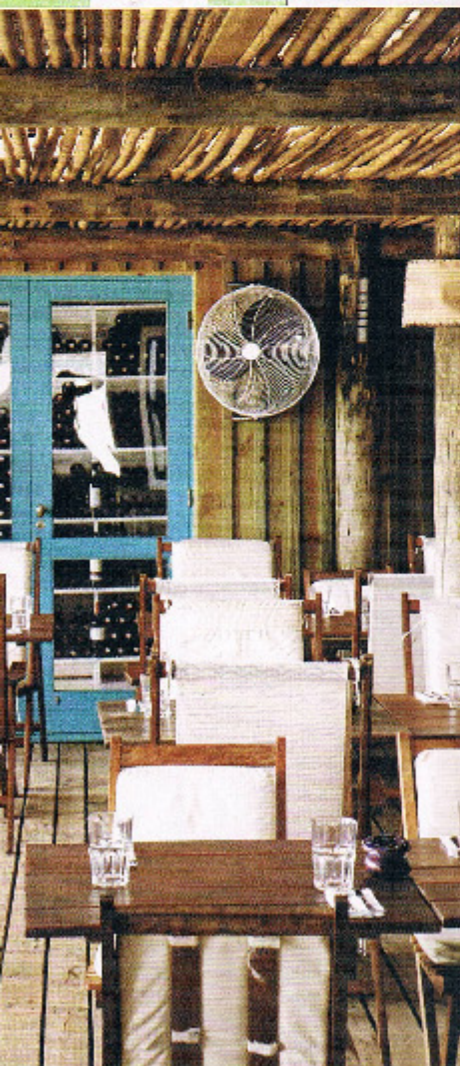




► The best with ocean views. The public spaces, indoor and out, are slickly contemporary and the service is mostly good, but the bedrooms are starting to show their age and could do with freshening up, especially their once white carpets. Parada 24, Playa Mansa, Punta del Este (00 598 42 233 441, www.serona-hotel.com.uy). Doubles from US\$160

◆ L'Auberge

This is a low-slung mock-Tudor building with a landmark water tower set in lovely grounds in the upmarket Parque de Gold



Bedroom at Estancia Vik José Ignacio



neighbourhood between the port and La Barra. The 22 bedrooms are fresh and elegant, the public spaces very 'English country house'; the Tea Room is famous for its waffles. Camocú y Avenida del Agua, Barrio Parque de Golf, Punta del Este (00 598 42 48 8883; www.laubergehotel.com). Doubles from US\$150

◆ Casa Zine

A strikingly unusual posada with artfully distressed decor owned by Aaron Hojman from Trading Post, a large reclamation and interior-design store in La Barra. Intended as a showcase for Hojman's wares, it now operates as a small hotel. Everything used in the construction and design of the building was reclaimed, including enormous



► windows from a defunct railway station and shutters from a demolished hotel. An extraordinary concept. **Le Bara, Punta del Este** (00 998 996 20066; www.casazinc.com). Doubles from US\$160

JOSE IGNACIO

◆ Casa Chic José Ignacio

Six stylishly underplayed self-catering beach houses in the village. Each two-bedroom house has a living room and dining room as well as a well-equipped kitchen. There is a guests-only pool in the complex. **Los Teros y Las Calandrias, José Ignacio** (00 998 486 2068; www.casachicjoseignacio.com). Beach houses from US\$400

◆ Casa Suaya

As it is owned by the Brazilian-born, LA-based chef Adolfo Suaya, cuisine is an important part of staying here. Butá restaurant serves fresh seafood and local specialities to a high standard. There are six suites and three thatched bungalows (one suitable for families), all decorated in a stylish, beach shack mix of period and contemporary. The hotel is just out of town on Route 10, Ruta 10, Km185.5 (00 54 11 4771 1867; www.casasuaya.com). Doubles from US\$150

◆ Estancia Vik José Ignacio

Estancia Vik José Ignacio, owned by Norwegian financier Alex Vik and his American wife Carrie, has given José Ignacio its first taste of audaciously ambitious, high-quality accommodation. The estancia is 10km out of town, set in 1,500 hectares overlooking a lagoon and the Atlantic. Each of the 12 suites has been created by a different Uruguayan artist and the public spaces are similarly endowed with sensational artwork; activities include riding, polo lessons (the Viks have one of the best fields in Jruglay) and canoeing. **Eugenio Saiz Martínez, Km8, José Ignacio** (00 998 94 605 212; www.estanciavikjoseignacio.com). Suites from US\$275

