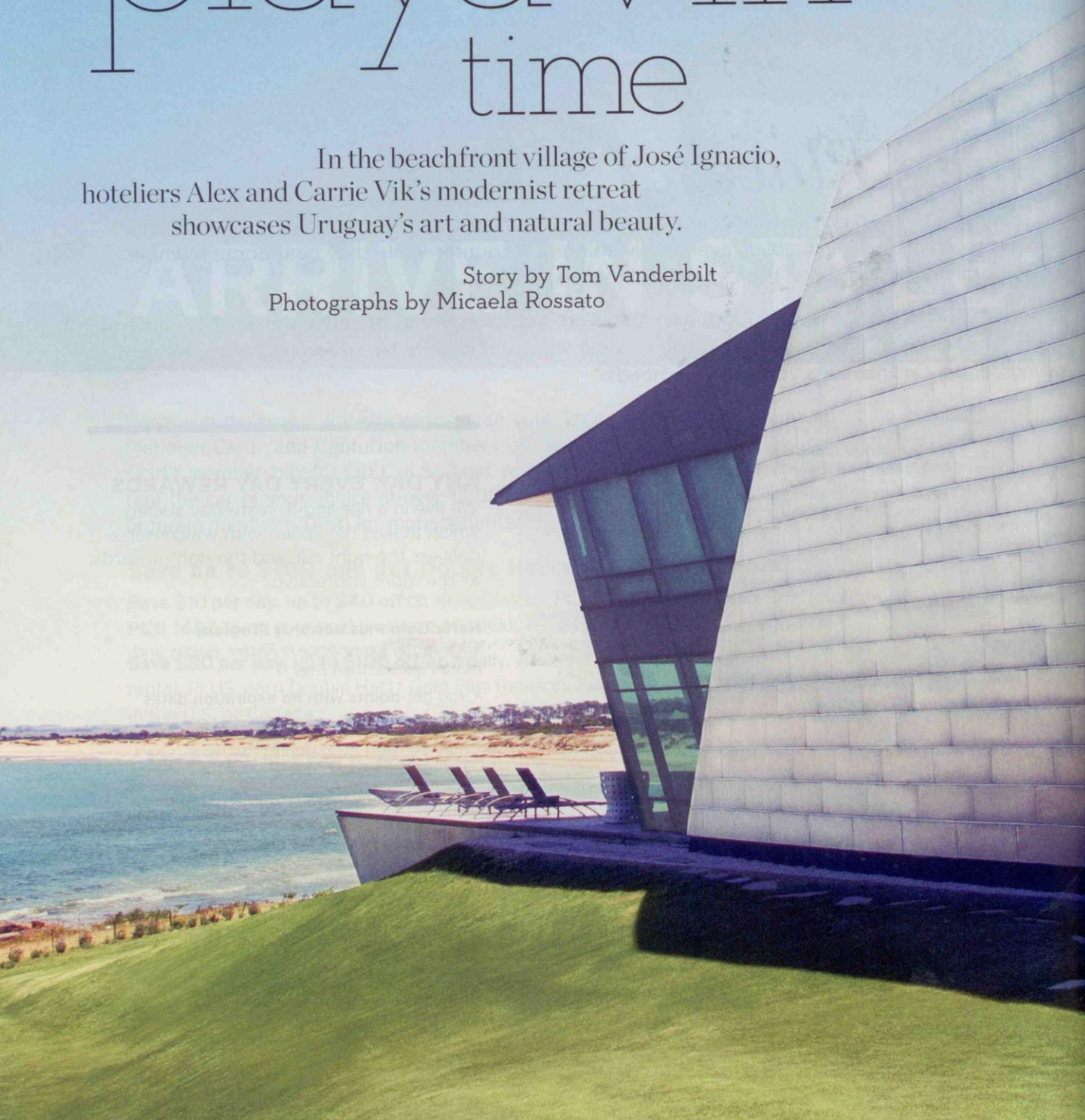
