

In the Mood for Maldonado

by Colin Barraclough | Published [January 2011](#)



Potent caipirinhas and fresh-caught fish turn many a meal at the lunch club La Caracola into a long siesta.

For empty, endless expanses and easy living, nothing beats the ribbon of boho-chic enclaves along Uruguay's Maldonado coast.

I'm driving down the pitch-dark road that snakes north from the old fishing village of José Ignacio on Uruguay's coast. The sultry, salty night air washes in, along with the hum of distant waves crashing on the Atlantic shore. I've heard great things about Marismo, where chef-owner Federico Desseno fires up *coronilla* logs in his homemade clay oven to coax hidden flavors from lamb, squid, and drumfish. The restaurant is hidden down an unmarked dirt track, I've been told, two miles from the last street lamp, and obscured by dense fronds of acacia and eucalyptus. I've also been told that no sign indicates the entrance; nor, strictly speaking, does the restaurant have an address.

Stumbling in the dark, I'm drawn by the flickering light of fabric lanterns dangling from the trees, and finally emerge among rough-cut wooden tables lit by candles and a crackling bonfire. I order a shank of lamb: It's succulent and expertly prepared. Marismo deserves its reputation for exquisite food, yet I can't help wondering whether Desseno intentionally makes the restaurant hard to find, figuring that concealment would be taken as shorthand for exclusivity. I corner him and accuse him of cynical obfuscation in an effort to create mystique. "Oh, you mean the sign," he says wearily. "I've been meaning to put one up for years. I always seem to forget."

Such lackadaisical attitudes are easy to find in Uruguay, particularly on the coastal stretches of Maldonado Department. From Punta del Este, a jarring, glitzy resort fashioned by celebrities from neighboring Argentina, expansive golden beaches and low headlands stretch for twenty-five miles northeast along a single coast road connecting a ribbon of beach settlements—La Barra, Manantiales, La Juanita, and José Ignacio—

each emptier and more low-key than the last. The road comes to an abrupt halt at Laguna Garzón, three miles beyond José Ignacio. A tiny winch-operated ferry crosses the lagoon each hour, but few vehicles venture on: Beyond lies the wild shoreline of Rocha Department, where a desolate, barely populated coastline of shipwrecks and abandoned fortresses stretches as far as Brazil.

My favorite time is the fresh November-December spring or the tail end of summer in February and March, when the area reverts to something far closer to its origins as a string of humble fishing villages on an unspoiled stretch of sandy coast. The back-to-basics beach settlements sport an atmosphere somewhat akin to the Hamptons of the sixties, with an endearing informality that's distinctly South American. Uruguayans have a knack for inspired improvisation, infusing low-budget, simply executed projects with an easy charm. Maldonado's villages are so casually slung together, in fact, that chefs open restaurants in garages or on the front porches of their homes.

This time, searching for an escape from my home in hectic Buenos Aires, I choose an August holiday weekend in the depths of the Southern Hemisphere winter to pootle around on back roads and take brisk walks on breeze-swept beaches under constantly changing grandiose skies. I've arranged to stay at Casa Zinc, the most talked-about hotel in La Barra, and I'm met at Montevideo's Carrasco Airport by its owner, designer Aaron Hojman, who is on his way to a friend's art show nearby and invites me to join him. I can't help noticing that Hojman's shoelaces are undone, his woolen cardigan threadbare. "I sell my lifestyle, which is very simple indeed," he says wryly, shifting cluttered papers in his battered Fiat to make space. "Uruguayans just don't 'do' glamour." Despite his rumpled appearance, Hojman mingles unabashed with Montevideo's smart set; within an hour, he's introduced me to a smattering of artistic leading lights, most of whom appear to share his dress sense. We leave the gallery around midnight and drive across the sparsely inhabited Uruguayan interior: During the two-hour journey to the coast, we barely spot an electric light in the dark before we skirt Punta and meet the Atlantic coast at La Barra. When we arrive, I find that I am the hotel's only guest.

A storm hits overnight and a gale is still battering in from the ocean the next morning, but I set out nevertheless to explore the coast. The shoreline seems to claw at the edge of town, its main street petering out into a low landscape of dunes and sea grasses. A mile beyond, I turn my back to the ocean and cut through a thorny scrub of cactus and gorse to the hamlet of Manantiales. Fifty years ago, when Punta del Este was already drawing Yves Montand, Jeanne Moreau, Sacha Distel, and a host of other film stars, royals, and artistic luminaries, Manantiales and neighboring fishing villages were frequented only by hard-wrought settlers and blue-collar workers from Uruguay's inland cities. The Arroyo Maldonado, which cuts through the Atlantic dunes at La Barra, provided a natural barrier between the distinct summering societies. Where Punta's coiffed and fashionably attired clientele drifted from one elegant soiree to another, their poorer cousins devoted their idle summers to egalitarian pursuits like shoreline fishing and roving barefoot along the dunes, sleeping in near-derelect, off-the-grid wooden shacks rented for a pittance from local fishermen. Even today, La Barra's peculiar double-humped bridge continues to form a figurative barrier between Punta del Este and *la costa*.