◆ Garzon Hotel & Restaurant

There are five bedrooms at this restaurant-with-rooms in the village of Garzon, owned by Argentine celebrity chef Francis Mallmann, whose aim is to revive the ghost town together with a clutch of high-end artisans who have set up shop here. The hotel and restaurant are beautifully decorated in a vaguely Scandinavian style and reservations are tough to get in high season. The (high) rate includes all meals. **Pueblo Garzon, Maldonado** (00 998 410 2811; www.restaurantegarzon.com). Doubles from US\$660



◆ Playa Vik José Ignacio

Built in stone, wood and titanium overlooking Playa Mansa (the calmer of two beaches in José Ignacio), Playa Vik has just six guest villas (known as casas), and a dramatic black-granite pool seemingly hovering over the beach. As with Estancia Vik (see left), different artists are represented in each casa. There is a large subterranean car park, games room, spa and wine cellar. **Calle Los Cisnes y Los Horneros, José Ignacio** (00 998 94 605 212; www.playavik.com). Two-bedroom casas from US\$600

◆ La Posada del Faro

Until Playa Vik opened, this was the hippest hole in José Ignacio. All 15 bedrooms have terraces, but no two are the

Barefoot on the beach

In between Argentina and Brazil is a small but perfectly formed land of rivers deep and pampas dry, of relaxed colonial towns, chic ranch retreats and bohemian seaside resorts. To discover the best of Uruguay, head east along the River Plate, and through Montevideo to the wild dunes of the Atlantic coast

By Peter Browne. Photographs by Mirjam Blecker



Town. These days I fly to Buenos Aires and catch the very efficient, three-hour ferry across the river to Montevideo. The city skyline rising before me, the smell of oil and machinery and the clatter of a major port at work, are exactly as I remember it as a child.

The river coast

ALONG THE RIVER PLATE

There are worlds within worlds in Uruguay. The tree-lined approach to the 19th century colonial town of **Carmelo** is pure Provence; the surrounding olive groves and vineyards are reminiscent of Tuscany (and a reminder that the wine-producing conditions here are similar to Bordeaux). The Four Seasons Resort Carmelo, Uruguay, 6km outside town, is straight out of Bali.

The resort is set in beautiful grounds, hidden in a pine and eucalyptus forest. It has a championship golf course, an Asian spa, even an 'emergency seamstress service'. The original owner imported everything – the wood to construct it, the ornaments and statues to adorn it, the cow hide cushions for the bar – from Indonesia. There is nothing to match it for bravado in Uruguay, even in Punta del Este; that it is here, in an obscure, seemingly remote corner of the country, is a delightful surprise.

But it turns out the Four Seasons resort is not the only ambitious project in the area. A wealthy Argentine developer, Eduardo 'Pacha' Canton put Carmelo on the map when, a decade ago, he bought Estancia Narbona, one of the oldest ranches in the region, a decade ago. He transformed it into Finca & Granja Narbona, a retro-chic, two-bedroom guesthouse and tastefully rustic restaurant serving mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses from its 100 strong dairy herd, organic vegetables from its gardens and fruit from its orchards. At the same time, he planted nine hectares of Tannat (a Uruguayan speciality), Viognier and Pinor Noir vines imported from France and now produces wines under the Narbona label.

A growing number of wealthy Argentines have bought land and weekend homes in nearby Punta Gorda. I met Tuti Gianakis, a music producer and DJ from Buenos Aires, who has invested in a new hotel and private villa complex, Club de Campo Medanos de Punta Gorda, with his business partner Federico Bonomi, a wealthy young Argentine fashion entrepreneur. Both Gianakis and Bonomi have second homes in Punta Gorda; Bonomi planted his first olive grove in 1999 and now produces thousands of litres of olive oil from his state-of-the-art cold press. Over the years, he has accumulated about 300 hectares of land along the river. Both Gianakis and Bonomi were attracted by the remote beauty and laid-back lifestyle Carmelo affords, a world apart from the big-city pressures of Buenos Aires yet just a 15-minute, small-aircraft flight across the River Plate to Carmelo International Airport, or an hour away by ferry.

The town of Carmelo itself, laid out on a grid pattern of cobbled, tree-lined streets, was founded



Clockwise from left: eating out in historic Colonia del Sacramento; Bonet restaurant, part of La Solana hotel, built in the 1940s near Punta del Este; Argentine music producer Tuti Gianakis at home at Punta Gorda; the rambla at Pocitos, Montevideo; one of just two bedrooms at La Solana; vintage-car installation in Colonia del Sacramento





► **'La Estancia'**, a ranch house with stables, vegetable garden and livestock (great for children). Activities include riding, cycling, tango and polo lessons, and tours of Carmelo, Colonia del Sacramento and the local wineries. Ruta 21, Km262, Carmelo (00 598 542 9000; www.fourseasons.com/carmelo). Doubles from US\$195

