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URUGUAY UNCOVERED

*Beaches filled with beautiful people; grassy plains where gauchos roam: it's tempting to apply the usual stereotypes to South America's latest hot spot. But beyond Punta del Este's party scene, **SHANE MITCHELL** finds a land that confounds expectations.*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID NICOLAS



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The titanium-clad central building at Playa Vik hotel, designed by Carlos Ott and located on José Ignacio's Playa Mansa.

THE OUTGOING TIDE DEPOSITED emerald-green kelp on Playa Mansa. Alejandro Turell dodged around the jetsam piled on the sand but then halted, tipping his head to one side as a sandpiper chirped in the dunes. Sunbathers, intent on their beach novels and bikini straps, ignored the young naturalist illustrator as he used his sandal to nudge a cluster of crab eggs still damp from the sea. "These

puff up like little balls when they dry in the sun," he said. As we continued to parallel the surf outside the fishing village of José Ignacio, Turell told me that when Charles Darwin explored Uruguay in 1833 during the second voyage of the H.M.S. *Beagle*, he discovered the fossil of a giant ground sloth. Then he remarked that the country's quirks weren't limited to its flora and fauna. "We are the Galápagos of South American culture," Turell said.

La República Oriental del Uruguay is an accident of geography and jealousy. Had Lord John Ponsonby been a less handsome man, his diplomatic posting to South America in the 1820's might not have been necessary to remove him from the immediate vicinity of George IV's favorite mistress, who apparently had a certain fondness for the dashing emissary. As fate would have it, this amorous exile meant that Ponsonby wound up in the right place to mediate for the creation of a buffer state between two squabbling titans, Argentina and Brazil, who have used this postage-stamp republic as their personal playground ever since.

In recent years Uruguay has joined the jet-set party circuit, with high-rise Punta del Este standing in as a Southern Hemisphere clone of Miami Beach. Red-hot Brazilian hotel group Fasano recently debuted Las Piedras Fasano, its first countryside property, here. The low-slung cottages of neighboring José Ignacio, on the other hand, evoke the colloquial sensibility of Amagansett, on Long Island's South Fork. (Both are less than a hundred miles up the coast from the capital of Montevideo and a 45-minute flight from Buenos Aires.) Fishermen still launch their boats from Playa Mansa, but now they share the beach with a seasonal population of international visitors—including British novelist Martin Amis, Argentine polo champion Nacho Figueras, and Latin pop star Shakira—who congregate at Parador La Huella restaurant to drink vodka caipiroskas as flamenco singer Diego el Cigala wails "Lágrimas Negras" on the speakers.

And yet, as Turell hinted, there is more to the Uruguayan way of life that sets it apart from its more flamboyant neigh-

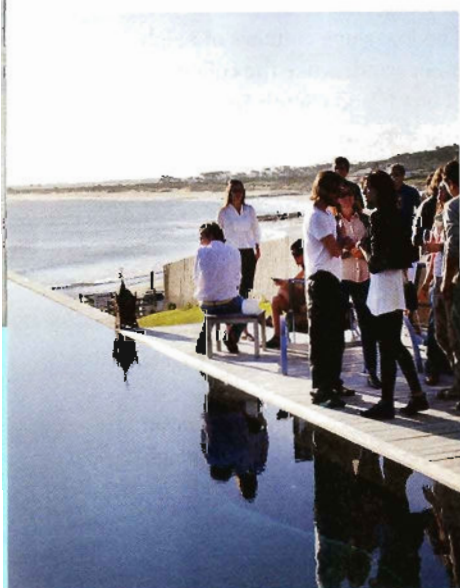
bors. For all the sunny outlook at the shore, a melancholy undercurrent runs through the culture—even though the country has had only one dictator of any note, little abject poverty or crime, and no civil conflicts in recent history except those that take place on the soccer field. Still, the music seems moodier than brassy Brazilian samba or Argentinean *ritmo latino* pop; while tracing a round-about route through the adjoining coastal states of Maldonado and Rocha, I kept hearing "La Cumparsita," one of the all-time greatest tangos, composed by Montevideo native Gerardo Hernán Matos Rodríguez and sometimes known by a version of its opening lyric, "Little Parade of Endless Miseries." The art scene is surprisingly dominant, producing works that call to mind an abstracted form of nature. The cuisine is pared down to the most primal elements; the country's most famous chef has the soul of a poet and the curiosity of a wilderness scout. Nothing is what it first seems in this accidental republic.

One of the principal reasons Uruguay has begun to register on the global radar has to do with the opening of Playa Vik, the 19-suite beach compound in José Ignacio owned by art collectors Alex and Carrie Vik. Designed by Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott, the complex is an aggressive visual statement. The seaside retreat also serves as a contemporary counterpoint for its 12-suite sister property, Estancia Vik, a working cattle ranch five miles inland. "Playa is about bringing Uruguay into the twenty-first century, while Estancia is an homage to traditional culture and nature," explained Vik, a Norwegian entrepreneur whose extended family has Uruguayan roots. "It's a way to showcase the two facets of Uruguay within a short distance of each other."

