



South America: On Uruguay's unexplored riviera

This little-known area of South America is full of surprises – from chic, cosmopolitan towns and modernist beach hotels to hippie hangouts and spectacular deserted beaches

'What this family needs,' my husband said, brandishing a copy of *National Geographic*, 'is the spirit of adventure.' It was eight o'clock on a February night at JFK airport, and we were about to begin the first leg of our trip to **Uruguay** (10 hours to Buenos Aires from New York, where we live, one day's stopover, and then another flight across the border to the Maldonado coast). I had never been to Latin America ('Isn't it very dangerous?' more than one friend asked), and it seemed mad to fly two young children to the southern hemisphere for half-term – most families we knew were heading to Florida, where there are perfectly decent beaches and people speak English.

But Peter wanted an edge-of-the-world, far-flung destination, and Uruguay, sandwiched between Brazil, Argentina and the South Atlantic Ocean, was unspoilt and remote enough even for him. And no one we know had ever gone there (a plus for him, a big minus for me and the children). 'Does Dad speak Spanish?' Sam, my eight-year-old, asked. No, and neither do I. 'So how will we eat any food?'

We landed in Buenos Aires at breakfast time and stepped outside the airport into the tail-end of the Argentine summer, like slipping into a warm bubble bath after New York's bitter cold. Fresh as daisies (no jet lag: Buenos Aires is only two hours ahead of New York), we checked our luggage into the luxury Park Hyatt, a renovated mansion in the city's old quarter of Recoleta, and explored. I am ashamed to say I had no interest in Buenos Aires before our visit, but have fallen in love with it. Slightly frayed at the edges, it is like a well-preserved courtesan, where you get glimpses of the great beauty that was.

Recoleta, historically the city's most affluent neighbourhood, is a majestic district of belle époque buildings with neoclassical facades, elegant boulevards and sloping grassy plazas shaded by Argentina's mammoth *gomeros*, or rubber trees, which have huge tangled buttress roots the children clambered over. We walked down the Avenue Alvear to the Cementerio de la Recoleta, the historic burial ground that contains the private family mausoleums of the aristocracy; we visited the crypt of Eva Peron.

Its ornate bronze door had fresh flowers and notes pinned to it. The 19th- and 20th-century funerary architecture was beautiful but rather morbid, and Sam and our six-year-old, Clementine, were more interested in the dozens of stray cats that live among the marble tombs. 'Lunch time,' Peter barked, so we headed off. Back near the hotel we came across Fervor, an old-school starched tablecloth type of Buenos Aires restaurant with two elegant tiers, black-and-white tiled floors, traditional chandeliers made from forks and spoons, and old gent waiters. It is a great find. 'This is the best lunch I've ever had,' Sam announced after polishing off a rib-eye steak with a tiramisu chaser.

It would be a great mistake to fly this far and not spend time in Buenos Aires, which has 48 districts or 'barrios', each with its own distinct character, and is the 12th largest city in the world. We managed three more neighbourhoods: Palermo Hollywood and Palermo Soho, which have undergone a renaissance in the past few years, and Boca, because Sam wanted to see the home of the famous Boca Juniors football club.

Boca was settled by Italian working-class immigrants in the 19th century and the houses are painted in vibrant colours – a Genoese immigrant tradition of using up the paint left over from boats. The children were intrigued by the comical oversized papier-mâché figures decorating the buildings and the tango dancing in the street. The design and fashion scene is booming in Palermo Soho and Palermo Hollywood: the tree-lined cobbled streets, with bursts of purple hibiscus, are humming with boutiques, cafes, furniture and interior design shops and art galleries. Clementine and I darted in and out of boutiques before finding a leather handbag the quality of an Hermès bag (for me) and a chic striped top and skirt combo (for her).

Uruguay is 30 miles from Buenos Aires, on the opposite shore of the estuary of the Rio de la Plata, or River Plate, which divides the two countries. To cross it you can take the ferry – the one-hour fast hydrofoil or three-hour boat trip go several times a day, and will deposit you at Montevideo or Colonia, from where you can pick up a bus or hire car – or you can grapple with Argentina's internal flight system. Locating our plane at the chaotic domestic airport was like trying to catch the last helicopter out of Saigon, and we wished we had taken the ferry.

