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TRUTH IN TRAVEL

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PART 1: THE EAST COAST

THE GREAT SOUTH AMERICAN BEACH FINDER

A beach is so much more than a sunny stretch of sand—although there are plenty of those, too, in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, where HANYA YANAGIHARA surveyed more than 9,000 miles of coast to come up with 13 of the continent's best strands. Here, on South America's east coast, you'll find not only tropical heat (and the hardbodies who come with it) but pebbled shores populated with penguins, unpeopled stretches where palm trees are your only company, and waves without end that attract fledgling and serious surfers alike. Call it the thinking man's beach

Photographs by JULIEN CAPMEIL



CRINGE TO ADMIT IT NOW, but my idea of the perfect beach has always been embarrassingly rigid. I grew up in Hawaii, and to me a beach was not a beach unless it fronted the Pacific—the water a sparkling royal blue, the sand bone-white and flour-fine. The first time I visited the Atlantic (it was in Massachusetts, and it was, admittedly, late fall), I remember feeling sorry for both myself and the inhabitants of the entire Eastern Seaboard.

Here, the ocean was a flinty pewter, tangles of seaweed scummed the surface, and the sand was grainy and pocked with pinecones. It was a landscape of grays—as different from that of my childhood as the earth is from the moon. As I grew older, though, I came to appreciate Atlantic beaches: their moodiness, their visual and ecological complexities. If the Pacific's strands, with their bright primary-school palette, are remarkable for their familiarity, the Atlantic's are notable for their unpredictability, for their radical interpretations of what a beach can be.

It is precisely this diversity—and yes, unpredictability—that so distinguishes South America's 8,925-mile Atlantic coast. In Brazil, home to some of the world's most popular and picturesque shorelines, you move from the Martian-red crescents of the State of Bahia to the jungled shores of the Angra dos Reis archipelago, south of Rio. In Bahia are beaches to rival those of Hawaii but whose alarmingly tanned and lithe inhabitants, clad only in meager thongs, are inimitably Brazilian. Farther down the coast lies Uruguay's José Ignacio, where more improbably good-looking people lounge by a steely sea that's icy even in summer. And finally, near the ends of the earth, is Argentine Patagonia, where instead of sand one finds inky stones worn marble-smooth by the surf, and a sky thick with birds.

I traveled through Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina in search of the best beaches for every taste and temperament. This baker's dozen includes not only remarkable places to swim, catch a wave, and spot wildlife, but also some of the world's most epic and unexpected landscapes. Collectively, they argue for looking beyond Rio and Montevideo and Buenos Aires, since it is outside the cities that one sees South America at its most relaxed, democratic, and wild, with strands that upend all notions of perfection. I know I'll never think of a beach in the same way again. And you won't either.

