



# South American Riviera

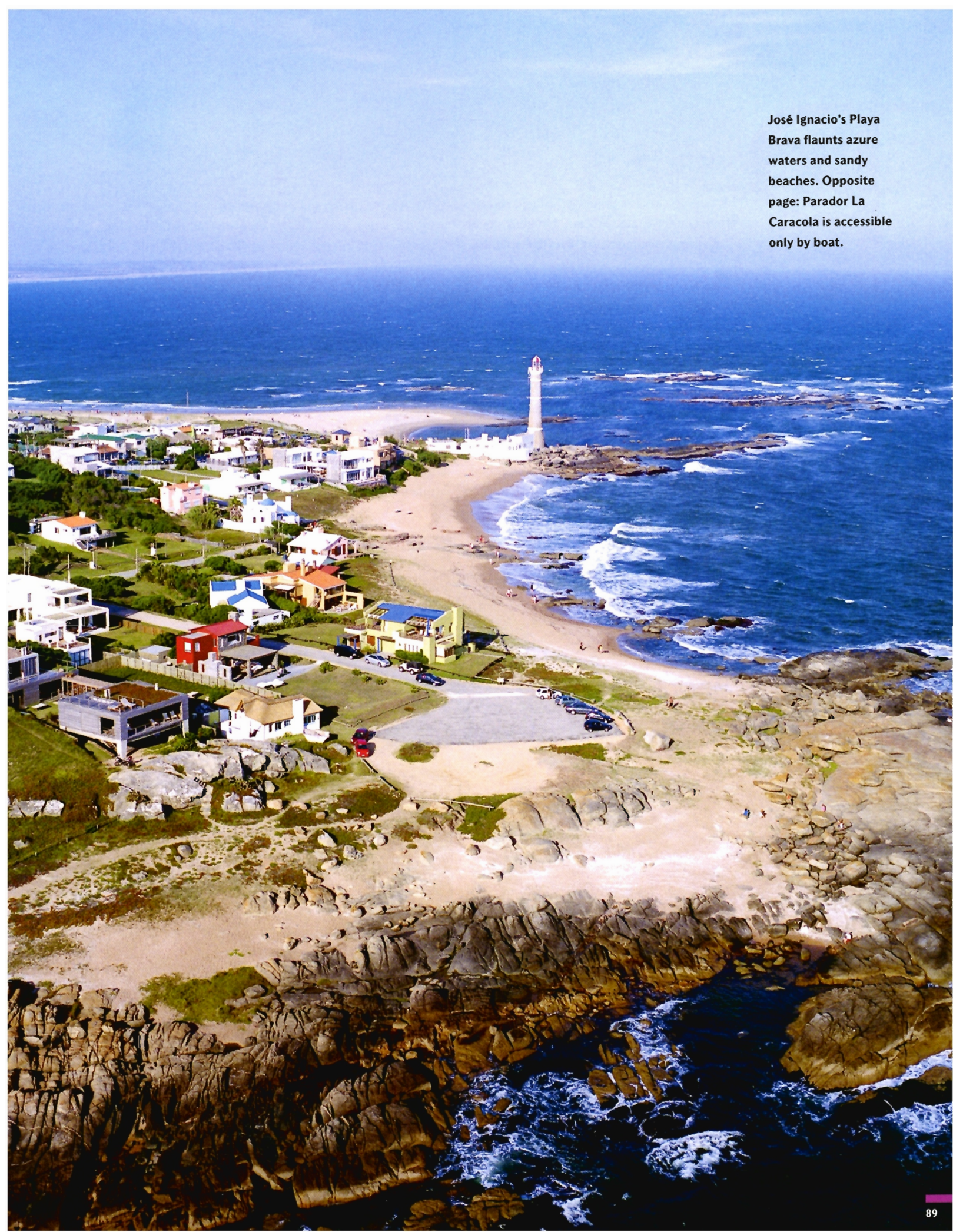
**Suzy Buckley** explores Uruguay's Punta del Este, the coolest seaside village south of the Equator

PHOTOGRAPHED BY GRACIELA CATTAROSI





José Ignacio's Playa Brava flaunts azure waters and sandy beaches. Opposite page: Parador La Caracola is accessible only by boat.





**P**ocketed between southern Brazil and eastern Argentina on the Atlantic Ocean, Uruguay sits in Argentina's shadow, some might say. But the nation has cemented itself as a stop on the international jet-set circuit, thanks to the hemispheric seasonal change—its summer falls during the North American winter—and the hill- and beach-laden strip of land where the Rio de la Plata meets the ocean. When the city heat takes its toll, well-heeled *porteños* (Buenos Aires natives) flock to Punta del Este for long weekends. The sheer concentration of wealth, beautiful topography, and wonderful parties has now caught the rest of the world's attention. But unlike most highly social warm-weather destinations, blink and you'll miss Punta del Este's entire peak season. The bulk of the coastline's hotels, restaurants, and shops are open from the end of November through March, but you'll find the most action and fabulous crowds over the two weeks after Christmas.

Although a proper city in its own right, Punta del Este more informally refers to a larger 30-mile region that runs from the downtown area through a handful of towns including bustling La Barra and the quieter fishing village of José Ignacio. These two neighborhoods are definitely the places to be: While La Barra consists of block after block of casual restaurants, bars, and boutiques, the activity in José Ignacio is a bit more sophisticated and less dense, spread out between long stretches of beaches.

