

NAVIGATOR

Where To Go Now On The Coast



EXPLORE

UNEXPECTEDLY, URUGUAY

A detour to the bohemian fishing village of José Ignacio delivers an unforgettable beach escape

Private back decks with ocean views beckon sunset seekers at Bahía Vik resort.

COURTESY OF VIK RETREATS

RECLINED ON A LOW-SLUNG SOFA, with a caipirinha in hand and a lightweight wool blanket draped casually around my shoulders, I turn to my friends Cristina and Phillip to see that, just like me, they are content—practically purring—and melting into their seats. After a weekend filled with the boisterous storytelling and infectious laughter that often come when old friends travel together, we are at last silent, contemplative, listening to the waves crash. We take in the open-air splendor that is Parador La Huella, a culinary mecca for sandy-footed seafood lovers built right on the beach in the tiny Uruguayan town of José Ignacio. The breeze is gentle but the drinks are strong, and we are all thinking the same thought: How had we overlooked this glorious spot before, and why in the world are we leaving tomorrow?

I break the silence. “What if we stayed just a few more days?”

This whirlwind love affair began innocently enough a few months prior, while planning a trip to Buenos Aires. What better way to ease into vacation mode, we reasoned, than by prefacing our city sojourn with a side trip to check out the beaches of neighboring Uruguay? So we booked flights into Montevideo and ferry tickets to Buenos Aires a few days later, unsure of what to expect.

From the airport, we drive 100 miles east along the country’s gently curving southern shoreline, keeping watch for our destination: a little fishing village called José Ignacio. The terrain grows increasingly more pastoral until, at last, the road leads us into a barely there town. There are no stoplights or street signs, just hand-painted wooden arrows pointing toward a smattering of inns, restaurants, and art galleries. “Is this it?” we ask each other. Exploration seems imperative and inevitable; with all those pretty-yet-vague arrows, getting lost seems part of the promise.

And lost we get. A stroll to the town’s iconic lighthouse segues into a long seafood lunch, sweetened by rosé and dulce de leche cake, on the cozy porch of



Clockwise: Playing on the playa; fresh ceviche at La Huella restaurant; boats recalling the town’s roots in fishing; breezes and beach views at La Huella; the perfect spot for a nap at Bahía Vik; hand-painted signs leading visitors through town—and beyond; Cubist accommodations on the sand at Bahía Vik

a palm-shaded café. After lunch, we sip watermelon-mint smoothies at Rincón Verde, a raw juice bar located between an art gallery and a yoga studio. We discover a tiny white adobe inn on the edge of town with slipcovered sofas in its library and an honor bar with top-shelf spirits in the living room. Is this coastal Uruguay or the Hamptons? Who cares, I decide. This place is divine.

But it is over dinner at La Huella that José Ignacio seizes our souls. The setting is fantastic: an upscale beach shack with billowing canvas drapes instead of walls, where the well-dressed and swimsuited

mingle over fresh-off-the-line seafood and chat idly in Spanish and English. Course after course, the plates astonish: a tangy citrus ceviche, giant langoustines baked in a clay oven and garnished with a fragrant tomato sauce, and fillets of brotola, a local whitefish, prepared simply and grilled.

We’re in love: with this place, this view, and especially this food. We cannot bear to leave town without having another meal here. Between courses, we rebook ferry tickets, reserve hotel rooms, and stow our phones in triumph. Our Uruguayan detour is now the main event.



BUNGALOWS: COURTESY OF VIK RETREATS; BEACH (OPPOSITE) AND CEVICHE: VICTOR MAZE; BOAT AND POOL: CRISTINA DE OLIVEIRA; SIGNS: PHILLIP BARKER; LA HUELLA: ERIC WOLFFINGER

AS IF REWARDING US for staying longer in José Ignacio, the Uruguayan travel gods smile, guiding our Googling (and us) to Bahia Vik, a new resort that places a contemporary aesthetic directly on the rustic blessings of the beach. In other words, we are blown away by what greets us upon check-in. A gray-slate main house with expansive courtyard anchors a string of 11 bungalows—each a modernist cube built from a different natural material, including stone, titanium, and copper. Set among dunes and grasses like a child's left-behind blocks, many are mere steps from the water's edge.

Our bungalow, built from a brown zinc that shimmers in the southern sun, is as splendid inside as it is starkly beautiful outside. Midcentury furniture and an eclectic mix of paintings, ranging from sweeping landscapes to abstract nudes, make our *casita* feel more like an art collector's guesthouse than a hotel.

