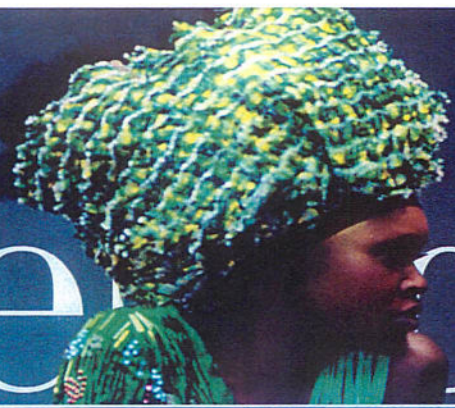


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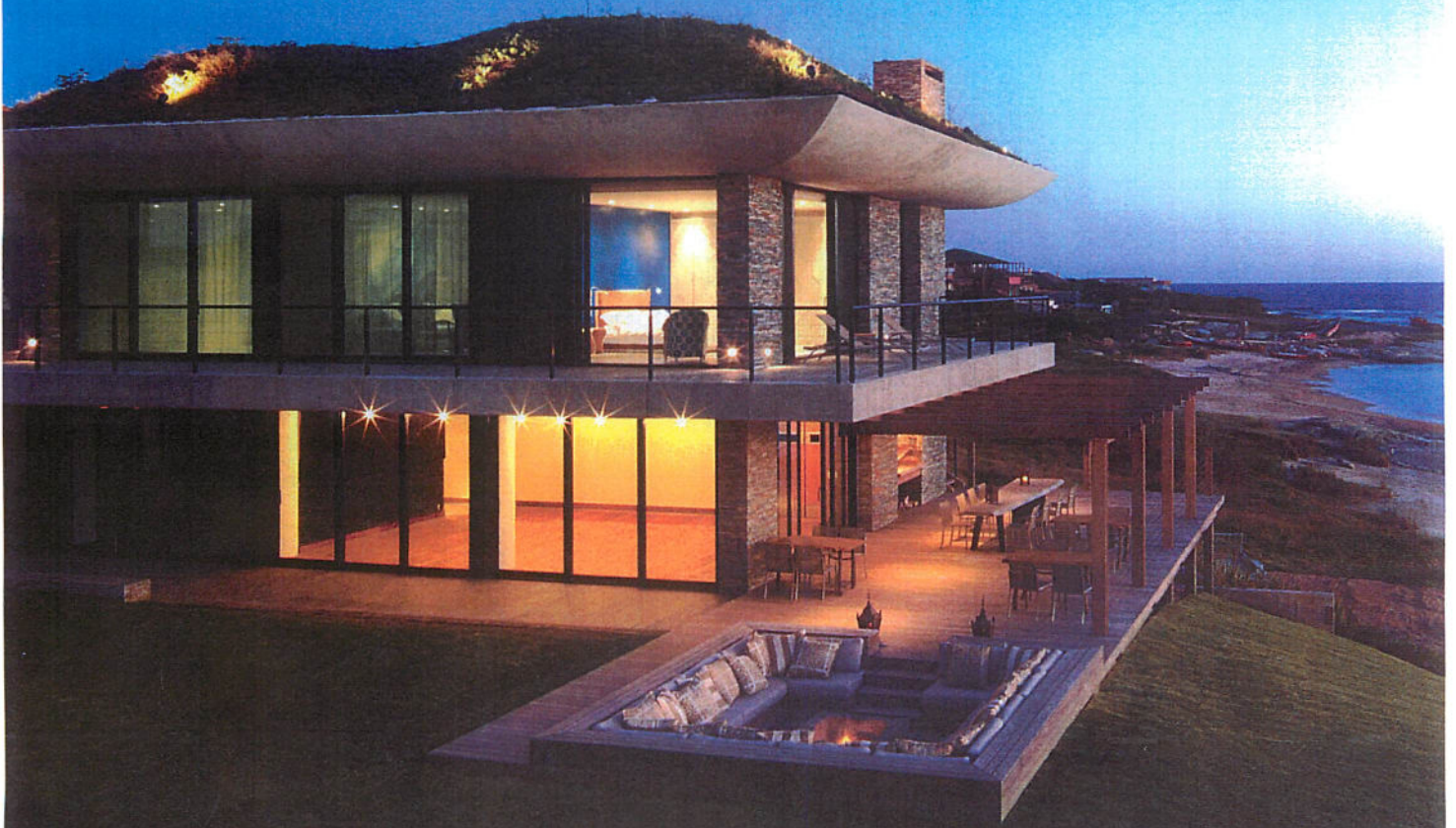
Travel unraveled

