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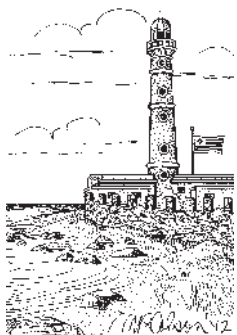
ANDREW HARPER'S Hideaway Report®

JUNE 2012 | OUR 34TH YEAR

AndrewHarper.com

CANDID REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY

Discovering Uruguay: South America's Riviera



WITH THE OPENING OF several dramatic new hotels in and around the small, strikingly beautiful Atlantic beach town of José Ignacio, Uruguay has emerged as a discreetly glamorous destination. A simple, sand-

in-your-shoes kind of place where everyone gets around on bicycles, José Ignacio is a complete contrast to the flashier, Miami Beach-like style of nearby Punta del Este.

Hemmed in by Argentina and Brazil, Uruguay has a character all its own. A Florida-size nation of forests and pampas, it has contrived to avoid the boom-and-bust cycles of its neighbors so often that it has become known as the Switzerland of South America. As well as being

financially solid, it is a safe, mostly middle-class country with excellent infrastructure.

Uruguay won its independence in 1828 and boomed during the 19th century as immigrants from Europe arrived to work in its cattle and meatpacking industries. With a vast, empty interior — most of the 3 million inhabitants live in and around the capital, Montevideo — plus a long coastline similar to the dune-edged shoreline of Cape Cod, the country is attracting major new international investment as a holiday destination.

On our recent trip, the high-season crowd in José Ignacio was a relaxed and interesting mix of American, British and Italian visitors, as well as upper-crust South Americans, all of whom seemed amused rather than impressed by the parade of movie stars and models to be spotted frolicking in the surf or strolling along the broad, sandy beach.

American Airlines operates the only nonstop flights between the United States and Uruguay, from Miami to Montevideo, so many travelers opt for a night or two in Buenos Aires before taking one of the many scheduled 50-minute flights to Punta del Este. This is what I chose to do during my 10-day trip in late February, which was a perfect time to escape the northern winter, but well past the Christmas to mid-January high season.

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With a booming Brazilian economy and relative prosperity in Argentina, Punta del Este is more popular than ever. Aside from the appeal of its beaches, climate and nightlife, it has always attracted affluent South Americans because Uruguay allows nonresidents to hold offshore accounts in U.S. dollars — insurance against periodic economic crises and the roller-coaster values of the Argentine peso and Brazilian real — and also to buy dollar-denominated real estate.

A stylish but quiet place in the '40s and '50s, Punta del Este has become a small city, with a growing number of high-rise apartment buildings downtown. As a result, those in search of tranquility have been moving north along the coast to La Barra and José Ignacio or inland to the lush grasslands of gaucho country. Tellingly, the sophisticated São Paulo-based Fasano Group opened its first Uruguayan property, **HOTEL FASANO PUNTA DEL ESTE**, four miles inland at the Las Piedras development, a 20-minute drive north from the busy beaches.

The centerpiece of the 1,200-acre gated estate is a beautifully renovated *chacra*, or traditional brick-and-timber low-rise Uruguayan ranch house, which is in dramatic contrast to the 20 concrete-and-glass Deluxe Bungalows and 10 Suite Bungalows designed by Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld. These have been sited on a hilltop to assure both good views and maximum privacy. (The Las Piedras estate also contains 225 private villa residences.)



Arriving on a hot, sleepy Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Harper and I enjoyed the warmest welcome we had received in a very long time from an efficient and sincere front-desk staff — a trio of polite 20-something Uruguayan young men who spoke perfect English. (We'd both been afraid that the place would be crawling with supermodels and be rather full of itself.) Once we'd settled in, we wandered over to the pool, which was attractively set amid large gray boulders. Though we had it to ourselves, I couldn't help but thinking it would be too small in the event of a full house. And the bungalows would definitely be more appealing if they provided the sort of private plunge pools that are standard at most Asian or Caribbean hotels charging similarly vertiginous prices.

