

ESSENTIALIST

JUST BACK FROM | JOSÉ IGNACIO

South America's most alluring beach town

Words by Mark Johanson

"Nobody comes here to stay busy; you come for shopping, dining, strolling, tanning and downing glasses of Garzon rosé until the sun plunges into the surf."

The Uruguayan city of Punta del Este likes to call itself "the Hamptons of South America," but that moniker rings far truer in the nearby hamlet of Jose Ignacio. It's here, one-hour east along the nation's ritzy Atlantic coast, that multimillion-dollar cottages line feral sands, designer boutiques populate sleepy streets, and art-filled hotels offer a whiff of sophistication by the pounding sea. This low-key resort town has all but solidified its reputation in recent

years as the premier summer destination for affluent city-dwellers from Buenos Aires to São Paulo. It's little wonder winter escapees from the Northern Hemisphere are now following suit.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Norwegian-Uruguayan businessman Alexander Vik and his American wife Carrie opened their first hotel in Jose Ignacio in 2009. Now, they rule the scene with three lavish properties in and around town. **Estancia Vik** is the elegant Spanish-colonial affair that put Jose Ignacio on the map by luring big name celebrities (like Katy Perry and Leonardo DiCaprio) with the promise of the ultimate gaucho fairytale. A stay at this inland property typically involves saddling up at the onsite stables for polo lessons and sunrise trots to a nearby lagoon. **Playa Vik** is a more modern affair, tucked beneath a living roof of native grasses on a bluff at the edge of town. The newest hotel, **Bahia Vik**, is a short stroll away. It boasts a string of plush bungalows along the region's most alluring stretch of sand. Collectively, the properties contain more contemporary Uruguayan art than you'll find anywhere else in the country.

