

Gastronomy rides high these days in Maldonado. Clockwise from top left: At the opulent Estancia Vik, in pampas five miles inland from José Ignacio; brunch at the town's Café de la Place; maracuyá soup with goat cheese at Estancia Vik; Café Zinc, in La Barra.

This time, searching for an escape from my home in hectic Buenos Aires, I choose an August holiday weekend in the depths of the Southern Hemisphere winter to pootle around on back roads and take brisk walks on breeze-swept beaches under constantly changing grandiose skies. I've arranged to stay at Casa Zinc, the most talked-about hotel in La Barra, and I'm met at Montevideo's Carrasco Airport by its owner, designer Aaron Hojman, who is on his way to a friend's art show nearby and invites me to join him. I can't help noticing that Hojman's shoelaces are undone, his woolen cardigan threadbare. "I sell my lifestyle, which is very

idle summers to egalitarian pursuits like shoreline fishing and roving barefoot along the dunes, sleeping in near-derelict, off-the-grid wooden shacks rented for a pittance from local fishermen. Even today, La Barra's peculiar double-humped bridge continues to form a figurative barrier between Punta del Este and *la costa*.

By the 1970s, the turbulent politics that racked much of Latin America had filled many Uruguayans and Argentines with an urge to escape urban hotbeds of political violence. With Argentina in the grips of its cabal of generals, wealthy *porteños* in particular began to spend long summers on the Maldonado coast, drawn

simple indeed," he says wryly, shifting cluttered papers in his battered Fiat to make space. "Uruguayans just don't 'do' glamour." Despite his rumpled appearance, Hojman mingles unabashed with Montevideo's smart set; within an hour, he's introduced me to a smattering of artistic leading lights, most of whom appear to share his dress sense. We leave the gallery around midnight and drive across the sparsely inhabited Uruguayan interior: During the two-hour journey to the coast, we barely spot an electric light in the dark before we skirt Punta and meet the Atlantic coast at La Barra. When we arrive, I find that I am the hotel's only guest.

A storm hits overnight and a gale is still battering in from the ocean the next morning, but I set out nevertheless to explore the coast. The shoreline seems to claw at the edge of town, its main street petering out into a low landscape of dunes and sea grasses. A mile beyond, I turn my back to the ocean and cut through a thorny scrub of cactus and gorse to the hamlet of Manantiales. Fifty years ago, when Punta del Este was already drawing Yves Montand, Jeanne Moreau, Sacha Distel, and a host of other film stars, royals, and artistic luminaries, Manantiales and neighboring fishing villages were frequented only by hard-wrought settlers and blue-collar workers from Uruguay's inland cities. The Arroyo Maldonado, which cuts through the Atlantic dunes at La Barra, provided a natural barrier between the distinct summering societies. Where Punta's coiffed and fashionably attired clientele drifted from one elegant soiree to another, their poorer cousins devoted their



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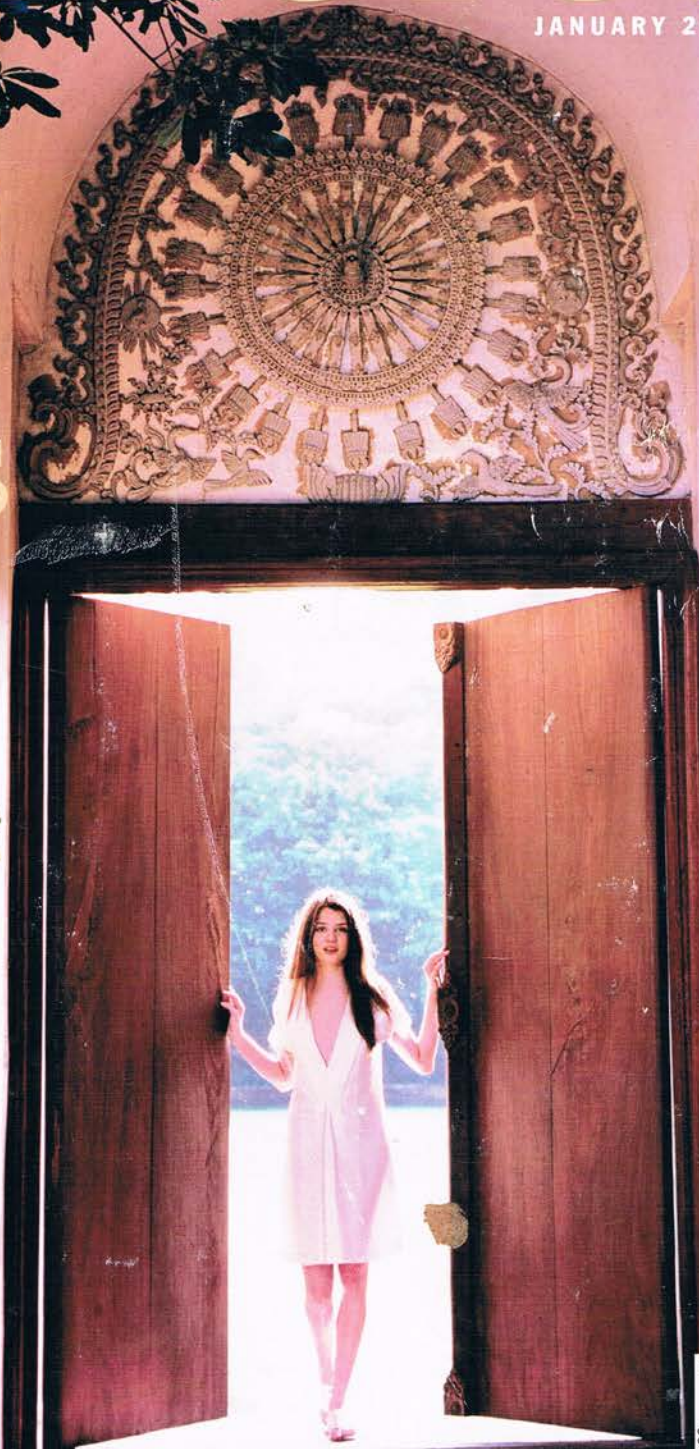
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One of Casa Zinc's six rooms, in the town of La Barra.

In the Mood for Maldonado

It's summer in South America—you can get your beach on in throbbing Punta del Este, but for empty, endless expanses and easy living, nothing beats the ribbon of boho-chic enclaves along Uruguay's Maldonado coast.

COLIN BARRACLOUGH simply disconnects

Photographs by **GRACIELA CATTAROSI**