

JOJOURNALS

URUGUAY UNDISCOVERED

Staying at Estancia Vik, a Uruguayan ranch on 4,000 acres of rugged wilderness filled with art and surrounded by cattle, Peter Davis lives out a South American gaucho fantasy replete with an authentic asado feast and swimming with horses.

ESTANCIA VIK JOSE IGNACIO

VIVA THE VISTA The 20-meter heated pool at Estancia Vik overlooks 400 acres of wilderness.



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It's not exactly a stylish journey to reach the resort town of José Ignacio in Uruguay. I first fly more than eight hours to Lima, Peru, which is cramped and has bad food (mystery chicken in a gloppy brown sauce and stale bread). After sprinting by Peruvian airport stalls hawking chocolate and alpaca wool hats, I barely make the four-and-a-half-hour flight to Carrasco International Airport in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. It's not yet 6 AM and I am met by Camila Ordonez, who is in her early 40s and an ecologist and travel guide with Lares Tours. Ordonez wears two different earrings and has her nails painted various Easter egg colors. She is upbeat and constantly smiling—like that Deadhead friend from college who is always game for a trek in the wilderness. Born in Bogotá, Colombia, Ordonez moved to the teeny town of Cabo Polonio, Uruguay, years ago. She is a veritable human encyclopedia of uplifting facts about her adopted country. “Uruguay is the happy, hippy country,” she declares. “It was the first country in the [Americas] to give women the vote, [the first in the world] to legalize marijuana, and [the first Latin American country to legalize] same-sex marriages.” Before I can wave an imaginary gay flag or mime smoking a joint, she adds: “Uruguay is a secular country. We have amazing social security, health, and education systems and the entire population [about 3.5 million people] has access to clean water.” I am already sold as we pull onto the highway.

Before we reach José Ignacio, we pit stop in Punta del Este, a sprawling beach city with recently built skyscrapers that's like a South American Miami, replete with a Cipriani resort and a booming nightlife scene. I quickly hop out of the car to snap the prerequisite shot in front of *La Mano*, a gigantic sculpture by Chilean artist Mario Irarrázabal depicting five human fingers emerging from the sand at Brava Beach.

Forty-five minutes later we amble up a long, winding dirt road, past a river and herds of grazing cattle and horses, to Estancia Vik, a 12-suite luxury Spanish colonial ranch designed by Uruguayan architect Marcelo Daglio on 4,000-plus acres of rustic land. With a horse stable nearby, it feels very Montana, and I am ready to live out my South American gaucho dreams in the vast wilderness.

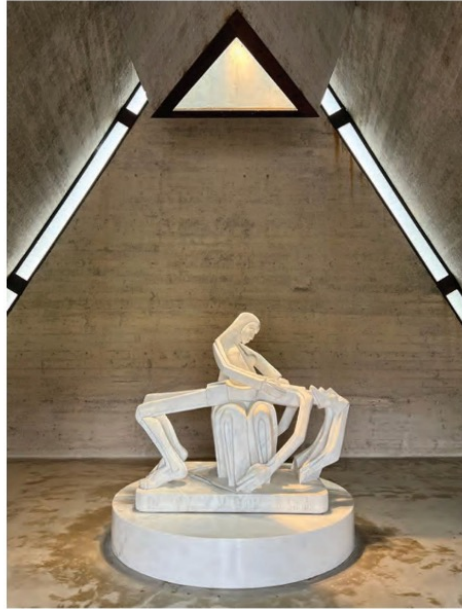
Estancia Vik is the creation of Norwegian billionaire Alexander Vik and his beautiful American wife, Carrie. The Viks, who live in Monaco and seem to always be traveling the globe, also own Playa Vik and Bahia Vik, two beachside luxury resorts nearby. The Viks are art collectors and patrons and, inside the white-washed adobe walls of Estancia Vik—which features open courtyards, gardens, and covered walkways—is a Charles

Saatchi-like collection of art they have personally collected. In the middle of the massive living room sits a 12-foot abstract marble sculpture by world-famous Uruguayan artist Pablo Atchugarry under a “Satellite-scape” ceiling and frieze of José Ignacio and Uruguay by Clever Lara, which was inspired by a Google Earth image of the region. It is Sistine Chapel-esque.

