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URUGUAY

High-season chic at a rustic retreat

A brief invasion of wealth and celebrity transforms an Atlantic coast fishing village once a year



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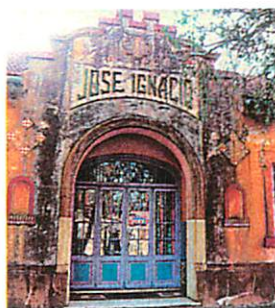
BY COLIN BARRACLOUGH | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

OSÉ IGNACIO — The physical appearance of this small town has changed little over the past decade. For much of the year, the sandy streets of the former fishing village on the country's Atlantic coast are silent and untrodden, the avant-garde designer houses half-hidden behind modest fishing shacks, and tumbledown cottages shuttered and empty. Even its grassy plaza is unadorned by anything more showy than a bed of lavender.

To the west, breezy beaches stretch for 26 miles along the Maldonado provincial coast, past the hamlet of Manantiales. Here fishermen still row out on Laguna José Ignacio to collect prawns trapped by receding tides. In the town of La Barra, where unpaved streets connect modest, white-washed bungalows, residents putter along the streets on mopeds.

Yet once a year, artists, aristocrats, and A-list celebrities transform the coastline into South America's most exclusive — yet determinedly rustic — year-end enclave. "The high season comes as a violent shock for local residents," said Karina Semirozún, who runs the health food restaurant El Chanco y la Coneja in La Barra. "A caravan of cars arrives for summer, backing up for miles along the coast. It's an incredible sight."

From Dec. 23 to mid-January, at the height of the Southern Hemisphere's summer, beach shacks and wooden huts topped with reeds emerge on the dunes. Their informal construction belies their status as the season's most desirable hangout spots.



SOURCE: ESRI, TeleAtlas DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF



PHOTOS BY COLIN BARRACLOUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Above, at the edge of acres of pampas is Estancia Vik, a luxurious 12-bedroom ranch that opened last year. The train station closed in 1989; a farmer keeps sheep there now. Top, the José Ignacio lighthouse from La Brava beach.

Visiting elite briefly enliven a rustic village

► URUGUAY

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For these few short weeks, a cavernous tent erected on dunes near José Ignacio is transformed into Étoile du Sud, an ethereal restaurant backed by roaring flames, roving spotlights, and tambor drummers where French master chef Jean Paul Bondoux prepares French- and Moroccan-inspired tapas.

RUSTIC LUXURIES

Sample the exotic Uruguay at www.boston.com/travel.

At Estancia El Noor, a country property a few miles beyond La Barra, models, film stars, and fashionable party people, drawn by DJs from all over the world, descend on 280 acres of rolling farmland for Miami-based entrepreneur and racing driver Laith Pharaoh's annual Move On year-end bash.

Celebrities and hangers-on seek out restaurants in wooden huts concealed down unmarked dirt tracks, miles from the nearest street lamp. Ramshackle bars become "a meeting place before the parties start," said Martin Pitluga, owner of Parador La Huella, a beach shack-cum-gourmet eating spot in José Ignacio.

Bars and party venues pop up even in automobile showrooms and offices. Well-connected public relations agents dispense invitations, often working with little more than a battery of cellphones and a chaise longue on the beach.

When those heady weeks of high summer draw to a close, South America's beautiful people fly off to chase the sun elsewhere and Uruguay's coastline returns abruptly to its normal quietude.

The summer whirl-a-gig is a spillover from the year-end fiesta at Punta del Este, a once-glamorous beach resort set on a peninsula that divides the Atlantic Ocean from the Río de la Plata.

Created and nurtured by neighboring Argentina's glitterati, Punta del Este was already a byword for jet-set luxury in the 1960s, when it drew Yul Brynner, Gina Lollobrigida, and a host of other luminaries from North America and Europe.

To South America's beau monde, however, the resort soon gave way to glitz of dubious taste. Upper-crust Argentines seeking a more exclusive summer idyll began to venture to quieter settlements farther up the coast, investing in rustic, beachside properties in order to park spare cash free of tax inspectors' back home.

Today, ramshackle farms on the coast near La Barra or José Ignacio start at \$250,000, a moderately sized apartment \$300,000. An oceanfront house in a gated community will set you back at least \$1.5 million — prices many times greater than in Uruguay's other rural niches.



COLIN BARRACLOUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A car ferry (rear) serves residents and the summer visitors who begin to arrive in December.

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Casa Zinc

Parada 40, Calles 9 y 19

La Barra

011-598-4277-3003

www.casazinc.com

Designer Aaron Hojman's six-room hotel is stuffed with antiques and industrial oddments. Doubles \$130-\$560.

Posada del Faro

Calle de la Bahía and Timonel

José Ignacio

011-598-4486-2110

www.posadadel Faro.com

A 15-room guesthouse with hammocks and a bar on the beach. Doubles \$180-\$750.