At Punta del Este, Uruguay's ritzy and overdeveloped seaside resort, we picked up our car, a clapped-out Toyota. Until the Uruguayan government recently lifted its heavy car import duty, everyone drove beautifully preserved American Fords, Dodges, Buick convertibles and Cadillacs, and we still saw them in evidence on our trip, but far more of the cheap new cars from Japan. We headed off along the single coastal road towards our hotel, located 45 minutes away in the former fishing village of José Ignacio, 'the St Tropez of Uruguay', Peter announced.

Though little is known of the Uruguay coast in Britain – pampas and estancias more readily come to mind – to Argentines and Brazilians it is one of the most glamorous destinations in Latin America. It is an unspoilt coastline of golden beaches, rolling sand dunes, green peninsulas and lagoons teeming with wildlife that stretches all the way to Brazil.

For 150 miles a collection of former farming and fishing villages – La Juanita, José Ignacio, Cabo Polonio, Punta del Diablo – boast modernist beach houses, pop-up art galleries, gourmet beach restaurants and a bohemian, low-key atmosphere that has drawn comparisons with the Hamptons of the 1960s. For most of the century the area was uninhabited by anyone but fishermen, until a small group of affluent families from Montevideo and Buenos Aires built beach houses in the 1970s and began summering here. It remained under the radar for 20 years, but now the high season of December until early February sees a mix of Argentines, Brazilians, New Yorkers and Europeans flood the area for the late-night art parties and fashion soirees. By the time of our arrival in mid-February the crowds had thinned, and though the glamour quotient remained high, the sandy tracks and beaches were peaceful and empty.

We were staying at Playa Vik, one of two boutique hotels in Uruguay owned by the Norwegian entrepreneur Alex Vik and his American wife, Carrie. Playa Vik opened in December and is the most talked-about property in José Ignacio. Six modernist casitas, walled with glass and roofed with sea grasses, surrounded a verdant lawn, at the bottom of which was a James Bond-style titanium-and-glass structure rising from the turf, with breathtaking views of the Atlantic. 'Is that a spaceship?' Clementine asked.

The Viks commissioned the architect Carlos Ott to create these jaw-dropping effects. We followed the children down to the spaceship, which turned out to be the dining-room and chillout area and, disconcertingly, a space in which to house pieces from the Viks' priceless art collection. I saw a Zaha Hadid desk and a James Turrell light installation in the library, Anselm Kiefer's majestic *The Secret Life of Plants* propped up against the wall next to the bar, and in the middle of the room Hadid's *Iceberg Sofa*, which Clementine insisted on sliding up and down. 'If one of the children damages anything here there goes our net worth,' Peter said ominously.

Giant glass doors slid open on to a teak deck and black granite pool cantilevered over the beach below. Above us, on the structure's second floor, three bedrooms had walls of glass that slid wide open. I made a note not to take the children up there. As Peter and I settled down on our sun loungers we realised the pool's edge had a 10ft drop beneath it. 'Don't stand up at the shallow end,' Peter roared as Sam and Clementine gleefully swam towards it.

We were assigned an 'experience concierge', a stupendously cool and charming Argentine named Juan who could organise anything for us, including dinner reservations at the iconic La Huella, which is rumoured never to take bookings. Juan was alarmed that we wanted to eat at 7pm. Nobody in South America, apparently, eats before 11pm. Against his better judgment he made us the earliest reservation, at 9pm, and we settled down for a siesta in our spacious four-room casa, which had two private patios and was a fantasy of Frette sheets and high-end bathroom design. 'What's that for?' asked Clementine of the sculptured stone bath, large enough for two people.