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ART IS IN RESIDENCE

New hotels and resorts are being conceived with art at their core, combining ultra-luxurious surroundings and experiences with blue-chip collections and site-specific installations. Jeroen Bergmans reports.



Main picture: Playa Vik in José Ignacio, Uruguay. Opposite, inset top: the living room at Casa Mar, Playa Vik. Inset below: artist Eduardo Cardozo created work, such as the murals and fireplace, for Casa Tierra at Playa Vik.

Cast your mind back, if you will, to the swinging mid-noughties, when the art world staggered observers with the astronomical sums commanded by works both at auction and in private sales. As the world's finance vizziers, entrepreneurs and oligarchs sought to outdo each other in the accretion of multimillion-dollar vanity collections, the frenzy had its reflection in a brief but buzzy hotel trend that saw top properties showing off trophy masterpieces for their own sake – witness American casino magnate Steve Wynn's acquisition of Picasso's *Le Rêve*, which hung for a handful of years in the lobbies of his glittering, outsized eponymous Vegas resorts.

The art world is a different place today, just the other side of the downturn. Collectors seem to be taking a longer view, weighing provenance and meaning more carefully. As in art, so, it seems, in travel. Experiences and surroundings that together communicate a real sense of place and give added meaning to a stay are the savvy independent hotel's new priorities. And, intriguingly, serious art is now being deployed by a few forward-thinking hoteliers, who as often as not are collectors themselves, to form the bedrock of the entire guest experience. The artwork sets the tone for both interior design and architecture, and becomes the focal and talking point of rooms and public spaces – in some cases because it's been directly commissioned for them.

Arguably the most impressive of these hotels can be found in José Ignacio, the Uruguayan beach town that's increasingly upstaging Punta del Este (its flamboyant neighbour 20km to the south) as the resort area of choice for South America's jet set. The new Playa Vik (pictured on these pages) welcomed its first guests at the end of March. Its sister hotel, the über-chic colonial-style Estancia Vik (pictured overleaf),





This picture: Carlos Musso's chapel in the grounds of Estancia Vik. Below: Musso's vibrant suite for Estancia Vik.

opened last year. Its half-Uruguayan owner Alex Vik, who has been an occasional José Ignacio resident for two decades, says the seven-star accolade on the website for his two hotels is deliberately tongue in cheek. "It's intended as a satire on the hotel industry, because Estancia Vik and Playa Vik are meant to feel much more like residences," he says. Both were in fact conceived by Vik and his wife, Carrie, as private retreats for their extended family. But as architectural plans for phase one – the colonial-style ranch that became Estancia Vik – were coming to fruition, the couple were simultaneously toying with the idea of displaying their impressive collection of Uruguayan and international art in an accessible but selective way that would reflect their own aesthetic. Thus the hotels' concept was born. Installation artist, set designer and family friend Enrique Badaró Nadal was brought on board as in-house curator, and drew up a roster of 20 of the country's leading artists, some of whom were already collected by the Viks. Each of the 12 suites bears the name of the artist who contributed site-specific artwork to it. In the sensual Trujillo Suite, huge canvases depicting a nude couple hang in the bedroom and the walls are painted with ghostly, grey outlines that mimic those of the artist's own studio. In the Legrand Suite, a series of framed canvases have been reconfigured by the artist into a headboard, while a massive architectural wooden sculpture is dramatically suspended from the vaulted ceiling. In some cases the collective investment in the Viks' project goes beyond mere time and talent. On a morning nature walk through the 4,000 acres of grounds shared by the hotels, the guide – whose encyclopedic knowledge of local birdlife and engaging tales of gaucho folklore both charm and impress – turns out to be the Uruguayan artist Alejandro Turell; his designs for the suite bearing his name incorporate 12 intricate pencil drawings of birds' nests and a series of dramatic, gorgeously wrought oils depicting woodpeckers and owls. Playa Vik is a sleek complement to the modern-rustic charms of the Estancia. It has the same philosophy of

