



November 9, 2008

WINTER IN THE SUN | NEXT STOP

Chic but Not Famous: A Resort Named José

By PAOLA SINGER

WHEN the socialites are in town, don't bother trying to park anywhere near Brava Beach in José Ignacio. The dirt roads are narrow, the Porsches wide, and there are too many drivers anxiously vying for a spot. After all, everyone's eager to check out the scene unfolding by the shore: models in micro bikinis, wealthy Americans trying hard not to stare, European bon vivants staring unabashedly, and Argentine beauties blowing air kisses every which way.

To the old timers of José Ignacio, a small village on the southern coast of [Uruguay](#), the traffic jams are something of a shock. Not long ago, this was a sleepy [fishing](#) outpost, a refuge for loners and the occasional celebrity seeking to escape the paparazzi in nearby [Punta del Este](#), a glamorous playground often compared to St.-Tropez.

But in the last five years, José Ignacio has evolved into arguably the chicest spot in Latin America, favored by jet-setters from around the world.

"It seemed like a lot of people were coming here," said Mike Rosenthal, a [Los Angeles](#) fashion photographer who's a frequent guest on "America's Next Top Model." Mr. Rosenthal heard about José Ignacio from a friend, and then [logged into A Small World](#), an invitation-only social networking site, for the latest hearsay. "From the food to the [music](#) to the way people live," Mr. Rosenthal said, "it's all very European."

Typical days include leisurely lunches at 3 p.m., late afternoons sunbathing at the beach (the sun sets at about 9:30 this time of year), midnight dinners of braised lamb and sweet potatoes, and late-night parties given by luxury brands like Lacoste or Chivas Regal at beachfront tents.

But that's a small part of the allure. Except for a few frenetic weeks after Christmas, when the social high season leaves no time for siestas, José Ignacio remains a sleepy place. The only sounds are of Atlantic waves crashing and the winds whistling. Noisy discothèques are forbidden and parties have a 2 a.m. curfew.

"If people want a busier place, they go to Punta del Este," said Martín Pittaluga, an owner of [La Huella](#), a fashionable beach shack where everyone goes — not just for the fresh seafood and clericó (a white sangría), but to see old and new friends.

Indeed, José Ignacio's newfound cachet owes much to the development (some say overdevelopment) of its splashier sibling only 20 miles away. "Punta," as everyone calls it, is starting to look a lot like Miami Beach these days, full of gleaming condos, megachain hotels, expensive stores and loud discos.

Sure, there remain abundant forested lands and long stretches of uncluttered [beaches](#) around Punta. But

José Ignacio appeals to those who prefer the wittingly bohemian, informal atmosphere of dirt roads, hand-painted street signs, mom-and-pop boutiques and bed-and-breakfasts.

“There are fewer tourists; it’s less commercial,” said a [London](#) banker, Sophie Slade, her long legs crossed elegantly while she sipped espresso at [Casa Suaya](#), a new boutique hotel that faces the grassy sand dunes of Brava Beach. “It’s kept its old style.”

That style goes all the way back to 1877, when a lighthouse was erected on a rocky peninsula that became José Ignacio. For much of the 1900s, the area remained uninhabited, though a small group of high-society families from Montevideo and [Buenos Aires](#) began summering there in the 1970s, and built Mediterranean-style homes by the sea. Still, the village stayed under the radar for most of the ’90s.

Among the first celebrities to show up was Mirtha Legrand, an Argentine movie and television star best known for a long-running daytime show. She was soon followed by other boldface names like the musician Fito Páez and the hotelier Alan Faena. Shakira, the Latin pop star, owns a ranch nearby and the British writer [Martin Amis](#) lived here for several years to escape the “world hum,” as he told a British newspaper in 2002.