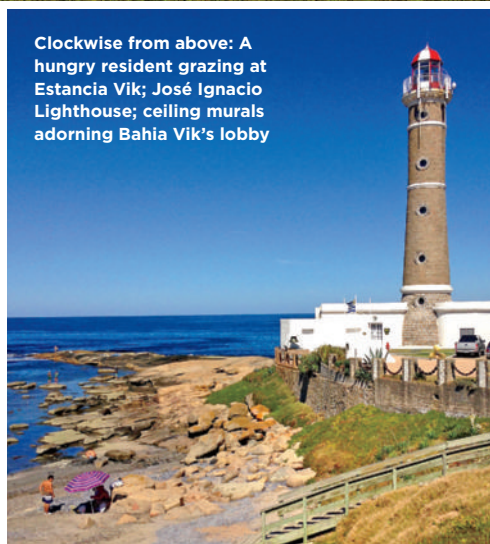
It's Uruguay's shoulder season, and we feel like we have the place to ourselves. We luxuriate in Zen splendor, nibbling brioche and cured meats at breakfast and taking walks along the shore, passing colorful fishing boats and the occasional beachgoer. We spend

afternoons beside four narrow pools, vacillating between paperbacks and naps. At night, we sleep with the floor-to-ceiling glass doors flung open, allowing the crash of the waves and the cool night breeze to circulate among us.

While seafood may have lured us into the embrace of José Ignacio and this stunning hotel, we use our final evening to venture out in search of beef. It's 6 p.m., and we are in the hotel's Jeep, rumbling along the winding road to Estancia Vik—one of two sister properties to our beloved Bahia Vik. As the name implies, the look here is Spanish ►



Clockwise from above: A hungry resident grazing at Estancia Vik; José Ignacio Lighthouse; ceiling murals adorning Bahía Vik's lobby



Colonial *estancia*, or ranch: In front of us lies a massive, red-roofed hacienda. Horses bray in the distance, the smell of grass is in the air, and the sun hangs low in a pale pink sky above rolling acres of green farmland. We've traveled just 10 minutes inland but feel a world away.

Every week, Estancia Vik hosts a gaucho-style barbecue for guests of all three properties in a domed-roof tin building, mirroring the traditional cooking huts used by the Latin cowboys but covered with colorful graffiti, in typical Vik artistic flare. The meat sizzles on a circular central grill called a *fogon*, and smoke rolls out of the hut and past our table just outside, an irresistible preview of coming events. Knowing it's

our last meal in José Ignacio, we ask for it all: chorizo, sweetbreads, flank steak, short ribs. Each piece is delivered one by one to a wooden cutting board that commands the center of our small table.

The sun drops below the horizon, and a twinkling dusk sets in, mirrored by tiny, glimmering lights at the bottom of the courtyard's granite pool. Other diners come and go but we remain, as the laughter and storytelling return, and our last supper stretches into the night. When our final bottle of wine is empty and the grill's glowing embers begin to fade, a thought floats above the table like a fourth friend, coming to join us again: Should we extend this trip once more, and stay for yet another night—or two?

THE DETAILS

GET HERE

High season runs December through early March; some businesses close during the off-season. Fly into Montevideo and book a car ahead of time; most rentals have manual transmissions, so specify if you require an automatic (not available at all rental agencies). Leave the airport with around 300 Uruguayan pesos for toll roads.

STAY HERE

Posada Del Faro is a charming inn a short walk from the beach. Borrow a bicycle or golf cart for a quick ride into town. Rates start at \$210; posadadel.faro.com. **Vik Retreats** are a trio of luxurious, art-filled properties including **Estancia Vik**, a Spanish Colonial-style horse ranch; **Playa Vik**, an ultra-mod beach house built around an infinity pool; and **Bahía Vik**, which opened in 2015 and includes 11 modern oceanfront villas, each made of a different natural material. Rates start at \$550-\$800; vikretreats.com.

EAT HERE

Parador La Huella is an open-air restaurant nestled among sand dunes where in-the-know travelers and casually chic locals come to enjoy fresh seafood, grilled meat, and tasty cocktails; paradorlahuella.com. **Lucy** is a cozy café and teahouse that serves organic fare on shady porches, surrounded by lush tropical plants; lucy.com.uy. **Rincón Verde** specializes in fresh-pressed juice and light vegetarian bites from a tiny walk-up bar; 598/4/486-2962.

My friends look to me. I consider this wonder of a place, this unexpected country, coast, and culture. Once again, I break the silence.

"Let's go to Buenos Aires," I say. But before anyone speaks, I add, "And start planning our next trip to Uruguay." ■