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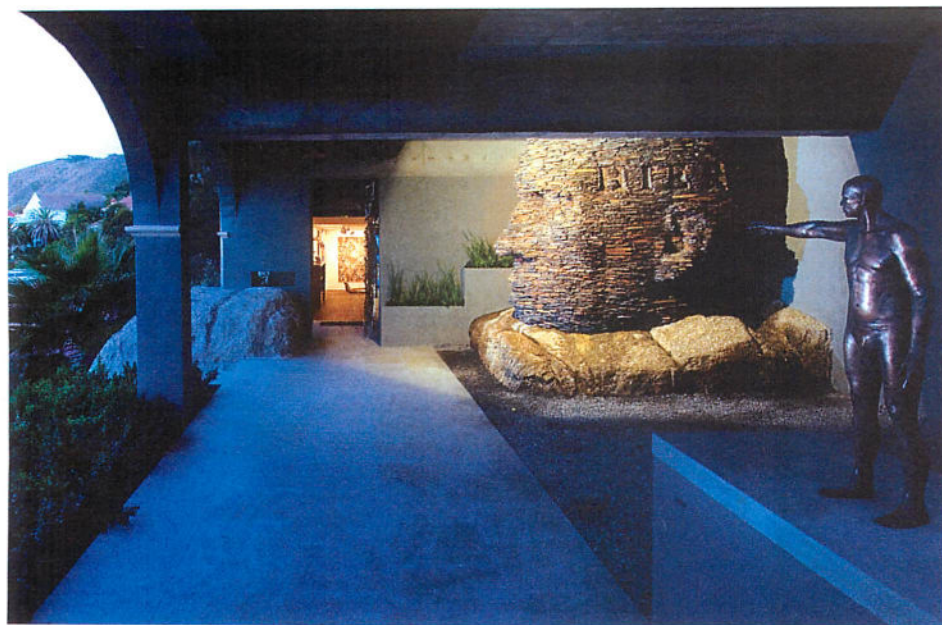
providing a setting in which guests engage with the surrounding art, but its aesthetic is cutting-edge contemporary. The hotel's six casitas have undulating rooftops planted with wild flowers; each also has two patios screened by a cascade of exotic foliage in the style of celebrated modernist Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx. Casa Tierra, one of the first of the casitas to open, was "assigned" to local artist Eduardo Cardozo, who has lined the entire living room with one of his moody, abstract murals. He also collaborated on the design of the sculptural central fireplace – hand-built, using a mixture of mud and straw – that complements the earthy tones of the walls and the rough-luxe elegance of the freestanding concrete bath. In contrast, for the three-room villa called Casa Raices ("roots" in Spanish), the Viks commissioned Pablo Cuberta, whose digitally produced work they had long admired but which they felt was too edgy for Estancia Vik, to install a work representing the Uruguayan diaspora to Europe and the US over the past 40 years. As

his mural stretches round the room, the artist gradually incorporates a palette of bold shades, so that the work culminates in a cacophony of colour by the door leading to the bedrooms.

The core of Playa Vik is a pavilion by internationally acclaimed Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott – a minor masterpiece in itself (the Viks refer to it as "The Sculpture") forged from sheets of titanium and glass around a poured-concrete core; the 16m-high façade, which faces a wooden-cobbled courtyard entrance, tapers down at a gravity-defying 30° angle. In dynamic contrast to the distinctly native message of the guest casitas, it houses work by world-renowned artists. In the atrium, a five-metre-long Anselm Kiefer canvas, one part of his *Secret Life of Plants*, hangs on a wall; to the right, a rosewood-lined library is furnished with a customised

"Stalactite & Stalagmite" table by Pritzker prizewinner Zaha Hadid, while a James Turrell light installation spans another wall. A second Kiefer painting, the other part of *The Secret Life of Plants*, presides over the dining room, from which 13ft-high glass panels slide onto a decked terrace surrounding a dramatic, 75ft black-marble swimming pool cantilevered out across an immaculate lawn toward the Atlantic.

