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Punta del Este Sparkles Once More, Day and Night

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IT was shortly after midnight on a warm summer night at the harbor in Punta del Este, Uruguay, and tanned young couples were streaming out of restaurants, wondering what to do next. Walk down the block to one of those well-appointed bars that would remain open until dawn? Or head over to a discothèque on the beach? And what about that all-night electronic music festival at the old airfield?

After losing some of its shine during the 1990's, Punta del Este, traditionally known as "the Pearl of the Atlantic," has reinvented itself as South America's premier all-purpose vacation spot, with attractions for everyone from lounge-music fans and families with small children to sport fishermen and gamblers.

"Over the past few years, Punta del Este has evolved into something that is a single place in name only," said Carlos García Rubio, a local music promoter. "People still come here to see and be seen, but depending on where you go and what you do, you can have three or four completely different kinds of vacation experience."

Indeed, the sheer variety of activities during the December-to-March high season -- jazz, festivals, film festivals, rodeos, fashion shows on the beach and various tournaments, including golf, rugby and polo -- is dazzling. Last year, the Miss Playboy TV Latin America beauty contest completed the roster of events.

Add to that casinos, nature reserves, spas, top flight restaurants and hotels ranging from basic to such quietly luxurious lodgings as the Hotel-Art Las Cumbres, and the result is a vibrant array of possibilities. With cruise ships now visiting in growing numbers and the E! Entertainment Channel's "Wild On" program popularizing Punta del Este's inexhaustible night life for a broader international audience, the resort's transformation from stodgy dowager into party belle now seems complete.

In its original incarnation, Punta del Este was the preferred summer haven of the Argentine and Uruguayan upper middle classes. From the beginning of the 20th century, generations of families lodged at elegant hotels or rented cottages along the shore, many of which still exist, in order to escape the stifling January heat of Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

But during the boom years of the 1990's, with the Argentine peso linked to the U.S. dollar at an artificial and ultimately unsustainable one-to-one rate, many Argentines who would normally have gone to Punta del Este began flocking instead to places like Cancún or Punta Cana, in the Dominican Republic, or Miami, leaving Punta del Este to a less affluent crowd.

With the collapse of the Argentine economy three years ago, however, Punta del Este's original clientele, its tastes now internationalized, began returning. Now the region is undergoing a building and tourism boom, with more than 30 new restaurants and hotels going up. Existing hotels are filled most weekends during the Southern Hemisphere's summer high season.

These days, the new, revived Punta del Este extends far beyond the original narrow peninsula that was its center a century ago. Almost the entire 40-mile coastal strip from Punta Ballena in the west to José Ignacio northward toward the Brazilian border is lined with hotels, condominiums, sports clubs, marinas, nightclubs and restaurants.

With the increase in new construction, parts of the coastline, such as Punta Ballena, or Whale Point, now recall a Mediterranean setting -- Ibiza, perhaps, or Crete. Off the highway to Montevideo, whitewashed buildings -- some of them houses, others luxurious resorts -- cling to the bluffs rising from the shore.

Elsewhere, once quiet fishing villages like José Ignacio, known locally for its lighthouse and spectacular sunsets, have emerged as getaways for the rich and famous, including Argentine celebrities and people like the British novelist Martin Amis, whose wife, the writer Isabel Fonseca, is half Uruguayan. José Ignacio, Mr. Amis said in a newspaper interview not too long ago, is the ideal place to escape "the world hum" that is "too much in our ears now."

Around the original peninsula, you can choose between two distinct beach experiences. The Playa Mansa, or Tame Beach, faces the calm, broad estuary of the Río de la Plata. Some families have frequented the same placid patch of seashore for generations, using the old numbered bus stops, known as paradas, to help guide them to the right spot.

Surfers and adventurous swimmers prefer the rougher stretch facing the Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the peninsula, starting with the Playa Brava, or Wild Beach, close to downtown and the site of one of Punta's famous landmarks -- a sculpture of a giant hand, its digits protruding from the sand. Farther up the coast, toward La Barra, there is even a topless beach.

