

VIRTUOSO

THE MAGAZINE



TRAILS LESS TAKEN



Well Connected

IN SEPTEMBER, we go big. For this issue – our biggest of the year, dedicated to big-ticket trips – our staff and contributors fanned out around the globe, slipping through secret doors and tasting rare citrus in Morocco, soaking in bathing culture at a lavishly restored sixteenth-century Istanbul hammam, and tromping New Zealand's latest South Island Great Walk. I jumped on the bandwagon, traveling to José Ignacio, Uruguay, for a cover shoot with the gauchos at Estancia Vik.

The trip had all the elements of a Virtuoso adventure: far-flung, fabulous accommodations; a deep connection to place; and people who walk the walk – in this case, Estancia Vik's head equestrian (and our cover model) Bauti Yelós and his team of gauchos, stewards of the 100-plus horses that range freely on the property. It was illuminating to hang out with this humble, hilarious, and wildly talented group, who welcomed us into their maté-sipping, curry-combing, horse-whispering world for a few days. We left with a stunner of a cover image, a taste of the gaucho way of life, and a stable of new friends.

Which is how trips should unfold, no matter their size – visiting a place should yield real connections with the people and the destination. Those relationships are Virtuoso's reason for being. Case in point: By the time you read this, our editorial team will be fresh off our annual Virtuoso Travel Week in Las Vegas, where we will have chatted, raised glasses, and held meetings with many of the 4,700-plus attendees from all facets of the luxury-travel industry. Our partnerships with the world's best travel advisors, hoteliers, cruise and tour operators, and destination representatives mean we have the inside track on where travel is headed next – and where you may be headed as well! We can't wait to share it with you.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marika Cain".

MARIKA CAIN
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



Sisterhood of the Traveling Hats

With art director Korena Bolding (center) and design director Melanie Fowler (right) on location for our cover shoot in José Ignacio, Uruguay.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KORENA BOLDING

PONY UP



116 September-October 2024

KATEKA BOLING





Ready to ride at Estancia Vik.

On the trail for the delightfully laid-back, unsung Uruguay.

BY DAVID HOCHMAN

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JACQUELINE REYNOLDS





Fasano Punta del Este and (opposite)
a criollo horse at Estancia Vik.

IF YOU'RE VISITING URUGUAY from the Northern Hemisphere, you'll notice the moon appears upside down. Instead of spotting a "man" on its face, you might see a rabbit. The stars look different too. You won't find the Big Dipper, but you get the Southern Cross and the trio of sunlike orbs known as Alpha Centauri.

My wife and I traveled all the way from California to glimpse these celestial wonders. We'd timed our trip to coincide with a full-moon horseback ride where the grassy, wide-open pampas of Uruguay's interior meets the fabulously relaxed beach scene at José Ignacio. But already, the country was revealing surprises beyond those overhead. Unlike in neighboring Argentina and Brazil, Uruguay's economy and political climate are remarkably stable, with low levels of poverty, corruption, and inequality. South America's second-smallest country is also the continent's most secular and one of the world's most progressive nations. Uruguay was the first country in the Americas to grant women the right to vote, the first anywhere to legalize marijuana, and a pioneer on same-sex marriage and energy independence. It also ranks high in peace and personal contentment,





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**The pampas: Uruguay’s
big-sky country.**

with low crime rates and few natural hazards such as earthquakes or tropical storms. Driving along the pristine highway from the airport that first night, I told Ruth, “I didn’t expect Uruguay to be so easy.”

Even the horses are chill: The criollo is known for being cooperative and reliable with an even temperament. Bauri Yelós said you could describe most Uruguayans the same way. He’s the charismatic head equestrian – the gaucho-in-chief, as it were – at Estancia Vik, a stunning guest ranch on 4,000 acres a couple of miles inland from the southern Atlantic beaches and one of two country lodges we were visiting. The other, Fasano, which is sleeker and more minimalist, also has an outstanding equestrian program. There’s tennis and an Arnold Palmer golf course there as well, and a dramatic glass-walled spa with views all the way to “Punta.”

“Uruguayans are the most welcoming and easygoing people you’ll ever meet,” said Yelós, who grew up in Argentina but has lived in Uruguay long enough to know. “There’s nothing flashy about them. They know what matters in life and how to truly enjoy it, which makes them great to be around.”

This is a country of grown ups. When I made an awkward U-turn after missing an exit, obstructing traffic for a minute or two, I didn’t hear a single honk. And when I mentioned to Yelós my apprehension about saddling up in the dark on a thousand-pound steed, given my limited riding experience, he smiled agreeably and suggested, “Do you like to drink red wine? Because that will help.”

EVERYTHING MOST first-time visitors want to see in Uruguay is within two or three hours of the capital, Montevideo, which feels more like a big





FYI

"Punta del Este deserves more than a stop for selfies on the beach. Combine a visit to famed artist Carlos Páez Vilaró's Casapueblo with Pablo Atchugarry's Sculpture Park, then top it off with lunch at Aguaverde Wine Lodge. José Ignacio will be waiting for your late arrival."