By the 1970s, the turbulent politics that racked much of Latin America had filled many Uruguayans and Argentines with an urge to escape urban hotbeds of political violence.

With Argentina in the grips of its cabal of generals, wealthy *porteños* in particular began to spend long summers on the Maldonado coast, drawn to its unspoiled beauty and a ragtag beach culture sustained by fishermen, surfers, and artists. When local *latifundistas* (landowners since colonial times), whose holdings around José Ignacio alone amounted to thousands of acres, divided their extensive coastal properties into ten-acre parcels, Argentines spotted a chance to sneak undeclared cash beyond the generals' grabbing hands—and to erect holiday homes that would provide a peaceful, albeit temporary, escape. In 1978, Francis Mallmann, then an ambitious young chef from Bariloche, opened Posada del Mar, the first restaurant in José Ignacio, and art dealers set up summer-only showrooms aimed at visitors from across the Río de la Plata.

Money arrived in the end—serious money. By the 1990s, with Argentina's currency pegged at par with the U.S. dollar, well-sited coastal homes in La Barra and José Ignacio began to change hands for millions of dollars. Hip Europeans appeared, many drawn by low-key, high-UV chill-out parties in José Ignacio organized by Cream, a nightclub based in Ibiza and England. Yet the wealthy newcomers have studiously maintained the region's bohemian air, garaging their Ferraris out of sight and mirroring the down-to-earth, slightly disheveled habits of the locals. Many built their holiday houses next to the *ranchito* shacks—two-room dwellings with the tiniest of footprints, simple homes for local fishermen, who row out each dawn before the mist has burned off Laguna José Ignacio to collect prawns trapped by the receding tide.

I drive up to José Ignacio the following day to clamber over the rocks beneath its landmark lighthouse. Even here, in a village renowned as a summer playground for South America's seriously wealthy, there are no extravagant mansions or glamorous bars, just simple whitewashed bungalows and modest cottages. The village's grassy plaza is adorned by nothing showier than a bed of lavender.

With no soaring cliffs, jagged peaks, or dense jungle lining the shore, Maldonado's wholesome emptiness generates contemplation and introspection. I realize that the absence of drama in the landscape is reflected, too, in the unpretentious, honest nature of the inhabitants. Unlike, say, the studied physicality of Rio's beach scene, Uruguay's coastal towns offer the chance to simply disconnect and unwind—*desenchufar*. Even in high season, the days flow at a languid pace. After a noontime breakfast, the summer visitor spends lazy afternoons at the beach that segue effortlessly into a late barefoot lunch of grilled prawns or crab claws at Marismo or at La Huella, a beach shack cum gourmet eating spot in José Ignacio. Those searching for even more tranquillity hit up owner Guzmán Artagaveytia for one of just thirty invitations to La Caracola, a private lunch club on an otherwise deserted finger of sand that divides Laguna Garzón from the ocean. With no road access, guests are rowed across the lagoon to the crudely cut wooden cabin, where potent *caipirinhas*, fresh-caught fish, and a soothing azure womb of sky and sea quickly bring on the profoundest of siestas.

There are so few activities, in fact, that it can take a while to adjust to the region's *adagio* rhythms. Fall into conversation at lunch with diners at the next table or—as often happens—with the chef or waiter, and the sun can already be setting by the time you're done. Even at night, most visitors seem content to do little more than dine at tumbledown beach huts, gaze at a bonfire's flickering flames, or listen to the beat of *tambores* under a midnight moon.

One afternoon, I drive slowly down a country lane that snakes inland from José Ignacio. Wood rails scuttle along the verge, and the air whirls with tanagers, tyrants, and woodpeckers. Bucolic grassland, edged with *coronilla* and pepper trees, stretches into the distance; I stop frequently and the silence is broken only by the buzz of insects and the cackle of parakeets. In two hours I see not a single car, just a mounted gaucho and a family of three balancing uneasily on a motorbike.

In mid-afternoon, I head back to the coast and stop off at La Juanita, the hamlet a mile south of José Ignacio, spotting a hand-painted wooden sign for Restaurante La Olada pointing down a quiet backstreet, alive to the twitter of flycatchers and thrushes. Its owner, Santiago Rivero, a young Uruguayan with tousled hair and a cheeky grin, is typical of the region's restaurateurs: A former manual worker from Montevideo who as a child spent long summers at the beach with his grandfather, Rivero returned as a young man to surf at José Ignacio. He found work in the kitchen at La Huella, picked up additional cooking experience while backpacking in Brazil, then set up his own place with his scant savings, nailing the building together from wood offcuts in his front yard.

