

Equestrian life

AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER EQUINE MAGAZINE

LIFESTYLE // TRAVEL

Playtime

It is a glamorous playground for the rich and famous, but such is the privacy and remoteness on offer that even the paparazzi have little luck in tracking their 'prey'. Couple that with a boutique hotel that wins global plaudits and a sister property with one of the most recognised polo fields in the world and *Equestrian Life* had to check it out and take a ride.

BY JAMES NEWMAN // PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIED BY MEG CONNOLLY

PLAYA VIK, DESIGNED by architect Carlos Ott, is situated in a tiny fishing village just North of Punta Del Este in Uruguay. Sandwiched between Argentina and Brazil – it is much-lauded by both countries for its natural beauty, rich soils and climate. Punta Del Este has scenic coasts and beaches. The two types of coastlines – Brava and Mansa – indicate the end of Rio de la Plara (River Plate) on one side, and the beginning of the Atlantic Ocean on the other.

That it has long attracted the rich and famous, akin to St Tropez, comes as no surprise. Although small in population, which is seasonally adjusted depending on the sun, for those who want to escape the paparazzi then the option to hide away in Jose Ignacio is a good one. The tiny Peninsula is accessed by dirt roads crammed with expensive European cars. High fences surround everything from traditional fishing shacks to the glorious architectural example of boutique 'award winning' accommodation known as Playa Vik. Wallpaper Magazine's Design awards are globally recognised and held in the same regard as the Oscars. Playa Vik was awarded 'Best New or Renovated Hotel' in the 2012 awards.

So, how does one of the world's most highly regarded hotels happen to be located in this fishing village? Add to that an art collection rivaling some of the most established public collections – all by Uruguayan artists – and the intrigue grows.

It began with the vision of Alex Vik and his wife, Carrie, and their desire to bring family and friends together to share their love of Uruguay and utilise Estancia Vik as a family property, away from the hustle and bustle of very busy lives. Alex Vik is a globally recognised businessman with interests in web-enterprise software, real estate development, investments, agriculture, wine and spirits and what has now evolved quite organically – luxury boutique hotels called 'Vik retreats'.

Alex's mother is Uruguayan. Born in Norway and now based in New York, Alex visited his mother's homeland. Instantly falling for the landscape, he purchased a substantial chunk of land and set about building an Estancia for family and friends to visit. What happened next was the realisation that their busy, travel-laden schedules meant the property would sit empty for long periods of time. Instead, they opened the 1618 hectare Estancia Vik and soon after the architectural marvel, Playa Vik, to the public. The Vik's have always sourced the best and their architect, Carlos Ott, was no exception. Ott is a native Uruguayan, who now resides in Canada. His other notable works have included the highly recognisable 'Burj Al Arab' in the United Arab Emirates, as well as the International airport which services Punta Del Este, 'Laguna del Sauce.' »