At the heart of Playa Vik is a titanium-and-glass-clad building dubbed Sculpture—all rigid, angular surfaces, with a cantilevered pool deck facing the steely towers of Punta to the west. In the upper atrium hangs a soft-gray-and-rose installation by Anselm Kiefer titled *The Secret Life of Plants*. Staying here is like a sleepover in a private gallery where you get to lounge on the artwork, even shower with it (Uruguayan painter Marcelo Legrand splashed a graphic fresco across the bathroom of the Valentina Suite). When the Viks planned their properties, they intentionally sought to promote the works of South American artists. Perhaps the best known of their collaborators, Uruguayan sculptor Pablo Atchugarry, forged the hotel's oxidized-bronze door—a massive portal that would thwart philistines storming a museum.

Introductions are easy in this unceremonious backwater, and so a few days later Atchugarry himself invited me to his studio outside José Ignacio. A burly man with marble dust caked on his broad face and graying beard, he has participated in the Venice Biennale and exhibited in galleries from São Paulo to Seoul. His monumental pillars bring to mind the bleached strata that are often exposed in abandoned quarries. Atchugarry explained that he and the marble typically have a "communication" before the carving commences; rather than execute sketches, he draws directly on the rough surface. We stood talking next to a jumble of columns shipped over from the Italian town of Carrara. "Since I am chained to the marble," he said with a grin, "it is better to be here at home than in Italy."

Like Turell, Atchugarry idealizes a connection between art and nature, but in his case, he has shaped the landscape to his own liking, dredging a man-made lake into the hills beyond his studio as a focal point for a sculpture park



COAST TO COUNTRYSIDE Left, from top: The Valentina Suite at Playa Vik; a bowl of steamed mussels at Parador La Huella, on the beach at José Ignacio; the pool at Playa Vik. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The living room at Estancia Vik, with a sculpture by Pablo Atchugarry and a ceiling mural by Clever Lara; Augustin Leóns, the ranch's manager; Estancia Vik's game room; dinner at the hotel's parrillero; the property's west wing at dusk.

and outdoor concert venue. His colossal works, apparently, require equal patience on the part of patrons like the Viks. The unfinished pieces he leaned against had been sitting around for several years—waiting, as he explained, for the conversation to start up again. Asked when they might be finished, he shrugged, smiling sweetly. His sense of time seemed to keep pace with geology. I had been advised that Uruguayans were laid-back, but this was positively horizontal.

It was tempting to head right back from Atchugarry's studio to the cheerful bars and cabanas on Playa Mansa. But I wanted to venture farther into the wilder campo, along dirt roads with barbed-wire-fenced cow pastures and battered Ford pickups kicking up clouds of pink dust. The terrain changed to low hills between cultivated fields of corn. It took less than an hour's drive north to arrive in the sleepy colonial pueblo of Garzón—one church, empty streets, a scrubby plaza with a fountain. Not exactly the sort of place I expected to find the maestro of South American barbecue.

"HAPPINESS AND SADNESS SLEEP IN THE SAME BED," FRANCIS Mallmann said. Sitting under a ripened grape arbor humming with bees at his intimate restaurant-with-rooms, El Garzón, the internationally renowned chef and I were discussing the melancholy leitmotif we both found appealing about his adopted home. Mallmann—born in Argentina of an Uruguayan mother—is as influential as the Viks when it comes to putting this corner of Uruguay on the map. His restaurant Los Negros, which he opened in 1993 by the lighthouse in José Ignacio, helped make a name for the town; he closed it in 2006 and retreated from the coast to settle deeper in the countryside. El Garzón, housed in an old brick single-level hacienda, sits on a corner of the town plaza. The indoor-outdoor restaurant feels less like a temple of refined cuisine than the study of a gentleman explorer with a passion for botany and architecture.

But the bookshelves in the lobby were conspicuously empty. "People kept taking them," Mallmann told me, leaving the arbor to fetch a volume by Canadian poet Robert W. Service from his collection. We shared a hard-rind local cheese and crusty bread hot from an adobe oven while talking about camping in the Maldonado pampas and cooking poetically simple meals—just a single roasted onion; some rice in a pot. This from the man famous for authoring *Seven Fires*, his extravagant interpretation of asado barbecue that typically includes black pudding, chorizo sausages, lamb, goat, sweetbreads, chicken, and a suckling pig or two, all grilled over a smoky heap of wood charcoal. Charring a whole cow, or a single vegetable, is as elemental as taste gets.

Later that night, under an iron chandelier that illuminated the dining room, I ate slices of rare beef with garlicky *chini-churri* and considered the poet Mallmann favored most. The Bard of the Yukon seemed oddly lowbrow, not to mention contextually far from home; and yet Service's "Call of the Wild"

perfectly explained how an intellectual who trained with the likes of Roger Vergé and Alain Senderens could wind up content in a dusty cattle town.

