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Have a Perfect Beach Vacation in Jose Ignacio, Uruguay

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The beach party at Playa Vik. Photo courtesy of Playa Vik. From surf shacks to gauchos to mention delicious communal asados on wide Atlantic beaches, it's beach chic with a magical vibe. And you should book your trip now.

By *Christina Ohly* for *Fathom* | Old Montauk meets Malibu in Jose Ignacio and the coastal towns surrounding Punta del Este in Southeastern Uruguay. Here you'll find everything from surf shacks to gauchos in traditional garb, not to mention delicious communal *asados* (barbecues) set on wide Atlantic beaches. Punta del Este serves as an entry point to a series of lovely fishing villages and quieter inland destinations such as Garzón, the Deco throwback set amongst verdant, rolling hills that is home to famed Argentine chef Francis Mallman's hotel and restaurant, Garzon.



The iconic lighthouse.

THE SCENE

For beach chic with an artisanal vibe, this area is impossible to beat. Jose Ignacio is hardly a travel secret anymore, but the destination is only going to get more and more popular. So magical is the entire scene that you should just book your trip *now*.

And although this gets tossed around like a bad travel brochure cliché, there truly is something for everyone in this part of the world. For the avid, athletic types, there's horseback riding, biking, and invigorating swims. For the chaise lounger, there's poolside *capriroskas* (a cocktail borrowed from neighboring Brazil), endless massages, and long lunches at La Huella (as seen in Michelle Lehman's [Just Back from Jose Ignacio](#), and I agree wholeheartedly with her ringing endorsement of this special spot by the sea).

Kids of all ages are enchanted, too, by the rugged mix of cowboy culture (horseback riding is accessible to all), polo ponies (in the high season which lasts the few, short weeks between Christmas and mid-January), and swims in the 20-meter Absolute Nero stone pools that have twinkling under water "constellations" (an added bonus at all [Vik hotels](#).)

Drive along the coastline (preferably in an open-top Jeep) through the villages of La Barra, El Chorro, Punta Pedras, and Manantiales. Plan on spending a few hours in **Manantiales** to visit [Atchugarry Foundation](#), the workshop of master sculptor/local hero Pablo Atchugarry and also to stock up on beach gear at the many great surf stores in the area and house décor with playful prints at [Roberta Roller Rabbit](#). Try to come hungry, so you can have delicately fried cod sandwiches and fresh gazpacho on the whitewashed patio at stylish **Fish Market** (Ruta 10, km 163.5; +598-42-774-4310).

Word to the wise: Before you set off on any expedition, you should know that there aren't many petrol stations or cash machines in this part of the world. You'll want to stock up on gas and pesos at the Ancap at the roundabout in Jose Ignacio before heading too far off the beaten path.

IF YOU ONLY DO ONE THING

Go Horseback Riding

I hadn't been on a horse in 20+ years and had no interest in saddling up again. Yet the charming gauchos (who smile sweetly and speak no English) and the spectacular scenery made this a memorable activity for our entire family — my husband, myself, and my tween son and daughter.

An excursion is easy to arrange because riding is included at many hotels — Estancia Vik, Casa Suaya, and Garzon among them. Horses are typically kept on property and thus don't have to be booked days in advance. The docile breed of Uruguayan horses seem comfortable with riders of all (read: zero) ability, which made for relaxing trail rides through diverse, meadow-filled terrain.

WHAT TO DO

Go to the Beach

For swimming, sunning, and some of the best people watching on the planet, hit any one of a number of these area beaches:

Playa Brava — Supermodels, Brazilian tycoons, children of all ages, and the odd, pale gawker (me) all converge on this starry strip of sand in Jose Ignacio. The water is refreshing, as is the *clerico* (white sangria) at beachside La Huella.

Playa Mansa – Located on the western edge of Jose Ignacio's peninsula, the beach is on the low-key side and is a spectacular spot to watch the sunset. Mellow vibe notwithstanding, impossibly small string bikinis are still de rigueur.

