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PHOTO OF CHEF AURORE DE BEAUDUY-YASINSKI BY CARL SCHUTZ

TRAVEL & RECREATION

jet set

SOUTH AMERICAN SUMMER

Thanks to a burgeoning wine region and a foodie scene led by celebrity chef Francis Mallmann, Uruguay is one of the hottest destinations south of the equator.

By Kathryn Romeyn



From top: A bungalow at Bahia Vik José Ignacio overlooking one of the property's pools; the game room at Estancia Vik José Ignacio boasts eclectic works of art.



Understanding José Ignacio, a fishing village turned upscale resort town on the Uruguayan coast—sandwiched between Brazil and Argentina—is

a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle. Only when all the pieces perfectly fit does the picture come into focus. Take the low-key glitz of Montauk; add some Miami and St-Tropez flash; splash in Byron Bay's boho beach vibes; top with Argentina's fiery cuisine; and blend in Bordeaux's wine country, and you can glimpse the feeling of vacationing in the tony enclave.

It's for this reason, among others, that the place seems to defy logic. Another such quagmire: Why are more people not aware? Those who have been know the answer is simple: It's one of those places so wonderful, so soul-stirring, it makes you question if you should do the world a favor and shout it from the rooftops (as I'm doing in this very article), or keep

quiet and not say a word. As with some of the best destinations, reaching José Ignacio is not the most straightforward journey from the U.S. First, fly through Miami, or perhaps somewhere in Brazil or Panama, to Montevideo; then drive a couple hours to reach the playground of the South American jet-set mixed with in-the-know Hollywood types a la Leonardo DiCaprio and Naomi Watts.

José Ignacio is a bit of an anomaly—sleepy for much of the year, then springing to life each December for one of the shortest seasons anywhere, filling to the gills with beautiful people at its hottest—literally—for the festive season and the South American summer.

In the few months it is awake, however, José Ignacio positively glows. Take slow, sinking steps in the soft sand to the beach-shack institution that is Parador La Huella (pronounced way-ja), where bottles of rosé go down as easy as the just-caught and simply grilled *corvina* (sea bass) draped across a wooden board and accessorized with a lemon wedge and

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIK RETREATS



perfectly dressed greens. Meals stretch on for hours here, as well as at other local hot spots like Juana.

Meanwhile, bikinis crowd the beach—if it's the highest of the high season between Christmas and New Year's—and surfers stud the waves off Playa Brava, the foil to the other side of the peninsula's calm Mansa waters. It's there that Bahia Vik José Ignacio's sprawling low-profile bungalows are set across 10 acres of dunes, creating a flawless atmosphere for enjoying sunsets. The vision of Alex and Carrie Vik, the intimate private retreat is one of three in Uruguay, each dwelling marked as one-of-a-kind by original artworks and installations that make for museum-quality eye candy in supremely laid-back environs.

Playa Vik José Ignacio is down the beach from Bahia Vik, while Estancia Vik José Ignacio is the romantic 4,000-acre estate where Katy Perry reportedly galloped over the verdant countryside. Estancia Vik is home to polo fields and enough horses to sate all three properties' guests, who have privileges at the stables. Thanks in part to Uruguayan architect Marcelo Daglio and sculptor Pablo Atchugarry, so stimulated are visitors by the creativity represented in Estancia Vik's surroundings—think a massive ceiling painted to represent Google Earth's view of Uruguay, and a pool that lights up to mimic the constellations above—

it's a place they never want to leave.

Up the rural road, which is dotted with gauchos sipping their omnipresent yerba mate mugs, is a serious draw for travelers: Bodega Garzón, a state-of-the-art winery—the first built outside North America to LEED standards—on a vast, rolling patchwork quilt of vines plotted out in tiny tracts to optimize microclimates and the Atlantic Ocean breeze. It's played a hefty role in upping the profile of Uruguay, and it's the baby of Argentine billionaire Alejandro Bulgheroni, whose portfolio includes wineries in Bordeaux, Mendoza, Tuscany, Napa, Barossa Valley, Patagonia and South Australia. Mouthwateringly bold flavors are the currency here—from the primo flagship Balasto blend of tannat, cabernet franc, petit verdot and marselan to impeccable estate olive oil and cuisine by Culinary Director chef Francis Mallmann, who cooked in his signature open-fire style at Gwyneth Paltrow's recent wedding.

Mallmann's treatment of seasonal ingredients serve both to delight and enhance not only panoramic vistas of the bucolic landscape, but also the wines made on-site. It's a process that, delightfully, is now possible to engage in directly, thanks to the just-launched members-only The Garzón Club, which boasts a private venue with subterranean barrel rooms and cellars where wannabe



Clockwise from left: A horse grazing on the 4,000 gorgeous acres of Uruguayan countryside at Estancia Vik; The Garzón Club houses an exclusive outdoor patio for members; the living area at Bahia Vik boasts views of the ocean, the fire pit and pools.



vintners may handcraft their own wine, select the level of roast on their barrel and aging period, and have it bottled with labels of their own design. (Exclusive access to the ultraprivate Ángel Cabrera-designed 18-hole golf course is also offered to members.) Future plans include an on-site lodge and spa, and a José Ignacio pied-à-terre beach club.

No visit would be complete without a countryside drive to the teensy town of Garzón, where, in 2006, Mallmann set up shop around a bougainvillea-flocked square, creating mecca for his fans in the form of Restaurante Garzón and its charming five-room inn, where full-board means absolute foodie heaven, including melt-in-your-mouth empanadas, flawless

New York steak and burnt fruit over homemade vanilla ice cream.

Whether chic and expansive at Bodega Garzón or intimate and homey at Restaurante Garzón, these lovingly created concepts embody the experience of this part of the world: indulgence and escape. After all, as one local put it, "Here, the mentality is to be wild and free." And that's all the plan you need—after booking those reservations early, of course. *Bahia Vik* from \$700 per night, bahiavik.com; *Playa Vik* from \$700 per night, playavik.com; *Estancia Vik* from \$550 per night, estanciavik.com; *El Garzón* from \$850 per night, restaurantegarzon.com ■

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