Still, we liked our room with its built-in contemporary furniture and eucalyptus wood floors covered with raw-wool throw rugs. The toast-colored limestone bath came with a large stall shower, a single vanity and skylights. We would have preferred a few more windows, however, since all walls were solid except for the one leading to the private terrace. This was reached through a pair of sliding screen doors and proved a delightful spot in which to enjoy the sweet-smelling night air.

The hotel offers a small spa that includes an indoor pool, sauna, steam room and six treatment rooms. A nine-hole golf course is scheduled to open this year. There are also two very good restaurants. Located on another hilltop overlooking the Maldonado River and the surrounding countryside, the dinner-only *Fasano* has an excellent regional Italian menu. There, we enjoyed delicious mozzarella-stuffed ravioli, followed by excellent braised lamb. The more casual *Las Piedras* in the main lodge also serves Italian food in a trattoria-like setting.

Very much a hotel for couples, the Fasano was quiet during the day when many guests were at the beach, although it became livelier in the evening. To sample the Saint Tropez-like hijinks of Punta del Este at arm's length, this charming, stylish and well-run hotel is ideal. **92 Deluxe Bungalow, \$900; Suite Bungalow, \$1,300. Las Piedras, La Barra, Punta del Este. Tel. (598) 42-670-000. fasano.com.br/hotelaria**

At a dinner party in Buenos Aires prior to our departure for Uruguay, the first thing the other guests wanted to know was whether we were staying at one or both of Alex Vik's new hotels, the seaside Playa José Ignacio and the equestrian-oriented Estancia Vik José Ignacio, about 12 miles inland. (A Norwegian-Uruguayan Internet tycoon, Vik is now based in Greenwich, Connecticut.) "They're very expensive but very special," our hostess confided, so

we made the easy 40-minute drive from Las Piedras to José Ignacio with great expectations. Suffice it to say, we were thoroughly charmed by the town, which reminded us of a Latin American version of Truro on Cape Cod.

On arrival, you'd never guess this relaxed little place with an old cigar of a lighthouse and a busy *playa brava* (beach with surf) on the east flank of a peninsula and a quieter *playa mansa* (beach with calmer waters) on the west was anyplace fashionable.

The **PLAYA VIK JOSE IGNACIO** is the work of Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott, who also designed the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and the Opéra Bastille in Paris. The property opened last year and comprises four suites and six pavilions (with two or three bedrooms). A spectacular lap pool is cantilevered over an expanse of lawn, and museum-quality modern art is displayed in the sculpture pavilion, a striking structure containing two pieces by Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, among those of other world-class artists. Overall, the place has an upscale bohemian personality.

The seafront complex is surrounded by a wall that encloses limestone, concrete, titanium and glass structures in a landscaped garden. The pavilions are ideal for families — during our stay, we chatted with a hedge fund manager from New York on vacation with his wife and three sons, as well as a doctor and his children from Raleigh — while the four suites are better suited to couples.

Our rhomboid-shaped room, “Fuerteventura,” proved to be the ultimate in sea-shack chic, with gorgeous teak floors, white walls and striking photographs. A very comfortable bed was made up in Frette sheets, and a dressing room came with built-in teak shelves and wardrobes. Despite the bold contemporary design, the room also managed to be very comfortable, almost cozy, with a moss-green velvet sofa, a copper-clad granite-topped coffee table, an area rug made from thick strips of soft brown leather, and a magnificent teak writing desk. The bath was a large and very dramatic space, clad in sheets of aluminum riveted together like an old airplane. A rainfall shower and a large Boffi bath by Philippe Starck flanked the double vanities, and toiletries were all-natural and biodegradable, reflecting a commitment to sound environmental practices. (Geothermal energy is used to create a natural air-conditioning system; rainwater is captured for irrigation; and there are solar panels hidden on the roofs.)

