

Living Well: Features

Latin America's Hippest Peninsula



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While the northern hemisphere shivers its way through winter in bulky coats, the gloves are off south of the equator, where summer is in full swing. Although Brazil's hip, tropical vibe is a popular destination for vacationers in desperate need of balmy weather, its tiny neighbor, Uruguay, is the choice for those craving authenticity with a touch of glamour. The beachfront skyline in Punta del Este, the country's most fashionable peninsula, may call Miami to mind, but it's nothing of the sort. Instead, the area's quaint oceanfront towns evoke a combination of the bohemian vibe of Venice, Calif., with the artisanal sensibilities of Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Whether you're looking for a quiet, laid-back getaway or want to indulge in a little revelry, The Financialist has some insider tips on the best places to sleep, eat and spend your days in Punta del Este, which more than earns its nickname, the Pearl of the Atlantic.

SLEEP

Casa Zinc

Location: El Tesoro, La Barra

La Barra, just 8 miles east of Punta del Este, is home to trendy Bikini Beach and attracts a crowd of models and celebrities. The town has a hot nightlife scene, and sophisticated visitors should consider a stay at design guru Aaron Hojman's wonderfully eclectic Casa Zinc. Hojman owns the nearby Trading Post antique store, and the vintage chic décor of Casa Zinc makes use of some of the most unique pieces he has picked up over years of collecting. Each retro-style room has a theme, including the "Architect's Studio," an airy 1950s throwback, complete with draftsman's table and incredible light, and the "Library," which offers a large selection of books, comfortable stuffed-leather chairs and a private garden.



The lighthouse in Jose Ignacio, near Punta del Este.

Casa Suaya

Location: Arenas de José Ignacio

Just a stone's throw from the beach, the 31-room Casa Suaya specializes in tranquility. At this secluded spot, guests can stay in airy, loft-style rooms or wooden bungalows overlooking the koi pond. The staff takes "*mi casa es su casa*" seriously and goes out of their way to make guests feel at home. While you're there, duck into the canopy-shaded tent on the beach for a massage with an ocean view, or head to the nearby Haras Godiva horse farm and ride a thoroughbred—either through the farm's rolling grasslands or on the beach itself. The gorgeous hotel pool, framed by palm trees, is an ideal spot for a laid-back evening cocktail.

Posada Azul Marino

Location: Arenas de José Ignacio

Ten years ago, Posada Azul Marino (Navy Blue Guest House) became the first hotel to open in Arenas de José Ignacio, a sleepy fishing village. Today, it's a great way for travelers to get a real taste of life on the Uruguayan coast. Located two miles from the center of

town, the tucked-away lodge is built on sand dunes and offers panoramic views of the Atlantic coast and a towering lighthouse. The family-run inn's style runs nautical-flavored rustic, but never fear: The nine-room lodge has satellite TV, air conditioning and a saltwater swimming pool. Try the catch of the day or some traditional Uruguayan barbecue at the hotel's restaurant. And that guy manning the grill? It's probably owner Javier Barrios.

EAT

La Susana

Location: José Ignacio

La Susana, a beachfront club and restaurant, is the latest addition to Norwegian property mogul Alex Vik's über-chic Vik Retreats, a group of South American luxury hotels and eateries. The Christiania Bar mixes up drinks more inventive than the ubiquitous poolside daiquiri – the Botanical Tonic, for example, adds an injection of clove spices to a refreshing vodka-based cocktail. Chef Marcelo Betancourt comes to La Susana after managing the kitchens at two other Vik properties in José Ignacio – Estancia Vik, a ranch retreat, and Playa Vik, a beachfront hotel. Here, Betancourt makes excellent use of his on-site herb garden in dishes such as the grilled sand smelt, which is accompanied by roasted beets and hand-cut fries sprinkled with rosemary.



Outdoor seating at La Susana, a beachfront club and restaurant in José Ignacio. (Photo courtesy of La Susana)

Marismo

Location: Route 10, Km 185, Arenas de José Ignacio

Marismo is one of the peninsula's best-kept culinary secrets. To find this hidden gem, you have to make your way down a small track of road just off Route 10, Punta's main artery. Chef Federico Desseno, who is also a carpenter, built every last piece of the al fresco restaurant's furniture, as well as the clay ovens and thatched roofs that extend over some of the tables. Menu highlights include pan-fried

baby squid fresh from the Atlantic Ocean and a decadent, slow-cooked lamb. And if you're looking for romance, you can't beat candlelight dining on the restaurant's secluded stretch of beach.

Almacén El Palmar

Location:

Las Garzas Street, between Martínez and Las Golondrinas Streets, José Ignacio

The founder of this laid-back eatery, Jean Paul Bondoux, is no stranger to successful restaurants. He started Punta del Este's award-winning Le Bourgogne eatery and oversaw the kitchens at Buenos Aires' landmark Alvear Palace hotel. But the Almacén El Palmar is a departure from those ultra-luxe settings in every way but the food. A deli counter sells cheese made at Bondoux's farm in nearby San Carlos, while the café's outdoor seating offers a relaxed gourmet dining experience. (For those looking for something a little more swish, there is also a smart private dining room.) A salmon plate that offers both tartare and smoked versions of the fish is a standout, while the house gazpacho with pan-fried sea bass and avocado puts a delectable spin on the Spanish classic. El Palmar also stocks a small, but well-chosen selection of wines: Pick up a Uruguayan Tannat and take it to the back garden to enjoy an afternoon of peaceful sipping.



Parador La Huella at Playa Brava in José Ignacio. (Photo courtesy of Parador La Huella)

Parador La Huella

Location: Playa Brava, José Ignacio

Thirteen years into its reign, La Huella still has the most in-demand tables in Punta del Este, if not in all of Uruguay. The first port of call for everyone from visiting celebrities to beach bums with bank accounts, La Huella is also a delight for gourmands – it ranked 20th in Restaurant Magazine's latest ranking of [Latin America's 50 best restaurants](#). Chef Alejandro Morales changes the seasonal menu every day, but fresh seafood specialties such as pan-fried baby squid

or octopus carpaccio are usually on offer. Morales' open kitchen also specializes in flame-grilled meats. Drop in at lunchtime, and a DJ will already be spinning tunes. Take a break to swim in the ocean, and then...well, you might as well stay for cocktail hour. And if time gets away from you – as we suspect it might –borrow a woolen poncho to keep warm after sunset and settle into a table with a sea view for dinner. You'll find it's surprisingly easy to spend the whole day here.

SHOP

Mutate Tienda y Café

Location: Las Garzas Street, between Martínez and Las Golondrinas Streets, José Ignacio

Casual browsing has never been as much fun as it is at Mutate Tienda, which peddles everything from screen-printed cushion covers bearing the image of Uruguay's marijuana-legalizing president, José Mujica, to leather weekend bags and *alpargatas*, the local spin on espadrilles. Also on site: an organic herb garden, a teashop and a wine bar. This kooky little store is well worth a visit.

DO

Kitesurf Garzón

Location: Route 10, Km 190, Laguna Garzón

With brisk southeasterly winds blowing most days, Laguna Garzón is a Mecca for kite surfers. After an introductory class, novices can take some practice runs on the 4-kilometer-long lake, which runs parallel to the Atlantic Ocean.

Photo of Parador La Huella courtesy of Parador La Huella.
