

Fun in the winter sun in Uruguay

When Buenos Aires' finest need to cool off they head over the border to Uruguay's Jose Ignacio



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They say Italians do it better. With their omega-3-rich diets and breezy attitude to work, theirs is a family-first nation where symptoms of stress are as foreign as curry powder. But I'd wager the Argentines do it even better: a home-grown diet of surf and turf, wine to rival the French and, in neighbouring Uruguay, a beautiful country with a sandy coastline, perfect for holidays — and less than an hour's flight away.

Satisfaction with their lot is writ large across the faces of the sun-kissed, flaxen-haired families who stroll along the Jose Ignacio beach in the height of summer. This is the Argentines' answer to Salcombe — with better weather — or the Hamptons, only less ostentatious. From December to February, Buenos Aires' wealthy set — all tall, all slim and all hideously good-looking, right into their 1960s — move to their holiday homes for a summer of fresh fish and flowing wine, competitive parenting, dinner parties and gossip.

This is the life, we thought, as we checked in to Playa Vik, Jose Ignacio's first five-star hotel, where you can spy on the Argentine super-race from your bedroom window — or rather, your sliding wall of glass, operated via a switch on the bedside table. In a town filled with slate-and-glass temples to modernism and shingled Southampton-style mansions with front porches and peaked roofs, just any old hotel wasn't going to make the grade. Fortunately, Playa Vik isn't just any old hotel.

For a start, the reception desk is a Zaha Hadid creation, long, sleek and lacquered. The 75-foot black granite pool is cantilevered so that the shallow end is suspended over a lawn — you can swim out and sit on the ledge to ponder the horizon. There are even gardens on the roofs of the outbuildings. No surprise, then, that the style arbiters at *Wallpaper** magazine last year crowned it the world's best new hotel.

By night, the action's at La Huella, a sprawling beach shack next to the nearby lighthouse. The vibe's informal, but top tables are booked weeks in advance and the seating plan is as complicated as The Wolseley's. There's a sushi bar, international beers on tap and the world's smallest Lacoste boutique, tucked away near the wood-fired oven. The menu is simple: fresh fish, red meat, good salads, and pizza (prices are on a par with London). A not so family-friendly option is

Namm, an isolated treehouse in the middle of the nearby forest, with hanging lanterns and Asian food — one of Mario Testino's favourite restaurants.

Content as we might have been to spend all week ingratiating ourselves with the BA-on-sea elite, we also wanted a taste of the true Uruguay. So we drove ten miles through the rolling green hills, passing big estancia gates (Playa Vik has a sister hotel, Estancia Vik, where you can learn to ride) and only the very occasional traditional one-storey house. The countryside is empty in the most delightful way. Once we'd wound off the motorway onto a bumpy lane, we noticed the variety of wildlife, including large numbers of different birds (the rhea, for instance, a relative to the ostrich) and a piglet-sized armadillo bounding along like a hare.

Our destination was Garzón, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it village built in colonial style around a central plaza. You could see everything in about 10 minutes, were you so inclined, but there's a different pace in Uruguay, and to get the true measure of Garzón you need to spend a few days there, doing really not very much at all.

Until the 1950s the town had nearly 2,000 inhabitants, but in the wake of the post-war nationalisation of the once British-owned railways, the government decided the network was too costly to maintain, and by the 1980s it was largely abandoned, leaving Garzón cut off. Today only 200 or so people live there, but it's a town on the up, largely thanks to an Argentine chef called Francis Mallman, whose eponymous hotel and restaurant sit on one corner of the palm-fringed plaza. The closest thing Argentina has to a celebrity chef, Mallman has written cookbooks about his traditional open-fire cooking method, and is the owner of the popular Patagonia restaurant in Buenos Aires' La Boca district (the brightly painted birthplace of Diego Maradona).

We stayed next door, at Casa Ana, a six-room boutique hotel where you're made to feel like a house guest more than a hotel resident: you eat breakfast in the kitchen with father-and-son team Marcelo and Camilo, who run the hotel, and you're free to take their two black Labradors for a walk whenever you like.

Marcelo is a landscape gardener, and his garden is full of lavender and agapanthus-lined pathways, as well as an outdoor pool and an outdoor cinema room. So warm and friendly were our hosts that we invited them to join us for dinner one evening at Lucifer, one of the town's few restaurants. Housed in the central patio of a traditional house, with a wood fire in the middle, it's run by a young chef called Lucy who toils over her stoves as you watch through the kitchen windows. We ate pan-fried sweetbreads and lamb cutlets cooked on the open fire, drank a wonderful Malbec and started planning our very early retirement. **ES**

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Where to stay

The Ultimate Travel Company offers three nights in a Master Suite at Casa Ana (B&B and drinks), and four nights at Playa Vik in a Caras Suite (B&B) from £4,071pp, including return flights from Heathrow to Montevideo. Three days' car hire and private transfers also included. (020 7386 4646; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)