Service from the young and attractive staff was generally good, but the general manager was a bit of a cold fish, which somewhat detracted from the warm, almost family-style, atmosphere. An intimate property like this

Gourmet Garzón

DRIVING NORTH FROM ESTANCIA VIK JOSE IGNACIO, it was a pleasure to putter through the Uruguayan countryside, where rolling pastures are dotted with lean horses and piebald cows and punctuated by stands of oak and eucalyptus trees.


Our destination was Garzón, a tiny town 20 miles north of José Ignacio, which has recently undergone a renaissance at the hands of urbanites from England and the United States, as well as from Buenos Aires. Having succumbed to its charm, these outsiders are busy restoring the old brick houses that line the streets around its tidy main square. Among them is Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, proprietor of **EL GARZON**, a pleasant five-room property with a superb restaurant.

Although not a luxury destination, this distinctive hotel is very comfortable — the air-conditioning works perfectly and there's plenty of hot water — and also has an irresistible “The Last Picture Show” charm. On our arrival at noon, Guido, a friendly Argentinean, helped us with our bags and settled us into a small but pretty room with a beamed ceiling, a wood-plank floor and faded chintz curtains. To be sure, these lodgings are primarily for people coming to dine in the restaurant who don't want to worry about Uruguay's strict drunken driving laws.

Having freshened up, we descended for lunch. This proved to be a superb meal of prawns wrapped in bacon on a bed of tomatoes with red onions in a lemon vinaigrette, and a lamb T-bone with oven-blasted potatoes seasoned with tapenade. The Argentinean wines — a dry Chardonnay-Viognier and a Petit Verdot — were first-rate.

In the afternoon, we took a stroll through the village. As we stopped to admire the flower and vegetable garden behind a nearby house, a child stared at us and shouted. Immediately, his mother and grandmother appeared and invited us inside for a visit. Despite our very limited Spanish, their hospitality had already delighted us when the mother presented us with a jar of homemade plum jam. Beyond the global renown of chef Mallmann, this is the reason to travel to Garzón — it must be one of the sweetest little towns in the Western Hemisphere.

Back at the inn, dinner comprised grilled beets with goat cheese and garlic chips, followed by an excellent steak cooked over a eucalyptus wood fire. It is a testament to the quality of the food that, although we weren't at all hungry, we thoroughly enjoyed every morsel.

 *Double Room, \$480, breakfast included. Camino a la Capilla y Costas de José Ignacio, Pueblo Garzón. Tel. (598) 410-2811. restaurantegarzon.com*

needs a charming host or hostess to interact casually with the guests. And as spellbound as we were by the beauty of the setting and the design of our room, we were a little disappointed with the food and beverage options. Given the room prices, breakfast should have been a memorable feast, but aside from very good homemade banana and walnut breads, it was a cursory buffet, with a Nespresso machine rather than good coffee, and no toast served with an order of fried eggs. Similarly, dinner proved to be an adequate meal of figs with salad and melted Camembert, followed by steak with sautéed potatoes and a garnish of chopped onion and peppers, but it was overpriced at \$80. The wines poured by the glass were mediocre. Fortunately, there are numerous good restaurants in José Ignacio — including the excellent *La Huella* — and most guests dine out for both lunch and dinner. Amenities at the resort include a small spa, a workout room with a sauna, a games room and a sunken barbecue pit where guests gather around the fire for a nightcap.

A great destination for a stylish and offbeat family beach holiday, Playa Vik is also a perfect base from which to explore the rest of Uruguay's spectacular coastline. If you require 24-hour room service and a serviced beach, then Playa Vik is not for you. If, on the other hand, you are content with an easygoing seaside existence, appreciate contemporary art and design, and have a sense of adventure when you travel, this remarkable property just might become one of your favorite hotels. **94 Suite (two people), \$1,600; Casa (four people), \$1,700. Calles Los Cisnes y Los Horneros, José Ignacio. Tel. (598) 94-605-212. vikretreats.com**

Visitors to Uruguay can now combine time at the Playa Vik with a stay at its sister hotel, the **ESTANCIA VIK JOSE IGNACIO**. On this magnificent 4,000-acre ranch, the principal sounds you'll hear are those of cows mooing against a backdrop of chirping crickets. Oh, and the occasional sound of a motor scooter, since these days, many gauchos ride herd on Honda scooters instead of horses!

