

Condé Nast
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SEVEN WINNING TRAVEL APPS
TRUTH IN TRAVEL
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Potent *caipirinhas* and fresh-caught fish turn many a meal at the lunch club La Caracola into a long siesta—improvised beds conveniently provided.



One of Casa Zinc's six rooms, in the town of La Barra.

In the Mood for Maldonado

It's summer in South America—you can get your beach on in throbbing Punta del Este, but for empty, endless expanses and easy living, nothing beats the ribbon of boho-chic enclaves along Uruguay's Maldonado coast.

COLIN BARRACLOUGH simply disconnects

Photographs by **GRACIELA CATTAROSS**

I'm

driving down the pitch-dark road that snakes north from the old fishing village of José Ignacio on Uruguay's coast. The sultry, salty night air washes in, along with the hum of distant waves crashing on the Atlantic shore. I've heard great things about Marismo, where chef-owner Federico Desseno fires up *coronilla* logs in his homemade clay oven to coax hidden flavors from lamb, squid, and drumfish. The restaurant is hidden down an unmarked dirt track, I've been told, two miles from the last street lamp, and obscured by dense fronds of acacia and eucalyptus. I've also been told that no sign indicates the entrance; nor, strictly speaking, does the restaurant have an address.

Stumbling in the dark, I'm drawn by the flickering light of fabric lanterns dangling from the trees, and finally emerge among rough-cut wooden tables lit by candles and a crackling bonfire. I order a shank of lamb: It's succulent and expertly prepared. Marismo deserves its reputation for exquisite food, yet I can't help wondering whether Desseno intentionally makes the restaurant hard to find, figuring that concealment would be taken as shorthand for exclusivity. I corner him and accuse him of cynical obfuscation in an effort to create mystique. "Oh, you mean the sign," he says wearily. "I've been meaning to put one up for years. I always seem to forget."

Such lackadaisical attitudes are easy to find in Uruguay, particularly on the coastal stretches of Maldonado Department. From Punta del Este, a jarring, glitzy resort fashioned by celebrities from neighboring Argentina, expansive golden beaches and low headlands stretch for twenty-five miles northeast along a single coast road connecting a ribbon of beach settlements—La Barra, Manantiales, La Juanita, and José Ignacio—each emptier and more low-key than the last. The road comes to an abrupt halt at Laguna Garzón, three miles beyond José Ignacio. A tiny winch-operated ferry crosses the lagoon each hour, but few vehicles venture on: Beyond

lies the wild shoreline of Rocha Department, where a desolate, barely populated coastline of shipwrecks and abandoned fortresses stretches as far as Brazil.

My favorite time is the fresh November–December spring or the tail end of summer in February and March, when the area reverts to something far closer to its origins as a string of humble fishing villages on an unspoiled stretch of sandy coast. The back-to-basics beach settlements sport an atmosphere somewhat akin to the Hamptons of the sixties, with an endearing informality that's distinctly South American. Uruguayans have a knack for inspired improvisation, infusing low-budget, simply executed projects with an easy charm. Maldonado's villages are so casually slung together, in fact, that chefs open restaurants in garages or on the front porches of their homes.

La Huerta Bistró, near Manantiales, focuses on local ingredients.



Wealthy newcomers are garaging their Ferraris
and mirroring the down-to-earth, slightly disheveled
habits of the locals

