



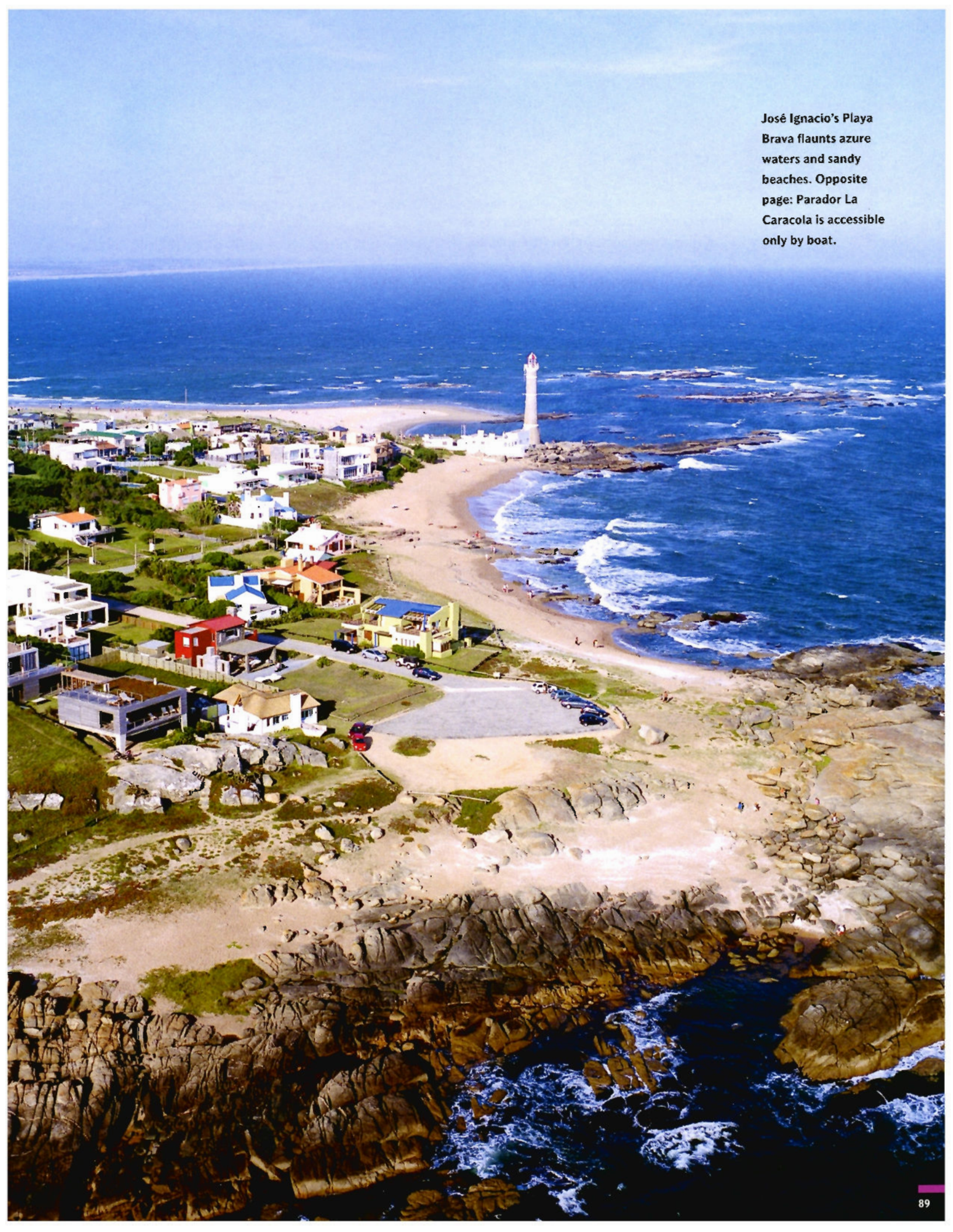
# South American Riviera

**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.