Garzón and its environs are, of course, the natural home of the gauchos. The old-fashioned ones wear flared *bombachas de campo* riding pants and felt berets, a wicked dagger stuck in embroidered waistbands. Their trusted sidekick, the criollo, is a feral descendant of the horses brought to the New World by Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century—an incredibly responsive, intelligent creature with the brawny lines of a long-distance galloper. Passing through the front gates of Estancia Vik, about 20 miles from Garzón, I unpacked my cowboy boots and saddled up.

"We kiss the horse to make him go and shush him to stop," Augustín Leone said, demonstrating by puckering up and making a smooching sound. A slim Argentine who manages the ranch, he sat a horse as if glued to its back at birth. When we forded a stream, the ash from his cigarette barely quivered. My mount was so sensitive to commands that he danced every time I raised my voice slightly.

Since breaking my wrist riding in the highlands of Iceland a few years ago, I sit a horse nervously now, so we trotted slowly through the level campo. (Estancia Vik encompasses 4,000 acres on both sides of an estuary that empties into the José Ignacio Lagoon.) Two black bulls wrestled lazily, their horns briefly entangled. The grass smelled like honey. Leone and I brushed past a thorny coronilla plant where a tiny moss nest resembling a teardrop was suspended from one limb. Before construction was finished on the Spanish-colonial-style estancia, Alejandro Turell would camp on the property to sketch nests like this one. The resulting series of miniature etchings wound up framed in the suite that was named after him.

The estate's main structure is far more traditional than Playa Vik—red tiled roof, white stucco exterior. There is no

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barrier between the ranch buildings and the grasslands. The living room at the center of the hacienda is dominated by a ceiling mural by Uruguayan painter Clever Lara, who used Google Earth as his inspiration for a bird's-eye view of the landscape, spanning the blue coast east of the Río de la Plata and the reddish-brown sierras of the western interior. Craning my neck, I realized yet another microclimate seemed to exist between the two.

It was this geographical irregularity that I set out to chart for myself the next day. About an hour northeast, near the town of Castillos, the rocky plains gave way to an intriguing tableau of wetlands and palm trees as I turned in to the long driveway at Estancia Guardia del Monte, a hillside building facing a vast freshwater lagoon. A pan of Chinche-grape jelly bubbled on a wood-burning stove in the kitchen, where I found the present owner, Alicia Fernández de Servetto. She offered to show me one of Uruguay's strangest natural treasures. Gauchos

used to love this indigenous tree for its sheltering canopy, she explained as we walked down a path leading to an old-growth forest of 50-foot-tall evergreens resembling African baobabs.

The giant ombu is, in its own way, as much of an aesthetic achievement as one of Atchugarry's sculptures or Kiefer's murals at Playa Vik. The silvery bark was splintered and pitted with wormholes, splashes of pink and blue lichen, clumps of green mold, tendrils escaping from gnarled roots. My palm rested on a crack where a few scraps of leaves were caught. While I knew better than to touch a million-dollar painting, no one objected to my probing the secret life of this one rare plant. It was hard to believe that its nearest North American cousin was plain old pokeweed.

"*Vamos a la playa, oh oh,*" sang the happy boy at the table next to mine in Restorán Lajau, where I waited for an order of crisp crab croquettes with caramelized-onion marmalade. In a red adobe-and-brick house facing the Atlantic at La Pedrera, Raúl Sanson Collazo cooked simple seafood dishes and crafted condiment boxes out of driftwood. A slight backtrack from

Castillos off the main highway, this beach town and the nearby un-signposted settlement of Oceanía del Polonio may be the next José Ignacio. Already town houses along the shoreline rambla between Playa del Barco and El Penon looked freshly spruced; surfers and kiteboarders who risk the undertow that whips through many of the bays along Uruguay's coast make this one of their first dips on the way to funkier Punta del Diablo, farther north.

So how could I resist one last chance to see the *playa*, too? By the time I finished lunch, the beach at La Pedrera was nearly empty and the sky turning squall-gray. The sand was littered with those strange crab eggs Alejandro Turell admired, now wonderfully altered from their jellied liquid state to parchment orbs that glowed like distant moons. For the solitary child splashing in the water, however, the eggs were simply beach toys. He tossed handfuls into the relentless sea-foam, where they were pulled under and miraculously popped back up, until at last they disappeared in a bigger wave, an endless flotilla of little mysteries. †

Shane Mitchell is *T+L's* special correspondent.

GUIDE TO URUGUAY



Estancia Vik Km 8, Cam. Eugenio Saiz Martínez, José Ignacio; 598/9460-5212; estanciavik.com; doubles from \$1,000, including breakfast and activities.

Playa Vik Calle de Los Cisnes y Los Horneros, José Ignacio; 598/9460-5212; playavik.com; doubles from \$1,500, including breakfast and activities.