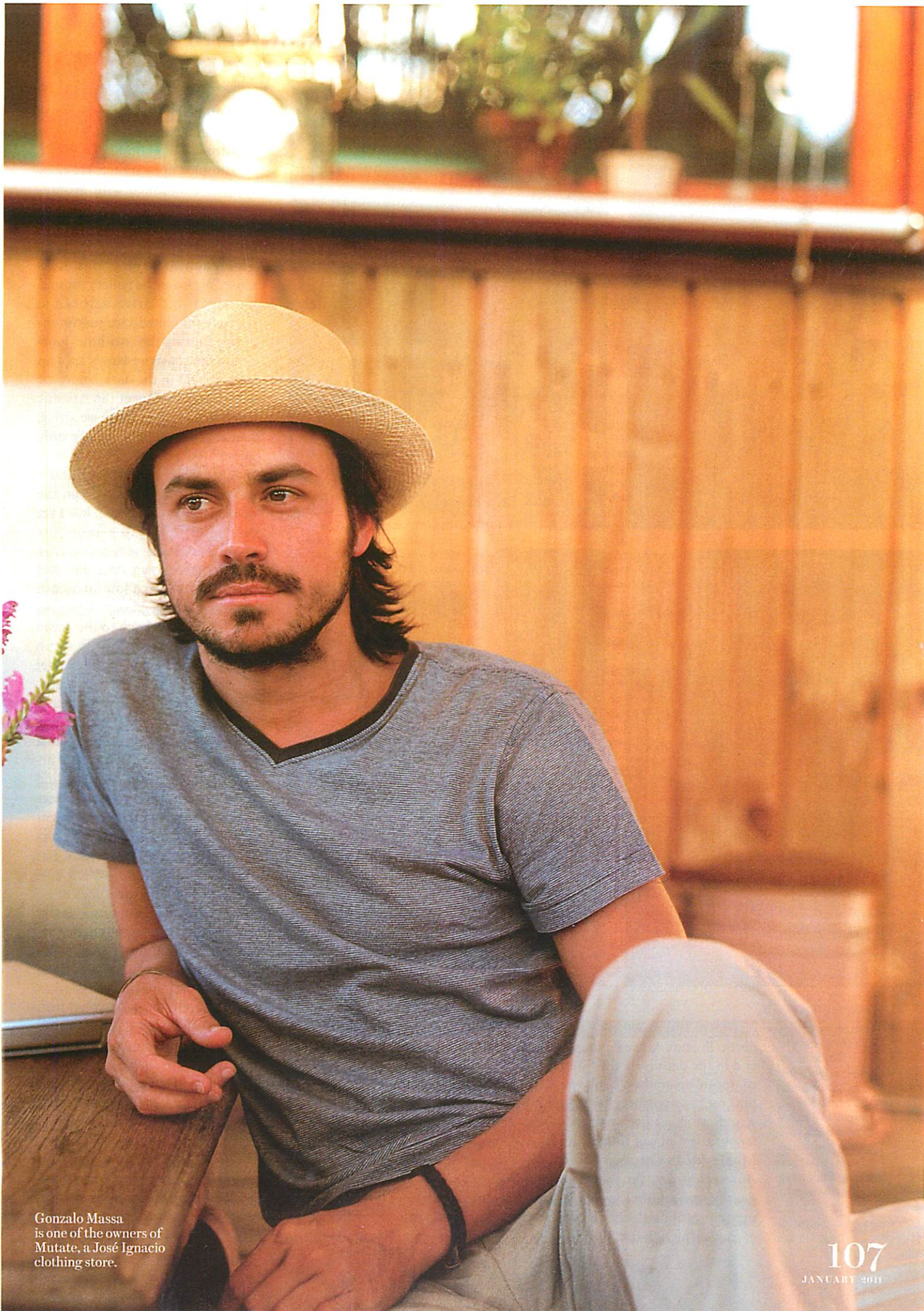


There is no road access to La Caracola—guests are rowed across Laguna Garzón for lunch. The region's overall atmosphere is the Hamptons in the sixties.

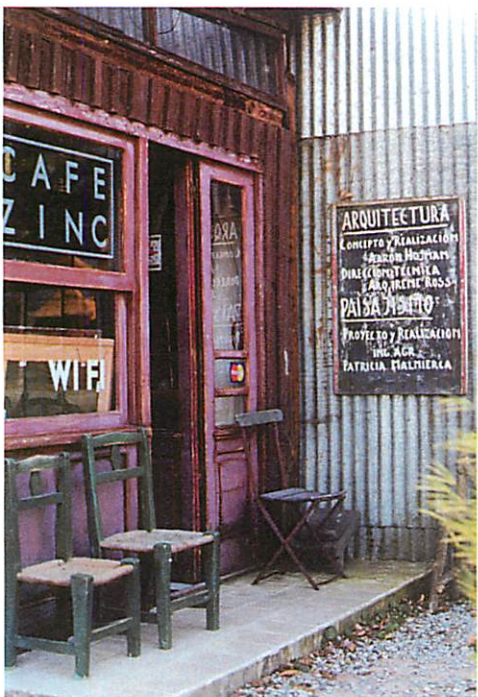
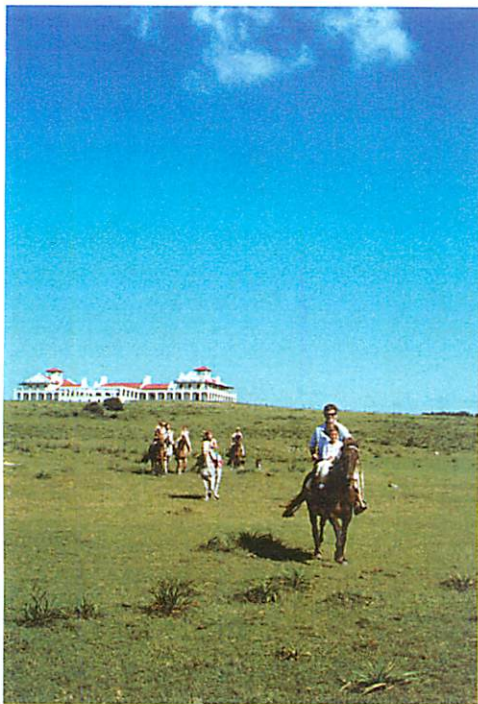
*"I sell my lifestyle,
which is very simple indeed.
Uruguayans just don't 'do' glamour"*



Shacks once rented for a pittance from local fishermen have morphed into still-small but stylish digs: Witness this bar in the fifteen-room Posada de Faro, in José Ignacio.