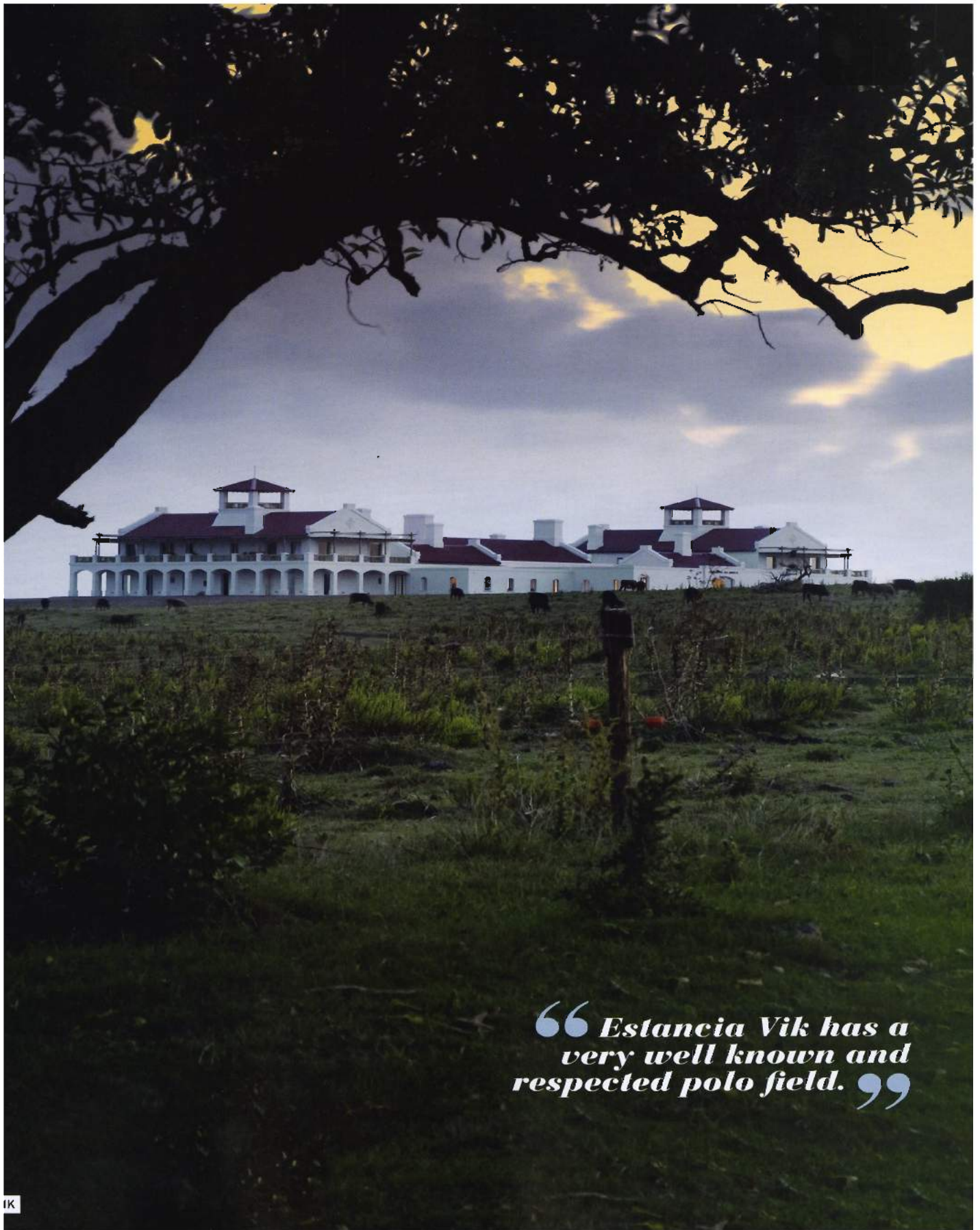


Polo Estancia Vik



The dining room





“ Estancia Vik has a very well known and respected polo field. ”

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» So what took Equestrian Life's Publisher to this part of Latin America? Heres of course. Estancia Vik has a very well known and respected Polo field and each year there is a reunion of famous players competing for the 'Cup Art Termanar' and the 'Lady Godina Cup'. Some of the players in the past have included Cristiano Razzari, Errico Gutierrez, Alex Vik himself and Mathias Magrini. Polo lessons at the Estancia are available, but we were more interested in taking a ride across the 1648 hectares and soaking up the stunning landscape.

Arriving in Jose Ignacio after a short flight from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, we are greeted by the Argentinian General Manager of Estancia and Playa Vik, Agustin. Having run substantial lodges in Argentina he was a natural choice for the Viks to run both properties. "The properties at this time of the year have just seen the last of their guests," said Agustin. Coming into winter the 'homes' are closed except for visits by the extended Vik family. Even across the summer, Agustin explains, when the family is in residence they sometimes take up the whole property. After all, Estancia Vik was built primarily as their retreat.

The 'Sculpture' as it is known, is the central hub of the retreat at Playa Vik. A two-story glass, concrete and timber structure with the sea-facing side of the building having a counter-levered pool, reaching from the central lounge and dining area and stretching to the sea. Upstairs are the Viks' bedrooms. At times it is hard to image that this is actually a dual purpose property - a home and a magnificent guest retreat, - as the two seamlessly blend. There is definitely a sense sitting in this property that you don't get when staying in other more standard boutique accommodation.

