



Clockwise from above The beach at Punta del Diablo; Palacio Salvo in Montevideo; antiques at Casa Zinc Trading Post; the pool at Fasano Las Piedras; the tango, octogenarian-style; hotel-restaurant El Garzón; lunch at Mercado del Puerto in Montevideo's old city; La Rambla runs along the coast; natural flora; Babilonia Libros, a plant-filled bookstore

Uruguay, I'M SORRY

THE SMALL SOUTH AMERICAN STATE REVEALS MUCH, AFTER ALL, TO FALL IN LOVE WITH...

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS JONATHAN CANE



I would like to make a retraction. Four years ago I wrote an article about Uruguay where I listed the numerous reasons why I really, really hated the country. I can't remember the reasons any more or why I was in such a horrendous mood on that failed trip. I was wrong and I want to make amends. This little meat-eating state, where gays can marry and cannabis is legal, is my new favourite South American country. Uruguay has great food and style, excellent wine, and a cantankerous, scruffy president who gives away 90 per cent of his salary and lives in a 'shack' with a three-legged dog called Manuel. President José 'Pepe' Mujica, an ex-guerrilla, chrysanthemum farmer and (scandalously) rumoured vegetarian, uses every public podium to warn the world, in his avuncular way, against hyper-consumption, waste and arrogance. Uruguay is the little country that could.

Uruguay can be divided roughly into four sections: the rugged coastline in the north, with beaches from Brazil down to Punta del Este; the capital, Montevideo, with its beaches and winelands; Colonia del Sacramento and historic surrounds; and the hinterland

and wood cabins interspersed with pampas grass and tall cacti have been beaten by the wind and burnt by the sun. You can rent a shack on the beach and start learning about Uruguayan wine (by the fire in July or on the sundeck in December). There are only the most basic supplies – no banks, no ATMs – so bring money, food and good wine.

Further down the coast, towards Montevideo, is the Uruguayan Riviera of Punta del Este, which some locals refer to as the Hamptons. The centre of Punta is a little glitzy for me – polo players with shiny hair, Eurotrash with luridly shiny fingernails, casinos – but as the beaches stretch out they become lazier, gentler. At the furthest point is the world's coolest fishing village, José Ignacio. Uruguay's top eatery, the luxury beach-shack restaurant Parador La Huella, is here on Playa Brava, and so too, with spectacular views of the coast, is the designer boutique hotel Playa Vik. No one actually stays in José Ignacio during the vacations though, except people who own helicopters and horses.

Nearby are La Barra and Manantiales, which are far from humble but don't require you to raid your trust fund. I stayed at Casa Zinc, a world-renowned hotel fashioned by antique dealer Aaron Hojman. La Barra now has some smart apartment blocks, but in general small cafés, antique stores and houses (from cottages to modernist masterpieces) run along the beaches. Five minutes up the coast is Manantiales, a sleeper and more refined beach village. On the corner of nowhere and nowhere is La Linda, a bakery that opens early, serving excellent bread, pasties and coffee.

In the hills recessed from the coast is the luxury rural retreat Fasano Las Piedras. The Fasano hotels in Brazil are famous for their sophisticated design and their first international hotel extends this tradition. Brazilian architect Isay Weinfeld has designed a handful of modernist concrete bungalows set in the uncompromising landscape and managed to retain a strong rural character in the stonework, landscaping of cacti, pampas grass and lavender, and vernacular detailing. I spent two decadent days luxuriating there, walking, reading and drinking more wine. Like a small animal before winter I had stored up some La Linda bread and empanadas, which I ate with the Uruguayan Tannat wines I was testing on my balcony.

Uruguay has not traditionally been known for its wine but the Tannat grape has become to Uruguay what Malbec is to Argentina. Tannat has a very high concentration of tannins and is described as complex with black fruit flavours, like blackberry. Most of the wine estates are located near the capital but one cool new farm, Bodega Garzón, is located in the Punta area. Garzón's namesake is a dusty little town, where Argentina's most celebrated chef Francis Mallmann has opened El Garzón, a boutique hotel and restaurant. His neighbour, chef Lucia Soria (an ex-protégé of his and owner of Jacinto in Montevideo), opened her charming restaurant Lucifer in the garden.

Soria's Jacinto was my first stop for lunch when I made it to Montevideo. The segue from countryside garden to big city isn't particularly pronounced; Montevideo is essentially a farm with high-rise buildings and an opera house. This is not to say that Montevideo doesn't look like a city, in fact it does, but at its heart it's just like Pepe's

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of cows and cowboys. Most people would enter Uruguay via Buenos Aires after landing in Argentina, but I came from Brazil, and there can be no better introduction to the nation than its border control office: a single-storey farmhouse with fireplace, wine-drinking officials and dogs sheltering from the cold.