In the late afternoon we walked up to the José Ignacio lighthouse, built in 1877, which sits on a peninsula, and meandered along the grid of sandy tracks on which small but perfectly formed beach homes, some boxlike structures of glass and wood, others atop stilts and brightly painted, sit cheek by jowl. 'Some of the most expensive real estate in South America,' Peter said. Walking back we stopped at an art gallery inside a whitewashed bungalow belonging to a French artist. She and her daughter live in Montevideo with her husband, but from December until March they relocate to José Ignacio, like many well-to-do Uruguayans and Argentines.

La Huella is built over a sand dune facing the Atlantic and is both a world-class seafood restaurant and a kind of private beach club for José Ignacio society. We walked in the dark – no street lights in José Ignacio – and found deckchairs surrounding low, candlelit tables, lanterns dangling from the ceiling, a polished and well-stocked bar, and an indoor-outdoor seating plan. The effect was chic and enchanting. Wrapped in big wool blankets supplied by our waitress, we ate delicious calamari and the signature fish of the day (striped bass), grilled the traditional way on a parrilla at the back of the restaurant, the barbecue continually stoked with logs from the wood pile on the floor.

We ordered white wine but got red, still water but got sparkling. No matter. By the time we left there was a long line of people queuing on the sand. The next night we ate like gourmets again, this time alfresco at Marismo, a tiny restaurant hidden down an unmarked sand track, where we had lamb shank hanging off the bone at long, rough-hewn wooden tables lit by a campfire.

Three miles beyond José Ignacio the coast of Maldonado turns into the wild and more deserted shores of the Rocha Department, populated by colonies of sea lions. Here the far-flung fishing village of Punta del Diablo is becoming an increasingly enticing destination for those in search of beautiful beaches and excellent local fish restaurants, but I was keen to visit the hippie outpost Cabo Polonio, where squatters have been building homes (since the 1960s) on a deserted landscape of dunes that has been described as one of the world's last utopias.

There is no electricity or running water and it is accessible only on foot, horse or by four-wheel-drive, which struck me as the kind of adventure Peter was looking for. We drove two hours north-east along Ruta 10, parked the car on the side of the road and queued up for one of the trucks that take passengers through the National Park. Our enthusiasm waned when we eyed our seats: a minuscule patch on the crowded roof. The children gamely clambered aboard and for an hour we clung to a handrail as the truck drove up and down sandy tracks and on to a two-mile stretch of deserted landscape, at the end of which was Cabo Polonio. Bright-coloured makeshift dwellings, some flying the Uruguayan flag, sat precariously along the dunes.

Our truck broke down and we walked the final 200 yards to the village centre, where there were hostels and makeshift cafes, and people were selling jewellery, wind chimes and miniature lighthouses made out of seashells. Handwritten posters advertised trips to view the sea lions and fur seal colonies, about half a mile off the point. Before leaving we walked to Playa de la Calavera (beach of the skull), the only beach on the coast of Uruguay that faces east and north-east, and where the waves crash on to the beach from different angles. It doesn't get more edge-of-the-earth than this.

Seven am, and a breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice and omelettes in the Playa Vik alfresco dining-room. I met a woman who had travelled from London with her husband and two teenage children. 'I haven't been to a place I've been quite so keen to return to in some time,' she told me. When I told her I was writing about José Ignacio, she pulled a face. 'Don't blow it for us.'

Peter and Sam walked along the beach to the early-morning fish market, where fishermen were laying out their catches of squid and swordfish. On Juan's advice, we drove to Garzon, about an hour's drive inland, where the renowned Argentine chef Francis Mallmann has a hotel-restaurant. Uruguay has a land mass larger than England's, but a population of fewer than 3.5 million, most of whom live on the coast. On our way to Garzon we didn't see a single car, only a farm boy atop a horse and cart, and an undulating landscape of pampas dotted with pepper trees, coronilla and huge cacti. We saw sheep, horses, cattle and ostriches running in groups of four, to the delight of the children.

