

Andrew Harper's  **Hideaway Report**
JUNE 2012



STYLISH
URUGUAY

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

editor's letter

JUNE 2012 — Occasionally, a new country appears on my radar screen, somewhere that has not seemed of especial interest before, but which now demands my attention. About 12 years ago, I took a perilous wooden boat trip across the River Plate — a wide, muddy flow that looks extremely placid from the bank, but which can be alarmingly turbulent in the middle — from Buenos Aires to Carmelo, in order to stay at the Four Seasons Carmelo resort. Until a few weeks ago, this had been my only experience of Uruguay. I knew all about Punta del Este, the Atlantic resort town at the country's southeastern tip, from friends who go there in summer when Buenos Aires becomes insufferably humid. As far as I could tell, their chief recreational activities were playing polo and partying until 3 in the morning. It sounded pleasant enough, but I'd never felt any particular urge to experience the place for myself. Then, suddenly, I began to hear about Alex Vik, a Connecticut-based Internet billionaire, who had returned in adulthood to his maternal homeland, Uruguay, fallen in love with its beaches and pampas, and been inspired to build two remarkable hotels. It seemed too interesting a tale to ignore and so, exchanging snowfall for sunshine, I boarded a flight from New York to Buenos Aires. In this issue, you will find an account of what I discovered. Here, it is sufficient to say that Uruguay has soared in my estimation — and that next time you are contemplating an escape from the northern winter, it is certainly a place to consider.



COVER Sunken fire pit at Playa Vik José Ignacio, Uruguay

OPPOSITE PAGE Striking modern fireplace in Casa Raices, Playa Vik José Ignacio, Uruguay



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.



A dazzling lap pool
at Playa Vik with a
view of the lights
of José Ignacio
in the distance



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



4
GARZON

Garzón Lagoon

José Ignacio Lagoon

2

3

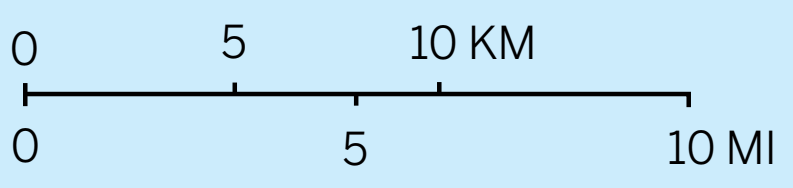
JOSE IGNACIO

1

LA BARRA

PUNTA DEL ESTE

- 1** Hotel Fasano Punta del Este
- 2** Estancia Vik José Ignacio
- 3** Playa Vik José Ignacio
- 4** El Garzón



perfect time to escape the northern winter, but well past the Christmas to mid-January high season.

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 ensure both good views and maximum privacy. (The Las Piedras estate also contains 225 private villa residences.)

A stylish but quiet place in the '40s and '50s, Punta del Este is now a small city. Those in search of tranquility head north along the coast or inland to gaucho country.



Hotel Fasano's unique concrete bungalows. © ANDREW HARPER



Hotel Fasano has a small spa with a glass-enclosed indoor pool and an excellent hilltop Italian restaurant overlooking the Maldonado River and surrounding countryside.





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.

HOTEL FASANO PUNTA DEL ESTE 92 Deluxe Bungalow, \$900; Suite Bungalow, \$1,300. Las Piedras, La Barra, Punta del Este. Tel. (598) 42-670-000. fasano.com.br/hotelaria **BOOK ONLINE**

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 Vik 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



Museum-quality modern art is displayed in the sculpture pavilion at Playa Vik, a striking structure containing two pieces by Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid.



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



Sitting area of the Fuerteventura Suite at Playa Vik

Our bath in the Fuerteventura Suite was a large and very dramatic space, clad in sheets of aluminum riveted together like an old airplane.

© ANDREW HARPER



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 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

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.



Playa Vik's Casa Mar, a three-bedroom pavilion, and public areas below

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.

PLAYA VIK JOSE IGNACIO 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



Estancia Vik is set on a magnificent and peaceful 4,000-acre ranch, ideal for equestrian activity.



The master salon has an elaborate décor of paintings inspired by Google Maps and photos of Uruguay — rather high-concept for the countryside, but comfortable nonetheless.






A high-angle photograph of a dark-stained wooden bathtub. The tub is rectangular with rounded corners and a central drain. It is set against a wall of large, light-colored stone tiles. Above the tub, a showerhead and a control panel are visible. A white towel is draped over the left side of the tub. The floor is made of large, light-colored tiles.

Our Marcelo Legrand Suite at Estancia Vik.

PHOTOS © ANDREW HARPER



Sunset at Estancia Vik



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, 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. **AH**

ESTANCIA VIK JOSE IGNACIO 94 Suite, \$650.
Camino Eugenio Saiz Martinez, José Ignacio.
Tel. (598) 94-605-212. vikretreats.com