— Michele M. Benigno,
Virtuoso travel advisor,
Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

Yerba maté, Uruguayans' go-to caffeinated drink.

town than a hectic metropolis. Set on the northeastern bank of the Río de la Plata, the city's focal point is the nearly 14-mile riverfront Rambla – described as the longest continuous sidewalk on earth. Day and night, residents amble, play beach sports, and gather around shared cups of maté, the national tea drink, brewed from the leaves of the yerba maté plant and sipped through a silver *bombilla* straw.

You sense the thrall of gaucho country even in the city. The beef industry keeps Uruguay prosperous, and barbecues, or *parrillas*, dot the landscape much like fast-food joints in the U.S. At the Museo del Gaucho y de la Moneda, you'll find antique saddlery and silver spurs so ornate they might as well be religious relics.

For the true gaucho experience, most travelers head to the large ranches, or *estancias*, where traditions date back hundreds of years to when *ganaderos* first herded cattle across the pampas. It's hard to imagine what those rugged individualists of yore would make of their distinctive fashions – the berets, the ponchos, the wide-legged *bombachas* – showing up today on red carpets and runways. Or how amazed they'd be to clip-clop upon the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Atchugarry (MACA), Uruguay's first contemporary-art museum, on expansive grounds near the country's international party destination, Punta del Este.

A lonely cowpoke could spend hours wandering the museum's outdoor sculpture gardens or admiring a rotating collection of works by Frank Stella, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Pablo Atchugarry himself – Uruguay's best-known abstract artist.



Steps from the sand in the town of José Ignacio, 40 minutes up the coast from Punta del Este, is another marvel: American artist James Turrell debuted his first freestanding *Skyspace* in South America here in 2021. The small domed sanctuary has an open ceiling that frames the changing sky, creating an ever-evolving palette of color and brilliance. It's like a carnival for the cosmos.

All signs looked promising for a cosmic experience at Estancia Vik too. The forecast for our moonlit outing called for clear skies and mild temperatures, but honestly, it was hard to pull ourselves away from the beach. We'd spent our first couple of days living the Uruguayan good life, which is easy to do in a place known as the Hamptons of South America, or the Saint-Tropez of 40 years ago. Locals like to say José was a sleepy fishing village until Brazilian supermodels and celebrities such as Shakira discovered these twin curves of coastline (one is Playa Brava, or "rough beach"; the other is Playa Mansa, or "calm beach"). To us, it still felt like an unspoiled dream.

One day, we found ourselves at an outdoor textile studio near the lighthouse, testing our marginal Spanish with craftsman Hugo González before eventually purchasing one of his handmade, naturally dyed wool blankets. Nearby, open-air juice bars filled with summering visitors, and simple "beach shacks" sold fine Italian linens and \$800 cashmere cover-ups. The heart of the town, and the epitome of chic and laid-back vibes in these parts, is the restaurant Parador La Huella. Here, the bronzed and beautiful can be found spending hours under a thatched porch right on the beach. The afternoon that Ruth and I lingered

José Ignacio and James Turrell's *Skyspace*.



PHOTO: JAMES TURRELL/PAUL AND CLAYTON





José Ignacio draws a laid-back, jet-setting crowd.

there, savoring charred local sea bass and leisurely finishing off a pitcher of *clericó* – Uruguay’s signature white sangria – goes down as one of my all-time favorite travel moments.

Then again, that was before we went full gaucho under an inverted moon. Although it’s just up the hill from the beach, Estancia Vik is another level of pure and untouched. Navigating to the isolated estate house, the views opened and suddenly we were in a Uruguayan episode of *Yellowstone*. Twenty years ago, Norwegian billionaire Alex Vik and his American wife, Carrie, envisioned a backcountry idyll for cultured rancheros, and they launched the hotel as their first of three resort properties in the country (the other two are on the beach). Estancia Vik has a polo field and herds of criollo and quarter horses roaming to the horizon, but that’s where the ranch clichés stop. Its sprawling living room is centered by a 12-foot-tall Atchugarry sculpture set against a giant ceiling frieze inspired by Google Earth images of the coastline. A grill room, meant to invoke the barbecue sheds used by gauchos, has graffiti artfully splashed all over its tin ceiling and walls. The brick barreled wine cellar is stocked with 5,000 bottles, including signature vintages produced at the Viks’ winery in Chile.

DESPITE WHAT ONE might expect from proprietors of their stature, the Viks are intimately involved hosts. As guests gathered at the equestrian center around dusk, out they came – Carrie in a magnificent poncho, Alex in traditional riding trousers – to join us on the trot-about. The horse rides are open to the public, but it was a cosmopolitan, international crowd. Among the 30 of us were a newspaper editor from New York, a retired German couple happily traveling the world, some American honeymooners, and a lively group from a yoga retreat led by Isabella Channing, a Uruguayan American who runs a wellness center with the Viks in José Ignacio.

KATEVA BOLDING