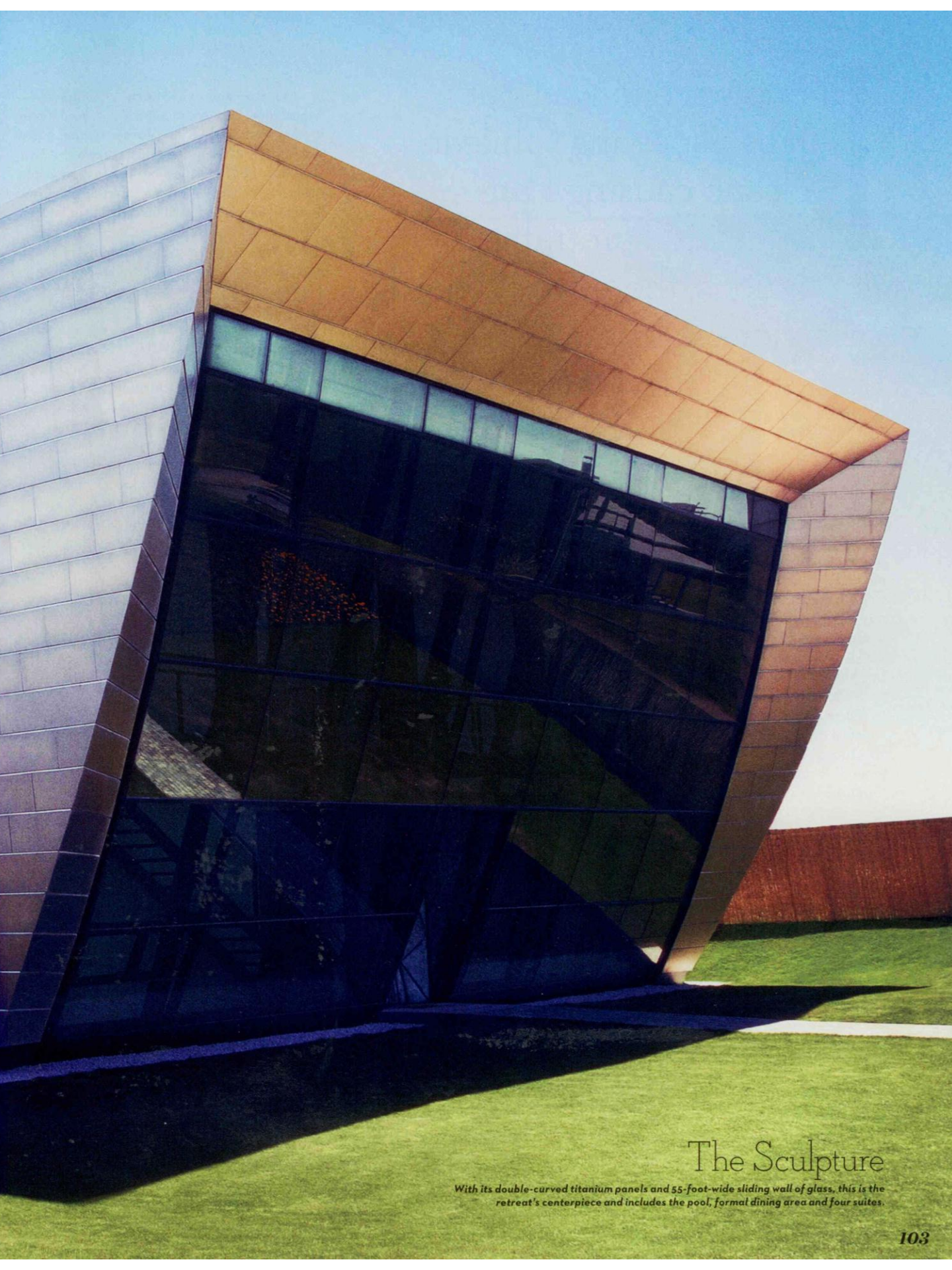


