

south american CHIC

Small in size but punching well above its weight in character and style, Uruguay is a well-kept secret poised for the spotlight, writes **Aaron Peasley**



Main and above:
Punta del Este's
Brava Beach and
Carrasco International Airport

If you come to Uruguay expecting images of South American cowboys and rolling pastoral landscapes, you'll be disappointed the minute you step off the plane. Montevideo's gleaming new Carrasco International Airport, designed by New York-based architect Rafael Viñoly, feels more like the kind of ambitious structure you'd find in hyper-efficient Switzerland than one of South America's smallest countries.

Inaugurated in 2009, the airy, architecturally audacious airport feels like a glimpse into the future, with an

enormous arched roof that stretches tent-like almost 400 metres from side to side. Far from just another bland commuter hub, the new airport has become something of a metaphor for Uruguay itself, a country whose ambitions and lust for the good life belie its tiny size (the population is just above three million). Many more international travellers are discovering the charms of this small but intoxicating country. Last year, for the first time ever, Uruguay attracted more than three million tourists, an increase of 24 per cent



Playa Vik in José Ignacio, La Barra (main) typifies the chic properties cropping up along the coastline, but culture such as Candombé Street Art (below) still thrives in the streets of Montevideo



from the year before. Chances are, a good many of them skipped the capital Montevideo, a medium-sized, navigable city with roots tracing back more than 326 years. Invariably eclipsed by its larger, more exuberant rival Buenos Aires, Montevideo has been derided as the kind of place that doesn't even merit a postcard. Today, that's no longer the case. Montevideo is making strides on a number of fronts, undergoing a slow metamorphosis. Calle Soriano has emerged as a hipster-friendly strip, where visitors can discover the work of local artists and craftsmen; a new wave of upscale stores and design galleries are joining the traditional artisan workshops; the hotel scene has grown significantly; and a small but dynamic food scene has spread from the smarter *barrios*.

Detour to paradise

For most travellers, however, a night or two in Montevideo will be enough. Just a few hours' drive away is paradise, aka Punta del Este, the country's most popular resort destination. Punta, as virtually everyone here calls it, is one of the most famous destinations in South America, long known as the place where *Portenos* (residents of Buenos Aires) come to let their hair down. Over the years, Punta has experienced its share of booms and

busts (most recently when the Argentinean peso was devalued in 2002), surviving the bad times by clinging steadfastly to its pristine natural beauty and sense of laid-back beach glamour.

Today, Punta's coastline – which extends about 50 kilometres north from the city – is once again ascendant, finding favour for its collection of chic beach towns, design-centric hotels and wonderful restaurants. Brazil, the country's booming, tourism-mad neighbour to the north, has made its presence felt: prices have risen, beaches feature more tiny bikinis than ever, and a clutch of Brazilian-owned businesses have opened, including the much-heralded Fasano hotel.

Like much of Uruguay, the coastline has become more international in feel. "For many years it would be the same people returning year after year," says Aaron Hojman, the owner and designer of Casa Zinc, a charming, highly idiosyncratic boutique hotel located in the fishing village of La Barra. "Today, it's not just Portenos coming here. Sometimes it seems everyone has discovered the spirit of the place. The good news is they are beginning to come all year round, not just for two weeks in January."

Even though it has become increasingly international in feel

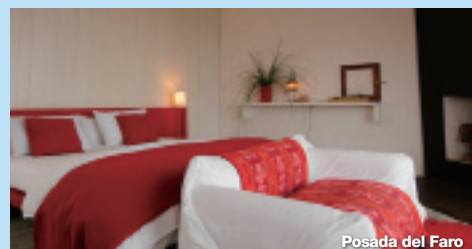
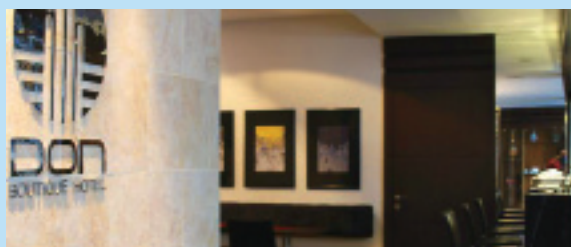
– English is invariably spoken in restaurants and hotels – the locals stress that not much has changed since the coastline transformed from a collection of fishing villages to a prime tourist area in the 1970s. "Everyone comes here because you can still relax," Hojman explains. "Uruguayans celebrate the simple things: wonderful beaches, great food and family."

Man-made wonders

Given their low-key ambience and almost pastoral backdrops, it's surprising that the towns along Punta del Este have developed a reputation for world-class architecture and first-rate hotels. Like the Hamptons, North America's famous beach enclave to which it is often compared, each town varies in size and character. But regardless of their current cachet, they each possess spectacular

Mate tea cups at Plaza Constitucion flea market, Montevideo





WHERE TO STAY

CASA ZINC

Residential in feel, this six-room posada exudes personality. Each room is different and all feature marvellous antiques and one-of-a-kind artwork.

www.casazinc.com

DON HOTEL, MONTEVIDEO

This 21-room property, considered Montevideo's first boutique hotel, opened in 2011 within a converted art-deco building. In contrast to the area's pastel colonial buildings, guestrooms are monochromatic with chic interior design. A rooftop swimming pool is a popular hangout.

