

DEPARTURES

— Travel —

Why José Ignacio, Uruguay, Should Be on Your 2019 Travel Itinerary

Foodies, especially: take note.

By Kathryn Romeyn on February 01, 2019

Each year it seems discerning travelers must search further afield for [off-the-radar vacation destinations](#) that are not yet overrun by tourists or destroyed by their popularity, a concept the Internet simultaneously makes easy *and* more difficult with the “where to go” lists we’re all guilty of poring over. Then there’s our protective instincts, when a magical place *has* been discovered, to not tell anyone else, keep it all to ourselves. It would seem elite, boho-chic Brazilians and Argentines—and the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio and Mark Zuckerberg—have been for years practicing the latter when it comes to Uruguay, and specifically the tony surf town of José Ignacio.

Not that it’s a total secret, since there are nonstop flights from Miami to Montevideo, the capital two hours away by car and easy connections from JFK. It was decades ago when Gwyneth Paltrow’s go-to wedding chef Francis Mallmann—himself an Argentine-Uruguayan—first opened restaurants in José Ignacio, then extremely off the radar and too remote for electricity. The chef famous for cooking with live open fire has been a pioneer in the area, helping the town make a name for itself over the years as more and more glitzy types flocked for the [ultimate bucolic barefoot beach getaway](#) sans pretense. Uruguayans are extremely hospitable, friendly and fun-loving, which makes the environment endlessly enjoyable as well as extremely laid-back—a visit means a chance to experience the serenity of something like island time. That and idyllic stretches of beaches that swell with umbrellas, bikinis, and surfboards during the hot summer months (America’s winter) contrasting with nearby pastoral scenes featuring healthy cows, goats, pigs, and horse-riding gauchos atop verdant rolling hills.

As savvy as the typical José Ignacio visitor is about food and vino, it's unsurprising the area is bursting with indelible edible experiences. The classic can't-miss is [La Huella](#), a chic open-air eatery hugging the sand where meals consisting of grilled corvina and other gifts from the sea are elongated by bottle after bottle of vino and flowing conversation. It's always a scene. For a more intimate, darkened scene inside charmingly decorated bungalows there's La Juana, serving savory tapas and G&Ts. Foodies and Mallmann acolytes make pilgrimages to the teeny town of Garzón, where the chef's unassuming green-trimmed [Restaurante Garzón](#) doles out bucket-list meals (and there are several charming guest rooms that are inclusive of three meals a day). La Excusa is the coffeeshop-turned-bar that provides all-day-and-night entertainment, and [Bahía Vik](#) has one of the best views in town for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, plus an in-season beach club for all-afternoon indulgence.



Courtesy Playa Vik José Ignacio

It's one of a trio of vibrant luxury boutique retreats owned by the Vik family, who looked to a plethora of Uruguayan artists and makers to create the design and decoration of their one-of-a-kind guest rooms and suites. [Playa Vik](#) is the buyout-friendly property right in town, Bahía is on its own stretch of beach with sunset-over-the-ocean views, while [Estancia Vik](#) is the gorgeous estate celebrating its 10-year anniversary, with a pool lit by star-like constellations of lights, polo fields, and famous asado dinners (barbecues) that are now open to non-guests making reservations. Slightly more casual options—besides opulent villa rentals—are [Posada del Faro](#) and the just-opened Posada José Ignacio, a beachside inn with co-working spaces, outdoor dining lounges, shared kitchens and barbecues. To combat the food comas, travelers practice their flow at The Shack Yoga, surf at Playa Brava, ride bikes, take long beach walks, ride horses at Estancia (like Katy Perry) or enter a polo match, or head up the coast to Punta del Este for windsurfing or maybe even fishing trips. There, [Museo-Taller de Casapueblo](#), a fanciful Santorini-esque castle-turned-museum by the late prolific Uruguayan artist Carlos Páez Vilaró, is a sight worth a stop.

If there's a downside of José Ignacio, because no great thing comes without a single caveat, it's that the "season" is short—incredibly short. All restaurant, shops, and other businesses are open mid-December through January, while a decent number continue into February and some operate on a year-round basis (with abbreviated hours in some cases), while most boutiques and several restaurants are shuttered the rest of the year. Rates soar during Christmas and New Year's holidays, the two weeks boasting nightly beach parties and an all-day sense of festivity. It's for this spirit those who know about it many return time and again.