Upscale dining, [art](#) galleries and boutique inns soon followed. Buzzing restaurants include [Marismo](#) and [Namm](#), both hidden down a winding dusty road, surrounded by a thick forest of pines, eucalyptuses and acacias. Marismo, known for its slow-braised lamb, is strictly alfresco, with candlelit tables set around a bonfire on the sand. Namm, which serves sushi and grilled meats, is housed in a wooden hut furnished with dim lanterns, low tables and pillowed bench seats.

The more secluded the location, the more appealing it seems. A case in point is La Caracola, a private club on an otherwise deserted beach accessible only by boat. Guests such as Giuseppe Cipriani, the renowned restaurateur and playboy, spend the day there drinking caipirinhas and nibbling on empanadas by the shore, followed by long lunches of barbecued beef and freshly caught fish.

While much of José Ignacio retains a laid-back, hideaway vibe, locals are concerned about development. Going up a few minutes from town is Laguna Escondida, a sprawling 200-unit lakefront resort being built by the Florida real estate mogul Jorge Perez.

And all eyes are on a luxury Setai hotel that will include a 25,000-square-foot beachfront lodge, 10 rental villas and 40 residences, set to open just outside the village in 2010. As a preview, the Setai opened a restaurant and lounge inside a large Moroccan-themed tent that has been frequented by scene stealers like the polo champion Ignacio Figueras, also known as the face of [Ralph Lauren](#)’s Polo Black fragrance.

“Some people say José Ignacio is growing too fast, but it still feels like a small town,” said Adolfo Suaya, a restaurateur from Los Angeles who opened Casa Suaya. Although his hotel attracts a fair share of celebrities like the recent guests [Naomi Watts](#) and the Formula One racer [Michael Schumacher](#), Mr. Suaya is not worried about overcrowding.

“This place is like [the Hamptons](#) in the 1960’s,” he said, “and it is going to stay the same for another 20 years.”

THE CLIENTELE IS JET SET, THE ATMOSPHERE LOW KEY

GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights to José Ignacio from New York. Many visitors first fly into [Buenos Aires](#), then switch to Aerolineas Argentinas or Pluna airlines for a connecting flight to [Punta del Este](#). [American Airlines](#) offers direct flights to Buenos Aires starting at about \$900 for travel this month. Connecting flights on Pluna start at about \$240 in the high season. Driving from Punta del Este to José Ignacio takes about 40 minutes. You can also fly into Montevideo, [Uruguay](#)'s capital, and drive 100 miles. Rental cars are scarce during the high season and must be booked in advance.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Suaya (Ruta 10, kilometer 186.5; 598-486-2750; www.casasuaya.com) is a secluded hotel facing the Atlantic, with 16 stone-wall suites and 3 thatched-roof bungalows. Butiá restaurant, which opens onto an infinity pool with ocean views, serves brick-oven sea bass and other local specialties. The owner, Adolfo Suaya, is plugged into the local social scene. Doubles start at \$750 during the high season.

Posada del Faro (Calle de la Bahía and Timonel; 598-486-2110; www.posadadelfaro.com) offers Mediterranean-style rooms surrounding a small pool that faces beautiful José Ignacio bay. High-season doubles start at \$380.

In the center of the village is Arbol (Faro de José Ignacio; 54-11-4803-1113; www.arbolcasaloft.com), an elegant guesthouse with six loft-style suites and a new pool area. A high-season suite starts at \$550.

WHERE TO EAT

Marismo (Ruta 10, kilometer 185; 598-486-2273) is known for its tasty lamb and rough-hewn décor of wood tables in the sand, lit by candles and heated by a bonfire (nights can get chilly). Open in high season, from December to February.

For sushi or grilled meats, head to Namm (Ruta 10, kilometer 185; 598-486-2526), referred by some as “the treehouse” because its log structure is surrounded by dense forest. Open in high season.

Book an afternoon table at La Huella (Playa Brava; 598-486-2279; www.paradorlahuella.com), a popular beach shack notable for its fried calamari and clericó, a local white-wine sangria. Open year-round.

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