Elsewhere in the world, the aesthetic model of the art-hotel phenomenon may differ, but the ethos is shared. One particularly interesting example is about to open in Stellenbosch, in South Africa's Cape Winelands. Delaire Graff Lodges & Spa (pictured overleaf) comprises 10 private villas set above the vineyards of Delaire Wine Estate, as a complement to an excellent restaurant and tasting room that opened last summer. From its inception, the whole – restaurant, tasting room, lodges – was conceived in large part as a showcase for South African art from the collection of the estate's owner, the diamond magnate Laurence



Left: the gallery at Ellerman House, Cape Town. Below: David Collins' lobby at Delaire Graff Lodges and Spa, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

A guest can hardly stop to admire the art without a staffer pausing to expound on its provenance or contextualise it.

Graff. He and designer David Collins were clear about their purpose: the artwork was to be treated as the cornerstone of the interiors, and intrinsic to the experience of all aspects of the property, from the guest lodges to the spa. "There is a fantastic charcoal drawing by William Kentridge [Untitled], designated for the restaurant's main dining room," says Collins. An earlier Kentridge work featuring bold use of colour, it drove choices Collins made for the room – such as the striking burnt-orange serpentine banquettes that weave through the space, which have been carefully configured to allow as many guests as possible to admire the art.

Elsewhere in the grounds and public spaces are works commissioned for the estate from some of the country's notable talents. Deborah Bell (several of whose large-scale portraits hang in the restaurant and lodge's public spaces) has produced a sculpture series to be incorporated into architectural water features in the spa and the winery, as well as others integrated into the landscaping. Notably, a guest can hardly stop to admire the art without a staffer or waiter pausing to expound on its provenance, or contextualise it within the collection.

Which is not to say that art has supplanted luxury. The lodge is minimalist and sleek, but deeply indulgent, set over a rise from the winery and restaurant, with its own entrance pavilion and check-in area; the lounge is airy and filled with sunlight, with wide patio. There's a small but quite perfectly formed spa, equally sunlit, whose treatment suites give onto a view that on a clear day stretches all the way to Table Mountain. Through clever manipulation of divider walls and landscaping, each villa feels utterly secluded from the others. The interiors are contemporary, but there are subtle references to indigenous design: pitched Cape Dutch roofs, gently striated plaster walls, oak parquet floors in some areas, rush matting in others. Each has a terrace and infinity pool reached by wall-to-wall sliding glass doors. They overlook rounded red-earth hills striped with the vines that produce the estate's sauvignon blanc and cabernet franc rosé wines, and the valley below.

About 40 miles west in the elegant Cape Town neighbourhood of Bantry Bay is Ellerman House, a splendid full-service guesthouse long known for its collection of 18th- and 19th-century paintings by local masters, ranging from emotive Betsy Bailey landscapes to engaging portraits by Gerard Sekoto. Owner Paul Harris, who curates all the art in the hotel, had been looking for a way to introduce guests to the country's burgeoning contemporary art scene that would be in keeping with the property's ultra-exclusive remit. The result is the Ellerman Contemporary Gallery (pictured



top), which Harris had constructed underneath the grand Victorian property's lawn and pool. Accessible exclusively to hotel guests and by appointment only, the space and its unique collection (which features 15-20 works at a time, rotated every couple of months) are a distinct departure from the classic elegance of the main building. The feel is cool, stark and resolutely minimalist. The gallery is intended as a place of quiet, luxurious contemplation of the country's most aesthetically valuable assets. A sitting area incorporated into the design allows comfortable viewing of the artworks and enjoyment of panoramic views of the sea through a vast plate-glass window extending to the ceiling.