COLONIA DEL SACRAMENTO

♦ La Casa de los Limoneros

This delightful new guesthouse nine kilometres north of Colonia was built eight years ago but looks a century older as everything came from salvage yards: windows, shutters, floors, baths, tiles, beams, even two doors from Carrasco prison in Montevideo; wood on one side, stucco metal on the other. The grounds are lovely: the long driveway lined with white agapanthus; there's a swimming pool on the edge of the lemon grove from which it takes its name. Carretera Humberto Mignone (00 598 52 31078; www.lacasadeloslimoneros.com). Doubles from US\$120

MONTEVIDEO

♦ Belmont House

This is the traditional establishment hotel of choice in Montevideo. It's very plush and decorated with antiques, over-stuffed sofas and oil paintings, exuding old-fashioned luxury and with excellent standards of service. There is an outdoor swimming pool, a gym and a bar serving snacks at outside tables. Restaurant Allegro is decent but mostly deserted in the evenings. Avenida Rivera 6512, Carrasco (00 598 2600 0430; www.belmont-house.com.uy). Doubles from US\$119

♦ Le Bibló

Three very smart suites in one of the best houses in Carrasco, built in 1950 and once home to the Korean ambassador. The living room is very grand, with wood panelling and a galleryed library. There is no restaurant (there are plenty

in the area), but meals can be arranged in advance. There is a large swimming pool in the lawned and walled grounds. A discreet highway aimed squarely at international financiers attracted by the Free Trade Zones and airport nearby. Icaria 5700 (corner of Acapulco), Carrasco (00 598 2604 4137; www.lebiblo.com). Suites from US\$240

PUNTA DEL ESTE

♦ La Solana

Built in 1947 by the Catalan architect Antonio Bonet, La Solana recently opened as a five-bedroom boutique hotel with a luxury apartment



Owner Aaron Hojman at Casa Zinc in La Barta

on the roof. Most of the furniture was designed by Bonet, and is authentic to the spirit and period of what was intended as a private home. The hotel is right on the beach on the quiet side of Punta Ballena near Punta del Este. The beachfront Roré restaurant serves simple, fresh meals, snacks and drinks and is open to the public. Ruta Interbalnearia Km118, Punta Ballena (00 598 42 578 044; www.solanadelcien.com.uy). Doubles from US\$260

♦ La Serena

This is the only hotel actually on family-friendly Playa Verde in Punta del Este and it makes the most of its beachfront location with enormous picture windows. There are 32 rooms including seven suites

in 1816 by Uruguayan independence hero José Artigas. Exuding a sun-dappled languor found in small colonial towns throughout Latin America, it is mostly shuttered and deserted in the heat of the day, slowly unfurling in the late afternoon. The streets are wide and the buildings squat and square, with a hint of Spaghetti Western about them, particularly the too-evenly restored shops (which now stock Grey Goose vodka and balsamic vinegar, reflecting changing times).

In Uruguay, with a population of just 3.5 million (1.67 million of whom live in the capital), the roads are seldom busy and often empty. The drive from Carmelo to Colonia del Sacramento takes just over an hour, through an undulating landscape of cereal and soya crops, cornfields and cattle ranches. A scattering of small-scale agricultural outlets, garages and general shops

line the route; a solitary police station stands sentry on a lone hillock, Uruguayan flag fluttering proudly.

Colonia's UNESCO-protected historic district, founded in 1680 by the Portuguese as a rival to Buenos Aires, is a carefully managed, well-sign-posted tourist attraction. Day-trippers pour in from Buenos Aires by ferry; buses arrive and depart from the port servicing all corners of Uruguay in a slick, national-transport operation. Yet somehow Colonia manages to absorb all this attention and remain unperturbed, a drowsy waterfront town with interesting architecture, cobbled streets and quaint little museums – Portuguese tiles, 18th-century Portuguese furniture – tucked away in renovated ruins on the edge of Plaza Major. The town's most noticeable attraction, a lighthouse, is one of many along the coast all the way to Brazil.

Outside the historic district, the townspeople of Colonia go about their business, queuing at banks

Punta Pelucas beach bar at La Pedrera. *Opposite, clockwise from top left: summer beachwear on sale in José Ignacio; shopping in upmarket La Barra, Punta del Este; in the pink at José Ignacio; La Huella, a fabulous beach-shack restaurant in José Ignacio*



and shopping in grocery stores that are air conditioned to Arctic temperatures to combat the heat and humidity. It is as if the residents have agreed to surrender the historic district to tourists in return for having the rest of the place to themselves. Just outside town there is a sweep of white-sand beaches overlooked by expensive houses built of stone and fronted by neatly clipped lawns watered by sprinklers; young people cycle and the elderly walk lap dogs (poodles are popular) along the riverfront promenade. A little further out is the town's racetrack and the deserted ruin of one man's dream to build the only bullring in South America, now surrounded by a suburb of tiny box-houses with rusty chicken coops and broken-down scooters in their dusty yards: wealth and poverty are sometimes shockingly juxtaposed in Uruguay, especially in coastal towns where Argentine money flows.

