

out of this world

Star attraction

José Ignacio, an unassuming fishing village in URUGUAY, has attracted the A-list as a place to party off the radar for years.

And today, finds *Susan d'Arcy*, the South American outpost has become a beach destination to rival THE HAMPTONS...





WINTER RETREAT

José Ignacio's long stretches of sandy beaches, such as Playa Mansa (opposite), laid-back bars, including La Susana beach club (this page), and remote location make it a honeypot for publicity-shy stars

Photographs: Emma Hardy, Julien Capmek

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Leonardo DiCaprio loves the surfing, *Robert de Niro* adores the sushi, and *Shakira* and *Martin Amis* have snapped up summer homes here, but *José Ignacio's* real charm lies in the fact that this little fishing village, flanked by wide sandy beaches and little inlets, isn't even remotely dazzled by how starry it gets when a regular influx of Hollywood A-listers and international luminaries descend over the festive period.

Come December and January it competes as one of the most glamorous resorts on the planet, yet outside the holiday and party season it retains its wild, edge-of-the-world feel, with sand blowing over its unpaved roads and the wind remodeling the dunes daily. Most restaurants here don't take credit cards, it has only recently installed an ATM, the internet is temperamental and the waiting staff in the bars and restaurants are clearly under the impression that the patrons should do the waiting.

If it is a bit *laissez-faire*, nobody cares. This South American brand of boho beach chic is much less affected than that of Saint-Tropez or the Hamptons. The dress code is board shorts and bikinis for barefoot strolls along sand the color of clotted cream. You'll sunbathe against dunes that have the hypnotic whimsy of a Monet canvas, feel the pull of the mighty south Atlantic and put up with the cold shoulder of passing polo-playing Argentinian or Brazilian billionaires who can't quite hide the fact that they would rather not have to share their favorite playground.

In a world so slow-paced that the civilized time to enquire about lunch is no earlier than 3pm, stress slips as easily from your shoulders as a cashmere shawl. Does it matter that dinner is rarely served before midnight? Chefs here don't even need to try: thrillingly, fresh shrimp and sea bream are scooped effortlessly out of the ocean, served on wooden platters, and steaks arrive at your table still sizzling from the barbecue.

In *José*, simplicity is the most direct route to pleasure and it is now home to some of the continent's coolest beach retreats – the avant-garde *Playa Vik*, its sister property *Bahia Vik*, and *Estancia Vik*, an art gallery disguised as a ranch further inland. All are gloriously high concept, yet surprisingly low-key, because if *José* is about anything, it's about the stylish validation of doing absolutely nothing. *Susan d'Arcy* writes for *The Sunday Times*

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HAZY, LAZY DAYS

Clockwise from above: the modernist Playa Vik combines a stunning location with avant-garde design; a pathway to the beach; the laid-back Posada del Faro pool



NEED TO KNOW

MOST STYLISH HOTEL

Stay at any of the Vik's stylish properties. The latest, Bahia Vik, boasts super-cool suites and bungalows filled with extraordinary art and surrounded by four pools. Next door is the hotel's irresistible beach club and restaurant La Susana, where you can dip your toes in the sand, while feasting on ceviche. *From \$800, B&B; bahiavik.com*

BEST PLACES TO EAT

Parador La Luella on Playa Brava is an institution – you haven't been to José Ignacio if you haven't ordered the catch of the day here, or drunk the signature caipiroska, which features lashings of vodka, lots of lime and a lick of sugar. *paradorlahuella.com*

Head further inland to Garzon, owned by South America's most famous chef Francis Mallmann, to try his signature wood-fire cooking; the flank steaks with chimichurri sauce and dulce de leche pancakes are unforgettable. There are also five bedrooms, each with their own garden and chimineas (mini chimney). *From \$428 per night; restaurantegarzon.com*

LUXE FOR LESS

Posada del Faro's modest beach shack maintains its own kind of low-key magic overlooking José's 19th-century lighthouse, where locals gather for the legendary beachside barbecues. Book one of the 15 rooms for instant access to the laid-back surf set. *From \$190 per night; posadadelfaro.com*

BEST ADVENTURE

Windsurf in the Laguna Garzón with South American champion Laura Moñino. Or take an unforgettable sunrise canter along the water's edge. *kiteywindsurf/laura.com*

RECHARGE

Breakfast on avocado chips and green smoothies at Rincon Verde Health Food before a vinyasa yoga class with Isabella Channing who splits her time between Uruguay, New York and the Hamptons. *theshackyoga.com*

WHAT TO BRING HOME

Oversized cardigans, cropped sweaters and ponchos from Garzón Luxury Knitwear. *garzon.co.uk*