Hotel Garzon sits on the corner of the main street, a beautiful 140-year-old former general store of red bricks. 'Over the years I always thought it was a beautiful town, with nice bones,' said Mallmann, a handsome man in his fifties and a master of grill-cooking. 'It was a bit crazy, just five rooms and a restaurant.' Garzon is now a destination because of Mallmann – the President of Uruguay recently dropped in – and we found out why. In a beautiful garden surrounded by pots of herbs we ate thin-crust pizza, baked in a wood oven, with rocket, tomatoes and grana padano, and succulent lamb with lemon and almonds, cooked the Mallmann method: roasted for seven and a half hours. It was the most delicious lunch I had that week.

The children had been asking to go riding with a gaucho. Juan booked us into Estancia Vik, the Viks' second Uruguayan property, three miles inland, on a 4,000-acre ranching estate by the side of the José Ignacio lagoon. We saw the estancia as soon as we turned off the road, despite the mile left to drive: this is the traditional estancia, supersize. All day we felt as though we were on a film set. Inside the stylised red sheet-metal roofs and white adobe walls was museum-quality art by Uruguayan luminaries such as the sculptor Pablo Atchugarry.

The frescoes in the drawing-room had been hand-painted by the artist Clever Lara, a personal friend of the Viks, whom they lured out of retirement to create the Google Earth-inspired representation of José Ignacio and Uruguay. At the stable the gaucho was saddling up a group of horses. We were joined by two New Yorkers who had been to José Ignacio for a wedding. The seven of us rode off across the estancia's beautiful grounds, Sam on my horse, Clementine with Peter. Two hours later we returned, a little sore and weary but invigorated and looking forward to dinner.

We returned to Playa Vik for our last day and night in Uruguay, and found the place in a state of frenzied organisation: the Viks, who live in Connecticut, had just arrived by private plane from their 11,000-acre property in Chile's Millahue Valley. Peter headed to the bar where he ran into Alex Vik, who was rearranging the artwork.

It is a universal truth that tycoons have exponentially more energy than the rest of us, and Vik is no exception: despite running businesses on three continents, skiing, playing polo, putting together a world-class art collection, running a vineyard and overseeing the construction of his properties, he has time to design furniture – including, he told me with pride, the dining-room chairs at Playa Vik. What motivated him and his wife to build such an unusual hotel? 'We did it for love,' he said. 'We're like proud parents – and we see it as private homes we're sharing with people. It's your home.'

This theory was tested to the limit later that afternoon, when Sam and his new friends, three young French brothers staying at the hotel, played a two-hour football match on the lawn. Goal nets were set up, Peter and the French father joined in, then Juan, followed by three more members of the Playa Vik staff, until there were French, English, Australian, Uruguayan and Argentine players on the pitch. Nobody seemed concerned that divots of pristine turf were flying everywhere, least of all Alex Vik himself. By the end Sam was red in the face and triumphant. 'This is the best day of my life,' he said.

That night we had a family dinner by candlelight at the edge of the pool, the twinkling lights of the granite floor melting into the night sky. Looking out across the Atlantic, I realised with a shock that the next land mass is the Falkland Islands, and then Antarctica. Afterwards we lolled on cushions around the firepit while the children looked up at the Milky Way and searched for the Southern Cross. 'Who wouldn't want to visit Uruguay?' Peter asked, waving his wineglass at the vista. I couldn't argue: all four of us are longing to return.

Uruguay essentials

Where to stay: Playa Vik – casas from \$1,000 per night. Estancia Vik – suites from \$500 per night (00 598 94 605 212; vikretreats.com). The Ultimate Travel Company offers a nine-day stay in Buenos Aires and Uruguay from £3,751 per person, with two nights in Buenos Aires, two at Estancia Vik and four at Playa Vik. The price includes flights from Heathrow to Buenos Aires and private transfers (020-7386 4646; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)

Where to eat: Fervor, Buenos Aires (00 54 11 4804 4944); La Huella, José Ignacio (00 598 486 2279); Marismo, outside José Ignacio (00 598 486 2273); Namm, outside José Ignacio (00 598 486 2526); Hotel Garzon, Pueblo Garzon (00 598 410 2811)