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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 Jane O'Grady |



**Sea Scenery**  
South America by  
Brianna Hines. Playa  
Vik's white sand  
beaches border the  
wine Atlantic.



**STREET STYLE** Playa VIK's modern architecture by Clark OB stands in stark contrast to the surrounding countryside.

**"B**est view," says Maximiliano Birsnes, director of Vik Retreats, as we whirl 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—it's just called "shack chic."

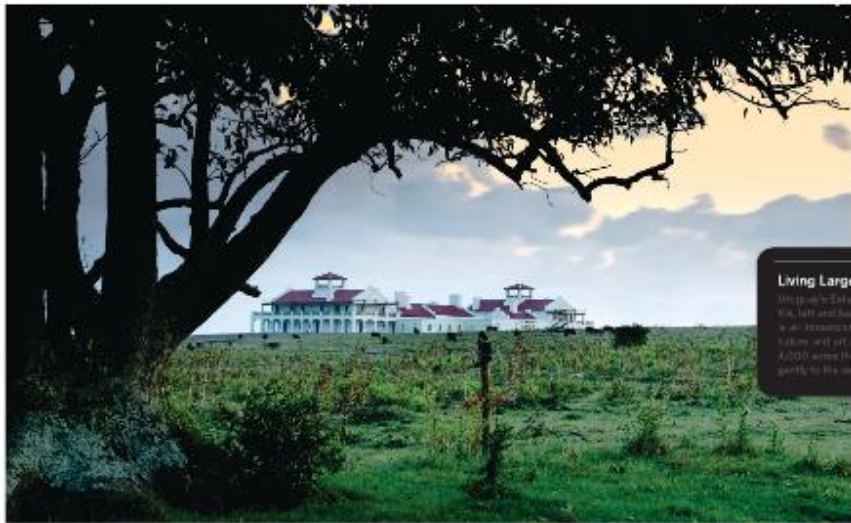
But in Uruguay, getting into a beach restaurant like this during the high season—December through mid-January—can be almost as daunting as getting a reservation at Aspen's Caribou Club during the holidays. That's when Latin pop stars, billionaire Brazilians and models descend upon José Ignacio, Uruguay, to 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—steered in Las Letras and

enrolled in Paraguriá—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 glittering 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-buzzed-about boutique options are destinations for discerning travelers: Ezeancia Vik and Playa Vik, part of Vik Retreats (vikretreats.com), owned by Norwegian-born billionaire and art collector Alex Vik and his wife, Carrie. Birsnes 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, hedonistic darling sister. Ezeancia Vik is a luxe ranch fantasy of Spanish post-colonial grandeur. One's a movie star; the other, an associate.

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



#### Living Large

Uruguay's Estancia Vik, left, and Sabana, an eco-retreat in Chile, are all on 4,000 acres that will shortly be up for sale.



scale version of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Here, Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott, who designed Paris' Opéra Bastille, created a beach stylé in oak, stone, titanium and glass that stands on a hillside. It's a stark 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. Bar life revolves around the infinity pool that jets out dramatically like the prow of a ship. The vibe is funny and lazy. Lolling is all about capirulinas and mojitos 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 tunes 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 Marcelo Dagli, has white adobe walls and red tin roofs; covered walkways link multiple courtyards and serene gardens. It is beautifully sited amidst 4,000 acres of rolling hills, rivers and lakes that stretch out and flow down to the Atlantic. (But my windows are grazing cattle and birds. These are 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 Achugarry. On the ceiling is a frieze—called a surlinescape—painted by Uruguayan artist Cleser Lara. 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. Fitting of an estancia, the 4,000-acre property has its own polo grounds, frequented by Argentinean star Adolfo Cambiasso, and polo lessons are available. While I didn't have time to ride one of the Estancia's horses, 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 grillmen (barbecue steers) looked more Jadeoat Pollock than Gauchito, with its graffiti-paint-splashed tin 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 radiate the charm as if you've been invited as a guest to one of the Vik's private homes. But with Vik Retreats, you can have two different vacations in just one visit. ☑



SUEBERRY Lee Pechon features 32 modern cabins.

#### New (and Next) in South America

Another nearby design destination is from the owners of the Pausani, South America's seediest urban hotel brand. It has branched out from its origins in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and opened a sleek retreat in the Uruguayan beach area of La Barra. Set on nearly 4,200 acres, **Las Piedras** ([elretreat.com](http://elretreat.com)) is located away from the beach on Los Piedras ranch with beautiful views of the lake and woods. Brazilian architect Iay Wiechil has designed 32 modern cabins that are perfect for peace and privacy. Lull about or take on literary classes, and visit local vineyards and wineries. Glasses can be arranged for windowing, napping or touring the area's art studios and antique shops. But lazy days and long nights are the real draw. In the wine region south of Santiago, Chile, the Vik will be opening the 11,000-acre **Vita Vik** ([vikhotels.com](http://vikhotels.com)) in Millahue. Its 16 suites, designed by Chilean architect Sergio Rado, will hopefully allow guests to feel as if they are living in the middle of a vineyard. Over the design and experience the Viks have created thus far, I can't wait to see the art and architecture—and taste the wine.



SUEBERRY Interiors at both Vik Retreats are all original and custom.