[it's playa vik time]

In the beachfront village of José Ignacio,
hoteliers Alex and Carrie Vik's modernist retreat
showcases Uruguay's art and natural beauty.

Story by Tom Vanderbilt
Photographs by Micaela Rossato





The Sculpture

With its double-curved titanium panels and 55-foot-wide sliding wall of glass, this is the retreat's centerpiece and includes the pool, formal dining area and four suites.

If one were to wait out an ash-spewing Chilean volcano causing Pancontinental air traffic disruptions, there would hardly be a more salubrious locale than the Uruguayan beachfront village of José Ignacio, on an exclusive, if low-key, peninsula

where eclectic architecture brushes up against a rocky beach, where the twilight that filmmakers call the “magic hour” seems to last several. And if José Ignacio was the chosen refuge, as it was mine on that South American spring weekend, when the Puyehue-Cordón Caulle volcanic eruption had its way with thousands of travelers, there would be no better place to serve as a departure lounge than the Playa Vik—in Uruguay it’s pronounced “plajah”—the visually arresting oceanfront property opened last year by Alex and Carrie Vik, whose names have already been established in the region with the nearby Estancia Vik.

Where Estancia Vik, a monumental white-and-red Spanish Colonial edifice overlooking an endless vista of riverine grazing lands flecked with cattle and waterfowl—not to mention its own polo ground, frequented by the likes of Argentinean superstar Adolfo Cambiaso—puts a luxurious gloss on the idea of the sprawling Uruguayan ranch, Playa Vik is its cool cousin. It is where one drinks fresh *caipiroskas* in a striking titanium structure housing works by Zaha Hadid and James Turrell as whales glide by in the oceanic distance, seen just over the edge of the infinity pool, which juts outward like the prow of a ship. One is grass and soft leather; the other salt air and sleek glass.

These two contrasting visions, mere minutes from each other, sum up what attracted the Viks to Uruguay in the first place. “The coastline is just one long, rolling, sandy beach,” says Carrie, sitting at the extendable Corian dining table, modeled after an airplane wing and designed by Alex. (This is one of the qualities of the couple: When they can’t find the piece of furniture they want, they will create it themselves.) “And there’s the land rolling down to the beach,” adds Alex as I try not to be distracted by a large, three-dimensional Cubist sculpture of my fellow Brooklynite, the writer Paul Auster (by Uruguayan artist Javier Abdala), looming in the background. “The Estancia is what I call Marlboro Country,” he says. “You’re riding a horse, canoeing on the river, riding a mountain bike. Here, in the summer, it’s more like St.-Tropez.”

“St.-Tropez 40 years ago,” Carrie adds.

The Viks, who lead the kind of far-flung existence (houses

in Monaco and Greenwich, Connecticut—“where our kids go to school”—a pied-à-terre in New York City’s Time Warner Center; a new vineyard in Chile), were first drawn to Uruguay in the 1980s, owing less to geography than to genetics. Alex, an investor who was born in Norway and lived his early life in Sweden, has a Uruguayan mother (he pulls this off well, casually wearing Uruguayan riding boots one day, a “Norway” polo jersey the next). When the couple’s first child was born, in 1987, they returned to his ancestral homeland to, as Alex says, “present my first daughter to my grandmother,” who was living in Montevideo.