"Piecemeal—that's the way things are done in Uruguay," Rivero says, laughing, and shows me a short menu of simple dishes—seaweed risotto, entrecôte, lamb shank, drumfish—that he cooks in a clay oven. He could hardly have chosen a more rustic situation for his restaurant: When I return that night, there are just two other people dining alfresco at tables casually arrayed between a vegetable patch and a log pile.

The village of Garzón is a half-hour drive inland from José Ignacio. Once a thriving way station linking some of Uruguay's largest cattle ranches, it boasted a mill and a rail connection to the city of Maldonado, the region's commercial center. Decline set in during the 1960s, when the mill went out of business and residents drifted away in search of work. When Uruguay axed its passenger rail service in 1989, Garzón was left as little more than a ghost town. Today, its population stands at just 200. I arrive to find a village so undisturbed that sheep graze its unpaved roads, and *ñandúes*, South America's ostrich-like rheas, roam the surrounding grassy hills. I watch a pair of horneros, cinnamon-colored birds native to South America, fashion a mud nest atop a telegraph pole, and I listen as flocks of parakeets squabble in hundred-foot eucalyptus and plane trees. In the largely treeless Río de la Plata basin, these towering trees are unusual evidence of perhaps two centuries of human habitation. Except for birdsong, no sound breaks the silence.

Despite Garzón's utter tranquillity, it is the focus of an ambitious plan by Francis Mallmann to expand Uruguay's coastal tourism scene inland. Mallmann's trajectory has soared since he helped pioneer José Ignacio in the 1970s; he has gone on to own successful restaurants not only in Uruguay and Argentina but in the United States as well. Five years ago, Mallmann opened a restaurant in Garzón's 140-year-old general store. He converted its former storage vaults into a small hotel and employed twenty-one local youths—one tenth of Garzón's entire population—to run it. In the years since, Mallmann has further extended his influence over the village. He revamped its disused mill as a cultural center to showcase Uruguayan music, film, and dance and refurbished several houses as luxury summer rentals, providing butlers, a 1920s-built limousine, and gourmet beach picnics as part of the service. "Garzón is not a place for parties or package groups," he tells me. "It's a place to enjoy simple sensations, to gaze at the scudding clouds or listen to chill music under the stars." It's also a place to savor

Mallmann's exquisite cooking, creative updates of classic Uruguayan and Argentine dishes, which he prepares in an *infiernillo*, or "little hell," an Inca-inspired homemade oven, constantly stoking its two tiers of fire with eucalyptus and *quebracho* logs from a large pile by the restaurant door. His presence alone has persuaded an international cabal of influential friends to buy and restore a slew of centennial houses in and around Garzón.

Other entrepreneurs have followed Mallmann's lead in seeking to develop acreage inland from Maldonado's coastal strip as a gastronomic hub and second-home retreat. Connecticut-based financier-turned-hotelier Alex Vik built his opulent, art-bedecked Estancia Vik on four thousand acres of wildlife-rich pampas three miles inland from José Ignacio. Argentine entrepreneur Eduardo Cantón also invested inland to open his Viñas del Este complex, planting tannat vines on four hundred fifty acres of rolling grassland three miles behind La Barra, before dividing the land into twelve micro-vineyards and selling each individually. The first buyers, drawn by the chance to produce vanity-label wines, have already erected a scattering of summer homes near a restaurant/bar/delicatessen, open to the public, that serves as a clubhouse. Brazil's Rogério Fasano, owner of design-minded hotels and restaurants in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, was attracted by a similar mix of tourism and real estate. In 2008, he bought twelve hundred acres of rocky outcrops, lakes, and forest behind La Barra to build Las Piedras, a development including the just-opened Hotel Fasano, a spa, and serviced villas.

It wouldn't be hard to follow Mallmann's lead in escaping from the razzle-dazzle of modern life by falling in love with inland Uruguay's pastures and dells. I have already devoted much free time to exploring the dirt back roads of the prairie-like pampas and the undulating ridges of the *rioplatense* interior, finding endless novelty in its wildlife, landscape, and culture that faster-moving travelers might miss. And in Maldonado, where the gaucho's grassy habitat extends to the dune-backed shore itself, the two landscapes appear to merge in a single, pastoral whole. It is Uruguay's low-frequency rhythm and its people's endearing informality that linger in memory, the agreeable qualities of a country which demands only that we come with a contemplative spirit and a desire for *desenchufar*.