Surrounding the 'Sculpture' are six very different yet equally as remarkable 'Casas' (houses). Carrie Vik has an incredible sense of design-style, led and inspired no doubt by the artists' works that adorn the Casas walls, roof spaces and dress the 'Casas' with furnishings.

Walking through each of these houses you realise the immense attention to detail through the complex weaving of paintings, sculpture, textures and colors which Carrie has approached with as much intelligence and knowledge as a composer would for a symphony orchestra. The sound of an individual note, or in this case 'piece', is not so enthralling but when all 100 instruments sound the note simultaneously, there is harmony and surprise, leaving an audience wanting more. For guests at Playa Vik, the temptation would be to experience the splendor of all of the villas, but this may not be available to them when the retreat is full. I guess that's why, as Sabrina, manager of the property says that when many guests return, they have their favorite Casa yet they often enjoy a change in their surroundings, and choose a different one. »



Clever Lara's Frieza - Estancia Vik

“When many guests return they have their favourite casa”



Estancia Vik



Handcrafted bathrooms



The BBQ Room - Estancia Vik

THE SCULPTURE PLAYA VIK

» One of the key drivers behind Alex and Carrie's vision is to ensure that guests who stay at either the Estancia or Playa Vik are immersed in everything Uruguayan. From the food to the art, Uruguay's rich culture comes to life. Dinner at Playa Vik is in the main 'Sculpture' and guests are provided with dishes all created with local ingredients, sourced from growers and suppliers within the immediate area where possible. On the first evening we are treated to Alex's own 'Vik' red wine. The first vintage was released in 2009 and is a Bordeaux-style blend, made from the Vik's own grapes, from the vineyard, in the Millahue Valley in Chile. Its a superlative blend with a perfect balance, which as an indicator of further vintages, leaves us extremely excited in the hope that one day this wine will land on Australian shores. At night the pool takes on a starlit appeal reflecting the night sky above. This is one hot venue for weddings and celebrations, particularly for well-heeled Brazilians.

The next day we are treated to a delightful breakfast on a balcony taking in the sights and sounds of the sea - a stone's throw from where we sit. On a point to the north there are traditional, very colourful, fishing boats, unloading the morning's haul. It's a quaint reminder that this is still a fishing village.

Our day has been organised with a wine tour run by Ryan Hamilton owner of 'The Wine Experience' (see breakout) and then lunch and a tour of Estancia Vik with Agustin before the much anticipated ride.



“Winding our way through the open paddock, dodging cattle, the Estancia appears on the horizon.”



The Wine Experience

Ryan Hamilton, a native South African, recognised a niche in the market in Uruguay. His vast knowledge as a trained wine taster led him to establish 'The Wine Experience'. We were fortunate to experience this on our second day in Uruguay. Ryan took us to a beautiful winery, set back from the coastline, in the sweeping plains of the country. 'Fodega Nacional' is a winery housed in a recently reconstructed building or set of buildings, that create the sense of a winery that has been established for many years. The winery itself has been around for many years, but this property is relatively new. The tasting room is rustic and filled with memorabilia. A tour takes in the cellar-tasting room, grounds, all set for any occasion and most importantly, showcasing the wines. Ryan's tastings are very informative, educating you on the burgeoning Uruguayan wine industry. The wines are not as developed or as sophisticated as those found from regions like Mendoza-Argentina, but they are well on their way to reaching similar recognition. 'The Wine Experience' is a must when you are in this part of the world and seems to add yet another activity, personally guided, to the many delights on offer. Besides, as Australians it would be almost out of character to visit a wine-growing region and not sample the product. Ryan also offers a sunset wine experience, which includes a three-course dinner by the infinity pool at Playa Vik.

Bookings can be made at: www.thewineexperience.com



Jose Ignacio

Arriving at Estancia Vik the sheer scale of the property is immense. Winding our way through the open paddock, dodging cattle, the Estancia appears on the horizon. The whole property is open and natural. No fences, except for a perimeter fence and Agustin explains that this is how the Viks like it. It's not your sprawling, overly manicured, European mansion, but a perfectly positioned, gleaming white Spanish Colonial style Estancia, fit for the up-market guests it accommodates.

