

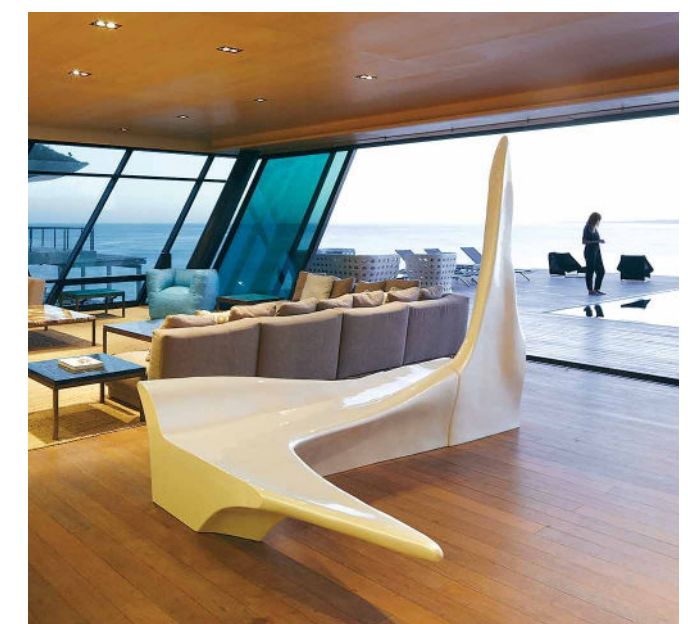
ART RESORT

At this spectacular beach retreat by Carlos Ott, the architecture matches the art

BY KAREN VON HAHN



←↑ The central “sculpture building” at the heart of the compound is clad in titanium and glass. The oceanside facade projects toward the 23-metre-long pool, which cantilevers dramatically over the beach.
← Set in the main building’s two-storey glass entry facade is a monumental bronze door by Uruguayan sculptor Pablo Atchugarry.
→ A sculptural bench by Zaha Hadid on the ground floor of the main building is part of the extensive contemporary art collection on display.



↑ The six smaller casitas arrayed around the central building are topped by green roofs planted with native wildflower species. Each contains two or three bedrooms, with private indoor and outdoor living spaces. Among the amenities is a large dining area that overlooks the beach and an adjacent fire pit.

NOT MANY BEACH RETREATS CAN BOAST a titanium “sculpture building” filled with art by the likes of Zaha Hadid and Anselm Kiefer, a cantilevered swimming pool that projects 10 metres into the air, and a 15.8-metre-wide glass wall that opens onto the sea. But then not many resorts are set in the formerly sleepy fishing village of José Ignacio, Uruguay, which is rapidly emerging as the winter Hamptons, a new playground for the international jet set. Nor do they happen to be designed by architect Carlos Ott, the visionary behind Paris’s Bastille Opera.

Playa Vik is the private retreat of Norwegian-born art collector and financier Alex Vik and his wife, Carrie, who imagined their beachfront property – which faces west on the rugged South

Atlantic peninsula, 19 kilometres northeast of Punta del Este – as a small, super-luxurious and avant-garde hotel. When the Viks aren’t enjoying the remarkable property’s many pleasures, the sculptural main house and its six casitas (the little houses arranged around it in an L formation) are available for rental, individually or all together.

Unlike its sister property, Estancia Vik, eight kilometres inland, which was built in a traditional style, here the Viks wanted to create a place that expresses the personality of José Ignacio, which Carrie Vik describes as “eclectic bohemian, tending toward modernism.” For that, they turned to Uruguayan native Carlos Ott. “The intention was to do something truly unique,” says Ott, who typically doesn’t sign on to residential projects.

He describes it as “a 21st-century design product, like a sports car, yacht or airplane, rather than a conventional house.” Says Carrie Vik of the titanium and glass flare of the main structure, which reaches skyward like a giant seabird, “the building itself is art.”

It’s also a feat of engineering. The 15.8-metre-wide glass wall can be thrown open to provide an unobstructed view of Playa Mansa from the building’s main floor. Meanwhile, the roof overhanging the inclined glass facade is cleverly designed to provide shade without the necessity for screens.

Recalling the sod roof dwellings of Alex Vik’s Scandinavian background, the stone and glass casitas are topped with living green roofs of native plants that meld into the landscape. Each

possesses its own unique design scheme, and contains two or three bedrooms, plus a living space equipped with a fireplace and private gardens for nude sunbathing. A vast indoor/outdoor dining area spreads out below, with views onto Playa Mansa, a 12-metre-long wine cellar, a playroom, a gym and a spa. The dining-room wall is fashioned from agatha stones, and the floors of rough-hewn lapacho wood continue out to a deck furnished with a lounge that surrounds a traditional brasero, or fire pit.

A certain transcendence has been achieved through Ott’s mastery of the most elemental materials. The swimming pool, a minimalist extension of Uruguayan black granite that juts into the sea and sky like an ancient stone arrow, has fibre

optics embedded in its floor that light up at dusk in a twinkling map of the southern sky. Says Ott, “Diving into it at night is like diving into the stars.”

Ultimately, what is most astounding is that Playa Vik’s earthy, sensual futurism is very much in keeping with José Ignacio, which manages to remain simultaneously low key and rustic while standing at the forefront of a new, casual elegance. This proves to be a delicate balance, as a new Setai hotel nears completion and more A-listers like Martin Amis and Naomi Campbell join the linen-clad company enjoying fresh-catch sushi and champagne at La Huella on the wild beach. “When I was a boy, José Ignacio was five fishermen, and I knew them all,” says Ott. “Now everybody wants to be here.”

PHOTOS BY CRISTOBAL PALMA



- ↑ The largest suite, in the sculpture building, combines contemporary art with chairs by Edra and furniture sporting Guido Crepax's graphic character Valentina.
- The casitas' decor varies, but they all have fireplaces, original art and hand-painted floors.
- ↓ An ensuite bathroom featuring a marble soaking tub.



If you go

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

The place to see and be seen for a late lunch is the elegant, breezy Parador La Huella (Playa Brava, Maldonado, paradorlahuella.com), where the servers wear Lacoste, the excellent wine list is full of South American gems, and an in-house sushi mistress gives you the lowdown on the catch of the day. For dinner, brave the unlit, unpaved trek inland to Francis Mallmann's exquisite and inspired Garzón (Pueblo Garzón, Maldonado, restaurantegarzon.com), where the famed South American super-chef works magic with fire.

WHERE TO SHOP

Off the main plaza in town, Mutate (Los Cisnes, José Ignacio, mutate.com.uy) offers chic, mostly Uruguyan designer fashions for both men and women among an appealing collection of vintage treasures and flea market finds. By the beach, Takkai (Frente a la Playa, Maldonado tel. 598 486 2515) stocks wonderful, breezy linens for the home and closet, as well as bright woven baskets, rugged woollen throws and other indigenous housewares. Nearby Punta del Este's main streets carry a full array of largely European retail brands.

WHAT TO SEE

The biggest draws are the unmanicured natural beaches: Playa Brava on one side of the José Ignacio peninsula is rough and wild, with a strong surf; Playa Mansa on the other is calm for swimming. At Hupupu, near the Faro (lighthouse), you can sign up for surf lessons (tel. 486 991 06707). And don't miss Casapueblo (Punta Ballena, tel. 586 4257 8041), Uruguyan artist Carlos Paez Vilaro's former home - it took him 36 years to build by hand - which looks like a child's drip sandcastle blown up on steroids. Open daily from 9 to sunset. → Rates from \$500 to \$3000. vikretreats.com