

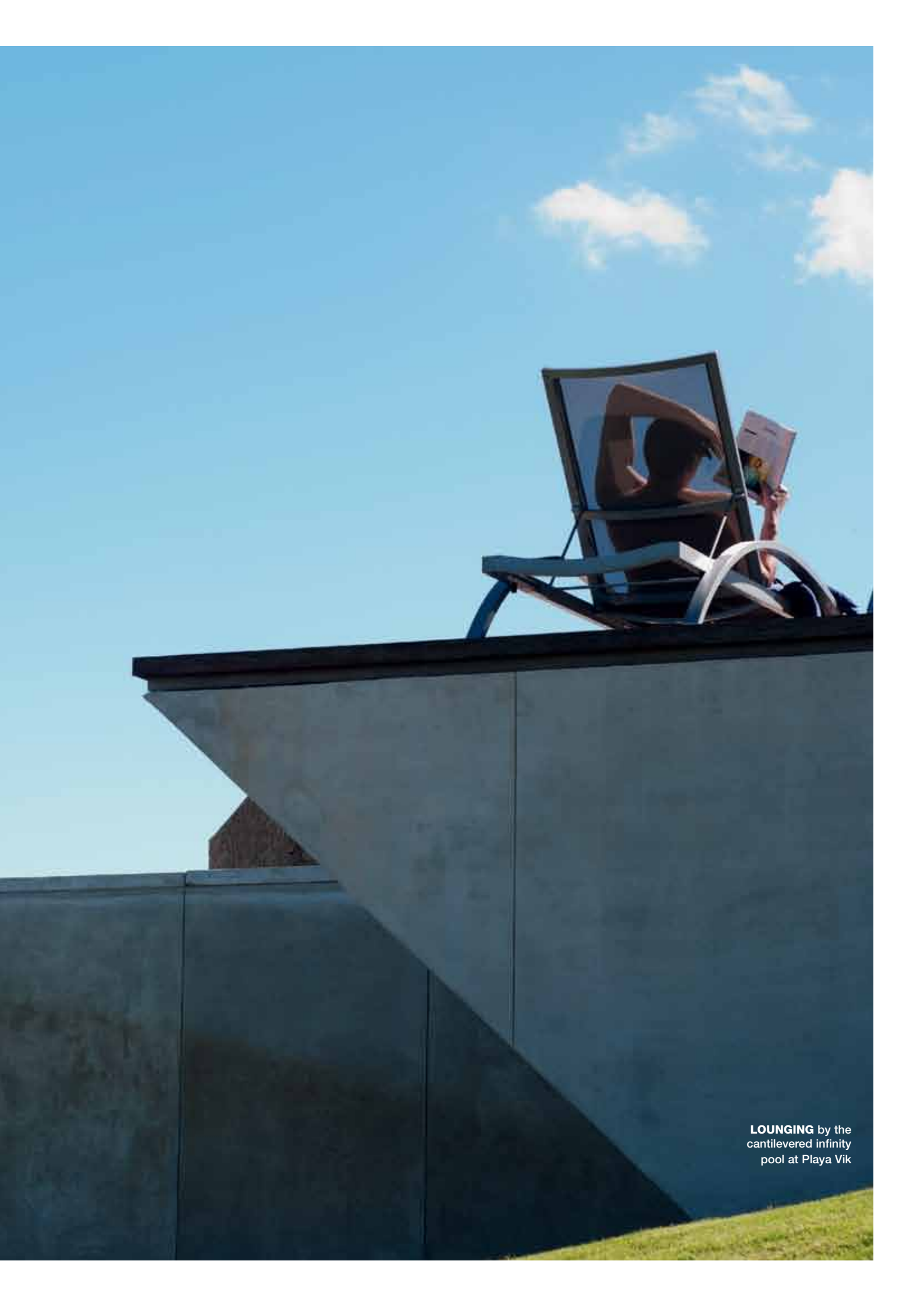
WHEN THE
coast
is clear

PHOTOGRAPHS **JUANJO VELANDIA**



Once the southern hemisphere's best-kept secret, the Uruguayan coastal resort of Punta del Este is now a January fixture for the global party crowd. But what, if anything, happens the rest of the year? **Matt Chesterton** finds out





LOUNGING by the
cantilevered infinity
pool at Playa Vik



B

revity is the soul of Punta del Este. The “season”, a whirligig of branded parties, itchy-bitsy thongs, dune buggy snarl-ups and Shakira sightings, starts on

Boxing Day, peaks at New Year, ebbs in February and expires in March. At which point the town exhales, rolls over and goes back to sleep for nine months.