A tour reveals the same passion for art and things, which we think is called at Playa Vik. There is a central living room where guests can take in the frieze created by Clever Lara for the Viks. Covering 3,850 square feet, it covers the entire ceiling, sitting proudly 5.4 metres above your head. The inspiration behind this creation was the desire to educate guests about Uruguay and the diverse Argentinian landscapes across the country. In the centre of the room is a sculpture created by Pablo Acabagory, who also created the remarkable bronze pivot coat as the entrance way to the 'Sculpture' at Playa Vik.

Maximiliano Borgeon, Director of Vik Retreats, gets us started explains the story behind the living room and the rest of the home. The suites - 12 of them - are all individual and one end of the building reflects the cool side of Uruguay's climate, with a palette of cool tones in the common areas. The other side of the building has warm tones, surrounding you in a veranda like here. Agustin's suites reflect the artistry they hold. In the 'Bunko Suite' there is a one-on-one wall behind the bedhead. When the property was being built it was had to be centred to make room. Carrie expressly requested that Enrique Bodega recreate this tree to commemorate the original.

**Getting there**

Qan'as and Lan: Chile fly to Santiago from Sydney, with connections from Santiago to Montevideo//

Lan, Pluna Airlines, Aerolineas Argentinas and Sky Airlines all connect to Montevideo//

Rates. Accommodation at Playe Vik starts at US\$1300 for a casa per night. Estancia Vik starts at \$500 for a suite per night (low season).

“A fast canter to the stables and I'm a convert to the Gaucho way.”

» Views across the Estancia are had from every room, the bathrooms are masterpieces of hand crafted timber, stone and glass and each complete with its own rain-shower.

After lunch we head for the stable block. Agustin had arranged for horses to be saddled and ready for our afternoon ride. Strict instructions are given not to pull back on the reins too firmly, as the horses are super-responsive and this could result in an accident. Mounted, we head off around the back of the stable with Agustin, one of the stable hands and an array of happy dogs in tow.

The country is mostly untouched and serene. It's quiet and we walk and canter through small valleys, ditches and across streams. Not a fan of trotting, Agustin instructs us not to. The only way you can describe the experience is that it's like stepping out of a manual car and into an automatic. The horses are neck reined and Agustin was not joking when he said responsive. Lift the reins up and forward and you are quickly into a canter. If you want to stop, a gentle pull in the other direction and you stop, fast.

We head towards the inland lagoon. It is getting late and it's cool. Behind us the Estancia is bathed in an early evening glow from a superb sunset. The wildlife, both natural and farmed, surrounds us - armadillos, ostriches, cattle with their calves. The air is fresh and the ride exhilarating. Agustin is a true Gaucho - extremely experienced and horses are in his blood. As we walk through reeds by the lagoon I ask him how often he gets to ride. "It's my favorite thing to do here. After a day in the office managing the properties, it's terrific that this is actually a part of my job. I get to ride almost every day as I have to check the property and make sure that the horses are kept 'tuned-up' for guests." Is it ever a lonely pursuit? "Never, my wife does not ride anymore but occasionally my son comes out with me. He is now old enough to ride, and that gives me a lot of joy as I get to teach him and we get time together."



The tack room

It is getting dark as we turn back towards the Estancia. We pick up the pace and head back towards the now mist-covered home. By this stage my confidence was building and a new style of riding was starting to feel more natural. A fast canter to the stables and I am a convert to the gaucho way - and even more of a convert to having horses saddled for you after a delightful lunch, warmed down and turned back out into the paddock, while you get to enjoy a beer back in the warmth of the Estancia.

As we leave Jose Ignacio, and farewell our hosts, I reflect on the last two days. The environment that surrounds you, the art that you experience, locally sourced and excellently prepared food, sublime wine, adds up to a truly unique experience.

These may be properties, which attract the rich and famous, yet we all should spoil ourselves once in our lives. This is a true indulgence and for the equine-minded, the perfect blend of up-market accommodation mashed with the chance to take Polo lessons, or simply ride the property. You'll be transported from the ordinary, to the extraordinary. **EQ**



FOR BOOKINGS www.vikretreats.com