

Travel

PARADISE FOUND

A new breed of luxurious accommodations, wineries and decent restaurants are putting Argentina and Uruguay firmly on the map for the traveller in search of comfort, culture and peace. By **Mary Lussiana**

The natural wonders of South America, belimed with its enchanting Latin beat, have long attracted visitors, but the continent is increasingly attracting the higher end of the market as a new wave of luxurious accommodation becomes more accessible. There are now direct flights with British Airways to Buenos Aires, for example, which provides the perfect gateway to the rest of the continent. From there, it is a mere hop to paradise along Uruguay's famed Atlantic coast - where there has been a recent flurry of designed-boutique hotels opening - or to where the Andes cradle the vineyards of Mendoza, home to new smaller-scale wineries.

Buenos Aires is a vibrant, charming city home of the tango, best seen at the restaurant Espina de Carlos Gardel, of side streets and long aisles of cafes - try Tortuga's Cafe, the city's oldest, and of

writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, who once said, "I snacked off fiction that Buenos Aires was ever founded. I judge her to be as eternal as the sea and wind. It was founded by the Spanish in the sixteenth century and has, over the centuries, famously become a melting pot of cultures. Head to the elegant tree-lined boulevards of Recoleta where, between the stylish shops, there are two lovely hotels. The Alvear Palace is old-fashioned luxury personified, the best address in BA since it opened in the Thirties, but for a recent take on urban chic, check into the city's first five-star boutique hotel, Algonquin Mansión. It is a gorgeously restored 1912 villa comprising just 10 rooms, a restaurant and a rooftop plunge pool. The huge marble bathrooms are sumptuous, the bedrooms filled with trifle linens and fresh flowers, creating the peaceful retreat that twenty-first-century travellers yearn for.

And as from the city to the coast, on a path well trodden by the rich and famous, who summer here, Casa El Viejo Puerto del Este in Uruguay, but as it grew, the cognoscenti moved north to José Ignacio. This little fishing village is all crashing waves and golden sands, thatched cottages and a sign as you enter, "¡Qué sol! Qué calor! Qué viento!" (Here it is only the wind that runs). And if coziness has a sleepy feel, the recent addition of Playa Vik, a strikingly modern hotel designed by Uruguay's leading architect, Carlos Ott, stands out. The main building is all titanium and glass, its interior filled with art by Anselm Kiefer, James Turrell and a sculpture bench by Zaha Hadid. There are four suites here, with the remaining accommodation in six two- and three-bedroom, glass-walled casas. It is a breath-taking whole, culminating in a cliff-lined back-granite swimming pool that

juts out over the beach below. Inland, its sister hotel, Estancia Vik, which opened in 2008 offers a traditional ranch-like atmosphere. Its 12 rooms are steeped in Uruguayan art, and there are views of huge skies and open landscapes, cows at the waterholes and horses to ride in the fresh-dawn air. Well-known chef Francis Mallmann's latest venture, the hotel's restaurant, is set in the dusty inland village of Gardón. Its simple but comfortable rooms, and the seriously good restaurant, will no doubt put this far-flung village on the map. It is worth the drive for Mallmann's sought-after salad alone but don't miss his slow-cooked lamb ether and art. If you can, in the pretty courtyard.

With sight of the bright lights of Punta del Este is another new, rural paradise. Las Piedras is the first venture outside their own borders for Brazilian hoteliers Fasano, and what an

achievement. Architect Iury Weinberg has created a hotel that vanishes into the magic of the landscape. The swimming pool is formed from a spring-fed rock pool, boulders and butterfly-filled shrubs frame the blue waters. The Akara restaurant serves the same sublime menu as its Brazilian siblings and sits high on a rocky promontory above the 20 spacious bungalows that make up the accommodation. Around you, in the unbelieve-

WAYS & MEANS

Mary Lussiana travelled as a guest of **British Airways** and **Casas** (020-7137 9010; www.casas.com), which can organize a similar trip to Buenos Aires, Mendoza and Uruguay, from £3,762 per person, including flights and transfers.

paradis, are the hummingbirds and parakeets that give Uruguay its name, "hue of the painted birds". From meadows to mountains, nothing prepared me for the beauty of waking up to see the sun rise over the snow-capped Andes. Mercedes is ravishing the sky in endless blues, the air sharp and clear. Verdant vineyards roll into the foothills of the Andes and amid this beauty lies the Casas Wine Lodge. It has 14 villas dotted around the rows of grapes, lavender, olives and truffles. Each has a plunge pool, rooftop terrace with log fire, stone-floored bedrooms, and rock-walled bathrooms.

As we sat at the neighbouring Roca Malet, one of the new-wave wineries that has so redefined the high-balled Malbec, with a glass of it in our hands, taking in the sunshine that made the top of the Andes golden, I felt I had reached a little corner of paradise. ☺

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CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: The strikingly modern Playa Vik overlooks the Uruguayan coast. Las Piedras was designed to merge into the surrounding landscape. The Master Suite Vik at Estancia Vik has a wood-lined bathroom. The River Palace's lobby personifies Tortuga luxury. Snow-capped peaks provide a view back up to the Roca Malet vineyard. The Casas Wine Lodge nestles in the foothills of the Andes.