“We fell in love,” says Carrie, as they began exploring the country—enraptured by a cousin’s estancia (six hours in the car with a gaggle of family members), the resort town of Punta del Este (then not groaning under quite the same weight of beachfront residential towers) and the sleeper districts of La Barra (more or less a fishing village at the time). They started to meet people, particu-

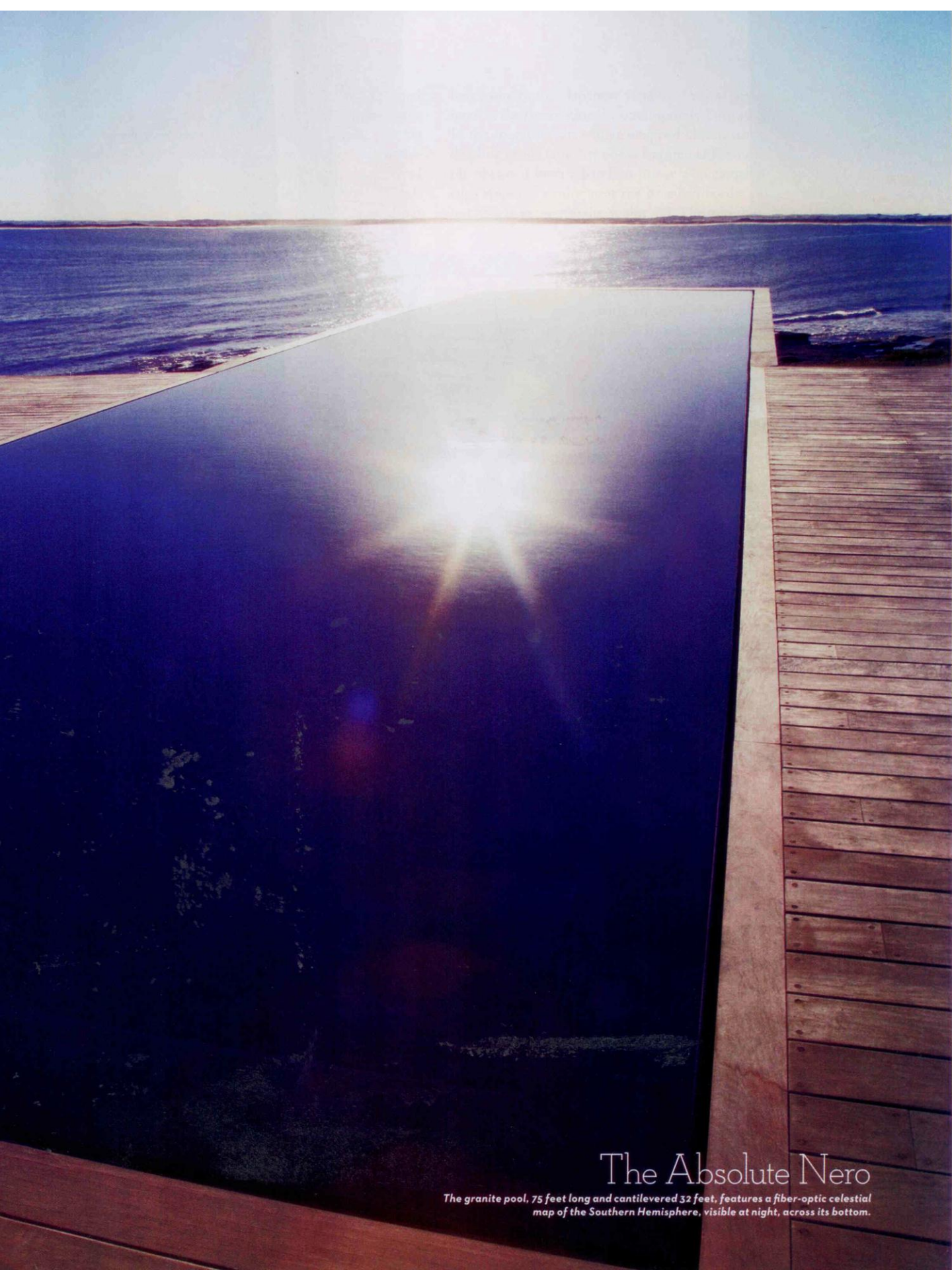
larly artists. The birth of a son and another daughter led to successive visits. They purchased a house in La Barra in 2000. “We decided that this was where we would come for Christmas every year,” Carrie says.