That at least is the conventional wisdom. The truth is more interesting. Punta (as its friends call it) is expanding both its

geographical reach and off-season appeal. The former trend has long been apparent, with outlying communities strung out northwards along the coast like José Ignacio and Garzón acquiring a cachet almost surreally at odds with their former lives (fishing hamlet and glorified railway station, respectively). The latter trend is being driven by major new tourist infrastructure, the kind which has investors unrelaxed about the idea of their assets being mothballed most of the year. Take the **Fasano Las Piedras**, which opened earlier this year and is the first venture



THE MODERN My Way property from boutique rental agency Oasis Punta



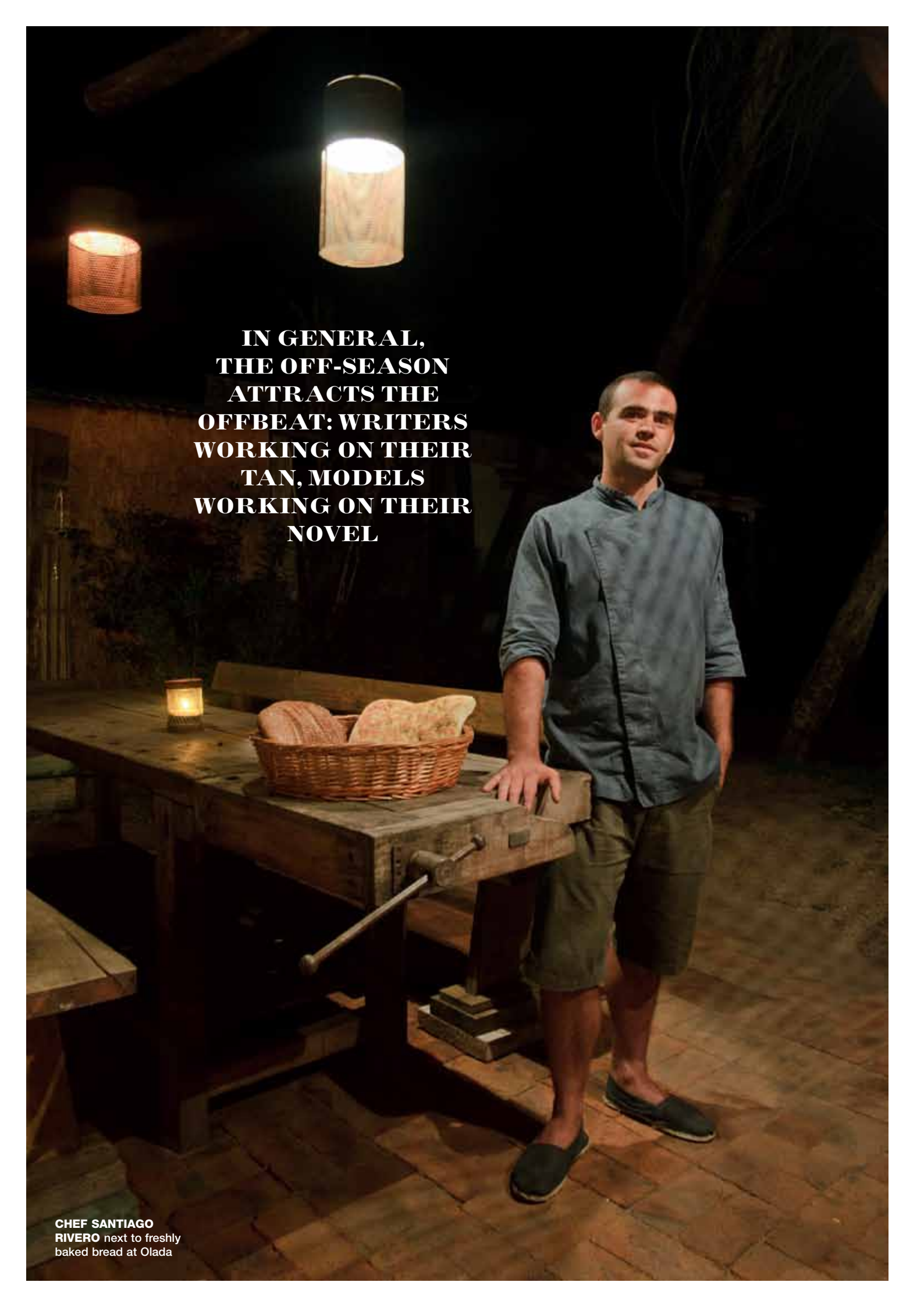
**AN INDOOR
POOL** at Fasano
Las Piedras

