ESCAPE *Routes*

WHEN DID YOU LAST GET YOUR PASSPORT STAMPED?

SUMPTUOUS BATHING IN THE BLANCA SUITE

PLAYA VIK'S COMMUNAL LIVING ROOM AND BAR, AWAIT SO SHARP VIEW

Designer luxury on the coast of Uruguay

WORDS: ANGELINA VILLA-CLARKE

When it comes to 'it' destinations, Uruguay is definitely having a moment. It first appeared on the radar in 2009 with the opening of Estancia Vik, a beautiful, state-of-the-art ranch in the glitzy hotspot of Punta del Este, on Uruguay's coast. The safest of the South American countries, it turns out that Latin Americans have been holidaying there for years, attracted by the pristine beaches and upscale hangouts. But while the rest of the world is just discovering the area, the local glitterati have already moved on. Twelve miles northeast to the tiny fishing village of José Ignacio, to be exact, drawn by the cool, bohemian vibe (the likes of Shakira, Argentinean polo stars and Latin filmmakers all have homes here). It now looks set to be on every cool-hunter's map with the opening of what could be the most stunning hotel *Stylist* has ever encountered.

Set against the rustic whitewashed cottages of José Ignacio, the modernist retreat of Playa Vik stands in jaw-dropping contrast. It is the sister property to Estancia Vik, also owned by Norwegian-born financier Alex Vik. This time he collaborated with renowned Uruguay-born architect Carlos Ott (best known for the Opéra de la Bastille in Paris) to design a beachfront property consisting of six casas, a central 'sculpture' building which houses a further four suites, an underground playroom, spa and wine cellar, as well as a stunning, elevated infinity pool.

It's hard to say what impressed *Stylist* the most (as this place has the wow-factor oozing out of every wall) but the central building's entrance certainly had us at "hello". You enter the 55-foot inclined facade through a monumental bronze door, created by celebrated artist Pablo Atchugarry, and are immediately struck by the communal space flooded with light. One minute you're brushing past a sculptural bench – Iceberg, by Zaha Hadid – the next you're dining against a wall of pulsating light by James Turrell. This is serious, grown-up luxury.

THE FUTURE IS SLEEK IN JOSÉ IGNACIO, URUGUAY'S NEWEST LUXURY HOTEL

Straight ahead is a vast, sliding glass wall opening onto an expansive terrace and the resort's highlight, the Absolute Hero pool, jutting precariously over the Atlantic. It's possibly the most dramatic swim *Stylist* has ever had. Dive in at night and you'll be further charmed by the celestial map on its black granite floor made from tiny fibre optic lights.

Why it's hot We loved the mix of ultra-modern design crossed with an eco conscience, especially in the Casa Raices where *Stylist* stayed. Each casa is individually designed but all have amazing 'living roofs' strewn with hot-pink bougainvillea, retractable glass walls and wooden terraces. Our stand-alone house had slightly mad, scribbled murals on the walls in the living area, but the sumptuous bedroom (all fine linens and state-of-the-art gadgetry), lovely stone fireplace and the stand-alone, jacaranda-wood oval bath provided a great contrast. But our favourite part was the alfajores – local caramel cookies, which appeared in our room each day. It's the simple things...

Eating and drinking While many hotels these days feature Michelin-starred restaurants, dining at Playa Vik is refreshingly low-key. For casual meals, the nightly barbecue is fantastic, with fresh seafood such as black drum fish and calamari being shared around with other guests, along with sides of fresh vegetables and homemade breads. Inside, the Parillero dining room is slightly more formal and focuses on Uruguayan beef dishes and the country's famed wines, 5,000 of which are housed in the 40-foot cellar.

Photo opportunity *Stylist* will never forget the evenings huddled under a blanket by the outside fire pit. Here we breathed in the fresh sea breeze and were awed by endless views of the majestic coastline. Playa Vik is the ultimate spot to watch what is considered the best sunset in the world.

Casas from £490 per night, including breakfast; playavik.com. British Airways flies to Montevideo via Buenos Aires; ba.com