You are never far from the River Plate

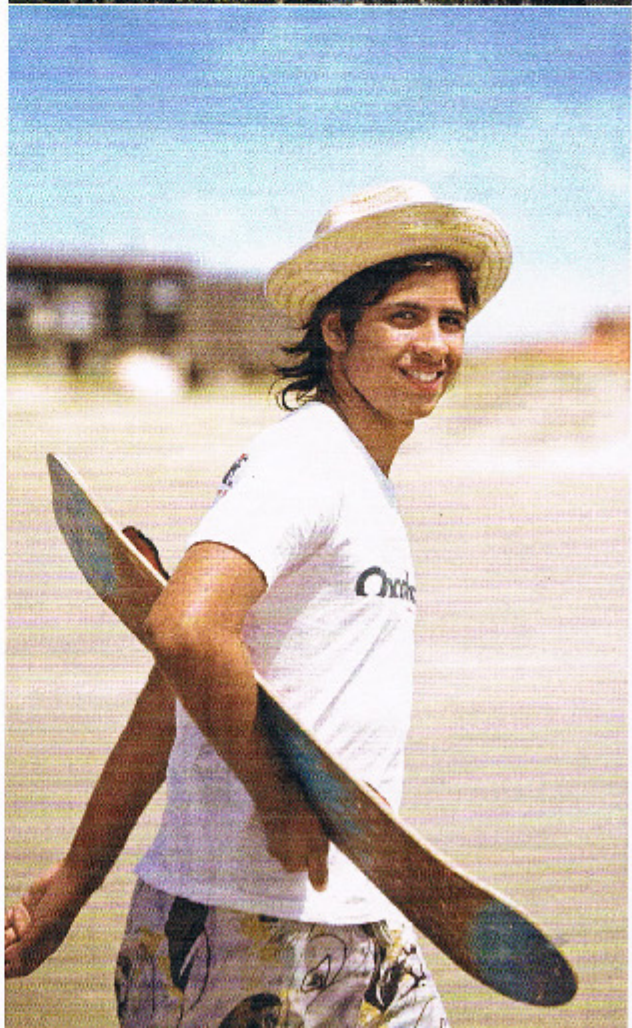
in **Montevideo** as the city is fronted by the *rambla*, a waterfront boulevard that hugs the coastline, swinging past sandy beaches on its winding journey to the smart suburb of Carrasco and beyond.

Compared to style-conscious, cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, Montevideo is small, slow, unpretentious, friendly and dignified. Most visitors don't get much further than the Ciudad Vieja (Old Town) and Centro (downtown) districts, which are nearest the port. The Old Town's market, Mercado del Puerto, in an enormous Victorian cast-iron building, is very popular and stuffed to its iron struts with meaty, smoky *parrilla* (flame grill) restaurants; outside, there are art galleries, buskers, street-sellers and muscums. The district's narrow side-streets of run-down 19th-century houses have often been used by filmmakers as a stand-in for Havana. Centro is full of office workers, civic buildings and department stores, but also a number of theatres and museums.

My family lives in Pocitos, a pleasantly upmarket neighbourhood with traditional and modern bars, good restaurants and high-rise apartment buildings overlooking the *rambla* and river (always referred to in Montevideo as '*el mar*', the sea). On summer evenings, Pocitos beach and the wide promenade that runs above it are busy with families and friends out for a stroll, a bike ride or a jog; tanned men and women of all ages stride purposefully in bright-white trainers and too-short shorts, catching the last rays of sunshine.

There are similar scenes all along the waterfront, past five or six more splendid beaches, to Carrasco, Montevideo's most affluent eastern suburb with its smart shops, big houses and embassies. My great aunt had a house here in the 1930s when it was a quiet beach retreat with deserted sandy lanes; her daughter remembers how the entire household would decamp from Montevideo for the summer: 'furniture, fridges, maids, the lot' and everyone rode horses to the beach.

From Montevideo I drove up the coast to Punta del Este, stopping at a few of the many beach



Clockwise from top left: new Brisas hotel in La Pedra; view to sea at Punta del Este near the British Consulate; four-wheel-drive car on road to Cabo Polonio; Posadas park; Posadas; isolated Océano del Norte; the unmarked beach; Océano del Norte; skateboarder on beach.

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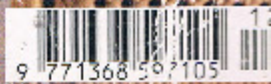
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