Playa Vik

Los Cisnes and Los Horneros

José Ignacio

011-598-94-605212

www.playavikjoseignacio.com

Six casitas surround a sleek dining room and black granite pool. Two-bedroom cabins \$450-\$1,100.

Estancia Vik

Camino Eugenio Saiz Martínez

José Ignacio

011-598-94-605212

www.vikretreats.com

An opulent, 12-room mansion, set on 3,700 acres of rolling pampas. Doubles \$500-\$900.

It's little wonder that international realtors are omnipresent in coastal towns.

The cost of a vacation in José Ignacio, say, far outstrips South America's other coastal resorts. In January, a dinner for two — if you're lucky or connected enough to get a table — can easily top \$400. Even commonplace hotels charge \$1,000 for a double room, five times as much as low-season

Hotel Garzón

The Old Almacén, Garzón

011-598-4410-2811

www.restaurantegarzon.com

A five-room hotel owned by chef Francis Mallmann. Doubles \$660, all-inclusive.

Rentals

Fully-staffed, three-bedroom

houses close to La Barra beach

start at \$7,000 a week (Azul

Latin America, 011-55-21-

8111-4405; www.azullatina.com).

In José Ignacio, five-bedroom houses with pool

and ocean view start at

\$12,000 (Oasis Collections,

011-54-11-4777-3692;

www.oasispunta.com).

Where to eat

El Chanco y la Coneja

Calle 12 and Ruta 10

La Barra

011-598-4277-2497

Canelones, pizzas, and vegetarian dishes cooked in a clay oven

in the owners' home. Entrees

\$9-\$13.

Lo de Miguel

Granja Narbona, Viñas del Este

La Barra

011-598-4410-2999

www.puertocarmelo.com

Wood-paneled restaurant and

wine bar offering seafood risotto

and peppered entrecôte. Entrees

\$30-\$45.

rates. Choose to rent a villa — often a necessity, as José Ignacio has just 50 hotel rooms and there are few available elsewhere along the coast in January — and even a midsize apartment will set you back \$20,000 a week.

Despite paying such high prices, most summer visitors seem content to do little more than relax and disconnect. Unlike those seeking Punta del Es-

te's nonstop party atmosphere, here they breakfast well into the afternoon and usually spend the remaining daylight hours swinging lazily on hammocks or sipping drinks at the informal bars set up on the beach.

Clad in flip-flops or barefoot, some visitors to the quieter coastal settlements rally for a 4 p.m. lunch at Parador La Huella. Others while away the afternoon on battered wooden chairs, half-buried in the sand, at Marismo, an al fresco eating place near José Ignacio, lighted at dusk by flaming torches and fabric lanterns dangling in the trees.

Those searching for even more tranquility book an afternoon at La Caracola, an isolated cabin on a deserted, sandy spit, backed to the east by the ocean and to the west by Laguna Garzón. With no road access, guests are rowed across the lagoon to lunch at a parrilla, a barbecue, or sip cocktails until siesta time. The cabin attracts the few who, says owner Guzmán Artagaveytia, appreciate "the luxury of being alone in immense nature."

Even nighttime activities are rarely more energetic than gazing at a bonfire's flickering flames or listening to the beat of tambor drums under a midnight moon.

Until now, the region's promoters have struggled for ways to extend the holiday season. Music, theater, and cinema festivals; tax breaks for businesses; and lower road tolls outside summer have failed to draw vacationers at other times. "We've even put on talks on whale-watching, but nothing seems to work," said Roberto Behrens, owner of Montevideo's Café Misterio and José Ignacio's Namm restaurant, which opens for just six weeks from Dec. 20. "People want to come only in December and January."

Growing international interest in the area, boosted by the unveiling of plans for several luxury

hotels, could help increase demand beyond summer. "The short-season tradition comes from Argentina, but that will decrease as interest from other markets starts to grow," said Carrie Vik, who co-owns two hotels in the region.

Last year, the Connecticut-based Vik, along with her financier husband, Alex, opened Estancia Vik, a 12-bedroom ranch five miles inland from José Ignacio. It is set on 3,700 acres of undulating pampas that team with river otters, gray foxes, and some 120 bird species, such as spoonbills, flamingos, and the ostrich-like ñandúes.

A second property, Playa Vik, a beachside complex of six casitas, a titanium-and-glass dining area, and a black granite pool cantilevered out over José Ignacio's Playa Mansa beach, is set to open next month.

In December, Brazil's Rogério Fasano, owner of upmarket, design-minded hotels and restaurants in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, plans to unveil Fasano Las Piedras, a 20-cabin hotel and spa set on 1,200 acres of rocky outcrops, lakes, and forest, three miles inland from La Barra.

Next year, Miami-based The Setai is scheduled to unveil a 10-cabin hotel, along with parcels for private homes, on the dunes south of José Ignacio.

Such projects may draw a new crowd or persuade summer visitors to return in other seasons. Until then Uruguay's Atlantic coastline will remain for most of the year as it is today: a string of humble fishing villages on an unspoiled, un sullied stretch of sandy coast.

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