

ELLE

A Quiet Spot in Uruguay Is the ‘Hamptons of South America’

The small towns of Garzón and José Ignacio are art world destinations.

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COURTESY OF VIK RETREATS

Heidi Lender visited Garzón, Uruguay, on vacation 14 years ago. Within three days, she owned a home there with 80 acres. “Garzón is the best-kept secret on the planet,” says Lender, who has been a fashion writer, photographer, and creative entrepreneur. The small Uruguayan town she calls home is part of an area known as the Hamptons of South America, whose summer season runs from December to March.

Garzón has fewer than 200 residents, yet has eight art spaces, a sculpture park, and a winery. There's a rustic-chic **hotel and bucket-list destination restaurant** from renowned chef Francis Mallmann. Mallmann's a pioneer in the area—in 2003, after decades in nearby José Ignacio, he and a friend-turned-business partner bought the building that houses both of his establishments. The oceanside town is about a 30-minute drive from Garzón and now draws a jet-setting crowd. In a 2019 interview, Mallmann recalled that when he arrived in the late '70s, Garzón had “no roads or electricity, and water was delivered via donkeys.” Times have clearly changed.



CRISTOBAL PALMA

Playa Vik, a beach-side hotel in José Ignacio.

Lender is a trailblazer as well. In 2017, she launched **Campo**, a nonprofit creative institute with a residency program called **Campo Air** that has hosted more than 250 artists, musicians, and filmmakers. Soon after came **Campo Artfest**, a three-day art festival that draws thousands and kicks off a month of events, including the **Este Arte** fair in José Ignacio and the **José Ignacio International Film Festival**, and Campo Canteen,

Artfest, now known as CAF, explored migration and movement and included works from Alaska Native artist Nicholas Galanin and designer and architect Ronald Rael.

Art also fuels the hotels in José Ignacio. Carrie and Alex Vik opened **Estancia Vik** there in 2009, followed by the beachfront properties **Playa Vik** and **Bahia Vik**. They've filled all three with an eclectic mix of furniture and works by artists from around the globe.

Each of the 12 guest rooms at Estancia Vik, a ranch property set on 4,000 acres, features a site-specific work from a contemporary Uruguayan artist, while Playa Vik, which was designed by the Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott in collaboration with the Viks, has pieces from Zaha Hadid and James Turrell. Surprisingly, it's not the only Turrell in this town of under 300 residents. **Ta Khut**, the first freestanding Skyspace in South America, is just down the road at **Posada Ayana**, a seasonal boutique hotel. (The Skyspace is open to Posada Ayana guests and the public by ticketed entry.) For those up for a short drive, Uruguayan artist Pablo Atchugarry opened the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Atchugarry** (MACA), the country's first contemporary art museum, about halfway between Punta del Este and José Ignacio.

The onetime fishing village is now luring bigger fish to its shores. “Over the last few years, more new people have arrived and built or renovated some spectacular houses—mostly off dirt roads and hidden away, so the landscape hasn't changed,” Carrie Vik notes. “What I like to see is that they have fallen in love with the area for being that laid-back, relaxed place it has always been. They are not looking for St. Tropez or St. Barts. They are looking for something different—an unpretentious place to come and strip off the layers, relax, and enjoy the nature, the good food, the beaches, the countryside. There's still that escapism.”