In Cape Town and the Winelands – both favoured destinations of moneyed and discerning travellers for at least a decade – there would seem to be a ready-made audience for this kind of novelty; top-end hotels are hardly in short supply, and visitors are ready for the next experience. But in Uruguay, will the appeal of such a niche, Zeitgeisty product be met by demand – especially with room rates starting at £550? José Ignacio, with its longstanding high-season population of wealthy South Americans (as well as a growing number of global visitors), is probably the ideal place to launch such an endeavour. In the past few years it has evolved from a fishermen's village with a population of 150 to a summer community with 10,000 residents. Strolling around its streets, you notice multiple "Vende" signs and the smart, shiny frontage of Christie's Great Estates, which is clearly doing a roaring trade. Sleek modernist villas with sea views may soon outnumber the town's original, charmingly rustic bungalows. Ralph Lauren purportedly

recently acquired a posada on a substantial plot of land in adjacent La Barra. José Ignacio's social epicentre is La Huella, a restaurant overlooking the beach that specialises in exquisite grilled fish. Here they take 400 dinner bookings almost every night in January and February. "They have a quite discreet VIP section inside," says Vik hotels' "experience concierge" Daniela Rizzo, "but people will queue for over an hour for a table on the terrace. They'd rather be seen out here than sit next to Naomi Campbell, but out of sight [of the other locals]."

Indeed, José Ignacio is far from a secret. Despite strict restrictions on hotel developments, Adrian Zecha (chair of Amanresorts and of über-luxe chain GHM Hotels & Resorts) has finally secured permission to build a second Setai, a 40-room boutique hotel with an additional 40 private villas on the outskirts of town, which is likely to match the Miami flagship in cachet the moment it opens. And at the end of the year the Fasano family, owners of the eponymous boutique hotels in São Paulo and Rio, also plan to open a resort property, Las Piedras, further inland. But the town's habitués are worldly wise, and many of them artistically literate; the two Vik properties, with their carefully cultivated provenance and authenticity, are likely to be the pieds à terre of choice for some time to come.

On the horizon are a handful of openings that suggest that the practice of weaving art into the fabric of the hotel experience is set to grow. Zendai Hotel Yin, for example, part of the Himalayas Centre development in the Pudong district of Shanghai (designed by Arata Isozaki, the architect behind MoMA Los Angeles and Barcelona's Olympic Stadium), is due to open its doors in October. The Zendai will be home to a modern-art museum (opening next May) and promises the work of significant Chinese contemporary artists throughout its 413 rooms, with mixed-media

installations in the public spaces. The Beach House Maldives, a 83-villa resort on a private northern atoll, which was acquired by Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts last summer, is in a similar vein. Following renovation, it had its soft opening in March and, from this month, adds to its attractions with a multimillion dollar "interactive" art gallery/studio, in which guests can converse with and observe half a dozen artists from around the island nation at work.

Whether these new enterprises will be meaningful extensions of the theme that Playa Vik and the others represent, or simply aspirational (or worse, gimmicky) permutations of high design, remains to be seen. The art, and the experience, will tell. ✦

MASTERPIECES, MASTER SUITES

Jeroen Bergmans travelled to José Ignacio as a guest of **Playa Vik**, Calle Los Cisnes y Los Horneros, José Ignacio (+598-94 605 212; www.playavik.com), which has rooms from \$800. He was also a guest of **Iberia** (0870-609 0500; www.iberia.com), which flies from London Heathrow to Montevideo (via Madrid) daily, from £836.

Beach House Maldives, PO Box 2062, Manafaru Island, Haa Alifu Atoll (+960-650 0400; www.beachhousemaldives.com), from £364.

Delaire Graff Estate & Lodge, Helshoogte pass, Stellenbosch (+2721-885 8160; www.delaire.co.za), from £800. **Ellerman House**, 180 Kloof Rd, Bantry Bay, Cape Town (+2721-430 3200; www.ellerman.co.za), from £407. **Estancia Vik** (reopens July 4), Camino Eugenio Saiz Martínez Km 8, José Ignacio (+598-94 605 212/314; www.estanciavikjoseignacio.com), from \$275. **Wynn Las Vegas**, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd South (+1702-770 7000; www.wynnlasvegas.com), from \$229. **Zendai Hotel Yin**, 1098 Mei Hua Rd, Pudong, Shanghai (+8621-503 35981; www.zendaihotels.com), from RMB3,910 (about £370).