On my first few visits to "Punta," as it's known, I spent the majority of my time closer to La Barra, where a long lunch sipping *clerico* (white sangria) and nibbling on salads at **Café Flo** is best followed by sandal shopping and a snack of dulce de leche-filled croissants at **Medialunas Calentitas**. Everybody works off all the calories later at the nearby **La Barra Sport Spa** or surfing the waves at Los Dedos beach. For a more off-the-beaten-path, homey experience, head to **Lo de Miguel** at **Finca y Granja Narbona**—a farmhouse restaurant, wine bar, art gallery, and market. For a similarly



Above, left to right: Waiting to hang *diez* at the Los Dedos surf school. The loggia-wrapped, hacienda-style property Estancia Vik sits on more than 4,000 acres of *pampas*, or plains. Opposite page: Fresh mussels at the al fresco beach restaurant Parador La Huella.





Clockwise from top: Horseback riding on the *pampas* at Estancia Vik. Sister property Playa Vik, an ocean-facing private retreat in José Ignacio, houses Uruguayan and international art. A bedroom at Mar, one of six *casas* at Playa Vik.



authentic experience, dine or enjoy what's considered a "late afternoon" cocktail at 8 p.m. at **Las Piedras**, the delicious Italian restaurant at the 32-room **Hotel Fasano Las Piedras**. Opened in late 2010, the property also features tennis courts, a full-service spa, and indoor and outdoor pools.

While I have always loved the energy in La Barra, I became partial to the scene in José Ignacio after my first stay at **Estancia Vik**. Two years ago, Carrie and Alex Vik opened this 12-suite property on 4,000 acres of rolling countryside where guests can ride horses, play polo, hike, fish, indulge in lavish treatments at the spa, swim, and even take a yoga class. And when you're in the mood for the beach, visit its luxurious and art-laden ocean-front sister property, **Playa Vik**. The spectacular cantilevered pool and extensive contemporary art collection—Zaha Hadid, Anselm Kiefer, and James Turrell works among them—are some of the biggest draws.

In José Ignacio, soak up the sun all morning, and then indulge in a long lunch on the sand at **Parador La Huella**, complete with caipirinhas, grilled

whole fish, and a front-row view of the surf. Those who want to break up all the napping, tanning, and eating with some heart-thumping activity can water-ski at **Lassarena Club de Ski** or ride horses at **Haras Godiva** ranch.

After such long, decadent afternoons, you will be grateful that dinners here happen much later than you would expect—de rigueur is after 11 p.m. Keep your eye out for a wooden fish that marks the entrance to **Marismo**, a rustic, romantic, candlelit restaurant on Ruta 10. Along the same dark, winding road, you'll find popular Asian fusion restaurant **Namm**, known for excellent sushi. And last season, everyone was buzzing about the reopening of **Los Negros**, now located within the impending Setai resort. Chef Francis Mallmann closed his beloved restaurant's original location five years ago, but with its menu of modern Argentine and Uruguayan fare, the new outpost has reclaimed its place as one of Punta's top reservations.

If you're up for a memorable day trip or prefer a cozy hotel up-country, head 30 minutes north of José Ignacio to Mallmann's other venture in the region—**Garzón Hotel & Restaurant**. Weather permitting, enjoy a menu of gourmet barbecue and fresh local seafood in a gorgeous outdoor courtyard. The welcoming indoor dining room is also a warm and relaxing spot to end a meal—as they all should end in Punta—with *pastelitos*, *café*, and laughter amid good company. ✱

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## AWAY TO URUGUAY

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**Café Flo** 011-598-42-771-481

**Estancia Vik José Ignacio** 011-598-94-605-212, [www.vikretreats.com](http://www.vikretreats.com)

**Garzón Hotel & Restaurant** 011-598-44-102-811, [www.restaurantegarzon.com](http://www.restaurantegarzon.com)

**Haras Godiva** 011-598-480-6112, [www.harasgodiva.com](http://www.harasgodiva.com)

**Hotel Fasano Las Piedras** 800/745-8883, [www.laspiedrasfasano.com](http://www.laspiedrasfasano.com)

**La Barra Sport Spa** 011-598-42-771-100, [labarrasportspa@yahoo.com](mailto:labarrasportspa@yahoo.com)

**Lassarena Club de Ski** 011-598-99-265-483, [www.lassarena.com](http://www.lassarena.com)

**Lo de Miguel at Finca y Granja Narbona** 011-598-44-102-999

**Los Dedos Surf School** 011-598-99-337-688, [surflosdedos.blogspot.com](http://surflosdedos.blogspot.com)

**Los Negros** 011-598-44-862-091, [www.restaurantelosnegros.com](http://www.restaurantelosnegros.com)

**Marismo** 011-598-42-486-2273

**Medialunas Calentitas** 011-598-42-772-347, [www.medialunascalentitas.com](http://www.medialunascalentitas.com)

**Namm** 011-598-486-2526

**Parador La Caracola** [www.paradorlacaracola.com](http://www.paradorlacaracola.com)

**Parador La Huella** 011-598-44-862-279, [www.paradorlahuella.com](http://www.paradorlahuella.com)

**Playa Vik** 011-598-94-605-212, [www.vikretreats.com](http://www.vikretreats.com)

**The Setai José Ignacio** [www.setaijoseignacio.com](http://www.setaijoseignacio.com) |||||

