

WINE ENTHUSIAST

Postcard From Punta Del Este, the Hamptons of South America

Located in the Uruguayan Riviera, Punta Del Este's cool, classy beach towns have become a wine-and-food lover's paradise.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER



Breakfast at Bahia Vik, Jose Ignacio

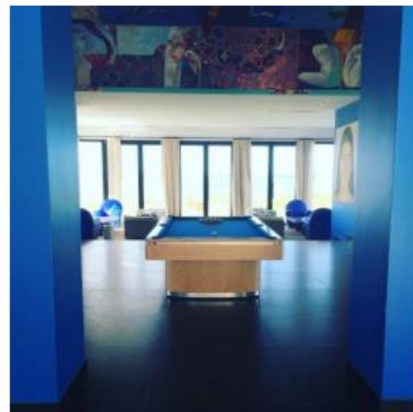
Years back, *Wine Enthusiast* ran a monthly item called Luxe Life that would highlight the crème de la crème of wine, food and travel experiences. While reading blurbs about luxury wine cruises, opulent hotels and \$20,000 bottles of Cognac, I would ask myself, “Will I ever come across anything in South America that might qualify as truly luxe?”

A day late and a dollar short for Luxe Life, which has been phased out, I recently spent quality time in a place that would have been perfect for that column. The location is José Ignacio, the last of a string of beach towns to the east of Montevideo before Uruguay, with a population of only 3.5 million people and six times as many cows, turns mostly untamed.

Long popular with well-heeled Argentines, Brazilians and Europeans, José Ignacio and nearby La Barra and Manantiales, with their architecturally impressive houses and pristine beaches, swell during the peak months of January and February but are ideal to visit prior to Christmas or in early March when crowds are thin.

As far as where to stay in José Ignacio, bunk down at **Bahia Vik**, one of four high-end South American properties owned and run by Alexander and Carrie Vik—he of Scandinavian and Uruguayan descent, and she from the States. Their Vik Retreats group, which also includes **Playa Vik** and **Estancia Vik** (both also in José Ignacio) in addition to newcomer **Viña Vik** in Chilean wine country, ranks as the finest set of luxury resorts I've come across in my many trips to South America.

Filled with gorgeous modern art, cutting-edge furniture and staffed by an international team of young, enthusiastic employees, Bahia Vik, which opened two years ago, is pure paradise. At night the stars feel as though they're within reach, and except for the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean, you sleep in supreme silence and wake up feeling like a million bucks.



Bahia Vik

And then it's time to ride horses at Estancia Vik, go body surfing in the ocean or venture into the town of Punta del Este to see a port full of yachts and high rises that mimic Miami Beach. Or you can tour **Casapueblo**, the whimsical cliffside property created by the late Uruguayan artist Carlos Páez Vilaró, where the sunsets are magnificent.

For wine lovers, Uruguay, which has been making wine since the 19th century, is on the upswing. Wineries like **Bouza**, **Pisano** and **Narbona** are all offering quality bottlings. But it is **Bodega Garzón**, hands down the country's most ambitious wine project, that's stirring things up. Built from absolutely nothing by Argentinean oil billionaire Alejandro Bulgheroni, Garzón, which is located about 30 minutes inland from José Ignacio, employs Italian winemaking consultant Alberto Antonini. Albariño and Tannat are the go-to wines coming from this blockbuster winery, which cost an estimated \$85 million to construct and was unveiled to the press and public in March.

As for dining, one eats very well along the Uruguayan Riviera. Fresh seafood, local beef and lamb, and superb fruits and vegetables grown in fertile soils drive most menus. My favorite restaurants include the highly popular **La Huella** in José Ignacio, Chef Jean-Paul Bondoux's **Almacén El Palmar** in José Ignacio (as well as his Relais & Chateaux property **La Bourgogne** in Punta), the quaint **La Olada** in José Ignacio and the charming but overpriced **Restaurante Garzón**, located in the tiny village of Garzón and co-owned by Bulgheroni and famed Argentinean grill master Francis Mallmann.