My room is like staying in a private museum. The suite is named “Seveso” after artist Carlos Seveso, who filled the space with his oil-and-acrylic paintings of dreamlike landscapes. The fireplace is framed by an enameled ceramic mural and an octagonal canvas hangs over the king-sized bed with a bed frame painting depicting the laguna

and iconic lighthouse of José Ignacio. I learn that David Rockefeller always stayed in the Seveso suite when he came year after year to Estancia Vik for his birthday in June. He planned to celebrate his 100th birthday at the ranch but died just a few months before he had the chance.

Once I finish unpacking, I am on the road with Ordonez and a few new friends who also flew in from New York. Our first stop is Bodega Garzón, a sprawling winery opened in 2016. Uruguayan wine is exploding and Bodega Garzón is at the center of the action, with land that boasts some of the world's oldest granitic soils (dating back 2,500 million years) that make for very tasty vino. I am hardly a vintner and more impressed by the



THE FLOOR OF THE POOL HAS FIBER-OPTIC LIGHTS THAT MIRROR THE CONSTELLATIONS ABOVE AT NIGHT. IT'S LIKE SWIMMING IN AN IMMERSIVE ART INSTALLATION.

INSIDE THE WHITE-WASHED ADOBE WALLS OF ESTANCIA VIK—WHICH FEATURES OPEN COURTYARDS, GARDENS, AND COVERED WALKWAYS—IS A CHARLES SAATCHI-LIKE COLLECTION OF ART.

COASTAL CULTURE Left: a marble pietà statue commands the chapel designed by Pablo Atchugarry at MACA. Right: a bungalow nestled in the dunes at Bahia Vik.



PETER DAVIS

ESTANCIA VIK, JOSÉ IGNACIO

architecture than the tannat grape, which is a star of the wines made here. Designed by the firm Bórmida & Yanzón, the modern LEED-certified building, made of exposed concrete, wood, steel, and dark glass melded to natural massive rock. After the wine tour and tasting, we have lunch at the restaurant which has panoramic views of the vineyard and surrounding hills. The eatery's ambassador and culinary director is Argentine star chef Francis Mallmann, famed for his open-fire Patagonian cooking style. I start with the beetroot hummus with feta cheese and vegetables and then wolf down the braised lamb from Cordero Esteño which sits on a plate with carrot, cashews, fennel, and beef broth.

After lunch we visit the small village of Garzón. Founded in 1892 as a staging post, it is now more like an abandoned movie set with gray granite buildings, empty streets, and not a human in sight. The main attraction here is, again, Francis Mallmann. His restaurant and boutique hotel are housed in a brick building that once was the town's general store. There are only about 200 inhabitants, but many local artists have studios in the town and empty storefronts bookend art galleries. The main square is like a postcard, shaded with palm trees that frame a small chapel and social club.

Driving back to Estancia Vik, I feel like J.R. Ewing returning to my massive homestead. To combat the jet lag that starts to creep through my bones,

I take a dip in the heated 20-meter pool, framed by a courtyard that overlooks an endless vista of rugged hills with the now-familiar wild horses and cows lolling about in dusk. Like everything at Estancia Vik, the pool, made of Absolute Nero stone, is a feat of innovative design. The floor of the pool has fiber-optic lights that mirror the constellations above at night. It's like swimming in an immersive art installation. There are endless activities to do at Estancia Vik: grass tennis courts, golf, fishing in the Arroyo de José Ignacio, a spa, and a polo field (another favorite of David Rockefeller) with Criollo riding horses.

Dinner that night is with Alexander and Carrie Vik and their son, Sebastian, who lives with his

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HOTEL ON THE RANGE Clockwise from left: a cow ponders the road, the Spanish colonial-style hotel, and the graffiti-painted tin walls of the hotel's *galpón* (grill room).



wife and baby daughter nearby. We eat at a long table in the salon-style dining room surrounded by oil paintings. The Viks tell me that they have a few other art-inspired hotels around the world. There is Galleria Vik Milano in Italy and Vik Chile, a 29-room hilltop retreat and winery with views of the Andes Mountain range in the Chilean Cachapoal Valley. Each dish we are served is paired with a glass from the Vik's vineyard and, as a bonus, we are given a bottle of "La Piu Belle," a cherry-red wine named after the goddess of the Millahue Valley, which is cased in a bottle that is painted with the face of a rouged, cherub-like girl.