This striking whitewashed property, with a distinctive red corrugated-iron roof, contains 20 suites, each decorated by a contemporary Uruguayan artist. Built three years ago on the brow of a hill, it affords sweeping views toward an inland lagoon, a winding river and the sea.

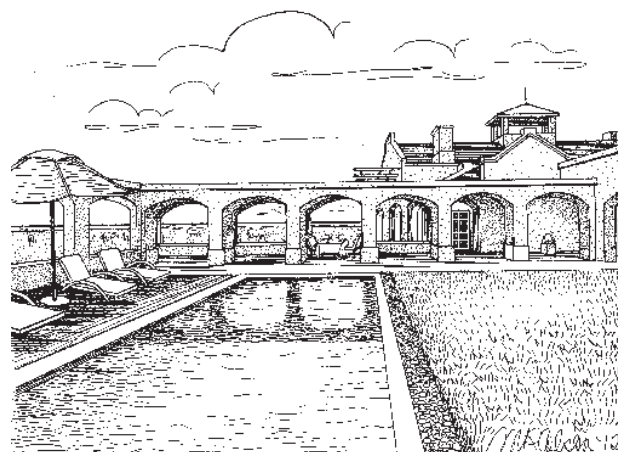
Aside from the spectacular setting, the main appeal of this profoundly peaceful place is equestrian activity. You can ride — on your own or accompanied — or take polo lessons on the property's full-size private field. Lagoons and streams offer canoeing, kayaking, windsurfing, sailing and fishing, as well as excellent bird-watching. We loved

spying on the ostrich-like *nandus* and more numerous black-and-white lapwings below our balcony.

On arrival, we were met in the driveway by the charming general manager, Agustín, who showed us around the hotel. This includes a small pool, a compact workout room, several tiny spa treatment rooms, a well-equipped games room and the master salon, with an elaborate décor of paintings inspired by Google Maps and photos of Uruguay — rather high-concept for the countryside, but comfortable nonetheless.

After our tour, we were escorted to our spacious suite, "Marcelo Legrand" — the name of the artist whose work adorned its walls — which had a ceiling of pickled pine and a floor of round tree-trunk tiles set into concrete. The room came with antique furniture — marble-topped nightstands, a mahogany Victorian desk, a briarwood armoire — plus a cozy sofa and overstuffed armchairs positioned in front of a woodburning fireplace. The spacious bath was appointed with a rosewood double vanity, a tub and two showers — rainfall and standard nozzle — but unreliable hot water was a recurring nuisance. A wonderful L-shaped veranda provided an outdoor shower and, for me, this private space was perhaps the nicest amenity of all.

Alas, the food proved expensive and only a little better than average. For almost \$100 a head, we were presented with a small serving of spindly asparagus topped with glue-like béchamel sauce and a dab of Uruguayan caviar,



Estancia Vik José Ignacio

followed by a steak with salad that was satisfactory but by no means outstanding. In fact, our wine — a superb red from the Vik vineyard in Chile's Cachapoal Valley — was the most memorable part of our meal. Nonetheless, Estancia Vik is a delightful place to spend a few days in the saddle, and I look forward to returning one day with friends. **94 Suite, \$650. Camino Eugenio Saiz Martinez, José Ignacio. Tel. (598) 94-605-212. vikretreats.com**

Buenos Aires: A Stylish Mansion Hotel in Recoleta



FOR ANYONE WHO SHARES my preference for intimate hotels, the 10-suite Algodon Mansion in Buenos Aires' chic and leafy Recoleta neighborhood — the equivalent of Manhattan's Upper East Side — is a fine base from which to explore the sprawling Argentine capital, even if the service could use a little fine-tuning.