But a dream of the estancia life beckoned, and in 2004 they found their property. Even as they sold the house in La Barra, they were reluctant to give up the beach, and so they purchased a place in José Ignacio. “We were sitting with these two pieces of property,” says Alex. “But we lead a very Northern Hemisphere kind of life. What are we going to do—we can’t be here all the time.” And so the idea of creating Playa and Estancia Vik was born: Two properties representing two quintessential sides of the Uruguayan experience. Places where not only the country’s natural beauty could be showcased but also its art and culture; homes that just happened to be open to visitors.

This is what my days at Playa Vik felt like—a weekend retreat of old and fast friends. Each room has a very distinct artistic motif—my suite, called Caras (“faces” in Spanish), featured a large mural on one wall of an array of women’s faces, along with portraits of Alex and the artist, Martín Verges Rilla. Rilla has been revisiting the room to add continuing details and, indeed, there was the faintest whiff of paint. I learned this because I ran into him at the bottom of the stairs one morning—and he readily laughed when I suggested that much more painterly attention had been lavished on Alex and him than the others in the work.

Another evening, the sculptor Pablo Atchugarry, a gregarious figure as outsized as his work (he regaled us with a tale of the logistics involved in moving some of his larger pieces), who works mostly around Lake Como but has a foundation and workshop (well worth a visit) nearby in El Churro, came by for dinner, walking through a door of his own design: a massive patinated form rendered in the organic curves and bold striations that characterize his work. Joined by Marcelo Daglio (the Montevideo-based architect who designed Estancia Vik) and Fred Bollerer (the COO of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.) and his wife, Susan, who happened to be staying at Playa, the evening felt like a relaxed and intimate *tertulia*.

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The Absolute Nero

The granite pool, 75 feet long and cantilevered 32 feet, features a fiber-optic celestial map of the Southern Hemisphere, visible at night, across its bottom.



Casa Mar Suite

One of two bathrooms in the 1,200-foot suite; Beach Beads Slide halter by Ralph Lauren; yellow-gold and platinum earrings with diamonds, green onyx and turquoise by David Webb. For details, go to page 132.

The centerpiece of Playa Vik, designed by the Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott—whose portfolio includes the nearby airport in Punta del Este and Paris's Opéra Bastille, among others, and is, with Rafael Viñoly, one of the few Uruguayan architects with a global presence—is called the Sculpture. It's an inverted trapezoid shape with gently curving sides, clad in titanium with a sliding wall of glass 55 feet wide that glows softly in the sun. "It's all about antigravity," says Alex. "That wall is curved 30 degrees; the pool is cantilevered 32 feet over the beach." Beneath the high concepts, however, lurks a simpler origin. "We were in our house in La Barra talking with Carlos about what we wanted to do with him in the beginning," says Carrie, "and our daughter, who was then six, made a drawing and gave it to him. He gives her credit for the first design—she had sketched the Sculpture and the houses around it."

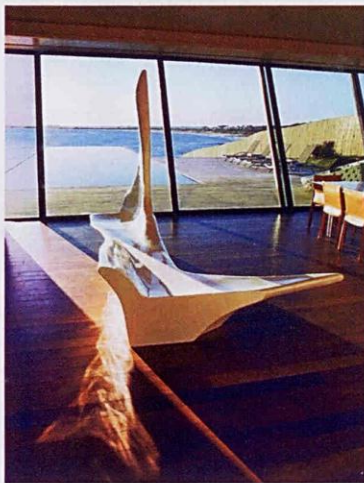
One does not quietly drop a building like the Sculpture into a town where single-family beach retreats (in styles ranging from concrete South American minimal to thatched-roof white-stone cottage) have been the norm, and the Viks readily admit a "mixed reaction" from locals. "There are people who think José Ignacio should just be the beach huts it was 20 years ago," says Carrie. On the other hand, the building has generated a kind of Bilbao effect in its own right, as I can personally attest: Through my glass-walled room I had a direct view not only of the Atlantic Ocean but also onto a neighboring road to the beach, and rare was the car loaded with Argentinean or Brazilian day-trippers who did not pause for a collective gawk (when it all started getting a bit too Marina Abramovic, I'd lower the semi-opaque shades with the press of a button).

