

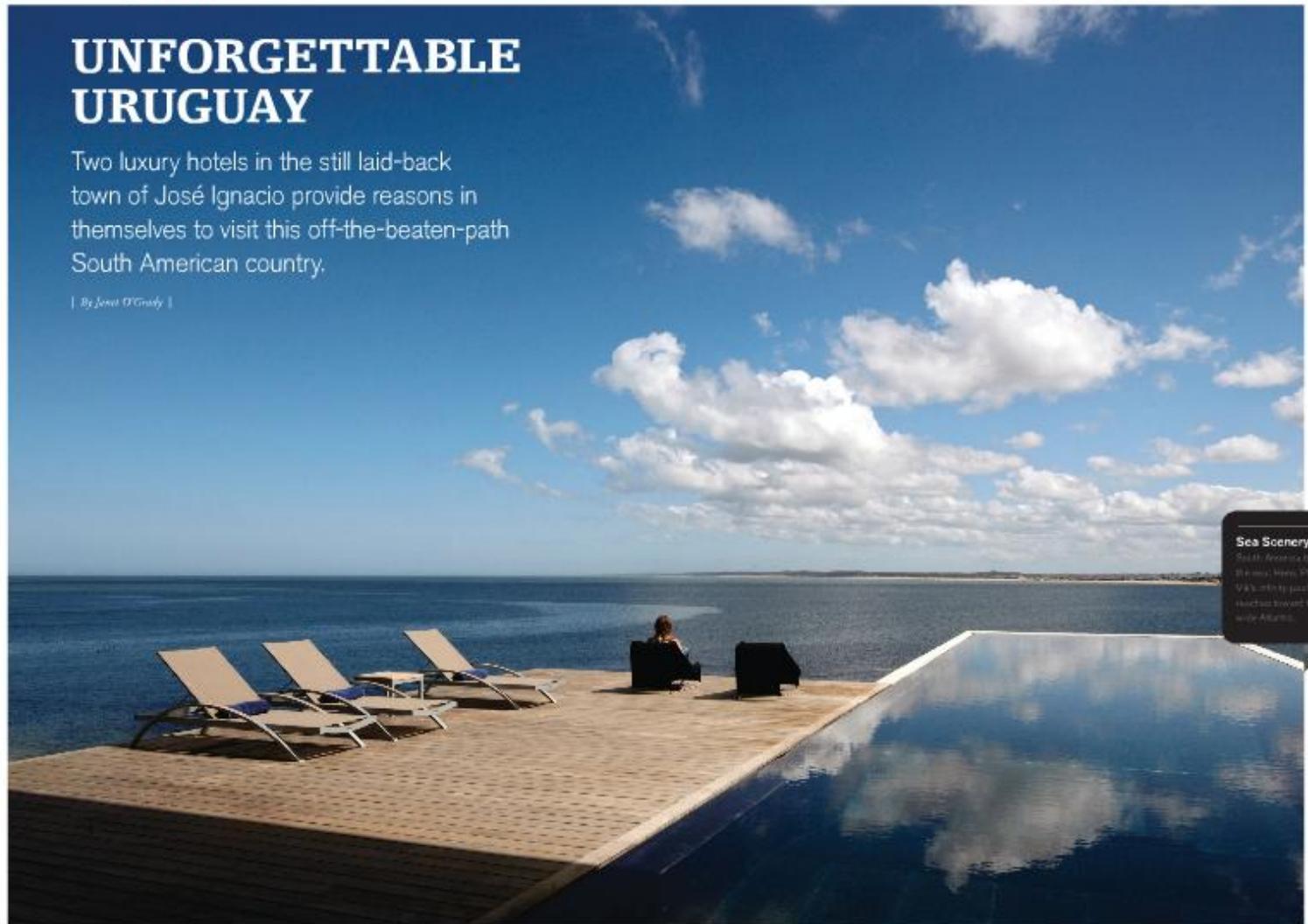
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UNFORGETTABLE URUGUAY

Two luxury hotels in the still laid-back town of José Ignacio provide reasons in themselves to visit this off-the-beaten-path South American country.

By Jenell O'Grady



Sea Scenery
Below: *Resort by the sea*: Here, Playa Vik's infinity pool looks out toward the Atlantic Ocean.



STRIKING STYLE Playa Vik's modern architecture by Carlos Ott stands in stark contrast to the surrounding savanna-like landscape.

Barefoot," says Maximiliano Renzetti, director of Vik Resorts, as we whip off to lunch at a laid-back, whitewashed beach shack called La Huella on Playa Brava. We sit facing the Atlantic Ocean, enjoying a simple grilled Chilean sea bass. The sounds of Spanish and Portuguese swirl around in the salt air. The crowd here is fashionable and sophisticated, but the setting is actually quite simple and charming—let's just call it "shark chic."

But in Uruguay, getting into a beach restaurant like this during the high season—December through mid-January—can be almost as daunting as getting a reservation at Aspen's Carlton Club during the holidays. That's when Latin pop stars, billionaire Brazilians, and models descend upon José Ignacio. Uruguay is unwind and let their hair down: They love it here. And so do I, although I'm here at the best time, in off-season, when life really slows down.