Gonzalo Massa is one of the owners of Mutate, a José Ignacio clothing store.



Gastronomy rides high these days in Maldonado. Clockwise from top left: At the opulent Estancia Vik, in pampas five miles inland from José Ignacio; brunch at the town's Café de la Place; maracuyá soup with goat cheese at Estancia Vik; Café Zinc, in La Barra.

This time, searching for an escape from my home in hectic Buenos Aires, I choose an August holiday weekend in the depths of the Southern Hemisphere winter to pootle around on back roads and take brisk walks on breeze-swept beaches under constantly changing grandiose skies. I've arranged to stay at Casa Zinc, the most talked-about hotel in La Barra, and I'm met at Montevideo's Carrasco Airport by its owner, designer Aaron Hojman, who is on his way to a friend's art show nearby and invites me to join him. I can't help noticing that Hojman's shoelaces are undone, his woolen cardigan threadbare. "I sell my lifestyle, which is very

simple indeed," he says wryly, shifting cluttered papers in his battered Fiat to make space. "Uruguayans just don't 'do' glamour." Despite his rumpled appearance, Hojman mingles unabashed with Montevideo's smart set; within an hour, he's introduced me to a smattering of artistic leading lights, most of whom appear to share his dress sense. We leave the gallery around midnight and drive across the sparsely inhabited Uruguayan interior: During the two-hour journey to the coast, we barely spot an electric light in the dark before we skirt Punta and meet the Atlantic coast at La Barra. When we arrive, I find that I am the hotel's only guest.

A storm hits overnight and a gale is still battering in from the ocean the next morning, but I set out nevertheless to explore the coast. The shoreline seems to claw at the edge of town, its main street petering out into a low landscape of dunes and sea grasses. A mile beyond, I turn my back to the ocean and cut through a thorny scrub of cactus and gorse to the hamlet of Manantiales. Fifty years ago, when Punta del Este was already drawing Yves Montand, Jeanne Moreau, Sacha Distel, and a host of other film stars, royals, and artistic luminaries, Manantiales and neighboring fishing villages were frequented only by hard-wrought settlers and blue-collar workers from Uruguay's inland cities. The Arroyo Maldonado, which cuts through the Atlantic dunes at La Barra, provided a natural barrier between the distinct summering societies. Where Punta's coiffed and fashionably attired clientele drifted from one elegant soiree to another, their poorer cousins devoted their

idle summers to egalitarian pursuits like shoreline fishing and roving barefoot along the dunes, sleeping in near-derelict, off-the-grid wooden shacks rented for a pittance from local fishermen. Even today, La Barra's peculiar double-humped bridge continues to form a figurative barrier between Punta del Este and *la costa*.

By the 1970s, the turbulent politics that racked much of Latin America had filled many Uruguayans and Argentines with an urge to escape urban hotbeds of political violence. With Argentina in the grips of its cabal of generals, wealthy *porteños* in particular began to spend long summers on the Maldonado coast, drawn



THE BOHEMIAN COAST

To truly enjoy the otherworldly peace of Uruguay's Maldonado coast, the ideal times to visit are the spring (Nov.–Dec.) and the end of summer (Feb.–March). Try to avoid the high season (Dec. 24–Jan. 20), when hotels impose lengthy minimum stays (and still book up months in advance) and prices for lodging, dining, and rental cars can increase as much as sixfold.

Coastal settlements are separated by up to a half-hour's drive, so consider dining not too far from your hotel. The Ruta 10 highway connects Punta del Este, La Barra, and José Ignacio, but Garzón is accessible only via unlit country roads. Always call a restaurant or store before setting out—opening times can be haphazard.

The country code for Uruguay is 598. Prices quoted are for January.

LODGING

In La Barra, expect exposed brick, rusted ironwork, and distressed wood at designer Aaron Hojman's idiosyncratic six-room **Casa Zinc**, which is stuffed with well-chosen antiques and industrial oddments (4277-3003; doubles, \$240–\$430). Opened in time for New Year's weekend, **Hotel Fasano's** 20 cabins, 2 restaurants, and a spa, outfitted by Brazil's award-winning Isay Weinfeld, are scattered across 1,200 acres of rocky outcrops, lakes, and forest glades, three miles inland from La Barra (4267-0000; doubles, \$850–\$1,650). Fully staffed three-bedroom house rentals close to the beach start at \$7,000 a week from **Azul Latin America** (55-21-8111-4405 in Brazil).