Of course, Punta del Este began life as a whale-hunting area, and on Isla Gorriti, just offshore, some of the buildings where whale blubber and oil were processed are still standing. The Southern right whale continues to migrate to local waters and can sometimes be seen from the beaches, though usually only between July and November.

But the main attraction in Punta del Este nowadays is not so much the beaches -- which pale in comparison to those just a few hundred miles north at Brazilian resorts like Camboriú and Florianópolis -- but the night life. When the sun finally sets, between 8:30 and 9 p.m. in the middle of summer, Punta comes to life. The streets along the harbor are lined with restaurants, but this is also the area where long-established and eternally popular bars like Soho, Moby Dick and Napoleon are always buzzing.

At the moment the trendiest clubs tend to be concentrated in two other areas. The younger crowd congregates in La Barra at places like María y el Lobo, Selena or Mint, an enormous barn of a place, while a slightly older set gravitates to La Plage, at Parada 12 on the Playa Brava, with the sound of crashing waves just outside competing with the thunderous music inside. In La Barra, the action spills out into the streets, and in both areas, dancing continues until dawn.

And then there is gambling. Many people come here just to visit Punta's ubiquitous casinos. Here, you'll find a surprising amount of Chinese and Korean alongside Spanish and English. The largest casino, a bustling Las Vegas clone in the Conrad Resort and Casino, at Parada 4 on the Playa Mansa, has 450 slot machines and 63 tables where guests 18 or over can wager on games of chance from poker to baccarat.

Along with the casinos come Las Vegas-style floor shows, with the Conrad leading the parade. Many performers have little or no following in the English-speaking world, which can give some presentations a certain camp appeal, but Brazilian pop stars like Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and Gal Costa have played Punta in recent years, as have B-list American singers like Donna Summer, Dionne Warwick and José Feliciano.

Theaters around town also offer Catskill-style comedy revues and plays, in Spanish of course, that include productions of Broadway hits like "Art" and "Houdini." Even the 19th-century American Chautauqua tradition of public lectures continues to thrive in Punta, with hotels, bookstores and community groups sponsoring readings by well-known authors and panel discussions on political, literary and religious matters.

When it comes time to eat, Punta del Este has endless choices, even at late, late hours, ranging from cheap, simple kiosks to haute cuisine. Seafood is the dominant option, especially at the cluster of restaurants near the harbor, but every cuisine from Basque, Sri Lankan and Chinese to barbecue and Spanish tapas is reliably represented.

On a recent visit, I wandered past La Bourgogne, on Calle Pedragosa Sierra in the El Bosque neighborhood, considered by many critics to be the best restaurant in Uruguay. After one look at the prices on the menu, I fled: A dinner for two of fish soup, breast of duck, dessert, mineral water and a glass of wine cost \$200, an extraordinarily expensive meal by local standards.

Instead, I headed back down to the harbor and ended up at Piegari, a relatively new branch of a well-known Italian restaurant in Buenos Aires. The ambience was tropical, with palms, a thatched roof and pastel adobe walls. The staff was dressed in vaguely Mexican garb, white shirts and pants with a bright sash. The portions were generous, the bill (at half the price) manageable, and after my meal I did what everyone else was doing and cruised the scene up and down Rambla General Artigas, moving from one place to the next until I was too exhausted to continue.

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At the moment, no airline has nonstop service between New York City and Montevideo, though United has daily flights from Washington, and American offers nonstop flights from Miami three days a week. Round trip fares start at \$700. Once in Montevideo, the easiest way to travel the 90 remaining miles to Punta del Este is by bus, taxi or rental car. An alternative route is to fly to Buenos Aires, just across the Río de la Plata, and then catch one of the 40-minute jet flights offered several times a day during high season by Pluna, the main Uruguayan airline, or Aerolíneas Argentinas.

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