Housed within a 1912 French classical-style limestone mansion, it was developed by Scott Mathis, chairman and CEO of DPEC Partners, a New York-based real estate investment group, and opened two years ago to rave reviews in the mainstream travel press. (Mathis has also invested in a sister property on a 2,500-acre wine estate in Mendoza.) On our arrival, the bellhop greeted us by name and was thoroughly warm and welcoming. Since there is no real lobby — a single, often busy desk serves as reception — we lingered on a nearby couch for a while, waiting for check-in. After an 11-hour overnight flight, it came as a nasty surprise to be told that our room wouldn't be ready until 2 p.m. In such a small hotel, it is of course understandable that a room might not be available, but given the predominantly American and European clientele, a day room somewhere would be a welcome amenity.

Fortified by several cups of strong coffee, we decided to visit MALBA, a museum of contemporary art, and asked one of the butlers in the vestibule for directions. The butler service system — friendly, well-dressed young staff members are on constant alert to help with reservations, taxis, sightseeing queries — is a good idea in theory. Regrettably, however, these kids didn't seem to be very well coached about what was going on in their own city. It was a much longer walk to MALBA than we'd been led to believe and, once there, we discovered that the permanent collection was on loan to a museum in Houston! Similarly, the next day we decided to visit the National Museum of Immigration in the hopes that it would be as fascinating as New York's Ellis Island museum and would offer insight into the Argentine identity, but arrived to discover that it was closed until further notice. The same butler who had described how to get to the closed museum had also never heard of any of the city's

fashionable new restaurants. So a plea to management: Forget about the butlers and hire a competent concierge.

Fortunately, despite these glitches, we liked our suite so much that we'd return to the hotel without hesitation. Large, quiet and bright, it had a beautifully polished ebony-stained oak floor and a velvet armchair that was perfect for reading. A rosewood armoire contained an espresso-maker as well as the usual minibar. The huge bath, faced with French limestone and Italian Calacatta marble, provided an enormous walk-in shower, a soaking tub, L'Occitane toiletries and piles of fluffy white towels. However, as is regrettably common at new hotels nowadays, many of the simplest room controls were high-tech, so we were obliged to read the in-room information file in order to figure out how to close the curtains!

The Algodon's *Chez Nous* restaurant, with burgundy silk-clad walls, a gold-leaf ceiling and woodburning fireplace, is a relaxed and stylish place for dinner. Chef Antonio Soriano's stated ambition is to reinvent traditional and regional dishes with French-inspired

The same butler who had described how to get to the closed museum had also never heard of any of the city's fashionable new restaurants.

culinary techniques. (Most of the fruit and vegetables, as well as the olive oil, come from Algodon Wine Estates.) We settled for grilled lamb chops with Andean potatoes, and black bass with black-olive gnocchi, both of which were excellent.

Despite the name, *Frank's Cognac Bar* serves an extensive selection of classic and house cocktails, as well as an interesting list of Argentinean wines. The bar is also an extremely pleasant venue for a light lunch. Salads and tapas are complemented by flatbread pizzas and Kobe beef burgers, while *Frank's Special Lunch Menu* seems to be a hit with the local business community.

Amenities at the hotel include a small spa (with steam, sauna and massage rooms), plus a rooftop plunge pool, Jacuzzi and sun terrace. The latter is a great place to relax after a day of sightseeing and perhaps before hitting the tiles to tango! **94 Recoleta Suite, \$480. 1647 Montevideo, Buenos Aires. Tel. (54) 11-3530-7777. algodonmansion.com**

An Exceptional Eco-Lodge on Lake Nicaragua

WHEN YOU TELL PEOPLE YOU PLAN TO tour Nicaragua, be prepared for the inevitable: “Really? Well, be careful.” Many of us associate the country more with Contras and Sandinistas than eco-lodges and beaches. These unfortunate connotations persist even though the civil war ended 22 years ago. Travelers willing to ignore the stereotypes will discover an abundance of natural and historical riches, easily accessible from the United States.