outside its homeland for Brazil's Fasano Group. Set amid rich, rolling pastures, 9km inland from La Barra, the liveliest of Punta's subresorts, the Fasano's 32 deluxe bungalows and blue-ribbon amenities mark it out as a destination lodging with a year-round allure. "We're betting a lot on the off-season," says Astrid Perkins of Think Argentina, the brand agency representing the Fasano. "We'll have spa programmes with personal trainers, special programmes for couples and newlyweds, and as much tennis, golf and horseback riding as the body can take."

Further up the coast in modish José Ignacio, there's another new property aiming to be more than just a liminal zone between beach and party. Designed by Uruguayan architect Carlos Ott, **Playa Vik** features six small houses, or *casitas*, surrounding a central two-storey "sculpture" building made from curved glass and titanium panels. A cantilevered infinity pool protrudes over the beach like a giant's diving board, and as guests wander through the terrace and dining areas they will pass original artworks from the likes of James Turrell, Anselm Kiefer and ►



THE BEACH at Punta del Este, increasingly the off-season destination of choice for jet-setters and offbeat travellers alike

A man, identified as Chef Santiago Rivero, stands in a rustic kitchen. He is wearing a blue chef's shirt and green shorts. He is positioned next to a wooden table that holds a basket of freshly baked bread. The kitchen is dimly lit with warm, glowing pendant lights. The background shows a rustic interior with wooden beams and a brick floor.

**IN GENERAL,
THE OFF-SEASON
ATTRACTS THE
OFFBEAT: WRITERS
WORKING ON THEIR
TAN, MODELS
WORKING ON THEIR
NOVEL**

**CHEF SANTIAGO
RIVERO** next to freshly
baked bread at Olada

Pablo Atchugarry. Popular restaurants like **La Olada** and **La Huella** (whose Sunday brunches are an institution even in the off-season) are just a stroll away, while the more energetic can cycle up to sister property **Estancia Vik**, where they can shake off the sand and slide into the stirrups for a horseback ride in the lush backcountry.

In general, the off-season attracts the offbeat: writers working on their tan, models working on their novel – the kind of people for whom privacy and flexibility is key. Such visitors may opt to stay in a fully staffed house with beach access rather than a hotel. “Houses tend to be stylish, with important architects like Mathias Klotz and Mario Connio working in the area,” says Katharine Pottinger, managing director of boutique property rental agency **Oasis Punta**. “Restaurant options are fewer in the low season, which means that being able to relax and eat well at home is a great benefit.”

Not everyone wants to indulge their inner gaucho or Ernest Hemingway, so it’s worth remembering that many of the older hotels – most of them in Punta del Este proper – run at three-quarters steam (at the very least) in the off-season. The best known of these is the Vegas-style **Conrad Resort & Casino**, with its themed restaurants, torch-lit swimming pools and gala evenings. Close by is the **Hotel Serena**, a boutique property whose Ibiza-esque private beach area centres on a black-bottom infinity pool guarded by a svelte Buddha. (In Punta, even the statues are buff.) **Hotel L’Auberge**, with its landmark water tower, mock-Tudor stylings, tea room and golf course, is more St Andrews than St Tropez and is exactly the kind of place you’d want to return to when the wind gets up and the clouds roll in; perhaps after tucking into some prime Uruguayan beef at legendary *parrilla* (steakhouse) **El Palenque**. “Punta is much more attractive in mid- and low season than it used to be,” says Ignacio Carrera Jr, assistant director at L’Auberge. “The buzz fades and leaves space for a relaxing *dolce far niente*.” In plain English, *sweet nothing*. And there’s really no time of year when that isn’t something worth doing. ●

HOTELS

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