The next day, I walk down to the stables to meet the ruggedly handsome head honcho of the ranch, Bautista Yelós, who goes by "Bauti." As he saddles up a light brown horse named Caramelo,

Bauti mentions that he was born in Argentina but feels like a proud Uruguayan. We trot then cantor on horses over open pampas, past herds of grazing cows and a flock of pink flamingos, to the Arroyo de José Ignacio. "The water is going to be freezing," Bauti warns me with a devilish grin as we reach a river. I quickly discover that I will be swimming bareback with Caramelo. I strip down to my swimming trunks and, holding Caramelo's mane and a single rein, I slowly get into the river. It's not that cold (I am known to take dips in the Atlantic in November) and the sensation of floating in the dark blue water above Caramelo who wades across the river is nothing short of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Dripping wet, I dry off and Bauti hands me a steaming hot cup of yerba maté, a caffeine-heavy concoction made of herbs and

sipped from a gourd with a metal straw known as a bombilla. Bauti says he sips maté all day long. The herbs, soaked in hot water, both warms me up and gives me an immediate spike of energy stronger than a triple shot of espresso. I am sold and make a mental note to switch from Starbucks to maté when I return to New York.

That afternoon Camila takes me to Atchugarry Museum of Contemporary Art (MACA), sculptor Pablo Atchugarry's over-the-top nonprofit museum which opened in January 2022 in the hills near the beach town of La Barra. The Uruguayan-Canadian architect Carlos Ott—who gained fame in 1983 when he won the international design competition to construct the Opéra Bastille in Paris—built the astounding arc-like museum, which holds five exhibition spaces and sits on

PETER DAVIS, ESTANCIA VIK, JOSÉ IGNACIO



STRIKE A POSE Left: the Shack, the wellness center at Bahia Vik, offers yoga classes with Isabella Channing. Below: a sculptural mixed-media portrait of Alexander Vik by Javier Abdala.



THERE ARE ONLY ABOUT 200 INHABITANTS, BUT MANY LOCAL ARTISTS HAVE STUDIOS IN THE TOWN AND EMPTY STOREFRONTS BOOKEND ART GALLERIES.

90 acres filled with eucalyptus trees and sculptures that easily give Storm King a run for its cultural money. We zip around the sculpture park in a golf cart and a young docent named Carlos tells us that MACA is the first and only museum in Uruguay promoting global contemporary art. The sculpture on display is truly monumental in breadth and scale—an enormous metal honeycomb-like piece by self-taught artist Verónica Vázquez commands a field and we stop by Atchugarry's famous chapel, featuring his marble sculpture in the center depicting the pieta.

Before dinner I swing by Bahia Vik, a resort with individually designed bungalows hidden on 10 acres of beach dunes on Playa Mansa. Dinner that night at Estancia Vik is an authentic asado feast, so to prepare for overeating I take a yoga

FEDE RACCHI, PETER DAVIS

class with Isabella Channing, who runs the Shack, Playa Vik's impressive wellness space. Channing grew up in New York City but has lived in Uruguay for years and leads the class in English and Spanish. After class, I go for a long walk on the beach, past rolling sand dunes before a plunge in the Atlantic Ocean. I can see now why people refer to José Ignacio as being like the Hamptons in the 1960s—before it became overrun with people and overpriced places to have a lobster roll. Swimming with horses, outdoor art, yoga, an empty beach: I feel completely renewed.

Back at Estancia Vik, Alexander and Carrie have gathered dozens of friends and guests of their Uruguayan resorts to the asado feast. Long tables flank a courtyard near a grill room, inspired by a *galpón* (a shed used by gauchos to barbecue) with

tin walls painted from floor to ceiling with graffiti like you're inside a Basquiat painting. Roaring flames from the *parilla*—the grill used to roast, smoke, and grill the various meats—illuminates the paint drips and brush strokes on the walls. As we sit eagerly, the *asador* (the main chef) rolls out an endless feast of rib eye steaks, short ribs, lamb, and crispy chicken, along with a few South American delicacies like blood sausage and sweet breads. Asados are traditionally social events and the Viks table-hop, treating each guest like family.

Stuffed with food, I lie in bed under the round oval painting by Carlos Seveso in my suite. I am amped up by an action-packed day, but I try to drift off to sleep. Instead of counting sheep or cows or pink flamingos, visions of swimming horses float across my eyelids. ♦





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