Winter is out of peak season in Uruguay. It can be romantic, windswept and cheap, but expect serious hibernation on the restaurant and hotel front. In summer, expect late lunches in the sun, Chardonnay-Pinot Noir blends, square pizzas, Spanish romances, celebrity spotting. There is neither sun nor Chardonnay in the most northerly fishing villages Punta del Diablo, Cabo Polonio and La Paloma in July. Punta del Diablo is one of my top places in the world. It's thoroughly unpretentious, undeveloped in the best possible way, with an endearing vernacular shack-like housing style. Little cottages



Clockwise from top left
 Casa Zinc Trading Post; treasures in Casa Zinc; shopping at Feira Tristán Navaja; the beach at Punta del Diablo.



chrysanthemum farm: unpolished, folksy, adorable. Jacinto has high-barrelled brick ceilings, large street windows, grey marble tables and chalkboard menus, and is one of a number of hip downtown eateries in Ciudad Vieja or the 'Old City'. This zone, directly adjacent to the port, used to be dodgy, and even now many buildings remain uninhabited with grand wooden shutters permanently closed.

The classic lunch spot down by the port is Mercado del Puerto, an iron market hall that has been serving barbecued meats (asado) since 1868. During peak season this dimly lit venue is a hot, busy, gringo-magnet but in winter there are only old men wearing hats, eating meat and drinking beer. If you're not up for an animal smorgasbord, Café Brasileiro, open since 1877, is wood-panelled, has its name inscribed in gold lettering on the windows, and serves classic European café food and excellent wine. For a more contemporary lunch you could go a few blocks up to Estrecho, where loyal diners eat at the bar.

Throughout the old city are characterful diners and pastry shops run by unfashionable old people who are warm and hospitable. Eat square pizzas sold by the metre, crumbed schnitzel Milanese with cheese, and honey/dulce de leche/ sugar-covered pastries, breads, croissants and doughnuts. The old city was designed at a particularly optimistic

point in Montevideo's history. While the scale is low – three to four storeys – there is drama packed into each doorway, window and lintel. This exaggerated flourish, once intended to be pompous, now looks endearing, like cartoons of old European buildings. The fanciest of all these is the Palacio Salvo on Plaza Independencia. The muscular tower has a Gothic sensibility and was the tallest building in Latin America for a long time. Across the plaza are Pepe's office and the extensively photographed neoclassical Teatro Solís.

The old architecture of Montevideo is summed up in an old hotel on the far edge of the city, now fully revamped, and run by the French hotel group Sofitel. The Carrasco was built in 1921 as a getaway for the best families of Buenos Aires and Montevideo who schlepped their butlers and cooks and nannies to this neoclassical resort. The building is structured by a series of intersecting ovals, which face the esplanade and the sea, and has bombastic stained-glass ceilings. The hotel was the only place to host a debutantes balls and entertained artists, intellectuals and vanguards. After being shuttered for some time, it has just reopened with an extensive refurbishment of which I cannot say I approve. The interiors are stiff and charmless, which is to say, nothing like Uruguay or Uruguayans. During my stay I struck up a friendship with the hotel's sommelier, Federico de Moura. The country's most awarded sommelier kept me appropriately inebriated, sharing wine gossip, educating me about the particularities of Uruguay wine, presenting to me the wide variety of non-Tannat wines he liked and suggesting wine tours in the countryside for my next visit.

On Sunday the energetic street market Feira Tristán Navaja had me back in Ciudad Vieja. On sale were trinkets, woven things, jars, things in jars, empanadas, rusted Swiss army knives, rolling pins, dogs, budgies, fruit. There were hipsters with nose piercings and bicycles flogging knick-knacks, dried flowers, baskets, tropical fish, door handles...

As the sun sets on Sundays, the oldies come out to dance the tango. In front of a nondescript diner in a nowhere-park, men put on their hats and ladies their heels to flirt and dance in a manner we're taught to imagine isn't possible for octogenarians. Some women sit in their fur coats – real I'm sure – and replay the steps in their minds, gesturing to themselves what move will come next. The music sounds slightly tinny and plays through a portable speaker. (Someone's grandson must be making good off pocket money.) The star couple move gracefully, if tentatively. She wears a yellow scarf with a dark aquamarine crushed velvet dress, a hat, fishnet stockings, dancing shoes and a fur coat. He wears a hat, a suit and a blue cardigan, and everyone wants to dance with him. (He's had his share of women I'm sure, and men perhaps too.) He dips her, and she goes down a little stiff, but with no apprehension.

For this, and all the other reasons why I was wrong about Uruguay, I'm sorry.

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