On the Caribbean side of the country, lush jungles, estuaries and archipelagos shelter an incredible array of wildlife. However, the best infrastructure and most sophisticated accommodations lie mostly in the southwest, between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean. Although the roads cutting through the tropical dry forest here are well-maintained, we recommend arranging for a chauffeur. Many key intersections lack signs, and local motorists can be overly aggressive (one of our drivers complained of Nicaraguan *imprudencia* shortly before passing six cars and trucks in a row!).

The country borders Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, and its setting on the Pacific Ring of Fire has resulted in a spectacular landscape of volcanoes and lakes, as well as a history of earthquakes. Managua,

fronting its own volcano-studded lake, was devastated by a 1972 quake, and the historic center remains more or less unrestored. As a result, Nicaragua’s capital unfortunately holds little to interest the visitor nowadays.

The vibrant colonial city of Granada lies just an hour south of Managua’s airport, on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. The baroque churches, charming galleries and airy courtyard mansions are a joy to explore on foot, though the heat of the afternoon demands frequent breaks in the many lively bars and cafés (see my recommended walking tour in the digital edition of the *Hideaway Report*).

Granada’s delights are best sampled from a base in Las Isletas, an archipelago of 365 islands scattered into Lake Nicaragua 20,000 years ago when the Mombacho Volcano exploded. Most of Las Isletas remains in the hands of farmers and fishermen, but some islands are being snapped up by the wealthy for vacation homes. Nicaragua’s most prominent beer-brewing family purchased a microdot and turned it into a private picnic island!

A backstroke away, the exquisite **JICARO ISLAND ECOLOGE** is situated just 15 minutes by motorboat from Granada’s lakeside promenade. In addition to the picnic island (which might have been the lodge’s spa, had negotiations not fallen through), Jicaro’s neighbors include a handful of residential islands, a cemetery island and about a dozen tiny specks big enough only for a tree or two and some waterfowl. The resort’s island is scarcely larger, but talented architect Matthew Falkiner managed to squeeze in nine duplex guest casitas and an array of public areas without making the one-acre space feel crowded or overbuilt.

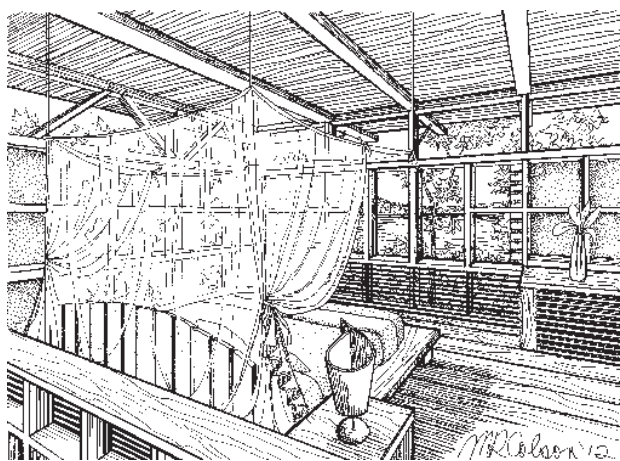
As we alighted on the island’s pier, several staff members greeted us with carved jicaro nuts (similar to coconuts) full of iced grama tea. Since check-in formalities had already been completed, we headed right to casita #5, passing a dramatic saltwater infinity pool. A winding path lined with Panama trees, spiny cedars, plantains and huge chunks of epiphyte-clad basalt felt almost primeval, but the casita itself exhibited chic and comfortable contemporary design.