But what's curious about Ott's design is that while the façade of the Sculpture, when viewed straight on from the courtyard of the property, looks rather large—almost suggesting a museum—from the beach or any other exterior vantage point it has the same scale as the neighboring residences. Surrounding it are a half-dozen stone-walled, low-slung casas, whose roofs are covered in sloping earthen mounds planted with flowers. These are not just green roofs, says Carrie, but an homage to the grass-roofed huts one sees in Scandinavia (per Alex's roots), as well as the grass berms sometimes used in Uruguay in place of fences. The plan, says Alex, is for the flowers to drape off the roofs and join the bougainvillea that will grow alongside. "It's a work in progress," he says. "It's a struggle because of the wind and sun."

I was struck more than once by the level of attention the Viks give to the property: This is no pleasant distraction for an absentee owner. Seemingly every object or design at the Playa had an intensely personal story behind it. When I asked about the semitranslucent walls in my suite's bathroom, which allowed light into an otherwise windowless room yet still maintained privacy, Carrie told me the idea

had come from a Japanese vendor of *washi* paper she had encountered at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. In the courtyard sits a huge wrapped object, which, it turns out, is a dazzling geode (another one is featured at Estancia Vik) that the couple obtained from a barefoot miner who casually trod across sharp-edge stones at a mine near the Brazilian border (they're still figuring out how to get it into the Sculpture). The tubs that resemble elegantly rustic canoes (one at Playa, another at Estancia Vik) were made by an artisanal boatmaker whom the Viks were introduced to by architect Daglio. "He works in a small house with an open-air workshop," says Alex. "I asked, 'If you can build a boat to keep water out, can you build it to keep water in?'" He could, and the results proved so winning the Viks are now flooded with requests to purchase tubs (even as they wait out the lengthy construction time to build one).

That same attention is now being paid to a new project—Viña Vik—a working 10,000-plus-acre vineyard in Chile, on a hillside about two hours south of Santiago (chosen after an extensive scientific search for ideal terroir), featuring a 16-suite retreat, which will open in early 2013. The vineyard building itself was designed by Chilean architect Smiljan Radic, while the guest lodge, with a transparent floor and walls that will make you feel "as if you are in the vineyard," is designed by the Viks themselves in their usual manner. "We sat down and drew it," says Carrie.



The art-filled rooms, one with a Bottega Veneta Shock Fire bag, have sweeping views of the southern Atlantic.

As the news of the volcano and the ensuing flight disruptions settled in—and I was granted another day—I decided to reprise my greatest hits: I walked by José Ignacio's imposing stone lighthouse; I looked for whales and polished stones on the beach; I went biking on the dirt roads past estancias, in a landscape that, by turns, evoked an Umbrian hillside and the South African veldt. As I pedaled up to a herd of cattle on the road, I spied a man on horseback on the other side; a true Uruguayan gaucho, with a Basque-style cap, billowy *bombachos* and weathered faced, he said "Buen día" with a

solemn, touching formality as we passed each other.

The following afternoon, the skies had finally cleared. But the process of rebooking flights in the wake of the shutdowns looked daunting. The Viks urged me to come back with them on their own Dassault, straight to New York. Who could say no to this extension of hospitality? And as we flew over the emerald reaches of the Amazon, I looked back in the cabin and saw Alex and Carrie intently arranging furniture layouts for Viña Vik on a piece of grid paper. ■

Playa Vik is a 90-minute drive from Montevideo's Carrasco International Airport. Rooms start at \$1,050. To book, call 598-94/605-212, and for more details, go to playavik.com.

DEPARTURES

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