met Ryan Hamilton, a South African sommelier who leads wine tours and had urged me to give it a go. This time, though, there's no pleading. "It's changing," said Sole, who has worked in the local wine industry all her life. "The winemakers are starting to understand the grape, so it's not so rough now." She poured a blend of tannat and viognier from Alto de la Ballena, her old workplace; it was rich as a Puglian red and meatier than a Californian cabernet. Even the pure variety from Bodega Garzon, about 30 miles to the north, which opened in 2016, was subtly delicious ([bodegagarzon.com](http://bodegagarzon.com)).

Wine may be the only understated thing about Bodega Garzon, as I learnt the next day. One way to get there is by chopper — there's a helipad onsite for the owner, Alejandro Bulgheroni, and his fellow billionaires (no exaggeration; there's a private members' club here for the richest of the rich). For the rest of us it's a 50-minute drive through a landscape that starts flat and then ripples up and down, the asphalt twisting round fields as goats graze at the roadside and cowhides hang on fences, drying in the sun.



A suite in one of Bahia Vik's bungalows

Laid across a bulbous granite outcrop, Bodega Garzon looks more like a starchitect's museum than a wine shop. Its scale is so vast — a 50 sq km estate — that tours are conducted by golf buggy. The winery isn't just a work of art, but eco-certified, living-roofed and dug deep into that granite to cool the tanks naturally. But best of all is the restaurant; its glass walls melt into the landscape and its food — flame-blasted parrilla meat and veg, so soft that it flakes off in layers — is overseen by Ricki Motta, a protégé of the celebrity chef Francis Mallmann.

Mallmann, whose signature technique is using fire, and plenty of it, is Argentinian, but spends much of his time in Pueblo Garzon, the sleepy village near by. It's a dreamy throwback where the roads are sandy tracks, the art deco buildings are unchanged and the only sight, emblazoned proudly on souvenir matchboxes, is an abandoned railway station. The sole sign of life is Restaurante Garzon, which Mallmann opened in 2003 in the old general store ([restaurantegarzon.com](http://restaurantegarzon.com)).

“It was a phantom town,” he told me, over ham-and-cheese-stuffed cake and more tannat. Once a thriving stop on the railway to Brazil, Garzon was effectively abandoned when the line closed in the 1950s. “It made the town die,” he said.



But opening high-end restaurants in unlikely places is Mallmann's speciality and, in truth, the José Ignacio phenomenon can be laid at his door. In 1978 he arrived at the windswept fishing village — at that point cut off from Punta by a lagoon — to open Los Negros, his first incongruously high-end restaurant in Maldonado. First came the rich, then the celebs. By the time a bridge was built across the lagoon in 1982, José Ignacio was on the A-list map.

Mallmann says he abandoned the coast because it got too busy. Garzon, where you won't see another person on the ghostly square, is more his scene.

José Ignacio is not as away-from-it-all as it feels at night. When the sun is up, you notice the Sotheby's signs and £250 sundresses in shops lining the sand-dusted streets. Outside La Huella is a stall hawking overpriced white ponchos. The buildings may be shack-style, but inside are chic cafés and posh boutiques. It's only the beach — the Atlantic chomping away at the coastline — that doesn't cost a bomb; that and the rock-wedged lighthouse, José Ignacio's only tourist attraction.

I was going to climb the lighthouse. I was going to lie in the dunes at Bahia Vik and take a class at the Shack, its new yoga studio and dreamy spa. I was going to drive farther north to Rocha province, where sea lions stalk the shore and an off-grid hippy commune hides in the dunes. But then came a different sort of trip.





I was sitting on the grass with a steak roll and a home-brewed glass of smooth tannat, face to face with the Milky Way-thickened sky at Sacromonte, one of the most extraordinary places I've stayed — four mirrored-glass cubes (aka five-star suites) amid vines in the craggy hills outside Pueblo Eden (also home to that other vineyard and as bucolic as the name suggests). Next thing I knew I was being taxied out to A&E in Punta del Este, having sprained my ankle as I stood up to see the Southern Cross.

I couldn't drive back to José Ignacio, but José Ignacio came to me. Forget the food, the wine, the ocean — Maldonado's top trump is its people. Sole appeared with a bag I'd left at Bahia Vik. Ryan, the sommelier, arranged my convalescence at Posada Kryon, a tiny family-owned hotel in chi-chi La Barra, near Punta. Here I lay in a hammock, the Atlantic thundering in the background, as the Rodriguez family cared for me like one of their own. Then, before I could get back to José Ignacio, José Ignacio closed. Not even a millionaires' playground could withstand coronavirus, and Uruguay's shutdown has been tough — and effective.

It will be back — all being well the season will kick off again in November, running until Easter 2021. We will huddle in blankets at La Huella, wave-watch from Bahia Vik, and drive back, bellies full, from Garzon, sea mist rolling over the car as that amber moon rises in the distance. And I'll watch the stars again from Sacromonte. Only next time in better shoes.