Farther up the coast, in José Ignacio, dozens of large-scale works from Uruguay's leading artists decorate the opulent 12-room **Estancia Vik**, where baronial interiors and a fine wine cellar are set on 4,000

acres of rolling pampas (94-605-212; doubles, \$500–\$620). The six art-garlanded casitas of **Playa Vik** surround a titanium-and-glass dining room and black-granite pool cantilevered out over José Ignacio's Playa Mansa (94-605-212; casitas, \$800). On a sandy bluff beneath José Ignacio's lighthouse, the unpretentious 15-room **Posada del Faro** feels like a private home, only with hammocks and a bar on nearby Playa Mansa (54-11-4803-113 in Buenos Aires; doubles, \$270–\$500). A low-profile guesthouse, **Arbol Casa Loft** has six ample loft-style suites splashed with bright colors (4486-2278; doubles, \$350–\$750). In high season, most visitors rent a house or apartment; design-minded five-bedroom homes with a pool and ocean view start at \$12,000 a week from **Oasis Collections** (631-731-1677 in the U.S.).

A half-hour inland, in tiny Garzón, the five-room **Hotel Garzón** is housed in a 140-year-old former general store, where celebrity chef Francis Mallmann updates classic Uruguayan and Argentine dishes over crackling flames (4410-2811; doubles, \$680, all-inclusive). Mallmann also acts as broker for a half-dozen rental houses with pool, limousine, chef, and barman, starting at \$35,000 per week, all-inclusive.

DINING

In La Barra, the diminutive **El Chanco y la Coneja** serves simple, tasty *canelones*, pizzas, citrus-flavored chicken, and vegetarian dishes, all cooked in a clay oven in the owners' home (Calle 12 and Ruta 10; 4277-2497; entrées, \$9–\$13). Located within Granja Narbona's Viñas del Este complex, **Lo de Miguel** serves seafood risotto, caper-butter corvina fillet, and peppered entrecôte in a wood-paneled restaurant

and wine bar with an attached deli (4410-2999; entrées, \$30–\$45). At **Café Flo**, with its ocean-view terrace, friendly staff rustle up gourmet sandwiches, seafood salads, and inventive omelets (Ruta 10, km 161; 4277-1481; entrées, \$10–\$17). Bakery and after-beach hangout **Medialunas Calentitas**, in the Palmas de La Barra shopping area, specializes in Uruguay's sweet buttered croissants, filled with creamy *dulce de leche* (4277-2347).

In the city of Maldonado is **Si Querida**, where chef Martín Marrero, formerly of Namm (see below), prepares quesadillas, burritos, and pizzas in the garage of his grandfather's house (Ventura Alegre 236; no phone; entrées, \$6–\$9).

In José Ignacio, beach shack cum gourmet eating spot **Parador La Huella** serves grilled drumfish, calamari, and sizzling steaks (4486-2279; prix fixe, \$200 for two). Beach bar by day, insider's restaurant by night, Ibiza-influenced **Marismo's** rough-hewn tables are illuminated by flaming torches and fabric lanterns (Ruta 10, km 185; 4486-2273; prix fixe, \$140 for two). At **Namm**, a wood hut hidden in a stand of pepper trees, chef Juan Pablo Clerici serves sushi and sashimi with grilled local fish, lamb, and beef (Ruta 10, km 185; 4486-2526; prix fixe, \$120 for two). At **Restaurante La Olada**, in La Juanita, Santiago Rivero prepares lamb, pasta, and risottos in a clay oven on his front porch (Ruta 10, km 181.5; 4486-2745; entrées, \$15–\$25). Guests are rowed out to the tiny **La Caracola** lunch club, on an otherwise deserted beach, to sip on *caipirinhas* until a siesta calls (94-220-772; lunch, \$300 for two including drinks). Pop into **Café de la Place** for waffles, muffins, and crêpes (Las Garzas and Saiz Martínez; 4486-2703). —C. B.

to its unspoiled beauty and a ragtag beach culture sustained by fishermen, surfers, and artists. When local *latifundistas* (landowners since colonial times), whose holdings around José Ignacio alone amounted to thousands of acres, divided their extensive coastal properties into ten-acre parcels, Argentines spotted a chance to sneak undeclared cash beyond the generals' grabbing hands—and to erect holiday homes that would provide a peaceful, albeit temporary, escape. In 1978, Francis

Mallmann, then an ambitious young chef from Bariloche, opened Posada del Mar, the first restaurant in José Ignacio, and art dealers set up summer-only showrooms aimed at visitors from across the Río de la Plata.

Money arrived in the end—serious money. By the 1990s, with Argentina's currency pegged at par with the U.S. dollar, well-sited coastal homes in La Barra and José Ignacio began to change hands for millions of dollars. Hip Europeans appeared, many (*Continued on page 141*)