Ride Horses

Preferably at Estancia Vik, where the dramatic scenery and friendly gauchos make even the most equine-averse feel competent.

Visit the Lighthouse and Plaza in Jose Ignacio

The sweet, brilliant white beacon is accessible by beach or by road. Interesting art galleries and design shops dot the neighboring streets.



WHERE TO STAY

You'll notice a lot of Vik hotels in this list. For good reason: Team Vik excels at creating innovative, cool, stunning places you'll never want to leave.

Estancia Vik

Camino Eugenio Sainz Martínez; +598-94-60-5212☎ / +598-94-60-5314☎

Set on 4,000 stunning acres of pasture and gently rolling hills, this is a house stay unlike any other. Each of the 12 suites were designed by a contemporary Uruguayan artist, giving the estancia the feel a modern museum housed in a stunning, authentic villa. No detail is overlooked, and the kind staff — including the resident gauchos — look after restaurant bookings, trail rides, and spa treatments. An eco-friendly emphasis and a killer Saturday night asado are but a few of the many lovely bonuses.

Playa Vik

Calle Los Cisnes and Calle Los Horneros; +598-94-60-5212☎ / +598-94-60-5314☎

The Vik group's original beach property has an extremely modernist feel, all glass facades, fire pits, and artwork, most notably a James Turrell light installation and a Zaha Hadid-designed table in the main house. Especially impressive is the 75-meter cantilevered swimming pool that seems to jut out over the sea, to say nothing for the grass-topped villas designed by starchitect Carlos Ott. In other words, the entire place is nothing if not striking and unique.

Bahia Vik

+598-94-60-5212☎ / +598-94-60-5314☎

Set to open in winter 2014 in time for high season, the hotel features contemporary Uruguayan art, separate swimming pools for kids and adults, and environmentally friendly casitas that are understated yet luxurious at the same time. Located directly on the beach, Bahia guests can horseback ride at the nearby Estancia property or stroll down the dunes for a perfectly grilled hamburger or fresh sushi at the Vik's **La Susana** restaurant.



Lunch is served at La Susana. Photos courtesy of La Susana.

WHERE TO EAT

The question is where *not* to eat, as the food – all kinds of cuisines and at all price points – is just so good.

La Susana

Ruta 10, km 182.5; +598-44-862-823 / +598-95-192-555

A casual beach club and restaurant that serves everything from grilled snapper and pizzas to Norwegian vodka produced by the Vik family. A festive bamboo bar in the sand draws all kinds. Children frolic freely, larger groups spread out, and the party lasts well into the night.

WHAT YOU'LL KNOW ON THE LAST DAY THAT YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN ON THE FIRST

Take Great Care When Booking Restaurants

You don't want to miss a meal in Uruguay. The restaurants and cafes are fantastic – at all price points. Area specialties include delicious grilled fish, sushi and ceviches, steak (of course), and housemade *helado* (ice cream). Places book well in advance – especially hotspots like La Huella, Garzon, and Marismo. Not that you're at risk of going hungry, considering how many under-the-radar gems you'll find everywhere. Among my favorites were La Olada, Parador al Almacen, Namm, and La Susana – all casual and festive, serving traditional, often wood-fired fare. This is the kind of food and drink that makes everyone happy, so book in advance if you can.

WHEN TO GO

I can't imagine there is a wrong time to go to Uruguay, but spring and fall – shoulder seasons leading into winter and summer – are completely delightful. With bright blue skies, temperatures averaging in the mid-70s, and an absence of crowds, March and April are the perfect times to explore – and to secure bookings at all of the area's stellar restaurants.

The winter holidays bring throngs from Argentina and Brazil, but nothing feels over-run, as there are no glitzy mega hotels catering to the St. Tropez club set. That said, these people like to party – very late into the night – so it's all about invitations to house parties and elaborate asados feasts of local beef (the best I've ever tasted – period), assorted vegetables, and locally caught corvina negra (white drum fish).