

A new Latin love affair: A week in unknown Uruguay, South America's little hidden gem

By [Chris Leadbeater](#)

PUBLISHED: 07:43 EST, 22 January 2014 | UPDATED: 14:49 EST, 22 January 2014

I walk around the Mercado del Puerto for seven minutes before I manage to locate a seat.

It is midday, and every table is taken at the 20 steak restaurants set up under the vaulted roof of this 19th century market hall.



A jewel of the River Plate: Uruguay has 400 miles of 'coastline' along the planet's widest estuary

Eventually, I spot a stool by the bar at La Maestranza, where weighty slabs of meat spit and click on the grill. The waitress scrawls my order – the tenderloin – in perfunctory fashion, but the cut, when it arrives, is cooked to perfection. I eat it slowly, listening to the Spanish chatter of my fellow diners.

The sole clue that I am in Montevideo is a faded poster on a nearby wall that shows the Uruguay football team lining up ahead of a game. Otherwise, this might be Buenos Aires, Rio, or another of the iconic cities of South America – busy, hungry, rather fond of beef.

But then, Uruguay has long struggled to assert its identity.





Decidedly chic: Jose Ignacio has its own lovely curve of sand (left), and a lighthouse that rears proudly (right)

Then comes Uruguay's shoreline jewel.

Jose Ignacio has had a rapid ascent, transformed, in the last decade, from sleepy fishing village to the sort of dazzle-destination applauded by style magazines. Just five blocks across, it looks, when I first catch sight of it, like a perfect pocket of American seaside, the sort of well-to-do hamlet you encounter on Long Island or Nantucket. There are clapboard houses – pale properties masquerading as basic dwellings, but worth millions – and the high-end estate agents who sell them. There is a soft crescent of white-yellow powder on which the beautiful people maintain their tans.

And there is Playa Vik, a five-star retreat where modern artworks loiter daringly in the lobby and the breakfast room gazes at the water through floor-to-ceiling windows.