www.donhotel.com.uy

ESTANCIA VIK

Not your average ranch. Each room in this plush country estate features the work of a different Uruguayan artist. The vast public areas are similarly colourful, including a spray-painted barbecue pit that hosts a traditional Uruguayan *asado*. A stay here offers a luxury take on the gaucho life, including horseback riding and hikes.

www.estanciavikjosegnacio.com

FASANO LAS PIEDRAS

A short drive from La Barra, this exquisite five-star hotel, designed by Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld, overlooks the rocky countryside around the Maldonado River. Expect exquisite guest bungalows, glamorous denizens, a sense of total refuge... and high prices.

www.laspiedrasfasano.com



PLAYA VIK

An architectural showstopper, this hotel combines innovative spaces with wonderful food and five-star service. The "sculpture" pavilion houses the best suites, which feature direct beach views. The property's six grass-roofed *casitas* are ideal for families.

www.vikretreats.com

POSADA DEL FARO

José Ignacio's first boutique hotel exudes the kind of laid-back luxe that put the small seaside town on the map in the first place. Fourteen rooms, decorated with whitewashed walls and colourful accents, are situated around a swimming pool. During high season rooms are hard to find, so reserve in advance.

www.posadadelfaro.com



GETTING THERE

■ Uruguay is an easy add-on to most South American travel itineraries. It's also becoming a popular destination for Americans. Currently American Airlines is the only North American carrier with direct flights from the United States (from Miami). That is expected to change.

■ Connections to Montevideo are easily available through other South American capitals, such as Rio, Santiago and Buenos Aires. Additionally, there are daily flights to Punta del Este from Buenos Aires. Montevideo can also be reached by ferry from Buenos Aires (www.buquebus.com).

beaches and plenty of places to eat – *chivito*, the country's iconic sliced steak sandwich, tends to be readily available should hunger strike.

About a 30-minute drive from downtown Punta, José Ignacio has become the most illustrious place to own property. Amidst the town's architectural pastiche – where local beach huts sit happily beside multimillion-dollar glass villas – is Playa Vik, owned by New York investor Alex Vik and his wife Carrie. Blending an exuberant design with a staggering waterfront location, the hotel, which opened in 2011, is the kind of property that sticks in your mind long after you've checked out.

After successfully establishing Estancia Vik, a grand ranch property some several kilometres inland from José Ignacio, the Viks took a less traditional approach, tapping local architect Carlos Ott. The hotel's central pavilion, known simply as "Sculpture", bears the architect's signature space-age aesthetic. With a pool that cantilevers dramatically over the beach, the Sculpture is the social heart of the hotel and, judging by its popularity during my visit, José Ignacio itself. In an effort to have the hotel feel more like one of their private homes, the Viks installed an enviable collection of contemporary art, including pieces by Anselm Kiefer, James Turrell and architect Zaha Hadid.

The art of living

In recent years, Uruguay has become a somewhat unlikely hotbed for the visual arts, producing world-class architects, designers and artists. While downtown Punta del Este's towers may suggest a little soullessness, this is far from a beach destination bereft of character or culture. Among the area's many cultural attractions is Casapueblo, an architectural oddity masquerading as an art museum and hotel. Home to the work of Carlos Páez Vilaró, a prolific local painter, the stunning cliffside complex resembles a supersized structure you might find in Santorini.

It's easy to understand why artists would be drawn here. The area's

sensational landscapes – often described as St Tropez meets Texas – seem to attract creative types, dreamers and entrepreneurs. "You can really come here and do your own thing," explains Hojman, who did just that when he returned to the area more than a decade ago to start his thriving architectural and design practice (encapsulated exquisitely within the hotel).

The same frontier spirit inspired chef Francis Mallmann, who opened his restaurant El Garzón in a 155-year-old general store eight years ago. Located around 30 minutes from the beach, this is true ranch country, complete with tumbleweed, wild dogs and rolling hills. The food, however, certainly justifies the trek. Mallmann's cooking, which he calls New Andean, is based on the use of a

Clockwise from top left: the "Sculpture" at Playa Vik; Calle Del Colegio's colourful street corner; Colonia del Sacramento Shop exterior at the Sunday market and Scallops with radicchio cooked "New Andean style" by Francis Mallmann (below)



super-hot outdoor grill. The technique leaves whatever he happens to be cooking – be it scallops with radicchio

or a traditional Uruguayan rib eye paired with *chimichurri* – with the perfect blend of smokiness and silky barbecued sweetness. Famous in spite of its hefty prices – dinner for two costs more than US\$300 – the restaurant, which also features five exquisite hotel rooms, has become an essential tourist rite.

Uruguay's relative compactness and general user-friendliness makes getting around a breeze (rental cars can be booked in advance and collected at the airport). Unless you visit during the peak season – the period following New Year's Eve when all bets are off – traffic is rarely a problem and the roads and highways are easy to navigate.

What's more, the country's size and immense character means travellers can pack quite a few contrasting experiences into just a few days: barbecues and horseback riding in gaucho country; cocktail interludes with South American television stars poolside at a spectacular one-of-a-kind boutique hotel; and even a day wine tasting in one of the country's emerging wine regions, which increasingly rival Argentina's in quality. From crystalline beaches to world-class restaurants, it's easy to imagine that this little corner of the world is destined for much bigger things. ■

