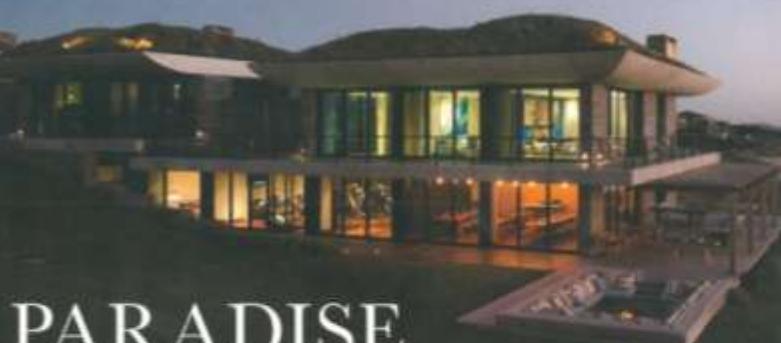


Travel

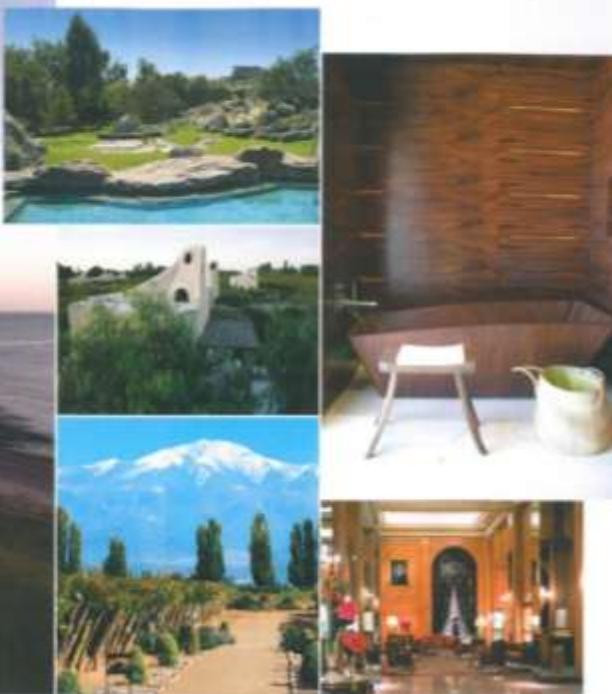
PARADISE FOUND

A new breed of luxurious accommodation, 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




CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: The strikingly modern Playa Vida overlooks the Uruguayan coast. Las Pedras was designed to merge into the surrounding landscape. The Hotel Sur Miramar Catamarca Vida has a wood-panelled bathroom. The Alvear Palace lobby personifies Thoreau's luxury. Snow-capped peaks provide a iconic backdrop to the Blue Moon Mendoza. The Cenar Wine Lodge nestles in the foothills of the Andes.

travel|Argentina and Uruguay



The natural wonders of South America, livened 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 beneath luxury along Uruguay's famed Atlantic coast – where there has been a recent flurry of design-led boutique hotels opening – or to where the Andes cradle the vineyards of Mendoza, home to now smaller-scale wineries.

Buenos Aires is a vibrant, charming city home of the tango, best seen at the restaurant Esquina de Carlos Gardel of late dinners and long sedas of caffes – try Tortoni's Cafè, the city's oldest and of

writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, who once said, 'It smacks of fiction that Buenos Aires has ever founded.' Judge her to be as elegant as she is endearing, it was founded by Spanish in the 16th century and has, over the centuries, become a melting pot of cultures. Head to the elegant tree-lined boulevards of Recoleta where, between the stately shops, there are tea rooms. The Alvear Palace is a post-fascist luxury personified, the last addition in 84 since it opened in the Thirties, but, for a recent take on urban chic, check into the city's first five-star boutique hotel, Algodon Manzana. It is a gorgeously restored 1920s villa comprising just 10 rooms, a restaurant and a rooftop terrace. The sumptuous bathrooms and sunshades, the bedrooms filled with fluffy linens and fresh flowers, creating the peaceful retreat that twenty-first century travellers yearn for.

And so from the city to the coast, on a path well-trodden by the rich and famous, who summer here. Once it was Punta 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, 'No pase como el viento' ('There is only the wind that runs'). And it certainly has a sleepy feel, the recent addition of Playa Vida, 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 Argentine Kiefer, James Turrell and a sculptural bench by Zaha Hadid. There are four suites here, with the remaining accommodation in six two- and three-bedroom, glass-walled cases. It is a breathtaking whole, culminating in a cantilevered back-granite swimming pool that

butts out over the beach below. Instead, its sister hotel, Estancia Vida, which opened in 2009, 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 air.

Well-known chef Francis Mallmann's latest venture, the Hotel Garde, is set in the dusty inland village of Carrizal. Its five simple but comfortable rooms, and the seriously good restaurant, will doubt put this far-flung village on the map. It is worth the drive for Mallmann's courageous salads alone but don't miss his slow-cooked lamb either, and all, if you can, in the pretty courtyard.

Within sight of the bright lights of Punta del Este is another new, rural paradise. Los Pechas is the first venture outside their own borders for Brazilian mafers, Assane, and what an

achievement. Architect May Weir Reid 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 its blue waters. The Italian 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 undulating

WHAT & MEANS

Mary Lussiana travelled as a guest of British Airways and Escos (020-7337 9010; www.escos.com), which can organise a similar trip to Buenos Aires, Mendoza and Uruguay, from £3,760 per person, including flights and transfers.

purpose, are the hummingbirds and sunbirds that gave Uruguay its name, 'River of the pink birds'.

From meadows to mountains, nothing prepares me for the beauty of waking up to see the sunrise over the snow-capped Andes. Mendoza is revealing the sky an endless slate, the air sharp and clear. Verdant vineyards roll into the foothills of the Andes and amid this beauty lies the Cenar Wine Lodge. It has 14 villas dotted around the rows of grapevines, lavender, olive and rosemary. Each has a plunge pool, rooftop terrace with log fire, stone-fired bedrooms, and rock-walled bathrooms.

As we sat at the neighbouring Roja Muela, one of the new-wave wineries that has so redefined the full-bodied Malbec, with a glass of it in our hands, basking in the sunshine that made the tops of the Andes glisten, I felt I had reached a little corner of paradise.