It seems many Americans haven't really heard of or visited Uruguay. As a South America devotee, I have visited Buenos Aires for years—skied in Los Leones and

traveled in Paraguay—but Uruguay remained an unknown. After a writing trip to Mendoza, Argentina, last year, I finally found myself on a plane from Buenos Aires to Uruguay's Punta del Este, where gleaming beachfront residential towers seem more New World Miami than Old World St. Tropez. I only had a couple days, so I headed about 12 miles northeast to the former fishing village, now resort, of José Ignacio. Lodging options here used to be limited to villa rentals or simple guesthouses, but now, two much-hyped-about boutique options are destinations for discerning travelers: Estancia Vik and Playa Vik, part of Vik Resorts (vikresorts.com), owned by Norwegian-born billionaire and art collector Alex Vik and his wife, Camille. Camille says that the Viks want visitors to feel as if they are guests in their "dream" homes.

Pick your mood: Playa Vik is beachfront theater: part hotel; part art gallery; part informal, bedrock-style daylong steak. Estancia Vik is a luxe ranch fantasy of Spanish postcolonial grandeur. One's a movie star; the other, an aristocrat.

On first glance, Playa Vik inevitably looks like a small-



Living Large

Estancia Vik, left, and **Vila Remanso**, above, are surrounded by rolling hills and sit on 4,000 acres that roll gently to the ocean.



scale version of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Here, Uruguayan architect Carlos Che, who designed Paris' Opéra Bastille, created a beach idyll in rock, stone, titanium and glass that stands on a hillside. It's a safe contrast to the surrounding countryside and its modest, whitewashed bungalows. Throughout are museum-quality works by international artists: a light wall by James Turrell and a bench designed by Zaha Hadid are standouts.

Playa Vik has just 12 accommodations, each with its own artistic motif. I actually preferred staying in one of the six rooms in the main structure rather than one of the half dozen two- and three-bedroom casitas with grassy roofs. The main building's communal living/dining room is relaxed and informal. But life revolves around the infinity pool that juts out dramatically like the prow of a ship. The villa is funky and lazy. Lolling is all about capimondas and majadas while gazing out on big views of the South Atlantic. And beyond, a grass lawn slopes to an unspoiled beach. In the evening, I loved just sitting around the communal fire pit near the pool. Evening turns to night, and the setting is magical.

I also stayed at Estancia Vik, just five miles away. It is new, but modeled on traditional Spanish colonial architectural heritage. The magnificent 50,000-square-foot compound, designed by Marcela Daga, has white adobe walls and red tin roofs; covered walkways link multiple courtyards and serene gardens. It is beautifully set amidst 4,000 acres of rolling hills, rivers and lakes that stretch out and flow down to the Atlantic. Out my window are grazing cattle and birds. These is fabulous bird-watching. Here, too, there are just 12 suites in the compound's four wings, each designed by a local artist. At night, fiber-optic LED lights beautifully transform the pool

into a mirror of the constellations.

The living room is dominated by two monumental fireplaces and a 12-foot-tall white marble sculpture by Uruguay's best-known artist, Pablo Achugarap. On the ceiling is a frieze—called a *cuadrioscópico*—painted by Uruguayan artist Clever Lora. It's based on views of José Ignacio and Uruguay from Google Earth maps. Eight very large semiprecious stones in their natural state hang from the walls between glass doors.

Though simply relaxing is enticing, plenty of activities are available at both properties; the wonderful staff will handle the details. Flying off an estancia, the 4,000-acre property has its own polo grounds, frequented by Argentinean star Adolfo Cambiaso, and polo lessons are available. While I didn't have time to ride the horses of the Estancia, I did get to see the town by riding

one of the available bikes to the village's landmark lighthouse.

Both properties offer limited menus, but you can count on fresh fish, and local beef and lamb, accompanied by local and Argentine wines. One night at Estancia Vik, I joined a couple other guests for a very special old-fashioned asado, the beloved South American tradition of char-grilled meats. At the Estancia, the parillada (barbecue dinner) looked meaty. Jackson Pollock-like Gauchos with its graffiti-painted glass walls around its huge fire pit. And there's always the beach shack.

Yes, it's far away. Yes, you should plan your visit in conjunction with a trip to Argentina. Yes, it's expensive. And, yes, both properties exude the charm as if you've been invited as a guest to one of the Viks' private homes. But with Vik Remanso, you can have two different vacations in just one visit. ■



SLEEP OVER *Lux Pedraza, Interviú's 32 modern cabanas.*

New (and Next!) in South America

Another luxury design destination is from the owners of the *Pearsons*, South America's newest urban hotel brand. It has branched out from its origins in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and opened a sleek retreat in the Uruguay beach area of La Barra. Set on nearly 1,000 acres, *Las Piedras* (*las piedras* means "stone") is located away from the beach on beautiful vine-covered hills with beautiful views of the lake and mountains. Built in architect Guy Weisfeld has designed 32 modern cabanas that are perfect for peace and privacy. Loll about or take culinary classes, and visit local vineyards and wineries. Guests can be arranged for snorkeling, riding or touring the area's art studios and artisans atelier. But lazy days and long nights are the real draw. In the same region south of Santiago, Chile, the Vila white spanning the 11,000-acre *Villa Vila* (*mil vidas* means "a million lives"). In 16 acres, designed by Chilean architect Silvana Radic, will elegantly allow guests to feel as if they are living in the middle of a vineyard. Given the design and experience the Vila have created thus far, I can't wait to see the art and architecture—and taste the wine.

