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## South America's St Tropez

Michael Booth finds that the Uruguayan Riviera is glamorous, sexy and every bit as enjoyably vulgar as its European counterpart

I KNOW what I hoped the Uruguayan Riviera would be like. I expected to find a wild, white-sand coastline, punctuated by exclusive Mediterranean-style resorts. I imagined walking into bars and finding obscure European royals plotting coups over cocktails; Julio Iglesias in the VIP lounge; and Alan Whicker inveigling his way into the confidence of Texan billionaires' wives. The problem was, I wasn't sure that the Uruguayan Riviera existed. I couldn't find any reference to it in the few guidebooks to the country. Indeed, I had a nagging suspicion that I had made the whole thing up.

Certainly, my first impressions of the capital, Montevideo, were none too encouraging. These days, its glorious, early 19th-century, neo-classical buildings, legacies of the beef boom, have all but crumbled or been consumed by concrete. As with the Graf Spee, scuttled in the harbour in 1939 - and still visible when conditions allow - the city is a historic wreck.

Much to my relief, it did turn out to have some fine beaches, veritable mini-Copacabanas fronted by modernist, high-rise apartment blocks and alive with football, volleyball and exercise classes day and night.

This was at least the germ of a riviera, though rather wanting in glamour. That commodity, I soon discovered, had packed its bags some decades ago, and moved east.

The resort of Punta del Este, 85 miles east of Montevideo on the Ruta Interbalnearia (inter-beach route), is one of South America's most fashionable holiday destinations. While the northern European herds head for Brazil or Peru for their taste of South America, well-heeled Brazilians, Argentinians and Paraguayans, plus their well-informed Spanish, French and Italian cousins, head for this ultra-chic peninsula, fortuitously lapped on one side by the River Plate (for bathing), and the Atlantic (for surfing) on the other.

Although the Spanish settled here in the 16th century, and the first hotel was built in 1888, it was not until 1955 that Juan Peron lit Punta del Este's touchpaper by allowing Argentinians to travel abroad. Buenos Aires' upper classes flocked here for their summers, and by the 1960s the high-rises and the high-rollers had arrived.

In the summer - December to Easter in these parts - the town's population swells from a few thousand to half a million as the continent's leading politicians, show-business stars and beautiful people decamp here or to the coast to the west, home to a pretty succession of tiny bays, beaches and headlands, set among wooded hills.

If towns could name-drop, Punta del Este would be a match for Hollywood or St Tropez: European luminaries, from Gina Lollobrigida to Antonio Banderas; British royalty from Prince Philip to Diana and Fergie; Spanish royalty, of course; plus the leading lights of the international arts scene, including Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges and Nureyev, have all been here. The week that I was there, Naomi Campbell had been snapped naked by a paparazzo.

The town's first film festival attracted Yves Montand, Jeanne Moreau and Anita Ekberg, and in 1967 Sacha Distel crowned the first Queen of Punta del Este (Tony Curtis did the honours the following year). The town still draws a stellar cast to swanky restaurants, such as La Cigale, La Bourgogne and Il Greco, as well as its coolest nightclub, La Marocha.

This seasonal influx of wealth is reflected in its shamelessly ostentatious architecture. This is a town whose planners just can't say no, so ziggurats lie side by side mock-Tudor mansions, while modernist cubes bully faux 17th-century thatched farmhouses. I stayed in a converted Victorian water tower in a suburb that could have passed for one of the more prosperous residential areas of Los Angeles.

One area is actually named Beverly Hills, and you can take bus tours of Punta del Este's celebrity homes - "This is where President Bush stayed, this is Yul Brynner's old house, where Ricardo Montalban and Fidel Castro once stayed . . . "

During the high season, apartments in the best parts of town can cost up to £13,000 per month to rent; the street signs are sponsored by Visa; and the tip of the peninsula is crowned by a public helipad.

When not partying, Punta del Este's holiday crowd amuses itself shark-fishing, windsurfing, surfing and watching the 200,000 southern fur seals which inhabit the nearby Isla de Lobos. The Battle of River Plate took place off the coast here in 1939, and its treacherous waters are also the resting place of HMS Agamemnon, the ship on which Nelson wooed Lady Hamilton. It is one of an estimated 50 or 60 wrecks that attract divers from around the world. In Europe. Both towns have superb crescent beaches and scented woods of pine, eucalyptus and acacia.

On my last day, I hired a car and drove east towards the border with Brazil. This stretch of Atlantic coast has yet to be developed - it was an area that Prince Charles specifically wished to see on his visit to the country in 1999 - and its windswept sandy beaches, interspersed with rock pools and decorated by waves of mussel shells, are among the most stunning to be found anywhere on the continent. In between the eucalyptus and pine forests, the roadsides are fringed by lagoons and carpeted by pink, white and yellow wild flowers.

One tour guide to whom I spoke described this area as "the future of the Uruguayan tourist industry", and she is probably right. For now, once you've passed the super-exclusive residential resorts of La Barra (where Maradona has a house), and Jose Ignacio (famed for its seaweed omelettes and Chivas Lounge beach bar), the Tarmac runs out, and there is little else but a fabulous array of bird life, the odd ranch, and - inevitably - more wonderful beaches.

I had reached the end of the Uruguayan Riviera, delighted not just that there actually was one, but that it turned out to be as glamorous, sexy and enjoyably vulgar as its southern European counterparts. What distinguishes Uruguay's coastline, however, is its accessibility and lack of development. Hire a car and, within minutes, you can be standing utterly alone, but for birds and distant cattle, on beaches as epic and beautiful as any on the planet, safe in the knowledge that the party of your life awaits upon your return. The Mediterranean will never quite seem the same again.

For further information on Punta del Este & choice property there, contact:

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