It took all my willpower to go inside for the tour, and not immediately to plop into the locally woven hammock hanging enticingly on our deck. A sliding door revealed a warm expanse of auburn cedar, recovered from trees felled by Hurricane Felix in 2007. Three walls were either screens or shoji-like translucent plastic, allowing natural



light to flood the space. A series of interlocking wooden lattices gave the casita an almost Japanese feel, the rigidly orthogonal design a striking contrast to the semi-tamed nature outside. The inviting rainfall shower, with lattices on three walls and the floor, was particularly eye-catching. Upstairs in the airy bedroom, mosquito netting draped the cedar-framed bed. The resort does not compromise its green credentials with air-conditioning, but ample screens and a ceiling fan provide cooling breezes. A third person can be comfortably accommodated on the daybed downstairs.

Each of the nine casitas is identical, making their positions on the island the deciding factor. One afternoon, forgoing a hammock snooze, I circumnavigated the island



Casita bedroom, Jicaro Island Ecolodge

by kayak to determine which were most desirable. Casitas #9 and #7 have the best views, and #6, #5 and #1 offer the most privacy. Note that numbers lower than five face a small residential island, from which salsa music emanated until about 11 p.m. on a Saturday night. On other evenings, the sound of frogs and the growls of howler monkeys lulled us to sleep.

The open-air lakeview restaurant served unfailingly delicious local and international cuisine. Standouts included tender lamb from nearby Zapatera Island, well-balanced melon gazpacho with mint and basil, and refreshing cantaloupe sorbet. The staff proved to be reliable bartenders as well; it was sheer delight to sip mojitos while watching the sunset from the yoga terrace, or to nurse a glass of 18-year-old Flor de Caña rum after dinner.

A small but well-appointed spa provided another excuse to remain on the island, but Jicaro's well-organized excursions made it worth the effort to leave. At the base of Mombacho Volcano, we kayaked through pristine wetlands, spotting egret, osprey, heron and anhinga (American darter), before paddling to some hot springs

for a therapeutic soak. Our guide made the subsequent hike through the tropical dry forest absolutely fascinating, pointing out sleeping bats, monkeys, edible wild fruits and curiosities such as the "tourist tree," so-called because of its reddish, flaky bark. Those who stay longer can explore the cloud forests of Mombacho Volcano, the enigmatic petroglyphs of Zapatera and Isla de la Muerte, and the charming market town of Masaya and its neighboring craft villages.

Considering the comfort of the accommodations, the anticipatory service, the excellent food and the tranquil surroundings, we could have very happily spent four or five nights at Jicaro. Since it's only 90 minutes from Managua's airport, we might do just that sometime soon. **93 Casita**, \$510 (meals and non-alcoholic beverages included). Granada Isletas, Nicaragua. Tel. (505) 2552-6353. jicarolodge.com

The original luxury eco-lodge in Nicaragua, **MORGAN'S ROCK** has 15 bungalows terraced into a ridge overlooking the Pacific coast and a pristine private beach. As on our first incognito stay, we loved the drama of the suspension bridge leading to the bungalows, relished the fine cuisine (notably the mahi-mahi with passion fruit sauce) and basked in the 4,500 acres of tropical dry forest. On a nature walk, we spotted toucans, squirrel cuckoos, gray-headed kites, howler monkeys, sloths and a Montezuma oropendola.

Had I remained on the property for the duration of the stay, as Mrs. Harper wisely did, I might have been troubled only by a frayed pillowcase and an unappetizingly cracked coffee mug at breakfast. Unfortunately, a disastrous excursion to Ometepe Island revealed additional problems. At one point, it seemed we might actually be stuck on the island for the night! Although informed that there had been a "small problem" with the ferry, the manager did not greet me when we returned to Morgan's Rock and offered neither apology nor recompense. When I did finally speak with her at checkout, she explained, "You know, that's why we don't offer the excursion to Ometepe very often — the ferries are simply not reliable." And how should I have known this, exactly?

