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PART 1: THE EAST COAST

THE GREAT SOUTH AMERICAN BEACH FINDER

A beach is so much more than a sunny stretch of sand—although there are plenty of those, too, in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, where HANYA YANAGIHARA surveyed more than 9,000 miles of coast to come up with 13 of the continent's best strands. Here, on South America's east coast, you'll find not only tropical heat (and the hardbodies who come with it) but pebbled shores populated with penguins, unpeopled stretches where palm trees are your only company, and waves without end that attract fledgling and serious surfers alike. Call it the thinking man's beach.

Photographs by JULIEN CAPMEIL



CRINGE TO ADMIT IT NOW, but my idea of the perfect beach has always been embarrassingly rigid. I grew up in Hawaii, and to me a beach was not a beach unless it fronted the Pacific—the water a sparkling royal blue, the sand bone-white and flour-fine. The first time I visited the Atlantic (it was in Massachusetts, and it was, admittedly, late fall), I remember feeling sorry for both myself and the inhabitants of the entire Eastern Seaboard. Here, the ocean was a flinty pewter, tangles of seaweed scummed the surface, and the sand was grainy and pocked with pinecones. It was a landscape of grays—as different from that of my childhood as the earth is from the moon. As I grew older, though, I came to appreciate Atlantic beaches: their moodiness, their visual and ecological complexities. If the Pacific’s strands, with their bright primary-school palette, are remarkable for their familiarity, the Atlantic’s are notable for their unpredictability, for their radical interpretations of what a beach can be.

It is precisely this diversity—and yes, unpredictability—that so distinguishes South America’s 8,925-mile Atlantic coast. In Brazil, home to some of the world’s most popular and picturesque shorelines, you move from the Martian-red crescents of the State of Bahia to the jungled shores of the Angra dos Reis archipelago, south of Rio. In Bahia are beaches to rival those of Hawaii but whose alarmingly tanned and lithe inhabitants, clad only in meager thongs, are inimitably Brazilian. Farther down the coast lies Uruguay’s José Ignacio, where more improbably good-looking people lounge by a steely sea that’s icy even in summer. And finally, near the ends of the earth, is Argentine Patagonia, where instead of sand one finds inky stones worn marble-smooth by the surf, and a sky thick with birds.

I traveled through Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina in search of the best beaches for every taste and temperament. This baker’s dozen includes not only remarkable places to swim, catch a wave, and spot wildlife, but also some of the world’s most epic and unexpected landscapes. Collectively, they argue for looking beyond Rio and Montevideo and Buenos Aires, since it is outside the cities that one sees South America at its most relaxed, democratic, and wild, with strands that upend all notions of perfection. I know I’ll never think of a beach in the same way again. And you won’t either.

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is patrolled by Uruguayans of all ages, who run the gamut from matter-of-fact good-looking to preternaturally stunning

ULTIMATE BEACH FINDER

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Playa Brava, Uruguay This low-key former fishing community plays host to families, surfers, and serious pickup games of soccer. Visit in March and early April for a more laid-back vibe—and lower rates.

The beach at Uruguay's José Ignacio—30 minutes northeast of the more heavily toured Punta del Este—reminds you that silence and space are more exclusive than glitz and glamour



Playa Brava, Uruguay The view from the lighthouse that anchors the southern, relatively unpeopled end of the bay.

URUGUAY



Playa Brava

JOSE IGNACIO

Not even an aggressively blue sky can turn the bottle-green waters off Uruguay's southern coast postcard-pretty. But not to worry: The real beauty here is on the beach. Pinkish beige and powder soft, it's patrolled by throngs of Argentines and Uruguayans of all ages . . . although that's where the diversity ends. Nearly all of the beachgoers possess an effortless beauty that runs the gamut from matter-of-fact good-looking to preternaturally stunning. The beach is 30 minutes northeast of the more heavily touristed Punta del Este, a coastal community often compared to Miami for its condo-lined waterfront and cosmopolitan-fueled nightlife. José Ignacio, however, reminds you that silence and space are more exclusive than glitz and glamour. Until very recently a fishing town, it still exudes a low-key cool, and the strict zoning laws ensured the construction of only a few wood-and-stone vacation houses overlooking the low, grassy dunes. Preeners and soccer players colonize the northern end of the beach, and the scene becomes more laid-back as you move south toward the lighthouse. Here, surfers and families wade into the brisk water, taking care to avoid the occasional jellyfish carcass.

THE 411: The inn closest to the beach is the breezy white-stone **Posada del Faro**, whose 12 airy, clean-lined rooms look out on either the ocean or the pool (598-486-2110; posadadelfaro.com; doubles, \$220–\$400); spend an afternoon with a drink and a light lunch at the beachside **Parador La Huella** (Calle Los Cisnes and Playa Brava; 598-486-2279; entrées, \$11–\$20). Alternatively, stay at the slightly more distant **Posada de Piedra**, whose six effortlessly elegant suites offer sweeping views of the property's wide, well-maintained lawns (598-42-774-126; posadadepiedra.com; suites, \$135–\$235).

WHEN TO GO: High season (Dec.–Feb.) brings South American society types. For a more relaxed vibe—and lower rates—visit in March and early April.