The splendor of the setting, the warmth of the staff and the uniquely designed accommodations still make Morgan's Rock a worthwhile stop. Mrs. Harper was all too happy to relate that she had a wonderful time reading under a palapa on the beach. However, the defensive and unhelpful attitude of the management gave me cause for some concern. **85 Bungalow for two**, from \$408 (meals and non-alcoholic beverages included). San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua. Tel. (505) 8670-7676. morgansrock.com

Reader Requests

To request travel and vacation advice, email aharper@AndrewHarper.com

TRAVELING TO EGYPT

Q We are debating whether to go to Egypt in December 2012. What do you advise given the current political uncertainty? *T.P.*

A Egypt presents an opportunity for intrepid travelers. Many hotels and tour operators have reduced prices, and the famous sights aren't beset by the usual crowds. Few tourists have encountered any problems, and some Andrew Harper staff recently enjoyed uneventful visits. To minimize risk, engage the services of a top-notch tour operator, and be sure to take out travel insurance in case the political situation deteriorates.

ASIA FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Q Is Bali a good place to spend Christmas? *K.P.*

A Bali's resorts are spectacular at any time of year, but December is one of the island's rainiest months. Normally, downpours are confined to afternoon bursts, but it can sometimes rain for days at a time. Even so, hotels charge high-season prices because of the holiday. Phuket would be a reliably

sunny alternative in December. But make your plans soon: Top resorts fill up well in advance of the holidays.

CARIBBEAN WITH CHILDREN

Q My husband and I are looking for a luxury Caribbean resort to take our kids (ages 7 and 12) with exceptional beaches and some activities for children. Where do you recommend? *S.C.*

A Carlisle Bay on Antigua, Caneel Bay on St. John and Little Dix Bay on Virgin Gorda all have pristine beaches and provide special programs for children. Little Dix Bay has a charming replica chattel house, a dress-up parlor and a mock shipwreck, while Caneel Bay and Carlisle Bay offer kids' clubs and a full range of supervised outdoor activities.

JOHANNESBURG SIGHTS

Q We recently had a blissful stay at The Saxon in Johannesburg and plan to return. But is there anything to do in the city itself? Is it as dangerous as everyone says? *S.J.*

A It is definitely not safe to stroll around downtown Johannesburg unaccompanied. However, the

concierge can arrange for escorted visits to Nelson Mandela's former home in Soweto, the Apartheid Museum, the Brenthurst Collection of African Art in the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the colorful Sunday craft market on the roof of Rosebank Mall.

CROATIAN COASTLINE

Q My guidebook mentions driving in Croatia, but I thought everyone went by boat. What is the best way to get around? *D.U.*

A The stunning Croatian coast is still best seen by private yacht, though this is not inexpensive. Hiring a private chauffeur would be my recommended alternative. You can certainly rent your own vehicle, but it is much less stressful to let an experienced local driver navigate the endless hairpin turns high above the Adriatic.

Book Ahead

THE WORLD'S MOST IMPRESSIVE wildlife spectacle is the congregation of the wildebeest in the southern section of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park from January to March each year. However, millions of other people have watched those *National Geographic* specials, and it can be extremely difficult to secure accommodations during the critical period. If you delay much beyond June, it could become impossible.

The best way to see the migration is from a private tented camp (at a cost of approximately \$4,950 a night for a group of six people). The alternative is **SANCTUARY KUSINI**, an ideally located camp of just 12 spacious tents. At the time of writing, limited space is still available. Our Travel Office (Tel. 800-375-4685) will be happy to help you make arrangements. But for a trip in 2013, I urge you not to delay.

— Andrew Harper

ANDREW HARPER HOTEL AND RESORT RATINGS

- 98-100** A truly great hotel/resort, among the finest of its kind in the world
- 95-97** An exceptional hotel/resort of great individuality and distinction
- 92-94** An outstanding hotel/resort of genuine sophistication
- 90-91** A fine hotel/resort of considerable merit
- 85-89** A commendable hotel/resort, providing high levels of comfort and service
- 50-84** A hotel/resort that did not meet the Andrew Harper standard



The hibiscus symbol denotes a hotel that is exceptionally charming but does not offer all the amenities customarily expected at an Andrew Harper-recommended property

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